

## ARTICLES

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# Beyond Disaster: A Comparative Analysis of Tsunami Interventions in Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh

PETER BAUMAN, MENGISTU AYALEW  
AND GAZALA PAUL

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the impact of the tsunami and the tsunami interventions on the protracted conflicts in Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh. Several variables helped to advance peace in one country and drove the escalation of violence in the other. Natural catastrophe alone did not lead to the mitigation of conflict: where neither side perceived an option for military victory, the tsunami itself, coupled with international support and pressure, offered a way out. However, lessons repeatedly learned during humanitarian interventions were not applied. The tsunami interventions were marked by major shortcomings, among them the failure to reach thousands of people displaced by conflict, a lack of effective coordination, conflict insensitivity, low levels of beneficiary participation, and the undermining of local capacities.*

### Introduction

On 26 December 2004, an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra caused a tsunami that spread from Sri Lanka to Somalia. Over 300,000 people died and over a million were displaced. The survivors, physically and mentally traumatised, faced shortages in housing, water, sanitation and employment. Jan Egeland, United Nations Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, estimated that more than two million people required food aid (PDMIN 2005). The total financial cost was an estimated \$12 billion. Equally unprecedented was the promptness and generosity of the international community. In three weeks, more than \$5 billion in assistance was pledged and organisations like Oxfam and *Medecins sans Frontieres* (MSF) received their full funding budgets within a month.<sup>1</sup> In one month, over 300 new international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) entered Sri Lanka (Harris 2005).

Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh, places marred by protracted war, were severely damaged.<sup>2</sup> In response, scholars and practitioners explored actual and potential impacts of disaster and disaster interventions on conflict. Their initial premise was that, if designed and implemented effectively, intervention could alleviate conflict. If pursued recklessly, however, interventions could fuel conflict. This research contributes to these discussions.

In developing this study, the authors first organised a symposium, 'Beyond Disaster: Opportunities for Peacebuilding in SE Asia', at Brandeis University in Massachusetts where scholars and practitioners in the fields of conflict and development helped to identify relevant theories and research questions. This background formed the basis

for interviews and observations which the authors conducted in Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh from August to October 2005.<sup>3</sup>

Comparative analysis yielded several findings. First, the tsunami and subsequent interventions precipitated disparate outcomes. In Indonesia/Aceh, the major actors, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) and the Government of Indonesia (GoI), negotiated an end to 30 years of hostility. Conversely, in Sri Lanka, relations deteriorated between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Second, the tsunami interventions in both locations failed effectively to reach thousands of war-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs). Third, failures in humanitarian assistance exacerbated old grievances and created new ones. These failures included a lack of effective coordination, accountability and transparency; low levels of sensitivity to cultural norms and power dynamics; disregard for beneficiary participation; and a propensity of relief organisations to undermine local capacities.

This article is divided into four sections. The first examines the context before and after the tsunami. The second draws on William Zartman's 'Mutually Hurting Stalemate' to identify key factors that contributed to peace in Indonesia/Aceh and war in Sri Lanka. The third uses Mary Anderson's 'Do No Harm' and related theories to explore how organisations operated and interacted within the two contexts. The final section provides lessons learned.

## ***Aceh and Sri Lanka: Before and After***

### ***Pre-tsunami Indonesia/Aceh***

The conflict in Aceh surfaced in the 1950s following Indonesia's independence and President Sukarno's mixed objective of ensuring regional autonomy and forging a secular Indonesian nation (Siegal 2000; Schulze 2004). The 'Darul Islam Rebellion' was driven by the claim that Aceh was a separate entity with a distinct culture, language and approach to Islam.

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When the state of Indonesia was formed, the people of Aceh were neglected. This frustrated the Acehnese who had fought colonisation for centuries. Many Acehnese say they were colonised by the new state. This short-lived rebellion planted the seeds for three decades of war. In 1976, the Aceh Sumatra National

Liberation Front (ASNLF), led by Hasan Di Tiro, declared Aceh's independence. This evolved into *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, or the Free Aceh Movement (ICG 2000; Schulze 2004). The initial grievance was compounded by the exploitation of oil and other natural resources and the centralisation of power by socio-political elites in Jakarta.<sup>4</sup>

Before the tsunami, attempts to resolve the conflict failed and the situation deteriorated into military intervention (Aspinall & Crouch 2003). In 2000, the Henry Dunant Centre brought together representatives of the GoI and GAM, yielding the December 2002 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (Huber 2004:viii). Five months later, the agreement was derailed. The GoI resorted to military means to annihilate GAM so that the Acehnese would 'accept special autonomy as a lasting political solution to the conflict' (Miller 2003). The next two years of martial law and civil emergency affected all parties; press restrictions were imposed and international actors were obstructed from entering Aceh. The brutal tactics employed by the Indonesian military, Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI), weakened GAM, pushing the rebels deeper into the jungle and

alienating them from the populace. One year into the emergency, GAM's supply lines and communications had been seriously disrupted, the movement's strength in urban areas had all but disappeared, and 'GAM's support from the Achenese people themselves was dwindling' (ICG 2005).

