

Competitive Humanitarianism: Relief and the Sri Lankan Tsunami

Introduction

This short paper is concerned with a common issue in disaster relief: high levels of competition between the agencies involved coupled with a lot of talk about the need for 'coordination'. The particular setting for the discussion is the relief that poured into Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami of 26th December 2004 and it is based on my role as an advisor (on a voluntary basis) to one of the major British-based agencies which became involved in the relief and rehabilitation process.

Lack of coordination between agencies and high levels of competition between them is frequently mentioned as characterising disaster relief. The post-tsunami efforts in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and India were no exception to this. This is one of the themes which the recent evaluation of the DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) response to the Tsunami alludes to on a number of occasions and which it sees as a problem which has to be overcome by better coordination.¹ In this paper, I shall be suggesting that 'better coordination' is unlikely to lead to less competition. Rather, I shall argue that competition of various forms is inherent in the structure of humanitarian relief, particularly amongst NGOs, and that this is the result of a basic contradiction at the heart of philanthropic approaches to relief and rehabilitation (and, one might suggest, to development interventions in general, especially those mounted by NGOs). For various reasons which I will examine in this paper, agencies which are based on disinterested principles are forced into situations where organisational and individual interests become increasingly important and which undermine the principles upon which philanthropic interventions are based.

The discussion is based on my experience of relief activities in the southwest of Sri Lanka, the coast between Colombo in the north and Hambantota in the south. The situation in the east was in many ways much more complex because of the continuing civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

The nature of the tsunami in Sri Lanka

By way of introduction, it's worth saying a little about the rather peculiar nature of the disaster in Sri Lanka, for in some ways the peculiarities of the tsunami had an effect on how relief agencies reacted to the situation.

¹ Tony Vaux et al 2005. [Independent Evaluation of the DEC Tsunami Crisis Response](http://www.dec.org.uk/uploads/documents/dectsunaACFF.pdf). Report to the DEC Board. Available at <http://www.dec.org.uk/uploads/documents/dectsunaACFF.pdf>

Put rather simplistically, most disasters – earthquakes, floods, cyclones and hurricanes - cover a more or less concentrated area. There is some sort of centre and around that centre destruction spreads all around. But the tsunami affected Sri Lanka in a very different way – ‘ribbon destruction’ rather than ‘centralised destruction’. Thus something around 75% of the Sri Lankan coastline was affected by the tsunami, yet at the most the destruction caused by the tsunami only penetrated a kilometre or so inland. More or less ‘normal’ life was never very far from devastation. At the same time, the impact of the tsunami was decidedly spotty. So whilst in some places the waters destroyed anything for a kilometre or so inland, in others there was almost no impact even immediately adjacent to the beach. The result was a mosaic of total destruction and no impact. One house would be destroyed; its immediate neighbour untouched.

This situation faced the relief agencies with rather different problems from those which they are more used to. So for instance it was difficult in Sri Lanka to use large scale water purification equipment because the tsunami-affected population was spread along the coast rather than focused on one central point. Basic amenities such as food and water were never very far away from the area of destruction. Another difference, which I will return to later, is that it made it relatively easy for different agencies to make claims to different segments along the ribbon of destruction.

Estimates of how many people were killed or injured still vary. Probably the total is around 40,000, mostly from the coastal belt itself. However, the tsunami hit on a full moon poya day, a holiday in Buddhist Sri Lanka, and thus many people were on the move. Some were on their way from Colombo to tourist resorts along the southwest coast whilst others had come from inland towns and villages to attend markets in coastal towns such as Galle and Matara. Thus from the beginning it was difficult for the agencies to identify precise areas of impacts and there was a tendency to concentrate on coastal areas where destruction was most visible even though the human impact of the tsunami was much more widely distributed.

In comparison with other types of disaster, the tsunami injured relatively few people, and there was not as great a need for specialised medical assistance (although it nevertheless arrived) as in many disasters. But as in many other natural disasters, the tsunami had a differential impact in terms of gender and age. Although there are no precise figures, anecdotal evidence indicates that the tsunami killed women rather than men, and children rather than adults. It appears that men were more able to run away or climb coconut trees and less involved in trying to save children and infants than were women. No matter why men rather than women should have been able to survive the tsunami, the result was that the agencies were often faced with male rather than female single parents, a situation which they appeared unprepared for. There were also relatively few orphans.

