Capacity building, accountability and humanitarianism in Sri Lanka

by Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis

This article argues that capacity building has been used uncritically by humanitarian staff in international NGOs and UN agencies throughout much of the 1990s. The authors contend that capacity building holds out both promise and problems in the context of humanitarian policy and practice.

Its promise lies in the various contributions of skilled staff working for well-financed international organizations to national or local organizations with compatible mandates, skills and projects. Herein lies the potential for accountability between the two scales of organizations. Its problems are more subtle, and lie in the very concept of capacity building as something invented by the West (or North) to 'help' the East (or South) overcome its deficiencies. To illustrate this point, the authors analyse findings based on recent research conducted in Sri Lanka.[1] Due to protracted civil war in the country, the role of international NGOs and UN agencies is long-standing and ongoing; their relations with local and national organizations in Sri Lanka are a major focus of the study. Capacity building in conflict zones must be undertaken with care, so as not to fuel or prolong the war. Furthermore, the war renders the question of accountability much more convoluted.

Capacity building in war zones

Capacity building is a means of engaging and strengthening local knowledge and skills to make people's livelihoods more secure. It implies outside intervention to augment or restore the well-being of persons adversely affected by any number of factors, including war, displacement, ecological disaster or state-sponsored dispossession. Capacity building builds on but departs from 'development' in a number of key ways. It acknowledges the prior existence of economic relations and modes of making a living that can be strengthened or restored, rather than fixed by foreign expertise; and it implies a time-limited intervention on the part of those providing the external assistance, assuming that sustainable livelihoods can either be restored or created *in situ* with appropriate planning.

A civil war has been raging in Sri Lanka for almost 20 years. Tamil and Sinhalese nationalist movements have contributed to the struggles but conflict between the security forces of the Sri Lankan Government and the separatist movement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has proven the greatest threat to the civilian population of Sri Lanka, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country. The government-controlled 'cleared' areas stand in contrast to the LTTE-controlled 'uncleared' territory that continually expands and contracts due to the vagaries of the war's ever-evolving 'front lines', 'no-man zones' and 'border areas.' There are displaced people on both sides of these lines, encompassing Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim groups, though the majority of the displaced in Sri Lanka are Tamil. Displacement has become a fact of life for many households. In 1999-2000 alone, thousands of newly displaced persons have had to re-start their lives, particularly in the northern region of the Wanni. The death toll from this war now exceeds 60,000.

To compare the colonizing powers of Sri Lanka (Portuguese, Dutch and British), or even the missionaries who visited the country, with the international humanitarian organizations that are currently located in Sri Lanka is to risk overstating the latter's influence in a country governed by an elected government but their respective aims are not dissimilar. The provision of social and economic infrastructure is an ongoing objective of international NGOs, such as CARE, CIDA (Canadian Development Agency), FORUT, MSF (Holland and France), OXFAM, Save the Children (UK, USA & Norway), WUSC (World University Services of Canada) and others operating in Sri Lanka.

Activities that would normally be provided by other sources in peacetime, such as education, vocational training and health services, and income generation projects for people in places adversely affected by the war, are implemented by international NGOs in concert with local and national NGOs. Considerable resources for these services are provided to nationally-based NGOs by the international NGOs. This is not a bad thing in itself but the relations of power embedded in these projects must be more self-consciously analysed, if any strong sense of accountability to Sri Lankan civil society, its nationally-based organizations with expertise and experience in such areas, and its governing bodies is to be forged.

The complexities of humanitarianism

As a humanitarian response, capacity building aims to address deficiencies within displaced populations, or at least disruptions to their livelihoods, to which outside expertise, experience or resources can be added to ameliorate the situation. Such objectives may be well-meaning and practical in peacetime but they become highly politicized in a war zone. Displaced populations on all

UNHCR Open Relief Centre, Sri Lanka, children repeatedly displaced by the ongoing conflict

sides of the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka, for example, may be 'taxed' by governing parties, such as the LTTE or the Sri Lankan government, to provide resources for fighting. The restoration of livelihoods in such a context is much less straightforward than the concept of capacity building to increase social and economic security in peacetime.

Capacity building also aims to augment and improve upon skills, experience and resources already situated in a given location. The idea that support for something as innocuous as education could become support for militarization is difficult to comprehend in such a context. Parents in LTTE-controlled areas of Sri Lanka have avoided sending their children to school because it is considered a training and recruitment ground for the Tiger rebel group. This is no unfounded fear for there have been instances where entire classes of students have disappeared to serve as LTTE cadres under the leadership of their teachers.

Both of these scenarios illustrate the politicization of what might be considered capacity-building practices. Similar arguments can also be posed *vis-à-vis* many of the capacity-building projects in the government-controlled areas which have enabled the state to pour money into the defence industry in the secure knowledge that the disbursement of services such as education and health is being facilitated by humanitarian agencies.

One must be vigilant, then, and extremely careful about the ways in which conventional development practices are transposed onto a highly politicized conflict zone, where the welfare of civilians is being negotiated on a constant basis.