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Several interviewees stated that GAM was considered both hero and villain because its tactics for recruitment and taxation had become increasingly belligerent. GAM also lacked the backing of a community in exile and therefore relied on the Acehnese for

ideological and economic support. Furthermore, the Indonesian government and military, fatigued by involvement in several other intra-state conflicts straining the country's resources, realised their inability to destroy GAM. Both sides in the Indonesia/Aceh conflict realised that the military option was not viable and sought a political solution, but they lacked an exit strategy.

### ***Pre-tsunami Sri Lanka***

The seeds of intractable war in Sri Lanka were planted during the colonial era. The British favoured Tamil minorities in education and government employment. When Sri Lanka attained independence in 1948, the new constitution introduced majority rule, altering the distribution of power in favour of the Sinhalese. In 1949, 54% of the government recruits were Sinhalese and 41% Tamils. By 1963, the numbers had changed to 92% and 7% respectively (Little 1999:48). The situation deteriorated when Sinhala nationalists launched policies to redress the power imbalance. The Tamil minority did not accept Sinhala domination and defended its rights, first through peaceful and ultimately armed struggle.

A key factor driving the war is the perceived vulnerability of both sides associated with a 'double minority complex'. About 74% of the 20 million Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, while just over 12% are Tamils.<sup>5</sup> The Sinhalese are the majority in Sri Lanka, but Tamils outnumber them worldwide by more than four times. The Tamils live mainly in the north and east and Sinhalese in the south, west and central parts (De Silva 1999:9). This geographical differentiation further defines the divisions. Sinhalese nationalists believe that Sri Lanka is the only country with a Buddhist majority and feel responsible for defending the 'Buddhist homeland'. This nationalism, coupled with the discriminatory policies and measures, causes insecurity among Tamils and Muslims. The situation has become more complex with Muslim-Tamil religious conflict and the emergence of a splinter group within the LTTE.<sup>6</sup>

As in Indonesia/Aceh, all attempts to resolve the conflict in Sri Lanka have failed. But in contrast with GAM, the strength of the LTTE increased after the 2002 ceasefire. When the tsunami struck, the LTTE held a powerful position, Sri Lanka lacked an active peace process and security languished.

### ***Post-tsunami Indonesia/Aceh***

Aceh was the closest inhabited place to the earthquake's epicentre. The destruction affected about 2.8 million people, more than 60% of its 4.1 million inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> An estimated 200,000 people were killed and half a million displaced. The total damage equalled approximately \$4.45 billion,<sup>8</sup> equivalent to 2.2% of the GDP of Indonesia and the entire GDP of Aceh.<sup>9</sup> The actors involved in the conflict were equally affected. Facing a strained economy and

other internal conflicts, the GoI lacked the capacity to rehabilitate Aceh without international support. The new international presence provided a sense of security, particularly in the tsunami-affected areas. Suraiya, Director of the NGO, Flower Aceh, stated in an interview:

In the first week we saw dead bodies, but at the same time we saw opportunities ... it is really hard to say that Acehnese can benefit from such disaster ... we lost family but we also saw space. Before the tsunami ... under civil emergency ... no one could enter. The tsunami exposed the conflict in Aceh. Maybe this is one way for Aceh to get international support ... Everywhere we saw TNI helping ... at first I thought that TNI was just helping to be seen as good boys. But one day, I gave my respect to army soldiers because I saw them ... removing the dead bodies. For the first time ... I saw the human side of them. I gave a thumbs-up ... they smiled.

In other interviews, Acehnese intellectuals provided similar insights into spontaneous acts that crossed divides, creating empathy among foes. The government realised that it could kill people but not ideas: military might could not eliminate GAM. Thus the government and GAM capitalised on the humanitarian situation to save face and gain support from their more conservative constituents. The tsunami changed the conflict's dynamic by providing the missing element for peace – an exit strategy.

International actors such as former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, chairman of the Crisis Management Initiative, capitalised on the window of opportunity by formalising the peace process which resulted in the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU)

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(ICG 2005:60). A dispute about the proposed size of the security forces in Aceh almost wrecked the negotiations, according to an interviewee. However, he stated, 'if GAM signed the agreement, then 14,000 TNI and 9,000 police would remain in Aceh, and if GAM did not sign the agreement, it would face

the wrath of the international community'. GAM went with the agreement, and in this way the tsunami gave both sides a way out of the war. Interventions after the tsunami expedited the peace talks, resulting in recognition by the government of the right of Aceh to 'special autonomy' – a solution short of secession.

