

EVOLVING ROLE OF THE NGO SECTOR IN POST-TSUNAMI RECOVERY OF SRI LANKA – ISSUES OF TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY & LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

Mr. Jeevan Thiagarajah

Executive Director, The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA)

Introduction

The role of NGOs in the post-Tsunami recovery and reconstruction process needs to be placed in the wider context of the utility and the need for interventions by NGOs. For some, the imperative to do so is derived from the belief to protect the core of human lives from environmental, economic, food, health, personal, political threats and/or wants, in other words, the provision of human security. The commitment to the protection of human dignity should also be seen in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, which include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development; a pledge of all 191 UN Member States to meet by the year 2015. Further, Sri Lanka has subscribed to the social agenda set out in the Social Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The Charter encompasses a broad range of targets to be achieved across the region in areas of poverty eradication, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resources development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children. This broad canvas of goals and rights to be claimed is the environment for the State and Humanitarian Agencies to engage in the delivery of services and resources providing for protection and dignity in the lives of citizens.

Contextual Analysis

The post-Tsunami environment of intervention in Sri Lanka is also in the backdrop of a desire and a felt need to sustain a process that addresses post-conflict recovery, which in itself requires a number of critical interventions. These include; restoring livelihoods of the displaced, restoration and development of infrastructure, regaining and making land productive, creating the necessary social economic framework for overall development and inter-phase with national development of affected areas. Whilst similar sets of issues are faced by those affected by the tsunami, it is also true that in many instances those affected by both the conflict as well as the Tsunami, are one and the same. Another factor, which requires attention, is less developed areas and persons who are socially and economically vulnerable in other parts of the country. Hence, planning for intervention requires sensitivity and

a continuous review of impact and needs in the overall macro economic framework of the country.

Operating Principles

Given this environment, Agencies involved in the early stages of relief moving to recovery and reconstruction need to consider subscribing to operating principles, which guide the work of disaster intervention, in addition to, adhering to guidelines in methods of work.

These include:

- 1] **Subscription to the International Standards**-International Code of Conduct for Disaster Interventions, Guiding Principles for the protection of the Internally Displaced Persons and adherence to Sphere Minimum Standards.
- 2] **Consultation and Participation** - Interventions should not be imposed and should ensure adequate consultation and participation to enable programmes to be effective, lasting and equitable.
- 3] **Respect for Religion, Culture and Customs** - The Programmes should be designed respecting culture, structures and customs of affected persons.
- 4] **Understanding the local context** - The context of Project activity is quite often dynamic. It is important to be aware of the issues and the environment including the key personalities and social groups as well as their dynamics with a view to being sensitive to local conflicts.
- 5] **Transparency and communication** - Affected populations have a right to be informed of the nature of Assistance Programmes and their Implementation. It is a fundamental duty of Agencies to disclose in full Assistance and Resources raised in the name of people and in their use.
- 6] **Grievance Processes** -Mediation and Arbitration facilities should be available in the context of Disaster Intervention.
- 7] **Maximizing Economic Recovery by strengthening local capacities**-Intervention in the areas of livelihood have a number of critical components. It includes reinstatement as well as regeneration. Reinstatement could be restoration of assets and regeneration with development beyond. In the restoration of assets, it is critical, for example, that boats are accompanied with engines, nets, wires, hooks etc. Whilst, on the other hand if a sewing machine is provided, the access to market and material needs consideration, unless it is purely for domestic purposes. It is also true that principal sources of community income needs to be understood. In regeneration, planning with macro-structures is essential including the sustainability of livelihood. For example, if livelihoods of farmers and fishermen in affected areas are enhanced, without a corresponding expansion of the market, competition

- may arise with unaffected farmers and fishermen with unforeseen consequences.
- 8] **Co-ordination** - It is a pre-requisite for professional conduct by all Agencies to share information, work with coordinating structures including structures of Government, as well as beneficiary communities.
 - 9] **Capacitating Disaster Preparedness and reducing vulnerabilities**- Interventions should assist in the development of community preparedness for disasters and the reduction of vulnerabilities.

Opportunities and Options

In the current context of the post-tsunami period, the availability of resources and the presence of Agencies has seen a very significant rise from that which existed prior to the 26th of December. As at April, 347 Humanitarian Agencies working in the twelve affected districts, have provided details to the Governments' Centre for Non-Governmental Sector (CNGS). Of which 110 are new agencies seeking registration to work in Sri Lanka. These Agencies have indicated willingness to work in 16 sectors, namely Capacity Building/ Governance, Disaster Response, Education, Environment, Fisheries, Health, Shelter, Livelihoods, Micro Finance/SMEs, Power, Protection/Psychosocial, Railways, Roads and Ports, Tourism, Water and Sanitation, and Coordination with a majority interested in the Livelihood sector. The scale of intervention, is one in which the Humanitarian Sector could well become a Development Partner in the country.

