

Homogenising humanitarian assistance to IDP communities (a cautionary note from Sri Lanka)

by Simon Harris

This paper argues that IDPs do not constitute a homogenous group and that relief agencies need to improve their analysis of the composition of internally displaced constituencies in order to plan appropriate interventions which account for, and respect, the issue of difference.

If one were to randomly select a hundred people from any disaster situation or emergency environment, the demographic composition of this group would reveal a wide range of different people from different backgrounds. The attitudes and actions of each in responding to their circumstances would be informed by the way in which the influence of factors such as gender, class, caste, race, religion and ethnicity has shaped their individual experiences.

Despite, or more probably because of, the multifarious complexity of people affected by poverty, conflict and disaster, there is a tendency amongst providers of emergency relief services to homogenise their intended beneficiaries. Whilst recognising the utility of this approach in simplifying and rationalising the delivery of humanitarian services to large populations, this paper will argue that failure to account for constituency difference in programme planning and implementation may negatively impact upon the effectiveness and sustainability of such services. Furthermore, the potential effect of homogenising non-homogeneous groups may even be a deterioration of the very conditions which humanitarian agencies seek to help improve.

Humanitarian agencies working in Sri Lanka's conflict-affected northern Wanni region generally categorise the civilian

population as either internally displaced people (IDPs) or residents. There exists a set of perceptions regarding IDPs which are commonly accepted by these agencies.

Most agencies would agree that the IDPs living in the LTTE¹ controlled areas are ethnically exclusively Tamil, that women and children form a particularly vulnerable group and that female-headed households are especially disadvantaged. There would probably also be broad consensus that loss of livelihood is one of the most significant effects of displacement and that access to food, water and sanitation provision, psychosocial care, health and education services are all extremely important factors which agencies need to prioritise. Indeed, the prioritisation of these issues has been endorsed by the constituents themselves in a series of community consultation exercises by Oxfam GB and SCF (UK)². Addressing one or more of these areas of concern forms the operational objectives of each international aid agency working in the Wanni.

Whilst these perceptions and prioritised needs may well reflect the overall situation for the majority of the displaced in the Wanni, humanitarian intervention strategies based on such generalisations fail to account for the potentially enabling, but equally confounding, diversity within the internally displaced population.

An 'unimagined' community

Although IDPs in the Wanni occupy the shared space of displacement, that is all they share. When humanitarian agencies refer to them collectively as a community this is a misnomer. They are, in effect, an 'unimagined' community brought together purely through the dislocating circumstances of displacement. Prior to their displacement, at home in the Jaffna Peninsula or other parts of the Wanni they would have led separate lives within the accepted norms and parameters of their individual social groupings, class or caste affiliations. Interaction with other classes or castes would have been minimal and superficial, limited to perhaps brief exchanges at the market place. Certainly they would not have worked in the same fields, slept under the same roof, drank from and bathed in the same well nor squatted in the same latrine. Such intimacy between the classes and castes of a highly stratified and socially conscious society would have been unthinkable and intolerable.

Rather than forcing individuals to subsume their identities in order to cope with the abnormality and commonality of their situation, observations from the Wanni suggest that in the experience of displacement, the opposite occurs. Divested of the security and confidence associated with the routine and familiar, displaced people attempt to maintain a semblance of normality by reinforcing the demarcation of their individual class and caste identities. Assertion of difference provides a socio-specific locus or touch-stone of familiarity which forms a vital coping mechanism for people affected by the trauma and upheaval of displacement.

However, whilst the assertion of different identities may be highly functional for the displaced, for agencies attempting

to help address their needs, the lack of constituency homogeneity becomes a confounding variable affecting the outcome of any humanitarian intervention reliant on the consistency of beneficiary response for its success.

Difficulties of consultation

The practical emergency problem of preventing or addressing an increased prevalence of illness resulting from the faecal contamination of water sources illustrates the dangers of assuming constituency homogeneity.