### ***Post-tsunami Sri Lanka***

Sri Lanka suffered an estimated 30,000 fatalities and over half a million people were internally displaced. The total damage was approximately 3.5 billion, 4.4% of Sri Lanka's GDP (PDMIN 2005). Several interviewees suggested the tsunami possibly averted another cycle of war and hoped that it would lead to renewed peace negotiations. Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda, of the University of Colombo, stated in an interview:

The tsunami occurred at a crucial moment in the peace process ... Negotiations had been suspended and the GOSL had changed its platform to national security based on failures in the ceasefire agreements. Also, attempts to bring the LTTE and GOSL together had failed and rumours suggested that the LTTE was planning a military operation. Thus, when the tsunami hit, the peace process was degrading. Also, relations between the Muslims and the LTTE in the east were deteriorating and there was a lot of violence between the two arising because of the split in the LTTE in the north and east.

Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Sri Lanka, observed in an interview that 'the tsunami's damage caused an interdependence of the two sides and there was a great deal of hope that interdependence would lead to further developments'. Kumar Rupasinghe of the Foundation for Coexistence stated, 'In the eastern city of Batticaloa, Sinhalese villages took meals to hundreds of Tamil refugees in camps.'<sup>10</sup> Kaushalya Naveratne of the Sewalanka Foundation observed that the east and north had been completely segregated, but the tsunami 'created an opportunity for Tamil and Sinhalese communities to communicate with the each other. This helped to break down stereotypes.'

However, the cooperation quickly dissipated. Tamils complained that the government had failed to provide adequate assistance. Muslims felt ignored and discriminated against.

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Inter-communal recriminations resurfaced; hope and expectations plummeted. The veneer of humanitarian will rubbed off as both parties quickly resorted to the rational calculation of their positions and the potential impact of any move toward or away from a peace process. The Sri Lankan government acted to pre-empt the LTTE from exploiting the tsunami to gain

international sympathy, recognition and direct assistance, and it prevented UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and other dignitaries from visiting LTTE-controlled areas.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, both parties realised that neither would receive assistance without cooperation. The government succumbed to international pressure and the two sides agreed to set up a joint mechanism called the Post-tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), an 'integrated operational management structure' for the purpose of 'planning, implementing and coordinating post-tsunami work' (Uyangoda 2007:24-26). Fearing the legitimisation of the LTTE, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists such as the People's Liberation Front, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), a group aligned with President Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), immediately challenged P-TOMS. Uyangoda writes:

The petitioners contended that ... there was no legally valid basis for the government to enter into an MOU with the LTTE, which was 'not an entity recognised by the law' [and] identified with terror, violence, death, and destruction ... The supreme court's determination legally validated the P-TOMS agreement ... However, the supreme court struck down three of the MOU's features (Uyangoda 2007).

After the JVP had successfully stalled P-TOMS, the political agenda changed totally with the impending presidential election in November 2005. 'Without judicial sanctions and political support ... P-TOMS became effectively null and void' (Uyangoda 2007:24-26). Tom Knappskog, Second Secretary in the Norwegian Embassy in Colombo, described the failure of P-TOMS as 'a huge opportunity lost'. Dr Norbert Ropers of the Berghof Research Centre observed that 'the tsunami only added to the old chaos' because of more money in circulation and 'fresh grievances based on inequality and inequity of aid'. Saravanamuttu says the collapse of P-TOMS led to polarisation, which intensified during the election. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's strategic alignment with the JVP, his accession to power, and the new government's policies against cooperation with the LTTE sent a clear signal. The tsunami created hope and led to initial cooperation, but both sides believed they could prevail militarily; political factors overcame humanitarian needs and international pressure. Uyangoda suggested in an interview that the context was not



opportune to capitalise on the situation, that the tsunami merely postponed conflict, and that the politicisation of aid allowed the situation to deteriorate into military confrontation.

### ***Peace in Aceh, War in Sri Lanka***

According to Zartman, parties resolve conflict only when they are ready to do so. This typically occurs when they run out of alternatives and can neither achieve decisive victory nor continue fighting. Conflicts become amenable to resolution when this ripe moment is achieved. Such a moment is often referred to as a 'Mutually Hurting Stalemate' (MHS). When the level of their commitment to a cause outweighs the importance of their grievances, the rebels often opt to continue fighting even if the grievances decline (Zartman 1995:9).

Prior to the tsunami, there was little indication that the parties in Sri Lanka perceived either the potential of the protracted stalemate to cause harm or the existence of 'an impending, past or recently avoided catastrophe' (Zartman 2003:19). Many interviewees expected that the parties, particularly the LTTE, would return to fighting. Given this situation, a ripe moment did not materialise when the tsunami hit; nor did disaster interventions significantly contribute to the emergence of such an opportunity. The two parties failed to engage successfully on even minimal humanitarian cooperation.