In a recent media release it was estimated that, "all NGOs put together have a larger commitment than top four donors World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Japan Bank of International Cooperation"¹. However, to rise up to this opportunity, we need to critically question our ways of working, attitudes and competencies to be identified as a Development Partner. It is true that the magnitude of funds made available through global public compassion was never foreseen. This has led in some instances to Agencies stopping the collection of funds, whilst, others have become involved in activities, which have not been their traditional vocation. Equally, the capacity of the economy and the availability of Human Resources to absorb the sudden influx of assistance have led to stresses and strains. Currently, one sees recruitment for an array of vacancies from agencies, almost on a weekly basis, for a number of programme interventions. In the eyes of independent observers, four months since the 26th of December, the

¹ Cassim Nisthar; Government, donors busy on post tsunami work plan for Kandy summit; Daily Mirror; Sri Lanka; 2005.

overall environment has potential for waste, corruption, leakages and possibly a loss of credibility and confidence.

In terms of resources, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka in its weekly updates as at 29 April, indicated that the banking system has registered an inflow of funds from international sources, (other than from Governments) amounting to Rs.12.1 Billion of which, Rs.1.6 Billion has been designated to the Government of Sri Lanka. Hence, the amount of resources, which have been officially registered for Humanitarian intervention outside of the Government, amounts to approximately US\$ 105 Million. It has been estimated that an amount exceeding US\$ 750 Million up to a Billion Dollars are in the hands of the non-profit sector for purposes of investing in post-Tsunami recovery. A considerable portion of resources earmarked for Sri Lanka still remains offshore. It is likely that the longer this situation continues questions of accountability and transparency will arise.

The challenge of managing, retaining and sustaining credibility of the process of intervention, recovery and development is a task for Government, Private Sector, Citizens and Agencies. All these efforts have got to, in the final analysis provide adequate and timely assistance in a manner sought by the ultimate beneficiary. In addressing these issues, we need to question our willingness to allow for critical evaluation of our collective working methods, the use of resources, the utility therein, including impact, and examine options to work as partners with the Government, local authorities, the private sector, citizens groups and other organized entities. We need to also find methods by which resources held in trust by us, can be shown from the point of pledging, to commitment, in conjunction with expenditure, as an on-going process. The totality of funds earmarked for recovery from the tsunami, need to be identified and factored into planning and development.

As we define the vision and the sphere of our work for the next three to five years, we may consider a few recommendations, in conjunction with related issues, as set out below;

- The Partnership of Government, Funds and Agencies in forging an effective collaborative framework (sources of financing, scale, coordinated approaches to planning, implementation, and communication);
- The conceptualization and the maintenance of an environment which fosters investment and development of benefit to all in the country (optimizing standards for accountability and transparency and effective utilization of resources by providing an investor climate which inspires confidence and sustains resource interests);
- The targeting of interventions which accomplish the attainment of specific goals and outcomes (engagement within contours of national and regional development goals, adhering to critical review and revisions periodically);

- Working practices which retain a balance between direct implementation and financing by Agencies of scale (commitment to foster local capacities, fast track direct impact and forge international and national partnerships);
- The harnessing of finances by sector and the leveraging of scale for purposes of maximizing development (resource mobilization and coordination to leverage economies of scale);
- Ensuring human contact and a human face in planning and implementation in a manner inspiring confidence in communities (effective communication rooted on the right to information of beneficiaries with adequate feed back mechanisms);
- The identification of exit strategies of our collective interventions where necessary. (Given that investments and resources are finite in nature, exit strategies are a prerequisite for effective planning and sustaining impact)

The Government of Sri Lanka has recognized the utility and the role of the NGO Sector. We have seen our potential but not fully harnessed our collective strength. There is much to be done to inspire confidence and to show visible results of all our efforts. The opportunity exists to work together at a momentous time, as Partners and address many long-standing issues that have affected the development of our country as well as that of the region.

References:

Cassim Nisthar; Government, donors busy on post tsunami work plan for Kandy summit; Daily Mirror; Sri Lanka; 2005.

Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs;

Common Operating Principles and Guidelines for Tsunami Reconstruction; Jakarta, Indonesia; April 2005.

Global Campaign for Free Expression; Article 19; Article XIX Publication; London; April 2005.

Owen Taylor; Challenges and opportunities for defining and measuring human security; Disarmament Forum; 2004.

Re-Build Sri Lanka; The Importance of Re-instating Livelihoods; Background material at the CHA Operational Meeting

Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response; Sphere Handbook; Revised 2004.

Submissions made by members of Humanitarian Agencies

Thampi K. Gopakumar; Ensuring Effective Project Monitoring and Evaluation in Tsunami Relief Operations; Public Affairs Foundation, Bangalore; April 2005.

UN – OCHA; The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

