

The Indian Ocean Tsunami Preliminary Field Report on Sri Lanka

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After concluding our field observations in India, the social science team traveled to Colombo, Sri Lanka on January 28th and proceeded with the Sri Lankan portion of the reconnaissance trip from January 29 – February 1st. In that time period, the team traveled from Colombo to Kandy for a meeting with Dr. Stanley Samarasinghe and his colleagues at the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES). ICES has an emphasis on conflict, governance, and development. ICES staff provided an overview of disaster relief operations as well as a background on the political climate in the country – especially in regards to ethnic and religious divisions and their respective impact on the disaster relief activities. Dr. Ram Alagan (also at ICES and a geographer by training) was assigned to be our escort and interpreter during our stay in Sri Lanka. His insights, contributions as well as all the background information (cultural, historical, and political) that he provided was extremely important for our field research and the observations and conclusions that we generated for this report.

From Kandy, we traveled to a number of communities impacted by the tsunamis, including geographical areas in the east and south of Sri Lanka. We spent a significant amount of time in eight (8) communities that were particularly hard hit by the tsunamis, including: Trincomalee, Kinniya, Balapitiya, Kahawa, Relief Camp Peraliya, Hambantota, Paiyagala, and Galle. Moreover, we stopped at numerous other heavily damaged areas along the way, visiting such facilities as a grade school, a salt harvesting operation, and other businesses impacted by the disaster. We also had meetings with representatives from UNICEF, a local community based organization (Social Service Educational Development Organization - SSED), local residents operating under the auspices of USAID, as well as with organizers of relief camps and a field hospital (from countries such as Italy, Austria, and the United States).

Compared to the communities we visited in India, the communities in which we conducted field observations in Sri Lanka experienced greater damage to the infrastructure (although this is in part due to the differences in the levels of socio-economic development between these two countries) and a greater loss of life. The number of deaths varied quite significantly from one community to another; we were provided with estimates ranging from 100s to several thousand lives lost as a direct consequence of the tsunamis. We observed hundreds of houses that were significantly damaged or totally destroyed. Nevertheless, some of these dwellings were still being used despite the obvious appearance that they were in danger of collapsing. In some communities, the housing and business stock were completely washed away. Many buildings

were completely reduced to rubble down to the foundation. It was quite common to observe temporary shelters (such as tents and other structures) located on top of the foundation where the house used to be or near the rubbles or whatever was left of the housing infrastructure.

Given the extent of physical damage and losses to the economic capacity of the communities we visited, a number of social science implications are evident and require extensive research. We provide a summary of some important observations in the following section.

1. A number of fishermen were uncertain about when they would return to their fishing activities and expressed sentiments, similar to those expressed in India, of simply wanting nets and boats to resume their work. Still, we saw many more fishermen engaged in fishing (both in boats and standing in the water) than we did in India. In fact, while fish was unavailable in restaurants in India, it was readily available in Sri Lanka.
2. As in India, the amount of compensation promised by the government for a destroyed boat was far less than the replacement cost. Although the disaster relief aid provided by the Indian government was clearly insufficient to meet the short- and long-term needs of the communities and the impacted populations, the process actually seemed to be much better coordinated and systematic in India relative to Sri Lanka. While in India almost all (if not all impacted communities) had received some type of government aid (a “standardized” package), in Sri Lanka it was very common to get reports in different communities that they had received little or no government aid. Moreover, there was a high level of skepticism (or pessimism) regarding the extent to which the government would fulfill the promises made in terms of the recovery process and the aid to be provided to communities; we encountered little hope that the government would follow through on the same. Indeed, some individuals we talked to questioned what the Sri Lankan government was doing with “all the external/international disaster aid it had received.” In Sri Lanka, communities seemed to be placing greater hope and confidence on the efforts and the work that was being carried out by NGOs. As in India, we were left with the impression that residents were uncertain about what would happen next and what assistance would be made available to them.
3. In the communities we visited, residents were well aware of government discussions to enforce a 100-meter buffer zone along the coast. We heard reports that the government had considered wider buffer zones but was yielding to pressures to keep the zone at 100 meters. As in India, the issue of relocation of fishing communities was particularly problematic. It was described to us that fishermen need to keep their boats and supplies near the shore. In addition, emphasis was made on the fact that, for example, the drawing in of nets is a community-wide activity and, thus, the community needs to be in the vicinity of where these tasks are taking place. Fishermen were also concerned that, if their communities were relocated, the government would eventually appropriate their land in the buffer zone and would sell it to outside developers. Many residents indicated that keeping possession of their land, held for many years, was of paramount importance to community residents and necessary for their economic sustainability. Given the degree of urbanization in the coasts of Sri Lanka (in other words, towns and cities with fishing segments rather than fishing villages – very different from what we observed in

India), it is difficult to imagine how relocation of such substantial districts will be achieved. While the residents we spoke with were afraid of another tsunami, for the most part, they wanted to stay where they were, along the sea.