Zartman further suggests that conflicts, when treated early, are more likely to engender the conditions for an MHS. In Aceh, the quiet pre-tsunami talks between the government and the exiled GAM leadership can be considered early treatment (ICG 2005). While the Indonesian military had managed to undermine GAM's military capacity, the government recognised that a permanent resolution would not come about through force. GAM officials understood the weakness of its military option and feared imminent damage. Thus, the combination of an MHS and what Zartman calls a 'Mutually Enticing Opportunity' (MEO) created by the tsunami and tsunami interventions, nurtured a ripe moment (Zartman 2003:25). A face-saving opportunity opened for both parties, offering a way out. Political leaders require support from their constituents. To change course dramatically, especially during war, they need a strong rationale. The MEO, in this case, the tsunami, provided this justification. Nur Djuli, a GAM negotiator, noted:

Muksalmina, commander of GAM fighters ... near Banda Aceh ... saw his village swept away, all members of his family and those of his men were gone ... without being able to do anything to help ... The whole village is gone, together with a battalion of the TNI based in that village. He asked me on the phone: 'Big brother, what am I doing here? Who am I fighting for and whom am I fighting against now? All my people are gone; all my enemies are gone.'<sup>12</sup>

Such sentiments enabled GAM officials to mobilise their militias for peace. As for the government, the newly elected vice-president 'called his closest advisors together to work in secret on a plan for peace' (ICG 2005). When the tsunami struck, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice-President Jusuf Kalla capitalised on the humanitarian imperative to gain popular support. Nurturing this political will, the international presence significantly alleviated GAM's sense of insecurity, a critical barrier to negotiated settlements of intra-state wars. Research by Stephen Stedman of Stanford University draws attention to the 'fear of settlement', or the 'fear of being double-crossed' as a key dilemma in peace settlements (Stedman 1991). This is a condition arising from the fact that for settlement agreements to succeed, 'parties must accept vulnerability and place their security in the other's hands' (Uyangoda 2007:6).

Interviews with TNI and GAM representatives illustrated this distrust. A TNI officer asked, 'Is GAM serious about giving up its guns? TNI knows that they are not giving all of their weapons ... we are concerned that GAM will use this time to recruit new members.' GAM representative Tengku Kamaruzzaman stated, 'TNI is still making lists of GAM members.'

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***The influx of international money offered ex-GAM combatants economic opportunities and the chance to return to a normal life.***

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A recently disarmed GAM cadre stated, 'The hard part was giving up my gun ... Everyone knows who I am, including the TNI.' He expressed concern about his livelihood and what would happen when the INGOs left. Prior to the tsunami, the prospects for GAM

members to return to their villages were not attractive. The influx of international money offered ex-GAM combatants economic opportunities and the chance to return to a normal life. Thus, the international community was apparently successful in providing a perception of physical security and economic opportunity (Burke & Afnan 2005:40).

As for Sri Lanka, Uyangoda observed in an interview:

The tsunami struck when the source of state power was in debate and fundamental questions regarding the deteriorating peace process were on the table. Thus, the tsunami created a window of opportunity for a joint humanitarian mechanism, but the timing in relation to the context of the peace process was not symmetrical. The LTTE and GoSL's negotiations of state power were diverging. The LTTE wanted to be seen as an equal and the GoSL did not want to legitimise the LTTE.

GAM and the Indonesian government were looking for a way out of war. In contrast, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE sought ways to gain power and mobilise constituents. The tsunami provided both options.

### ***Post-tsunami Interventions: Dividers or Connectors?***

Before the genocide in Rwanda, many relief workers recognised that international aid often fuelled war. The 'Do No Harm' (DNH) concept emerged from this concern. Its basic assumption is that 'when international aid is given in the context of a violent conflict, it becomes part of that context and thus also of the conflict' (Anderson 1999:145). DNH takes into account the nature and context of conflicts by identifying 'dividers' and 'connectors'. This way, interventions can be planned and implemented to serve connectors instead of enhancing dividers. Peter Uvin, among others, recognised the potential role of humanitarian assistance to mitigate or exacerbate conflicts, and the concept of 'conflict sensitivity' became widely accepted. In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) distributed the manual, *Conflict-sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding*. Despite these efforts and previous lessons learned, research findings suggest that tsunami interventions lacked conflict sensitivity and caused harm. The following section explores these topics.<sup>13</sup>

#### ***Conflict awareness***

According to Uvin, conflict awareness entails an 'examination of the conflicting parties, their ideology and relations with local populations; their aspirations with regard to international acceptance; the resource flows; and regional dimensions' (Uvin 1999:17). In Sri Lanka, two categories of humanitarian actors emerged. The first were organisations that had operated in the country for a long time and had adequate knowledge about the

conflict. Other organisations rushed in with little knowledge or sensitivity about the conflict and often created conflict-blind programmes, which led to inter-communal tension. For example, the distribution of aid to only the tsunami-affected people in the south, who are mostly Sinhalese, exacerbated tensions with the tsunami-affected populations in the north and the people displaced by war who are mostly Tamil and Muslim.

