

# Livelihoods in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

by Simon Harris

*Livelihoods in Sri Lanka have been affected not only by the initial devastation of the tsunami but also by the policies and practices of the government and the humanitarian aid community's post-disaster response.*

The following stories offer a composite presentation of experiences related to the author by displaced people and aid workers some five months after the tsunami. They convey some of the key livelihood issues in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, in particular the impact of competitive multiple-agency humanitarian interventions, the reconstruction industry, the coastal no-build zone and delays in receiving state compensation.

## The fisherman

You're a fisherman whose boat was damaged in the tsunami. It was a small catamaran that helped yield a modest catch: not enough to make you rich but, nevertheless, a decent living. The government has offered to replace your boat but you have been waiting for months and nothing has materialised. However, after the tsunami the international humanitarian aid agencies came. Some offered community consultation and participation and wanted to know how your needs could be best met, whilst other just seemed to want to disperse their funds as quickly as possible. They wanted to offer you a loan, a grant or perhaps a share in a cooperative. One NGO was willing to provide you with a replacement catamaran. Another was giving larger single-keel boats, whilst yet another was offering outboard motors. And that's just the choice for fishing. You could retrain as a carpenter or a mason, learn to use a computer or start another local NGO to compete with the hundreds that have proliferated since the international aid money started arriving.

What do you do? Your boat was damaged but not that badly. Your friends are asking for big boats with motors. They will be able to fish further and catch more. Some people are saying that the seas are already over-fished

anyway and that these boats will only exacerbate the depletion of existing stocks. But that's in the future. You need to make a living today. You need to be competitive.

## The trader

You were a small trader before the tsunami. Not poor but doing quite well. You lost your house and they won't let you rebuild because your land lies within the 100-metre coastal construction exclusion zone that the government declared within days of the disaster. Your business has collapsed. It was a cash-in-hand type of enterprise and you had borrowed heavily to support it, using your property as collateral. Now that your house has gone, the bank has foreclosed on your loans. You haven't been able to claim compensation because your title deeds were washed away in the tsunami and re-establishing ownership is a lengthy and complicated process. Like everyone else you know, you had no insurance. Even if you had been able to rebuild you wouldn't have been able to afford it because since the tsunami the cost of local materials has soared and construction worker salaries have trebled. Anyway, the government says the land was not really yours because the Coast Conservation Act had prohibited building in that area since 1981, even if they had chosen not to enforce these regulations for over 20 years.

Now you are living in a tent with your family in the grounds of a school, awaiting transfer to a transitional shelter a few kilometres inland on the edge of a swamp where they have to bring in water every day because of the saline water in the wells. The camp is near the temporary shelters occupied by those displaced by conflict for the past 15 years. You are getting food rations and a small amount of money each month from

the local government administration. It's enough to survive. If you move elsewhere you might be able to use your market savvy to start something new. But if you go, you will be on your own – no government aid, nothing. A local NGO says it will start a revolving loan scheme or provide grants so that people can start small business initiatives. They are talking about a few thousand rupees to rear goats and chickens. You used to have a daily turnover of 50,000 rupees (c\$500) and employ five workers.

## The semi-skilled labourer

You are a semi-skilled construction worker. Before the tsunami things were lean. You had to travel to the city for work and sometimes couldn't find any. Since the tsunami there has been a building boom, providing temporary dwellings, transitional shelters and permanent homes. There are new schools to be constructed, roads to be repaired and bridges to be built. Wages have shot up and there is no shortage of work. The tsunami is the best thing that ever happened to you. Sometimes you wonder, though, what will happen after all the houses are built? How will you go back to 250 rupees a day (\$2.50) after earning 750 for tsunami-related construction? And what will be the impact on the local employment market of all the masons and carpenters that the vocational training NGOs are now producing? Will the post-disaster reconstruction industry stimulate long-term development or will it all suddenly go bust when the humanitarian aid agencies go home?

Regarded by many as a reactive top-down response, the government's decision to enforce the 1981 Coast Conservation Act, which prohibits construction within 100 metres of the mean high tide mark, has effectively deprived hundreds of thousands of tsunami-displaced people of the opportunity to rebuild their original homes. Although this policy is informed by sound ecological arguments (encouraging mangroves and sand dunes to regenerate) and emergency preparedness argu-



*A fisherman inspects his net at Point Pedro, a village in the far north of Sri Lanka, near Jaffna.*

ments (reducing vulnerabilities by establishing a physical buffer zone against future hazards), the inter-relation between property ownership and livelihoods appears to have been largely overlooked. Given the questionable legality of coastal tenures and the problem of making claims in the absence of title documentation, securing state compensation for lost property is likely to be a lengthy and complex process during which time livelihoods are effectively put on hold.

The fishing community was one of the sectors worst affected by the tsunami. Although the government has promised to restore lost livelihoods for fisher-folk, the lack of capacity within the state bureaucracy to cope with these claims has resulted in serious delays over compensation. Humanitarian aid organisations have stepped in to try to plug this gap. However, due to the enormous amounts of funding being mobilised by the local and international NGO community, this has become an extremely competitive environment. As the case of the fishing boats reveals, aid organisations are competing for a space in which to

help by offering a diverse array of appealing livelihood assets. In the short term such practices may have a benefit on livelihoods as fisher-folk can immediately restart their trade. In the longer term, however, the implications for sustainable livelihoods may be disastrous. Providing *ad hoc* assets without community consultation and participation in analysing the potential impact on local relationships, market capacity and the environment could result in rapid degradation of available fish stocks. This would undermine livelihoods in the longer term and increase the likelihood of inter-communal tensions in an already ethnically charged conflict-affected environment.

There are of course both winners and losers in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. As the semi-skilled labourer's case shows, the construction industry is experiencing an unprecedented boom. New markets have also emerged in accommodation and transport for the hundreds of new international humanitarian aid programmes. Unfortunately, these new opportunities are something of a double-edged sword, bringing

temporary prosperity for some but rendering goods and services unaffordable for others.

Post-tsunami livelihoods have become inextricably intertwined with government policy and administration, the shift in labour needs, market priorities and demands, and the proliferation of international and local humanitarian aid organisations operating in affected areas. Urgent action needs to be taken to address the issue of livelihoods in a timely, coherent, strategic and equitable manner, ensuring that policies and practices integrate local participation, decision making and environmental protection, and reduce disaster-related vulnerabilities. Otherwise, the long-term prospects for sustainable livelihoods may be bleak for those most affected by the tsunami.

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