To return to the timing of the tsunami, poya day being a holiday meant that the majority of the inshore fishermen were not at sea. The result was that most small fishing craft were laid up on the beach and received the full impact of the tsunami. In contrast, craft which were at sea, even only a few hundred meters from the beach, successfully rode the

tsunami waves. On another day the damage to fishing craft and gear would have been much less.

Thus the overall result of the tsunami was a narrow strip of devastation stretching down the coast from just south of Colombo, along the south and up the east coast almost as far as the Jaffna peninsula. Within this narrow strip there was widespread devastation. Fishing communities in particular were badly hit. As well as houses and equipment being destroyed the major lines of communication by road and rail were badly affected. Given that in the southwest of Sri Lanka most major urban centres are on the coast, the tsunami also had a major impact on public infrastructure: hospitals, schools, administrative centres, shopping and commercial centres. Yet at the same time, a little inland the tsunami had no physical impact whatsoever.

The immediate response to the disaster was very much Sri Lankan led. Even though road and rail connections were very badly hit by the tsunami, individuals and groups of individuals from Colombo and inland almost immediately became involved in taking food, shelter and medical equipment to those directly affected. It seems that much of the immediate response was provided by what one might call, 'civil society': government appears to have been relatively uninvolved and made relatively little effort to coordinate or manage a response to the disaster. That the President was out of the country at the time of the tsunami may have been significant. Various foreign organisations became involved in the relief effort very quickly. Some of these such as OXFAM, SCF and CARE were already active in Sri Lanka whilst other organisations, not just NGOs but also the military from various nations, arrived within a few days. Very rapidly these foreign organisations became increasingly important and influential in the relief effort. Sri Lankans became less active; local organisations including NGOs became dependent partners on foreign organisations. But before looking at this process in more detail, something has to be said about the nature and scale of the response to the tsunami outside the affected area

The scale and nature of the response

One of the aspects of the tsunami which remains somewhat obscure are the factors which gave rise to the massive response to calls for relief assistance. Throughout Europe, North America and East Asia, vast sums were raised to support the relief and rehabilitation effort. Thus the British-based DEC raised around £350 million before the appeal was closed in March.² Organisations which are members of the DEC also received funds from other sources. The British Red Cross raised a total of £85.9 million of which £59.3 million came from the DEC, £26 million from direct donations and a further £3.5 million from DFID. Much of this money came from private individuals or groups of individuals

² The members of the Disasters Emergency Committee include World Vision, Help the Aged, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Care, Concern, Save the Children and the British Red Cross amongst others

but in addition the corporate sector was also involved. For instance, Marks and Spencer gave £260,000 to CARE for work in southern Sri Lanka.³

In part the response to the tsunami has to be seen as the result of the media coverage of the disaster. Shots of the wave first receding and then thundering into the beach destroying all in its path were certainly dramatic. Furthermore, Sri Lanka and Thailand are tourist destinations for Europeans and this may also have had some effect, especially as European tourists were amongst the victims. Finally, countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand are easily accessible to the media. That this is was truly a ‘natural’ disaster, not the result of human activities such as war or civil unrest must also have played a part.

But no matter what the factors behind this response, the result was that almost every household in countries such as Britain, Scandinavia and Germany were to a greater or lesser extent involved in tsunami relief. This could just involve donating money but it also involved organising fund raising events, coordinating fund raising activities and acting as collectors. Not only was money collected but also goods – clothes, medical and educational supplies and food. And of course in some cases people themselves went to Sri Lanka and elsewhere to assist in the relief effort.

The result was that, to use developmental terms, the agencies involved in relief activities found themselves not only the recipients of vast amounts of money and other resources but also faced with a vast number of ‘stakeholders’ who to a greater or lesser extent felt a sense of ‘ownership’ in the relief effort. From the beginning the pressure was on the agencies not only to be effective but to be seen to be effective. They had to try to justify the vast investment that had in effect been made in the relief effort. And they had to intervene in ways which these ‘stakeholders’ would recognise as being ‘relief’. So from the beginning there was a certain bias in the sorts of interventions favoured by the relief agencies: highly visible, photogenic, and focusing on the poor, women and children. Furthermore, given the climate of opinion, even vaguely appropriate agencies had to get involved in tsunami relief. Not to do so was in effect to deny either their humanitarian commitment or their competence.