In Aceh, many relief agencies behaved similarly. Only a few organisations and staff members responded affirmatively when asked, ‘Do you think the INGOs understand the context?’ Martha Thompson, Director of the Rights in Humanitarian Crises Programme, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, reported:

The overwhelming issue in the first two months of response was the naiveté of most agencies. They just did not understand the nature of the conflict ... the nature of counter-insurgency and the way agencies were being manipulated to support the Indonesian authorities’ bigger plans for Aceh and its people.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, a few agencies that had developed relations with the conflicting parties before the disaster helped to implement practical components of the peace process. For example, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) clandestinely supported the GOI in the reintegration of political prisoners because it lacked the ability to achieve this within the time frame agreed in the formal negotiations (ICG 2005:7).

In Sri Lanka, international organisations’ lack of conflict awareness resulted in inter-communal tensions. Political entrepreneurs capitalised on these tensions to mobilise constituents. As a result, tsunami interventions increased polarisation between the government and LTTE, exacerbating the alienation of the Muslim population. In Aceh, the lack of conflict sensitivity did not have a major impact on the peace process at the Track 1 level evidenced by the MOU.<sup>15</sup>

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However, several interviewees stated that international relief has been a mixed blessing. While it provided increased access, protection, and economic dividends, it also undermined local capacities and caused further vulnerability. As the honeymoon created by the prospects of peace fades and the Track I agreements are implemented, the lack of conflict awareness could lead to problems. If the peace agreement holds, ‘the vertical conflict’ between GAM and the government is likely to become one ‘involving a horizontal scramble for resources and revenue streams, underpinned by widespread violent criminality’ (Barron *et al* 2005). As in Sri Lanka, such horizontal, or inter-communal, conflicts could be easily mobilised by spoilers on both sides.

### ***Accountability and competition***

Lack of accountability contributes to corruption, fosters misunderstanding, causes inappropriate behaviour, and raises false expectations. The tsunami created a situation where INGOs raised more funds than governments and inter-government agencies. The financial power of INGOs, combined with the freedom they enjoyed and low levels of accountability they were held to, frequently resulted in their arrogance toward local NGOs and disregard for government institutions, their inappropriate and ineffective use of resources and unhealthy levels of competition within and between them. Coupled with inflexible donor mandates and unrealistic project-based time constraints, these factors



caused beneficiaries to become mere objects – the more an organisation claimed to serve, the more money it could request regardless of organisational capacity or quality of the services. According to Jock Stirrat, an anthropologist at the University of Sussex:

The problem for most NGOs was to find ways of spending their money. 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. 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 (Stirrat 2006).

Sri Lankan interviewees stated that in several villages, more boats were provided than were required, frequently without engines and nets, and individuals linked to fishing through marketing and transportation did not get proper assistance. Such ill-considered approaches created tension and failed to serve the relief objectives. Substantial disparity also manifested in construction practices. Along the west coast of Sri Lanka, a multiplicity of sizes and types of housing is evident. The smaller, less ornate dwellings were abandoned while beneficiaries competed for spacious, fancier models. IDPs, relocated inland from the disputed buffer zone, remained in temporary shelters resembling horse stables. Many tsunami and war-affected IDPs in the north and east were housed in tents.

Competition over the target beneficiaries was also evident in Aceh. An INGO country director reported that his organisation had secured government approval to build a school. When a UN agency began building on the site, it emerged that it had outbid the INGO by promising the government a smarter, two-storey school. Frustration was also created, particularly in Aceh, by high expectations and unmet promises. Accessible knowledge, regularly publicised, of 'the big picture' involving agencies' activities and budgets could have created realistic expectations and augmented accountability. Moreover, in Aceh, such measures could have increased grassroots awareness of and participation in the peace process. In Sri Lanka, it could have fostered the initial inter-communal cooperation, built empathy among conflicting groups, and avoided the exploitation of false or oversimplified accusations.

### ***Donor mandates***

Inflexible donor mandates created inter- and intra-agency competition for projects, space, and beneficiaries because they had to 'fit into a relatively narrow conceptualisation of what relief is and which would be easily accepted by the donors back home' (Stirrat 2006). Consequently, greater attention was paid to regions with greater access to the media, sectors that were more visibly appealing (boats for fisherman), and populations that typically receive greater sympathy (women and children). INGOs and UN agencies staked out land, withheld information and competed over projects and partners. This created considerable harm: frustration and complaints from international staff, beneficiaries and locals; staff poaching and depletion of local capacities; duplication in certain areas and neglect in others; wasted and misused resources; poor role modelling; and negative implicit ethical messages.