We can assume that the responsible aid agency will have followed the principles of best practise in having consulted with the target community of displaced people regarding perceived needs. It will have taken account of gender requirements and concluded that the community requires the construction of a tube well, a

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number of sealed latrines and a menstrual shelter. Ideally the agency will have obtained community participation in the planning and construction process, and will have secured assurance of shared community responsibility for the long-term cleaning and maintenance of the water and sanitation facilities. They may even have implemented a health and sanitation awareness-raising and training programme to instruct users on appropriate and hygienic practices. Following a number of weeks of intense labour, the well has been sunk, the latrines and menstrual shelter completed and everyone involved seems clear of their maintenance responsibilities. The water and sanitation engineer and team give themselves a pat on the back for a job well done, wave the community farewell and say they will be back in six weeks to see how things are getting on. Perfect? Not quite.

Six weeks later the monitoring team returns to find that the tube well is broken, blocked by sticks and stones and irreparable, the latrines are caked with excrement having never been cleaned and the menstrual shelter remains unused. What went wrong?

Imagine for a moment that this community of displaced people in need of water and sanitation services is not a community at all, but is merely masquerading as one. Thrown together by circumstance and the directives of the *de facto* authorities responsible for the relocation of displaced persons, this is an unimagined community of disparate classes and castes. Of course there is the veneer of community. When services are offered people will gather *en masse*, spokespersons will emerge and decisions will be made. Yet if humanitarian agencies were to take the trouble to scrape away the veneer they would find that the voices rising from amongst the constituents might well be those from the upper echelons of the pre-displaced social hierarchy. Empowered within the group by the social conventions of respect and deference afforded to those of a higher class or caste, these spokespersons may well believe that they are representing the wider community but they do so simply because the conditioning of their social position allows them to. Although they may not realise it, these spokespersons will be reflecting their own assumptions of the needs of those they regard as their social inferiors, rather than representing the actual needs as perceived by those of a different class or caste.

Whilst the opinions and prejudices of social stratification lie largely silent, actions speak louder than words for the unimagined community. Resentment festers over the pecking order for bathing at the well until vindictiveness prevails and someone decides to sabotage the tube. Latrines are left uncleaned because there is no one from the appropriate caste to undertake such menial duties. Menstrual shelters remain unused as women from different classes are unable to tolerate a shared privacy.

Fragmentation of village structure and hierarchy

The unimagined community of IDPs is unable to call upon the traditional forms of authority and social organisation that formed a vital part of their previous lives and helped them to negotiate any problems which arose. Within the milieu of displacement the hierarchy and structure of the village have been fragmented and rendered invalid. Prior to displacement everyone would have understood and accepted their position within the system. The place and role of the village elder, rural priest, landowner, money-

lender, petty trader, mason and agricultural labourer would have been clearly defined. Within the new class and caste mosaic of displacement, social positioning ceases to be seen as fixed. Those who previously occupied the most respected positions in their home villages now find that they have to contend with others of higher rank. Such social fluidity amongst the displaced undermines the possibility for a commonly acceptable system of community organisation to emerge.

Humanitarian aid agencies reliant upon the IDPs' willingness and responsibility to maintain inputs such as wells and latrines may be making a fundamental error in regarding the collective displaced as a community capable of fulfilling such expectations.

If we accept the possibility that the reality of displaced constituencies may not reflect their superficial image, and acknowledge that this is likely to affect the success of any intervention, two key questions need to be addressed. Firstly, how can agencies ensure that such assumptions are not made and secondly, having identified a lack of homogeneity amongst the intended beneficiaries, how can agencies work with such groups to achieve sustainable planned objectives.

Constituency audit

In order to address the first question, humanitarian agencies need to develop their depth of analysis in profiling the composition of potential constituencies and assessing their needs. Participatory approaches to appraisal tend to focus upon apparent areas of community consensus regarding collectively prioritised needs, but do not place significant emphasis on points of divergence. Where difference is taken into account, this tends to be a desegregation of needs on the basis of gender, whilst other important divisions, such as class and caste, are frequently overlooked. One method of incorporating these factors into a beneficiary analysis, determining the homogeneity of a possible target group and the extent to which any lack of homogeneity is likely to frustrate the success of the planned input, could be to conduct a constituency audit.