NGOs in competition

Within a week of the tsunami a vast range of relief organisations were active in Sri Lanka. Some of these were the military. Thus the Americans, the British, the Belgians, the Indians and the Pakistanis all had a presence. The Americans for instance were active in clearing rubble whilst the Indians and Pakistanis concentrated on medical assistance. But much more visible were the vast numbers of NGOs which arrived in Sri Lanka intent

³ See the M&S press release at <http://www2.marksandspencer.com/thecompany/mediacentre/pressreleases/2005/csr2005-06-16-00.shtml>

on spending money.⁴ Hotels in Colombo and those that had survived along the coast all went through a short term boom as did the demand for drivers and interpreters. Such was the flow of foreign currency into the country that the Sri Lankan rupee rose rapidly in value.

The problem for most NGOs was to find ways of spending their money.⁵ Given the number of NGOs and the amount of money they had at their disposal this was not surprising: after all, there were only a limited number of ‘beneficiaries’ and only a certain area of land which had been affected by the tsunami. The result was that first comers tended to carve out their territories both spatially and in terms of activities. Thus in the Matara region, repair of fishing craft was taken over by an Irish NGO called GOAL whilst the International Organisation for Migration dominated temporary housing. Any piece of land which could be used sported an IOM signboard, an effective statement that other organisations should keep out. NGO representatives talked of ‘carving out territories’ along the coastal strip.

At the same time there was also pressure on the incoming NGOs to find ‘local partners’ with whom and through whom they could work. Many of the larger NGOs recognised that they did not have the capabilities or capacities to launch activities in Sri Lanka and recognised the need to work with local organisations which had the necessary skills and experience. Yet these were scarce and often already in some sort of relationship with foreign NGO donors. By the end of the third week after the tsunami it was generally accepted that there were few available ‘partners’ although there was a certain amount of ‘poaching’ as latecomers offered higher inducements in terms of facilities or management fees to potential Sri Lankan partners.

Part of the problem of course was not just that international or foreign based NGOs were under pressure to spend money but that they were under pressure to spend it in particular ways. Thus NGO representatives were only too aware of the presence of TV teams and reporters, and many organisations had their own film crews to record their activities. The result was to privilege certain sorts of activities such as distributing new fishing craft or constructing housing rather than less visible or more indirect forms of disaster relief, for instance rehabilitation of government offices destroyed by the tsunami. Competition was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the right way which would fit with western donors’ visions of what relief should be.

⁴ It’s impossible to list all the NGOs that appeared in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami. Perhaps my favourite was ‘Noah’s Wish’, an American NGO which assists animals in disasters. See <http://www.noahswish.org/>

⁵ DEC supported spending in Sri Lanka is estimated to be £41 million in 2005. This was broadly in line with overall spending objectives but overall the DEC in 2005m only managed to spend £128 million on tsunami relief compared with its target of £151 million. Most of the shortfall was in Indonesia – based spending.

Competition also occurred within organisations. Thus whilst the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies ostensibly acts as a united organisation in such situations, in practice competition between different national branches led to different strategies being followed in different places. Thus the Maltese and the Turkish national organisations followed their own paths, much to the annoyance of other national organisations which toed the Federation line.

Dinosaurs and small furry animals

So far, the organisations I have been concerned with are mainly the large international NGOs with a long track record in relief or development or both. These include the members of the DEC as well as other international NGOs and they all in general follow a strict set of guidelines laid down in the Red Cross/NGO code of conduct.⁶ In addition, such organisations tend to follow international guidelines in the contexts of sanitation, water supply, temporary housing and so on. Finally, these organisations generally attempt to create good relationships with government, work alongside government departments, and have to a greater or lesser extent a political understanding of the context in which they are working.

The result of all this was that in the Sri Lankan case at least, these agencies tended to be rather slow and ponderous in their response to particular situations. This was exacerbated by the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratised way in which many of these organisations are structured. In one of them the team in Colombo charged with finding ways of spending money was unable to take any decisions without consulting by telephone at least once a day with management in London. The justification for this was the need for ‘accountability’, how proposed activities fitted the mandate of the organisation, and to consider how proposed forms of intervention or partnership might play in the context of British based stakeholders.