Moreover, war-affected IDPs and others living in abject poverty rarely received assistance from relief and reconstruction initiatives (Adams 2005:2). In Sri Lanka, most of the estimated 390,000 war IDPs live in the north and east and are Tamil or Muslim.<sup>16</sup> Thus, discrimination between war- and tsunami-affected IDPs, aligned with pre-existing social divides, was easily politicised. That a proportion of the war-affected IDPs became tsunami IDPs further complicated the situation (Global IDP Project 2005:11).

The real and potential consequences of unrealistic and inappropriate donor mandates have major implications for peacebuilding and development in conflict situations. Mari Fitzduff and John Paul Lederach, prominent figures in the field of conflict resolution, suggest integrated approaches to conflict transformation at multiple levels. Competing agendas often caused by unrealistic and inappropriate mandates are an obstacle to such approaches.

### ***Coordination***

Agencies and individuals involved in the tsunami interventions acknowledged that coordination was important, but many lacked understanding of and commitment to doing it. As *Alertnet's* Emma Batha reports:

... flush with funds, aid agencies made individual assessments and distribution arrangements rather than coordinating through the United Nations ... Some communities were overwhelmed with aid, others were overlooked ... Bad co-ordination did not just waste cash but in some cases endangered the very communities agencies were trying to help ... Surgeons poured into Banda Aceh where 10 field hospitals were set up, but none worked at full capacity as relatively few tsunami survivors were injured. One UN witness in the Indonesian town of Meulaboh saw 20 surgeons competing for a single patient. By contrast there was a dearth of midwives and nurses. Women had to give birth without medical assistance (Batha 2005).

Despite the numerous meetings and coordination initiatives in Sri Lanka and Aceh, organisations had difficulty working together. Nearly two months after the tsunami, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) 'estimated that more than 250 organisations were operating in Aceh' but only 25% had registered their activities with UNOCHA on a regular basis (PDMIN 2005). INGO staff in Sri Lanka and Aceh suggested that the UN did not have the capacity to coordinate effectively and therefore, instead of being a facilitator, 'the UN became an obstacle' (PDMIN 2005). The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition report for Sri Lanka stated that

... OCHA's capacity to assist national coordination and to deploy quickly throughout the country has been weak for various reasons – lack of experienced senior staff in the field, slow deployment of longer-term staff, and insufficient resources available for even basic administration (Bennett *et al* 2005).

Even if coordinating bodies had the capacity, they lacked the authority. As interviewees stated, no one really wanted to be coordinated. Batha asserts that the vast amount of funding meant that aid agencies could 'make individual assessments and distribution arrangements rather than coordinate with one another and through the United Nations' (Batha 2005).

Beyond these pitfalls, coordination could have positive implications for peacebuilding. However, interviews and reports suggest that most conflict, relief and development interventions were not integrated and grassroots activities were disconnected with each other and Track 1 peace processes.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Participation***

Uvin states that 'in any society, there are people, organisations, and institutions that provide resources and opportunity in favour of peace, inter-ethnic/religious/regional collaboration,

reconciliation, and so on'. Therefore, 'mapping such indigenous resources is extremely important for effective intervention, for it allows donors to build on what already exists in society' (Uvin 1999:17). Disaster interventions were planned, designed, and implemented from the top down. Some interviewees suggested that there was a tendency for internationals to view beneficiaries as passive recipients. Disempowerment nurtured dependency, complacency and inappropriate aid.

In Sri Lanka, as indicated previously, many agencies failed to take ethnic and religious cleavages into account. In Aceh, ethnic divisions are less salient, but culture and religious values are strong. Lack of consultation with and participation by the local population in decision-making processes often led to culture and gender insensitivity (Batha 2005). Tess Bacalla, of the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism, wrote:

Personal supplies such as underwear and sanitary napkins have also apparently been excluded from the list of basic needs provided in the shelters. The lack of supply of long-sleeved shirts and headscarves – essential to Acehnese women, who are predominantly Muslim ... has remained unchecked (Bacalla 2005).

Empowerment of beneficiaries through participation in relief activities could have alleviated psychosocial trauma, provided needed skills, and, with the inclusion of national

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and local organisations and members of civil society, provided the agency necessary for social transformation. Acehnese and Sri Lankans said that the INGOs were poaching staff from local NGOs and undermining their capacity. This was confirmed in an IFRC report (Batha 2005). Despite the obvious need for and the benefits of including affected

populations and members of civil society in planning and implementation, humanitarian interventions remain paternalistic and non-inclusive.

