

Human and Social Tragedy in the aftermath of the Tsunami: some thoughts

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The human tragedy of the Tsunami was overwhelming and unbearable not only to the population of the affected countries but also to the whole world. It caught the attention especially of Westerners, some who not only were unaware of the geography of small islands like Sri Lanka, but were even unaware of the existence of some of the affected countries. Within a matter of 10 minutes, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or their dwellings or occupations destroyed. Multiple tragedies; of several family members killed, houses destroyed, boats or workplaces destroyed were common consequences. I do not think going through statistics and emotions over and over again will help us at all. It is better to look at the aftermath, practically and also to look positively in order to overcome the physical and social damage.

First of all it was never expected even in our wildest dreams. The administration was trained for relatively small catastrophes such as bomb blasts or river floods. Even the bomb disaster force was not in place properly in Sri Lanka, since we have not experienced any terrorist bomb blasts recently. Initially hardly anybody knew what it was except for the youngsters who had seen a film on a tidal wave ("Day After Tomorrow"). I heard a youngster a "Discovery" / Science addict suggest that it may a "Tsunami". I was ashamed afterwards for not knowing it. The initial confusion of the extent of damage was confusing and the mounting, but small doses of the statistics may have been a protective blessing to keep hope and expectations going on, avoiding a massive and a sudden collapse of the collective emotions of despair of a population.

Fight or Flight

A natural response to fear or traumatic experience is a physiological response called a "sympathetic reaction" mediated through the adrenaline hormone in any animal's body including humans. When you sense danger the gush of adrenaline makes you run away

or fight it. When the Tsunami wave came, people reacted either by fighting the wave or by running away from it. This response either to run or fight it is also influenced and modified by one's previous experience. There are also two other possibilities. One is to 'freeze' by fear or 'dissociate' yourself from what is happening which may also be related to previous experience. Some who died may very have done this. Another experience was the reaction of the public and officials who reacted similarly in the aftermath of the traumatic disaster. Some fought the situation to do positive things for the society, while some fought hard to steal. Some were at least 'frozen' temporarily not knowing what to do at least for sometime, while there were others who fled the issue usually by dissociating themselves.

One of the positive things, we observed was the sudden shattering of barriers of ethnicity, religion, class, friend or foe where human beings came together in support of each other affected or otherwise, local or International through pure emotions of humanity. People in affected areas often with children, parents and/or friends dead and missing or their houses and belongings "gone", came to each other's helps. How they shared the food, looked after each other's children, elderly or belongings and comforted each other in spite of all the negative effects of the disaster, is some thing to be proud of. At a CNN interview, I was asked by the interviewer, why and how the Sri Lankan population in spite of being badly affected, managed a beautiful smile and an expression of hope. I never thought of it till that moment, but managed to think of an explanation! I said "Sri Lankans have faced tragedies of war, subversion, mass deaths and floods and many families and friends have been affected for more than two decades. They have managed to rise positively soon after each of these disasters. It is this *resilience* in the community that has made us look forward compared to a population like the US that feels/felt completely protected and insulated from massive disasters but yet had to face 9/11. It took a relatively long time for the US citizens to pick themselves up from that tragedy"

At the same time people who really felt a "jab in their hearts" from all over the world and Sri Lankans streamed in with all possible first aid and relief. I saw a young medical student emptying almost all in his wardrobe to be distributed to the refugees. He was weeping at the time. It is not whether it was useful or not that matters but the gesture of

goodwill. When a boss told his staff that he would distribute all their gifts for the New Year to the refugees, they all said "YES, that's exactly what we want you to do"

On a negative note, the local and international response may not have been the most appropriate. There were both international and local "experts" after reading some manuals for worldwide disasters, giving out inappropriate message by requesting bottled water (may have been useful at the initial stage and for the relief workers) which was airlifted from countries like Germany, heavy blankets (for a warm tropical country!) and most adversely, infant milk food and feeding bottles! In a country where breast feeding is a norm, in disaster where infants and young children also died with their mothers, the risk of breast feeding mothers stopping breast milk when receiving "free" bottled milk, and the likelihood of breast milk subsequently drying up in the midst of poor sanitation in the refugee camps really spelt another disaster of diarrhea and dysentery. Immediate press statement by the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), and the Ministry of Health/College of Paediatricians, prevented it from happening. There were other 'experts' cry out aloud of possible malaria epidemics, probably straight out of a book on Africa!

Thousands of packets of prepared food that went to the refugees was overwhelming and was often too much and sometimes it had even gone stale. Although there has been criticism of these aspects together the food /goods were inappropriate or stale. What was important to know and feel was that we were not alone. We came together across all barriers to help human kind. How the Sri Lankan of all ethnic groups and the armed forces worked in the north-east, in spite of logistical difficulties of approaching these areas and in spite of politically motivated negative accusations should be considered on a positive note that Sri Lankans felt they were all together and imagined it as a "peace process". For those who "gave" it was important to feel and be contended that they were able to help the victims. This actually relieved their emotions of grief (whether it was actually useful or not.)