Such an audit, extending participatory appraisal techniques such as resource mapping and wealth ranking, would help identify the range and interests of the various classes, castes and other social,

religious or political affiliations that comprise the target group. It would examine the nature and extent of both pre-displacement and present associations between these various social subsets. The perceptions and attitudes of each set, *vis-à-vis* the others, as well as how they view their own position within the displaced community, would be highlighted. Finally, perhaps through the use of hypothetical scenarios, the audit would inquire of each component set how they would respond to the sharing of various communal resources with other displaced persons. Analysis of this information would enable the humanitarian agency to build up a picture detailing the breadth of difference, the variety of needs, prejudices and rivalries, as well as the areas of tolerance and scope for opportunity that exists within the community.

Planning and implementation

The picture formed by such an exercise provides the starting point for attempting to address the second question of how to work with unimagined communities. Having developed a more accurate assessment of the limitations and possibilities that exist within a non-homogeneous target group, the humanitarian agency will be required to work sensitively and transparently with all parties, collectively and individually.

Participatory work within communities will have to account for difference in planning and implementation, and establish structures of management and responsibility that respect the validity of divergent needs and identities. Agencies will have to be skilled in negotiating acceptable and mutually inclusive - or, if necessary, mutually exclusive - spaces for relief inputs to function.

For example, in developing a mutually inclusive space, analysis might indicate that a shared water source located in the spatial domain of a particular group would be subject to issues of ownership and control, and wholly unacceptable to all other parties. Here the construction of a tube well in a neutral space may satisfy all concerns. A mutually exclusive solution on the other hand might recognise that although a single set of communally shared latrines would be rendered defunct, multiple latrines placed in different locations, for differ-

ent groups of users, would be totally functional and maintained adequately.

Role of local staff

In attempting to address these issues of analysis and implementation, the role of locally recruited personnel should be carefully considered by agencies. Indigenous staff are likely to have a better understanding of the complexities and dynamics operating within the displaced communities than the foreign consultants or head-office evaluation teams frequently deployed by aid agencies to conduct assessment and planning missions. Although the incorporation of local knowledge and expertise will help agencies better understand and address the multifarious nature and needs of the displaced, there may be difficulties in ensuring that the 'right' sort of local assistance is accessed.

The staffing profiles of international relief and development agencies operating in the Wannu reveal a predominance of upper caste Jaffna Tamils among the local managers and senior programme staff. Staff from the Wannu region itself and from other social groups are under-represented in these positions.

Difficulties arising from this situation have been noted by both aid agency staff and displaced or resident communities. The issues of hierarchy inherent among the communities of displaced are similarly reflected within the agency-constituency relationship. Local staff play a potentially crucial role in helping to inform appropriate agency responses. However, care needs to be taken in selecting staff who are able to identify with and negotiate between a wide range of constituents. Where the availability,

education and skills required to perform certain key local positions are largely limited to a particular group, agencies will need to invest in training to develop staff competencies to work within a multi-class or caste context.

Conclusion

If humanitarian interventions targeting non-homogenous communities of internally displaced people are to be effective, agencies need to both recognise and accept that constituency difference exists and plays an important and defining role for the people affected. They should utilise the opportunities that the articulation of constituency difference presents and maximise the points of convergence which emerge to assist communities develop innovative solutions to their disparate relief needs that will be workable and sustainable throughout the period of their displacement.

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Notes

1 The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a militant separatist movement which has been fighting the Sri Lankan government for a Tamil homeland in the north and east since the early 1980s.

2 Four constituency surveys have been conducted in the Wannu area by Oxfam GB and SCF (UK): *Listening to the Displaced*, Oxfam UK/I, 1996 (unpublished); *Listening in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu*, Oxfam UK/I, 1997 (unpublished); *Listening to the Displaced III*, Oxfam GB, 1998 (unpublished); and *Listening to the Returned*, Oxfam GB and SCF(UK), 1998 (unpublished). Although these surveys have not been formally published, their findings and recommendations have been widely circulated among humanitarian agencies and other interested parties in Sri Lanka.



Oxfam project officer in consultation with Muslim IDPs in Saltern Camp No 2