## ***Learning the Lessons***

In response to the question introducing the foregoing section, evidence suggests that post-tsunami interventions served both dividers and connectors. The intersection of natural disasters and conflict situations is extremely difficult to negotiate. Lessons continue to go unlearned. The research team asked Dr Stephanie Schell Faucon, a senior advisor with the German Technical Corporation (GTZ) in Sri Lanka, 'What lessons have international organisations learned in post-tsunami reconstruction processes?' She replied, 'No lesson has been learned ... codes of conduct are difficult to apply and what we have is not good enough.' Interviews, observations and many reports suggest a need to improve the design and implementation of aid, particularly in conflict situations. It is also clear that only a few actors in state institutions, INGOs and UN agencies have received sufficient training in DNH and similar approaches that can help to serve connectors instead of enhancing dividers. Furthermore, even those actors who have the requisite experience, training and awareness seem to have difficulty in capitalising on such approaches.

Tentative recommendations of how the delivery of humanitarian assistance can be improved in situations of conflict and how peacebuilding and development activities can be integrated more effectively in disaster contexts are offered here:

### ***Flexible donor responses***

Fund-raising and resource allocation efforts should be flexible so that interventions can address inter-related situations effectively. Inflexible donor mandates create roadblocks. Changes in policy communicated candidly between agencies and donors can overcome these pitfalls while still allowing for outcome-driven goals and accountability to prevent corruption. *Medecins sans Frontieres* provides an example of this approach. When the INGO achieved its funding needs for tsunami relief, MSF began to solicit 'unrestricted' donations to provide emergency medical care to victims of ongoing conflicts in places such as the Darfur region of Sudan<sup>18</sup>

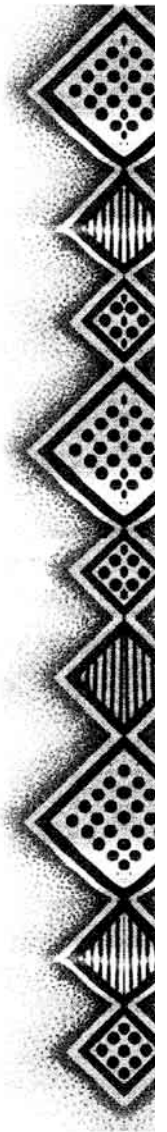
### ***Adapting to domestic contexts***

Relief interventions and development initiatives in conflict situations should be context-appropriate. Sunil Bastian of the Centre for Poverty Alleviation suggested in an interview that the linkages between natural disasters and pre-existing conditions are not widely understood.

*Cross-learning:* International and national staff play a crucial role in humanitarian and conflict-related interventions and should therefore receive interdisciplinary training to build their capacity to work in such complex environments. Jackson states that 'donors and agencies are finding the need for the skills to intervene across a broad spectrum that covers relief, development, rehabilitation ... human rights protection, advocacy and peacebuilding' (Jackson 2001). Sustainable development and conflict transformation are interdependent. Therefore, disaster relief and development projects planned and implemented without a 'conflict lens' are less sustainable. Relief, conflict resolution and humanitarian organisations and practitioners should therefore understand each other's mandates, roles, and positions and work together. Cross-learning can facilitate this process.

*Contingency plans:* Contingency plans and fallback mechanisms should be a regular component of peacebuilding. When the joint mechanism P-TOMS failed in Sri Lanka, and in the absence of a contingency plan, polarisation filled a vacuum. The international community could have worked more closely with national and local bodies to reduce the risk of failure at the Track I level. Although the peace process was on the right track in Aceh, leaders of both parties warned that failure would result in extreme violence. That did not happen, but if formal negotiations had failed, no feasible plan would have been in place to prevent a total collapse. The Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland (Fitzduff 2002) and the National Peace Accord in South Africa (Marks 2000) are examples of contingencies that supported fragile, prolonged and volatile peace processes.

*Reflecting on lessons learned:* Scholars and practitioners, bilateral donors, INGOs, UN agencies and others involved in relief, development, and conflict resolution should engage in a macro-discussion regarding the system of international intervention. The lessons identified in this article are not new. Many feature in studies such as *Disasters and Development* (Cuny & Abrams 1983). Most conflict/peace and development practitioners are intelligent, well intentioned and hard working. Why do they repeat their mistakes? One answer is that the problems they face are systemic, suggesting that the ways in which international aid is planned, distributed and conducted require re-evaluation. Some might argue defensively that the tsunami was unique and that the lessons learned are not transferable. This is plausible. However, since the completion of this research, one of the authors assessed the impact of international intervention on the conflict in Nepal. The findings, though less resolute, were almost identical: inflexible and inappropriate donor mandates; disparity in aid distribution; lack of effective coordination;



conflict insensitivity; low levels of participation; and undermining of local capacities. A macro discussion at this level is beyond the scope of this article.