Both the Sri Lankan and international *Homo sapiens* were also "Stripped Naked" by the Tsunami to reveal their weaknesses and strengths at a time of disaster. There will always be "opportunists" who will take advantage of situations like this for their own benefits as

well as others who would take the "opportunity" to contribute positively to society and country.

We saw opportunists who frightened people of another Tsunami, and looted their houses. There were others who either "helped" to collect the corpses while ridding the bodies of belongings, and others who falsely claimed bodies - cleaned the Jewelry and returned the bodies back to hospital. What was interesting was that these individuals surfaced within minutes and hours of the tragedy, indicating it was pre-planned! However we know that the Tsunami was not predicted, which indicates an ingrained human trait of dishonesty which was seen not only in the local petty thieves but also in the organized International criminals (often from well recognized or unheard of organizations) who are ready to creep into human tragedies where there is despair, emotions and hopelessness. But more importantly their ability to manipulate the confidence in the minds of the helpless has to be recognized in order to identify them and make them accountable.

There were some others, including officials who looted relief rations and medicines. There were politicians who took advantage of the situation, while other politicians may have taken advantage, but did work positively for the benefit of mankind. One known person took packets of rice to the South. They were stopped on the way by stooges of a politician in Galle who had wanted 25 packets of rice. He quite passionately gave the packets only to see that the stooges took out a rubber stamp and ink and stamped the packets as donations from the politicians: a real political opportunist! What a shame! Another ethnically focused political group claimed that the government did not give anything to "their" people. However, whatever that was given by the government, they took over and distributed it as if it was their own donations while condemning the government to the people. Two politicians accused of paedophilia took advantage of the situation. One even got bail on false claims, but is not accountable to his false statement to date in spite of reports by the police to courts! Another group sent SMS messages all over claiming that it was 'poor governance' as in the previous Tsunami 2500 years ago that was responsible for this Tsunami! Should they not be considered political "pariahs" (outcasts)?

It is interesting to know that in tragedies such as train crashes of Katukurunda and Veyangoda, more than half a century ago, looting of belongings on dead bodies happened in the same fashion. It shows that this behaviour is nothing new, and probably a human trait of greed for 'survival', although it cannot be justified at all.

A criticism aimed at those affected was that they were standing in queues to collect more than what they needed. An interesting scientific study done long time ago showed that when mice are given less food than they needed, they ironically hoarded some of the little food given although inadequate. Even when they were given what was needed later on (in adult life), they still hoarded some food, compared to the other group of mice who were given adequate amounts from early days. Whether they were given less or more later on they never hoarded any food. This example fits in well with what we saw and comparable especially to people in developing countries whose future is insecure and unpredictable. When it comes to savings (as compared to investment) of money the middle class in a developing country saves relatively more than the middle class in a developed country. It may be worth comparing the first generation in developed country expatriates with the second generation as regards savings. The justification for this phenomenon of taking excesses may be, "If there was an excess of dry rations going around, it would be better to be distributed in excess to the people rather than getting into hands of corrupt officials as long as the excesses were not sold or bartered for cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs (although not widespread some instances have been recorded).

Other opportunists included mushrooming NGO's, some of which were spurious, who brought in, ladies shoes, computers cell-phones and other luxury items duty free in the name of "relief". The "knee Jerk" reaction to stop all new NGO's by government was also inappropriate since it may have "Chased" away genuine aid organizations. A good screening process should have been a better choice. There were other international agencies even with creditability, taking anything from 10% -40% for logistics. Although it may be an accepted norm, is it right for anybody's conscience to collect millions of dollars and take a large percentage as opposed to a fixed amount? Other internationals paid themselves 1000 US dollars per day for their "humanitarian sacrifice". There were others

who brought in duty-free luxury cars and shipped it back own countries in weeks. Some tried to bring helicopters without prior permission. Other mushroom agencies collected money in Western countries (money collected in developing countries with a low per capita income would be insignificant). Although individual donors have eased their conscience by “giving”, are those collector “opportunists” accountable to any system, either locally or internationally. Each of the foreign countries should think about accountability of their own citizens, while Sri Lanka should not keep quiet.

Another major issue was: donor groups wanting to give money for only “tangible” projects. Projects that could be seen and shown to donors were what most people wanted, like building houses, giving boats, temporary shelter, books, school bags and uniforms. Another human weakness! When money is raised *ad hoc* without verifying real needs (that would take a long time to assess), neither the donors nor the collectors can be blamed. But the donors want to know what exactly what was done with their money and tangible projects are the best to show with pictures or movies! At the same time in most developed countries, moneys have to be used for what it was collected whether it be appropriate or not! Before any assessments were done and before the actual extent of the tragedy was known, money for orphanages was collected in the West, and now they have to build these orphanages whether it is needed or not. However, orphanages were not the most appropriate. Initial estimates were Tens of thousand of orphans. However it was realized that the most vulnerable to the Tsunami were the elderly and children. Women especially when pregnant were also vulnerable. Those children who managed to escape were mostly older children or teenagers who managed to grab on to something, usually a tree or a lamp-post. A relatively small younger child population that survived were the ones who were for some reason physically not in an affected area (e.g. children of parents who were caught at the Sunday Markets near the sea), or when a parent or relative grabbed on to the child (Although the force of the water and slipperiness dragged many children away from an adult’s grasp, some lucky ones survived. A very small number of small kids got thrown on to a higher elevation such as the roof or a “Surviving” structure)

At the same time most of the single parents or relatives of children who lost their

parents do not want their children in orphanages. This I feel is for multiple reasons.

