

The Micro and Macro Dynamics of a Mega-disaster:

Rethinking the Sri Lanka Tsunami Experience

Background

The direct cause of the tsunami of 26 December 2004 was an earthquake off the coast of North Sumatra with a magnitude of 9.0 on the Richter scale. This earthquake set in motion a huge wave that hit fourteen countries around the Indian Ocean. When the tsunami landed, the waves varied from approximately 30 metres high in Banda Aceh up to ten metres in parts of Sri Lanka. The tsunami hit thirteen out of a total of 25 districts in Sri Lanka and more than two-thirds of its coastline. Loss of life was recorded at 35,322. The number of injured was 21,411 and the number of displaced 558,287. All major population groups – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims – were affected, though the most severely affected Districts were largely Muslim and Tamil. About 200,000 persons lost their livelihood or employment. One and a half years after the tsunami 60% of the households reported a reduction in monthly income. Damages and losses combined amounted to 7.6% of the gross domestic product. All these different figures underline that the tsunami in Sri Lanka could veritably be called a mega-crisis. A further analysis of the Sri Lanka tsunami, however, reveals a number of interesting details.



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Analysis of the Sri Lanka tsunami

First, the impact of the Sri Lanka tsunami varied according to the level of analysis. Whereas human loss of the tsunami was only 0.18% of the population when measured at the national level, it was 15 times higher in the most affected district and well over 300 times higher in the most affected villages or neighbourhoods. The same applies to economic losses and damages. This means that the intensity of a disaster is scale-sensitive; it is a relative issue rather than a fixed value. The labelling of a disaster as a mega-crisis therefore is depending on the level of analysis. For a proper understanding of a disaster it is not sufficient to rely on macro-data at higher aggregation levels only, as those tend to hide local variations. Multi-level analysis with sufficient attention being paid especially to the local level is recommended.

Second, as corroborated by current insights in the field of disaster studies, the size of the hazard or natural trigger agent alone does not explain the impact of a disaster. Pre-existing patterns of physical, cultural, political and socio-economic vulnerabilities determined to a large degree who were hit. Vulnerability is defined here as “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process). It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone’s life, livelihood, property and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature and in society”. This emphasis on vulnerability has alerted academics and aid workers to the existing variability and differentiation of disaster impact among different categories and groups of the affected population. The tsunami in Sri Lanka did basically affect the poorest sections of the population, such as poor fishermen’s families living in marginal, low-lying areas along the sea or lagoons, internally displaced persons who lived in temporary shelters along the beaches, or illegal squatters along the railway line. Eighty percent of the affected households lived on less than one dollar per day per person before the tsunami struck and thirty percent was living well below the official Sri Lankan poverty line. This reconfirms the need to carry out detailed vulnerability assessments as part of a pro-active and preventative policy. In Sri Lanka this was lacking. The country had no disaster policy, institutional framework or plan in place when the tsunami hit. This probably not only worsened the impact of the disaster, it also affected the response to it.

Third, there was a notable gender-specific impact. Relatively many women and children died, as a larger proportion of men could swim, climb trees and run faster when the waves came. In the Amparai District

two times as many women died as men. In terms of recommendations this points to the need of gender-specific vulnerability assessment and disaster preparedness to mitigate the physical, cultural and socio-economic risks of women.

Fourth, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, rescue and life saving activities started nearly instantaneously. Medical aid was given, dead bodies buried and relief aid mobilized by a variety of local governmental and non-governmental actors as well as individuals acting spontaneously on their own initiative. In the first days into the disaster many groups were seen working jointly in the hour of need, including unexpected partnerships such as between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government, between opposing political parties, and between army and civil society groups. Due to the conflict in the east and the north, multilateral and international NGOs had already offices, stocks and staff in place that could be mobilized without delay. The role of the central authorities at the initial rescue and relief stage was, however, minimal. There were strong indications that the central government was completely overwhelmed by the situation and lacked the resources for a quick and effective response. This was enhanced by the centralizing tendencies of the Sri Lankan government. Moreover, its tsunami response became highly influenced by party politics and political patronage. The government was accused of indifference, delay and inertia, evoking strong criticisms from the population and civil society, who assigned this sluggishness to ethnic discrimination and exclusion. Demonstrations, protests and acrimonious exchanges exacerbated divisions and ethnic tensions. This reflected tensions and struggles between the government, the LTTE, local armed militias and political factions, resulting in a power vacuum. It also reflected differences between the Sinhalese majority and the Muslim and Tamil minorities. Aid, instead of relieving the situation, became a problem of and in itself. These realities cannot be grasped when assuming a fairly monolithic, a-political and a-personal, formalised type of government. A grounded, context-specific analysis of the functioning of the state and of political patronage is needed to understand the dynamics at work in practice. This demonstrates the risk of working with western models of state or governance which may not be applicable to countries elsewhere. De-contextualized protocols of aid delivery are similarly unable to grasp the realities of aid in patrimonial or hybrid states.

Fifth, another serious omission was a nearly total lack of communication, consultation, and information vis-à-vis the local population, leading to frustrations, misapprehensions and accusations. Especially, there



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was a lot of insecurity regarding the reconstruction plans in the future, as the government had been slow and indecisive on many important issues and decisions to be tackled in this connection. This underlines the need to inform and involve disaster victims as much as possible and avoid patronizing top-down approaches.

Sixth, the tsunami aid became entangled in the political and conflict dynamics at play in Sri Lanka. The political legitimacy and credibility of both conflict parties depended at least in part on how they managed the humanitarian disaster and this also affected the competing “state projects” of the government and the LTTE. The failure to set up a joint management system for the distribution of the aid to LTTE-hold areas,

conflicts around aid distribution and the overall political economy of aid contributed to an escalation of tension and ultimately violence. In sum, the tsunami and the tsunami response not only became entangled in the ethno-political dynamics of patrimonial politics, but also succumbed to the logic of the politico-military conflict. The disaster thus ended up strengthening conflict structures and dynamics and compounding attempts to resolve the conflict, while the conflict in turn affected the humanitarian response negatively.

Conclusion

My major conclusion is that mega-events, like in this case the Sri Lankan tsunami, can only be understood on the basis of a thorough and locally grounded analysis of vulnerabilities, political economy and societal (violent) conflict. The impact of the disaster and the effectiveness of the aid response had in fact little to do with the impressive numbers attached to the natural hazard or trigger event *per se*. Analysis of the Sri Lankan tsunami showed that they remain firmly based on prior, nationally and locally determined, vulnerabilities and on the characteristics of the local patrimonial system of governance and political culture.