Impact of the tsunami response on local and national capacities

by Arjuna Parakrama

The largest ever evaluation of an international humanitarian response found that most lives were saved by affected and neighbouring communities in the immediate aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. When the international community bypassed or appropriated local and national response, the impact was inefficient in terms of cost, effort and time.

The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC)[1] highlighted the disparity between the stated policies of international humanitarian actors and the operational realities in terms of direct execution, engagement with local capacity and community participation. It showed that when the aid system is under pressure in crisis situations, the imperative to deliver services is dominant.

There was lack of engagement at the earliest stage with community-based and local non-governmental organisations (CBOs and NGOs). Many of these had played a major role during the search-and-rescue phase but were marginalised during the relief process. Relations had become strained, or capacities weakened, by the time agencies sought their cooperation in the recovery phase. CBOs and NGOs became contracted organisations, corruption spread and inappropriate forms of leadership were able to flourish.

Specific aspects of the response that undermined local capacity include 'poaching' of staff from other organisations, especially local NGOs, and burdensome requirements for reporting. There was too much emphasis on speed and profile, leading to unnecessary and wasteful use of expatriate staff, many of whom had little relevant experience and were at a disadvantage in addressing the highly complex social structures of communities in the region. Structurally, this reflects an underestimation of local capacities,

which were generally coping with most of the immediate problems.

Within the humanitarian system, the tsunami disaster demonstrates the problem of the 'mega response' from the Western public. The way in which the humanitarian sector is funded, by sudden inputs following public appeals, encourages an emphasis on rapid service delivery, exaggeration of the agencies' own importance and understatement of the role of local people. The unprecedented level of global public donations made the international NGO sector the key player in the international tsunami response, both in absolute terms of size of country budgets and in relative terms compared with the UN and bilateral agencies.

Pressure for results

With this new role should have come a responsibility to strengthen partnerships with national and local authorities and to join with others in creating new formal mechanisms for collaboration and accountability. Information could have been handled far more strategically, so that affected people were able to assert their needs and speak on equal terms with aid givers. INGOs were slow, however, to adapt to this new reality, and remained in competitive and target-driven mode until quite late in the response. There was strong pressure for 'results' from the headquarters of international agencies. Even among field staff there was a tendency to

underestimate local capacity and give excessive importance to the delivery of external assistance. This is a process that re-confirms itself. By ignoring local capacity, the role of external aid is made to seem all the more important. The more external aid there is, the more local capacity is undermined. The hitch is that, having started off in such a way, relationships and strategies then fail to develop more positively during the recovery phase.

UNHCR/H J Davies

Fishermen return to the sea after the tsunami, Nilaveli beach, north of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka.

There has been a tendency for international agencies to strengthen centralist structures and processes. In most cases their main concern was to secure an agreement with the national authorities. They were less likely to make formal, or even informal, arrangements at the local level, and therefore might not have been able to recognise or respond to the subtle interplay of power that surrounded the relief operation. International agencies tended to exploit what capacity they could find in the relief stage and then were surprised to find that this local capacity did not conveniently transform itself into a suitable tool for recovery and reconstruction. Instead, local capacity was undermined, issues of inequality and marginalisation became more intractable and distrust developed. Agencies

Two Sri Lankans take on the grim task of removing bodies for burial in the immediate aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami.

found themselves supporting elites and unable to address the problems of marginalised groups.

Strengthening capacities is not simply about supporting institutional structures but a more complex political process that involves the empowerment of poorer and more excluded people so that when disaster strikes they have a valid claim on their community, local officials and national government.

Policy versus practice

This evaluation highlights the disparity between the stated policies of international humanitarian actors and the operational realities. The principles are lofty but the practice is often very different. When the aid system is under pressure in crisis situations, the imperative to deliver services predominates; in contexts such as the tsunami response where there was an unprecedented flow of resources, the key factor of success appeared to be the ability to spend money quickly, not wisely.

A fundamental re-orientation of the humanitarian sector is required

to recognise that the ownership of humanitarian assistance rests with the claim-holders – i.e. that local capacities are the starting point, that long-term sustainable risk reduction is the aim and that the role of other players is to support. Only when vulnerable people take control of their environment will they escape from vulnerability. Otherwise they will simply be dependent on fickle Western public responses and the reliability or otherwise of international aid.

There is a need to rethink the end goal of humanitarian assistance and move from a service delivery approach to a capacity-empowering framework. The TEC team highlighted the need for international humanitarian agencies to:

- engage with local and national capacities and have clear partnership strategies and develop local partnerships from the start

- realise that the process of relief is not politically neutral: it has profound effects on issues such as inequality, marginalisation, social organisation and political rights

- pay attention to social inequalities, exclusion and hierarchies

- work to enable marginalised groups to improve their position in relation to communities, and communities in relation to district and national authorities

- institute procedures for making grants for longer time periods even from the outset of an intervention

- develop protocols to prevent 'poaching' of staff and to ensure local capacity is not undermined

- critically examine reporting requirements

- ensure women are represented in all decision-making bodies affecting them.

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1. www.tsunami-evaluation.org/NR/rdonlyres/8E8FF268-51F0-4367-A797-F031C0B51D21/0/capacities_final_report.pdf