For example, the use of participatory rural appraisal (PRA), a common assessment tool in development circles, is highly questionable in the Wanni area of northern Sri Lanka. PRA employs a methodology which involves the collection of household data, including the number of family members, their livelihoods, the household assets and income in terms of land, livestock and earnings. It includes family names and a 'social map' of who lives where, with whom and owns what. Such information in the hands of the LTTE for the purposes of monitoring the current military training and recruitment campaign could be disastrous. In the hands of the armed forces it could also be dangerous, partic-

ularly in the increasingly hostile and suspicious climate that reigns in the Eastern Province (after the recent assassination attempts on the Sri Lankan President and the Prime Minister) where every Tamil person is perceived as a potential 'terrorist'.

In order to be accountable to the people one aims to assist, the concept and practice of capacity building must be linked to the geopolitics of conflict, the catalysts of displacement and the uneven impact that dislocation has across differences of gender, class, caste and ethnic identity. This is not to suggest that the sharing of resources proportionately among competing factions to the conflict is sufficient (ie help all sides in order to remain neutral and apolitical); rather, the political crisis in Sri Lanka cannot be separated from the humanitarian crisis it generates.

Consultations with displaced persons throughout Sri Lanka, collated by OXFAM GB and Save the Children UK into the recently-released *Listening to the Displaced* report,[2] raise a salient point: people's needs, concerns and material well-being would not be an issue if the war could be stopped and people's liveli-

hoods restored. The mobility of people and goods is highly restricted because of the war, a pattern which distorts markets and prevents access for many to better jobs and educational opportunities. Political solutions are critical to the success of capacity building in terms of the long-term security of people's livelihoods.

Alternative solutions and examples of effective practice

It is, however, much easier to diagnose the problems with humanitarian and development assistance in a conflict situation than to propose alternative solutions and examples of effective practice in such a context. Regardless of purported neutrality or apolitical status, humanitarian work is always fraught with politics. Capacity building in Sri Lanka, for example, will always be circumscribed by perceived socio-cultural alliances or simply one's cultural background as Muslim, Tamil or Sinhalese. Once basic food, shelter and health services have been established, changing prevailing attitudes and strengthening civil organizations to reduce conflict are central to humanitarian work in conflict areas. A practical *modus vivendi* can be forged in several ways and we offer here a few suggestions and examples:

a) Promoting inter-ethnic cooperation

International NGOs should work with national and local organizations of all ethnic groups but especially those working towards a peaceful political solution to the ethnic conflict by contesting the chauvinist elements within Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. Organizations which actively work against the often racist and stereotypical notions of 'other' should be sought, strengthened and encouraged to expand their work.

One example is the Butterfly Garden project in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka where children of various ethnicities, religions and cultural backgrounds are granted 'scholarships' to spend nine months together in an educational and play setting. This is a transformative approach to education which grapples with the cultural politics of that region. Promoting attitudes of acceptance and cooperation and forging friendships among these youth constitute a concrete step towards changing the attitudes and prejudices that fuel ethnic nationalisms.

Another example is the Kalmunai Peace Foundation, also located in eastern Sri Lanka (partially funded by OXFAM), which is a community-based organization of Tamil and Muslim men and women who seek to reduce inter-ethnic conflict in their region by acting as intermediaries and peace advocates in times of inter-ethnic tension and by promoting inter-ethnic interaction through cultural, extra-curricular and intellectual activities.

b) Transforming attitudes about gender

By identifying national and regional efforts already in place, international NGOs can work to strengthen or augment existing organizations by promoting positive social change through changes in gender roles/identities. Conflict tends to represent a period of instability and most often loss or suffering but the presence of international NGOs during such crises also represents an opportunity. People displaced from their jobs, schools and land can be provided with training, skills and education by existing institutions whose capacity can be strengthened and expanded by the international NGOs. An opening for change exists: societal attitudes about what women can and should do are dynamic.

For example, one of the most interesting and inspirational local feminist organizations in the Eastern Province is the Suriya Women's Development Centre which is run by a group of Tamil women displaced from various regions in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The support and funding they have received from organizations such as CIDA and HIVOS (Netherlands) has enabled them to broaden their scope of activism to provide legal assistance to displaced, battered and sexually violated women, to help displaced communities to mobilize themselves to secure their rights as well as identify productive forms of self-employment, and to form a cultural troupe which uses music, dance and drama to raise awareness, both locally and regionally, about the deleterious effects of ethnic chauvinism and patriarchy.

The challenge of changing social attitudes has also been taken up by international organizations such as World University Services of Canada

international NGOs might do well to revisit their personnel policies

(WUSC) which, in cooperation with local institutions in places like Trincomalee and Batticaloa, has provided additional funds for courses in welding, bicycle repair, carpentry and mechanics. This is nothing particularly new, except that many of these classes are full of young women; other classes mix young men and women together.