**Conclusion**

In the tsunami's wake, hope arose that catastrophe and the resultant humanitarian spirit would create a window of opportunity to mitigate conflict. Expectations were based on levels of destruction, prospects for inter-group cooperation and the international presence. Outcomes in Sri Lanka and Aceh suggest that these variables lack agency unless other subjective and objective situations are fulfilled. In Sri Lanka, the generous flow of international assistance did not significantly alter the context or break the impasse between

***Major catastrophes and the resulting inflow of resources and support in situations where power and identity are central to a conflict neither bring credible incentives nor foster the political will for peace.***

the conflicting parties. Indeed, humanitarian interventions sometimes exacerbated old tensions and created new ones. Major catastrophes and the resulting inflow of resources and support in situations where power and identity are central to a conflict neither bring credible incentives nor foster the political will for peace. However, when

opposing parties perceive few prospects for military victory and pre-existing conditions are ripe, they can harness the opportunity to save face and mobilise their political base. In Aceh, this condition, combined with significant international presence and strategic intervention, facilitated a successful peace process.

PETER BAUMAN is an international consultant for development and conflict resolution organisations.

MENGISTU AYALEW is an experienced diplomat who has served as a counsellor with the Ethiopian Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.

GAZALA A. PAUL is the founder and Managing Trustee of Samerth, an India-based humanitarian relief and peacebuilding organisation.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> [www.oxfam.org/en/programs/emergencies/tsunami](http://www.oxfam.org/en/programs/emergencies/tsunami) and [www.msf.org/msfinternational](http://www.msf.org/msfinternational)

<sup>2</sup> Indonesia has been engaged in several intra-state conflicts. The province of Aceh on the tip of Sumatra is the location of one of these.

<sup>3</sup> The information in this article is based on more than 100 interviews conducted in Sri Lanka and Indonesia/Aceh and participatory observations in various sites involving people affected by both the tsunami and the conflicts. In Sri Lanka, the researchers visited Jaffna and environs in the north; Mallaitivu, Trincomalee, Ampara and other villages and communities in the east; and Hambantota, Matara, Galle and Kalutara in the south. In Indonesia, the discussions and interviews were held in Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, Pidie, Sigli, Lhong and Jakarta. A listing of the interviewees and the research questions is accessible in a report of the study, which can be found at [peterbauman@yahoo.com](mailto:peterbauman@yahoo.com). Interviewees are not always identified in the text because of confidentiality agreements.

<sup>4</sup> The conflict resulted in approximately 12,000 deaths and massive displacement.

<sup>5</sup> The Muslim community makes up about 8% and the rest are Burghers, Veddahs and Malays.



<sup>6</sup> The Muslims in Sri Lanka were at one time considered an integral part of the Tamil ethnic group. But as the LTTE infiltrated the north and east, the Muslims felt threatened and dissociated themselves from the Tamil liberation movements. This led to extreme violence against the Muslims, which in turn resulted in fear, insecurity, and the solidification of another ethnic cleavage (De Silva 1999).

<sup>7</sup> [www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk) 2005

<sup>8</sup> [www.adb.org/media](http://www.adb.org/media) 2005

<sup>9</sup> [www.siteresources.worldbank.org](http://www.siteresources.worldbank.org) 2005

<sup>10</sup> *USA Today* World report, 11 November 2005.

<sup>11</sup> 'UN Chief Restricted from Tiger Areas', BBC News South Asia, published 8 January 2005; available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/4156763.stm>

<sup>12</sup> This passage was presented to the researchers during an interview with a senior GAM commander and later confirmed in 'Considering Peace together with Achenese Guests', a speech written by M.N. Djuli and delivered on 26 September 2005 at Waseda University, Japan.

<sup>13</sup> The researchers developed the sub-headings to frame relevant topics found in the literature and discussed by scholars and practitioners and those directly and indirectly affected by tsunami interventions.

<sup>14</sup> 'Disaster Globalisation: Evaluating the Impact of Tsunami Aid', policy briefing paper, July 2005; available at [www.famin.tufts.edu](http://www.famin.tufts.edu)

<sup>15</sup> Track 1 level usually refers to the senior political level. Senior members of GAM and the GOI involved in the peace process in Indonesia/Aceh would be an example of Track 1.

<sup>16</sup> [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

<sup>17</sup> 'Reflecting on Peace Practice', a project of the Collaborative for Development Action; available at [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com)

<sup>18</sup> 'One Year After the Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster', MSF Operations & Financial Overview, 9 December 2005; available at [www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news/sasia\\_tsunami/index.cfm](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news/sasia_tsunami/index.cfm)

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