This situation encouraged the activities of what might be called ‘small furry animals’ in a world of slow moving dinosaurs. One of the striking features of the relief effort was the presence of a horde of small, often newly formed, foreign organisations with little if any experience in disaster relief but motivated by a strong humanitarian impulse that ‘something had to be done’. Throughout the tsunami-affected areas small groups and individuals from a wide range of countries were active in all sorts of activities. For instance, a Slovakian organisation was engaged in boat building whilst an Austrian NGO assisted in constructing houses. Neither had any previous experience of South Asia or disaster relief. From the point of view of the larger NGOs such as the members of the DEC the visibility of these small projects was a problem which only got worse as fewer and fewer visible means of activity were left untouched. It looked as if they were doing nothing.

⁶ For the text of this code of conduct, see <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/>

The lack of experience of many of these small groups led to a degree of vulnerability. This was particularly true in some areas of the country where political individuals and groupings attempted to control the relief effort with the result that aid was perhaps misdirected.⁷ But this lack of experience was also apparent in other ways. So for instance, competition between the Indian and Pakistani armies led to the establishment of two 'field hospitals' a few miles apart. Both did brisk business, partly because they were free and partly as novel suppliers of medical commodities. This was interpreted (wrongly) by some inexperienced NGOs as indicative of failings in the Sri Lankan health service and led to further interventions in a sector which needed little assistance. In other cases the boats and fishing equipment supplied to fishermen were technically flawed. There was also little control as to who received assistance. In some cases fishermen received no assistance; in others individuals were given two (and in at least one case three) brand new boats. But, and this was what was perhaps most important, what was being done was highly photogenic and appeared to be dealing in an immediate and relevant fashion with the results of the tsunami.

Attempts at coordination

The overall picture of relief in the period immediately after the tsunami is one of chaos. A large number of agencies, mostly NGOs of various sorts from various countries, competed with one another for ways of spending money in ways which fitted into a relatively narrow conceptualisation of what relief is and which would be easily accepted by the donors back home. Well meaning amateurs could in effect outflank the relatively slow dinosaurs of the relief world by undercutting standards – but in such a way as to appear more 'effective' than the larger more well established NGOs.

Of course, those who were working for the NGOs were only too aware of the problems involved and saw this competitive world as counter-productive in terms of the humanitarian objectives of the relief effort. And there was a whole series of attempts at coordinating relief activities at various levels.

As I mentioned earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the government of Sri Lanka took very little role in actively managing the relief effort. In contrast to, for instance India and Indonesia, foreign NGOs were given free access for personnel and resources to enter the country and very little effort was made to control who came in with what.⁸ Over time, this situation was to change in various ways with the government attempting to take increasing control over the activities of relief agencies. Thus in early February customs duties on imports for humanitarian use were reintroduced. This led to massive accumulations in Colombo harbour of aid items sent by well meaning groups and

⁷ So for instance some East Asian organisations became involved in the then Prime Minister's scheme to resite the town of Hambantota.

⁸ This in part led to suspicions later on that various Christian evangelical groups had used the tsunami as an opportunity for proselytisation.

individuals abroad and also led to complaints from NGOs that their work was being hampered.⁹

Internally, various efforts were made to coordinate relief activities on a sectoral basis. This frequently involved the local offices of UN agencies working with government agencies. Thus agriculture and, more importantly, fishing, were charged to the FAO working with the Department of Fisheries. Shelter was a matter for the UNHCR. Yet it was almost impossible for them to find out what was happening in their sectors because of the plethora of agencies involved in the relief effort and the need for each individual agency to maximise its visible impact. In the case of the fishing sector matters were made worse by the attempt by the FAO to use the tsunami as a means of restructuring the fisheries sector which was seen as employing too many fishermen who were over-fishing the inshore waters. This policy was widely rejected by the relief agencies- to such an extent that by the end of March there were probably more fishing craft active off the southwest coast of Sri Lanka than there were before the tsunami.