4. In all of the communities that we visited – regardless of whether they were situated on the southeastern, southwestern, or northeastern coasts – residents strongly articulated the view that people on the other side of the country were getting more disaster relief aid. People also reported different views on the disaster aid relief process in Sri Lanka. In essence, it seemed that there was no real institutionalized or systematic governmental disaster relief process underway, at least not according to the diverse sets of individuals that we encountered during our field observations in Sri Lanka.
5. NGOs have played a significant role in the distribution of material resources in Sri Lanka. Some of the NGO activities included construction of temporary shelters, distribution and preparation of food, and debris removal. Their presence, however, seemed inconsistent, from one community to another, during the time period that we were there.
6. The construction of temporary shelters varied greatly between camps, although perhaps less so than in India. Many consisted of donated tents, others of makeshift tarp tents, while a significant number of people appeared to be staying in or very near the remains of their damaged homes. While most of the temporary shelters in India were just inland of the point where the tsunami had reached (for example, in the sector of a village farthest away from the shore), temporary shelters in Sri Lanka were more often established in the midst of the damage, surrounded by debris, and well within the impacted zone. This may be a result of variety of factors, such as land tenure issues or lack of availability of land in areas relatively close to the shore that would allow people to continue with their daily employment (e.g., fishing), among other factors. Actually, as noted above, many fishermen that we talked to and observed in Sri Lanka (contrary to what was observed in India) were already actively engaged in fishing and thus needed to be near their working areas.
7. Proposals for temporary housing consisting of 300-square-foot apartments were being considered by the government. Several of our sources were critical of this proposal pointing out the unsuitability of these dwellings for fishing communities.
8. Extensive coastal erosion was observed in many of the communities that we visited. The force of the tsunamis, after the waves came crashing inland, generated what seemed like extremely large craters which can only be described as “remarkable” or “dramatic.” These types of observations were generated in our field research throughout many of the coastal communities that we visited. The impact of the tsunamis, as well as the extensive amount of infrastructure (including housing and even cemeteries) located very near the shore (in many instances only several feet away from the shore) has very important implications for coastal erosion and degradation, as well as the disaster recovery and reconstruction process.

9. Many rumors were circulating in the country. We heard of a rumor that the American Government engineered the tsunami as part of an initiative to take over these regions. Others recounted prank calls that another tsunami was imminent, which resulted in large numbers of people evacuating in several communities.
10. Many people we talked to, through our interpreter, reported impacted sleeping patterns, increased stress levels, and interruption of daily activities. The magnitude of lives lost clearly plays an important role in both individual and community recovery. Much more so than in India, we encountered many people in Sri Lanka who had lost multiple family members and they were quick to convey the difficult times they were having coping with these losses, including the loss of their houses, their boats, and their livelihoods. Without probing, men told of wives who died while selling vegetables in the marketplace by the sea and children noted that classmates had lost family members or that teachers were no longer there. Although we did not directly speak with women who had lost their husbands or children, one might expect them to report similar experiences. The impact that these community-wide human losses and the associated grief have on the short-term and long-term recovery of communities merits further exploration.
11. We observed significant variation in the extent to which local residents appeared to be playing an active role in recovery operations. In some communities, victims did not seem to be proactive but appeared to be waiting for outside assistance. In contrast, some communities included activities where residents were actively engaged in the recovery and reconstruction process. For example, in one community, a local school principal and community leader had a working relationship with a USAID official who has had a presence in that community for several years. While USAID provided the economic resources, the locally-based group of residents provided volunteer workers for debris removal and recruited other residents to participate – greatly expanding the community involvement in the rehabilitation efforts. On the day we visited, the principal reported that 400 people were clearing debris in various locations; we also observed that the cleanup process was quite extensive during our field observations. In another community, residents were also engaged in debris removal activities using both heavy equipment and hand tools; we observed at least three distinct groups of people, each numbering between 30-40 individuals, actively engaged in this process. The president of the community was observed in direct manual labor along side foreign volunteers. We should also note that NGOs and individual foreign volunteers were quite active in this camp as well, providing drinking water, staffing a clinic, and engaging the children in recreational activities.
12. As noted above, in Sri Lanka, the communities were more urban and more diverse in their economies relative to India. Issues relating to relative impact of the tsunamis, cohesiveness of the communities, access to community resources, access to community support, proportion of community (versus individual) impact, distribution and allocation of disaster relief aid, and the role of NGOs and local governments in the recovery and reconstruction process are critical issues that require in-depth analysis.

13. It is noteworthy that the country's longstanding civil unrest between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government provides a background tension to nationwide disaster planning and management efforts. We heard repeated assertions from a variety of sources that political relationships and interests were affecting the allocation of disaster assistance, the control of donated resources, and the negotiation of the general relief effort. These "political tensions" in Sri Lanka provide an important contrast to India and other impacted countries that will allow for extensive comparative studies in terms of the impact of these political conflicts on the short- and long-term recovery process following the tsunamis.
14. In our discussions with aid organizations and residents, a connection between disaster vulnerability, resilience, development issues, and political context was noted. For example, some organizations working in the area were able to expand their focus on development concerns and address tsunami-related issues in a manner similar to that of their usual activities. At the same time, however, some successes achieved in recent years experienced setbacks. For example, we heard accounts of planned initiatives that were delayed in order to focus on disaster relief and recovery as well as accounts of buildings – such as schools – that had been built in conjunction with development initiatives but were destroyed by the tsunami. As noted above, the ongoing conflict and tensions between political groups were suggested to be a factor in the response and potential recovery of various regions. As a consequence, the effects of the disaster on a number of societal processes as well as on the prospects for recovery must be viewed in the context of pre-existing social, economic, cultural, and political conditions.