There can be no single recipe for capacity building. No module or training manual can provide all the political information, conceptual categories and cultural capital necessary for the successful implementation of practices to augment the existing foundations and skills of all places. Context matters; the historically and geographically constituted grounds for conflict that precipitate humanitarian intervention have to be understood and addressed before such efforts can be genuinely effective. If local and/or national actors in humanitarian efforts have no space to engage and shape the concept and practice of capacity building *in situ*, it risks becoming just another Western project.

Our research found that the politics of the Sri Lankan conflict were not always well-understood by the international staff implementing capacity-building projects. One explanation for this is the short-term duration of international staff contracts. Developing an understanding of the complicated and ever-changing dynamics and implications of this 20-year-old war in Sri Lanka is a huge project in itself, and yet how can someone with a one-year employment contract be expected to undertake this challenge effectively? International staff rely heavily on national employees for access to, information about, and understanding of Sri Lankan politics. More accountability on the part of international NGOs and UN agencies might be generated through longer contracts and commitments to international staff and the renewal of such contracts in a single place.

Likewise, international NGOs might do well to revisit their personnel policies so that the promotion of nationally-based staff is not artificially limited by a problematic local/international distinction between staff in international NGOs and

even UN agencies. Effectively, a kind of 'glass ceiling' for those hired locally exists in many of the international NGOs. The hierarchies that such divisions generate can serve to create turnover among committed national staff whose institutional memory tends to outlive those of more temporary international staff. Offering renewals for personnel on international contracts, where warranted, and dismantling barriers to promotion allowing access to more senior posts for national staff employed by international NGOs may well improve accountability to Sri Lankan society and serve the interests of the organizations themselves.

Accountability

Senior staff implementing capacity building have asked: "What is the value added to work done by international NGOs in conjunctions with local NGOs?" Genuine engagement between both parties (international and local) may be more cumbersome than working independently but it is one of the few measures of accountability to the places in which capacity building takes place. International NGOs can ask at least two questions to ascertain their accountability in a broad sense:

a) To what extent does the international NGO impart skills and resources to its national counterparts and consult with them to render itself redundant over time? (Is it even possible for an international NGO to be redundant in a conflict situation?)

b) To what extent does the international NGO render its national counterparts more sustainable, stable and able organizations?

Accountability is a sensitive issue for humanitarian organizations precisely because those who fund and administer such agencies are not the same groups as those who receive their services. Unlike a democratic municipality, province or nation-state whose constituents vote on policies, people and programmes to govern them, the beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance have less say as to what or who will help them and how (despite the pro-active efforts of many NGOs that promote 'the right to a say'). Thus the accountability of both international and national organizations providing such assistance is an even more critical issue.

Avoiding charitable relations between donors and beneficiaries requires genuine engagement between international humanitarian agencies and their national counterparts. The onus is on the international agencies to initiate such contact, to respond to the expertise and experience of national staff *in situ* by allowing them to shape the meaning and practice of capacity building at all levels, and to ensure that every effort is made to avoid arrogance, disinterest or indifference on the part of international staff towards such local 'capacity'.

Jennifer Hyndman is an assistant professor of geography at Simon Fraser University in Canada. Dr Malathi de Alwis is a senior research fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Jennifer Hyndman's book *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* was published in April 2000. ISBN 0 8166 3354 1. US$19.95. In it she critiques UNHCR's pattern of refugee camp management, observing how camp design shapes gender relations, imposes risks and burdens on working women, and sacrifices opportunities to empower refugees. Drawing on her field research among Somalis, in Somalia and Kenya, she challenges the political and cultural assumptions of current humanitarian practices. Contact: University of Minnesota Press, 111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520. Website: www.upress.umn.edu

Academic-practitioner working group on response to psycho-social needs of refugees and displaced persons

Humanitarian assistance agencies now routinely implement programmes explicitly targeting the 'psycho-social' needs of refugees and displaced persons. However, while the need for such interventions is now rarely disputed, the principles that should guide implementation remain a focus of considerable debate. As a field of work, psychosocial intervention remains characterized by a lack of consensus on goals, strategy and best practice.

This recently established academic-practitioner working group seeks to bring together key individuals and institutions for a focused two-year programme of action. The working group will be structured around a core group of eight institutions: Queen Margaret University College (Edinburgh), Refugee Studies Centre (Oxford), Programme on Forced Migration & Health (Columbia), Harvard, Save US, Christian Children's Fund and Randolph-Macon College, the International Rescue Committee and MSF-Holland.

In addition, one core group meeting each year will provide a wider 'Working Group Forum' for participation by key institutional stakeholders with representation from such agencies as CDC, WHO, UNHCR and UNICEF and also, particularly in the second project year, from Southern NGOs actively engaged in psychosocial work. The aim will be to seek unifying principles and practices from across the widest breadth of current activity with the minimum of duplication of effort.

The work programme aims to develop a framework; a resource inventory; a research and development agenda; and a programme of pilot applied field studies.

For more information, contact Dr. Alison Strang at Queen Margaret University. Email astrang@qmuc.ac.uk