At a local level there were also attempts at coordination of relief activities. In some places such as Galle this involved the UNDP; in others local government agencies were more important. But again, attempts at co-ordination were generally unsuccessful. Agencies were unwilling to share information where it might threaten their own efforts. There were unsavoury disputes between agencies as to which one should intervene or take the lead in specific areas. Thus in one case representatives of two agencies almost came to blows as to which one had the 'right' to assist elderly female coir workers affected by the cyclone.

Over time, and as the immediacy of the relief effort passed, forms of coordination did develop. Areas of activity both geographically and thematically were demarcated. But this was not the result of some effective coordination policy. Rather it was the result of a competitive process which, in a parody of the perfect market, produced a series of equilibria.

Discussion

The situation which I have described above is common in many post disaster situations. In Sri Lanka it was exacerbated by the sheer quantity of aid coming into the country making it extremely difficult for agencies to effectively spend the money they had been entrusted with. Yet the question remains as to whether there is at base a very real contradiction between the philanthropic and humanitarian objectives of relief agencies which implies cooperation and coordination, and structural forces which force relief agencies to compete with each other.

⁹ The government claimed that these restrictions had to be reintroduced because unscrupulous groups were using humanitarian imports as a means of supplying the LTTE. Oxfam vigorously complained about duty being charged on the import of four-wheel drive vehicles which it claimed were being imported for humanitarian purposes.

Certainly all the organisations, agencies and individuals I came into contact with were driven by a strong sense of moral commitment to the relief effort and they deprecated what they recognised as the corrosive nature of inter-agency competition. All talked of the desirability of effective coordination although there were strong differences as to what form that coordination might entail. Thus there were complaints of over centralising attempts by central government to manage the relief effort, although in practice this effort seems to have had little effect. Most saw more local or district-level forms of management as preferable.

But although inter-agency coordination and cooperation might be a preferred ideal state, in practice it seems to me that this is impossible to achieve for two related reasons.

First, relief agencies exist in a competitive world. Organisations such as the Red Cross or Merlin or whoever continually face challenges from other organisations which claim to be doing the same things more effectively.¹⁰ Continued funding depends upon not just being effective but being seen as effective. Thus disasters become media opportunities for these agencies to stake a claim to continuing or new effectiveness. And in this case, given the importance of private donations to the DEC, the audience for this media effort is the public in the developed world. Competition is thus greatest in aspects of relief which play directly to this public – for instance housing and shelter, distribution of food and medical aid, new fishing tackle. Where there was no competition was in areas which did not have this immediate and visual quality. Thus it might be argued that in the fishing sector restoration of the capacities of the Fisheries Department was a priority – yet as far as I know very little was done in this area during the first few months and even later there were few inputs.,

Secondly, there are individuals' career trajectories. Many of the people involved in post-tsunami relief in Sri Lanka were to a greater or lesser extent 'disaster professionals'. In Colombo the major social centre patronised by these people was a bar known as, 'The Cricketers'. On one level this became a clearing house for information and, it has to be said, a scene for informal forms of coordination being worked out and deals over territory being made. But it was also the scene for reunions between people who had worked together in previous post-disaster situations and were now recreating the social networks through which future jobs could be ensured. Career paths and development become a matter of gaining a reputation and 'doing well' in the disaster business, and this involves successfully shifting relief materials both physical and financial. Again we are in a competitive milieu which whilst extolling the virtues of coordination and collaboration is at the same time based on individual self interest.

Thus whilst philanthropy might be the antithesis of self interest, the means of delivering philanthropic relief undermines this high moral tone. People who gave so generously in

¹⁰ Thus there is little love amongst many Red Cross personnel for MSF which is seen as flashy and too intent on maximising the media coverage it receives

Europe, Asia and the Americas in response to tsunami appeals were doubtlessly motivated by a humanitarian sense of moral and ethical obligation. The organisations involved in delivering this relief are also premised on these high moral standards as is the vast majority of the people who work for these agencies. Few people if any get rich through working in disaster relief. Yet the structural nature of the relief business inevitably generates competition both between and, perhaps to a lesser extent, within relief agencies. For the ethically motivated donor the issue is always on how their donation can have its maximum effect and this inevitably generates competition between the donors to prove that they and not other organisations have the greatest impact in alleviating suffering and achieving humanitarian objectives. Philanthropy and competition are inextricably linked.

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