(There are only 16 orphans due to the Tsunami in orphanages in the Southern Province)

1. The social environment of the Tsunami victims, although many are poor, would be relatively different from that of children who traditionally stay in orphanages, those who are “unwanted”, children born out of wedlock, children of commercial sex workers, often abandoned in hospitals, bus stands, trains or other public places. The stigma of keeping children in an orphanage is often “unthinkable” for the surviving relatives and community.

2. The sudden a tragic loss of almost everyone and everything close to you is unbearable. This psychological impact of this grief would want you to keep whatever and whoever surviving close to you and not let it go. We still do not know what their feelings would be in the future? There have not been many such tragedies in this world for experience.

3. Promises and prospects of receiving distant foster care funding to the upkeep of these children would make it feasible to rear these children. Although some critics say that some of the money would be used by relatives for “other things”, would it not be rational and acceptable? In Western countries there are foster-care systems, where the “caring” foster-parents are paid for what they do as a job. If there is nothing wrong in that, why not this arrangement, as long as a significant proportion is used for the child and they are not exploited or neglected, and the money not used for booze or other similar things. Hence, the absolute need to monitor the children who were orphanage by the Tsunami.

The other opportunists were those who came to convert religions. Rather than comforting and relieving human misery they came to exploit it! Such organization could work in Tsunami affected areas to provide relief and rehabilitation but they should act responsibly not to trap people into religions/faiths, and should be made accountable by a monitoring system.

There are the factors that affect the “needs” for institutions. Apart from the “Want” to build orphanages, some of the money was collected to build orphanages and by existing systems that run orphanages. It is therefore essential for these people and orphanages to

“Justify” the need, and to show donors how the money is spent. There is reason to believe that some persons/ orphanages are showing existing orphanages, children who were already there or have ‘brought in’ sometimes “non Tsunami” kids to demonstrate the work they are doing. If children, whether Tsunami or not who are in need of care and protection get this support, there is some Justification. However, organizations that may “buy” or “make” already existing buildings of their organizations with Tsunami money collected, and budget 5-10 Euros (or Pounds/Dollars) per day per child and siphon away some of the money. Although this expense may be justifiable for donors (where the cost of living is high) it is not justifiable for the country or the children of Sri Lanka. Is there accountability in this process or is there a system to check this? Again other groups of opportunists may make a quick buck. I do not however wish to generalize on this comment.

In one Province the Probations and Child Care had ‘handed’ over an orphanage which did not have Tsunami affected kids to an American ‘couple’. Following several complaints the NCPA (National Child Protection Authority) investigated to find the man to be a convicted paedophile in the sex offenders’ register!

There were many interested parties wanting to adopt possibly to be child servant? Reports were coming through from Thailand and Aceh that children were being picked up by traffickers. Within a few days of the Tsunami, NCPA issued a general warning to the public which hit the headlines that “children and women are the most vulnerable”. It did not mean that there was wide scale trafficking and exploitation (except for a few reports) but was meant to be a warning. The NCPA informed the Immigration department and foreign embassies to scrutinize all applications of children for passports and visas almost immediately after the tragedy blocking the exit out of the country. Sri Lanka is fortunate that we are an island and effectively has only one point of exit

The Media meanwhile did a tremendous job by focusing the tragedy both locally and internationally. However all over the world the Media wants sensation on any issue and Tsunami was one of those ‘big’ ones! When the ‘heat’ of sensation of the tsunami was waning off, some media persons including Internationals were trying hard to

sensationalize on the “fall outs” of the Tsunami which could have become really sensational issues. In spite of the wonderful job they did at the beginning, unfortunately some wanted to be “opportunists”. Widespread ‘non existent’ abuse, exploitation and trafficking were the issues of main focus. Although there were few instances (and appropriate action had been taken) it was meant to take the focus away from real tragedy. The big sensational issue of “Baby 81” who was claimed by many mothers was unnecessarily exaggerated. The media was also used at least in one instance to attack professionals to meet one reporter’s personal agenda and possibly “used by organization/s. Media responsibility and accountability should sometimes should be questioned although a majority are sensible.

Websites

In an era where we see corruption in the spam we receive every day that manipulate the greed in us through ‘lotteries’ and ‘business opportunity’ scandals, it is no surprise when the World Wide Web and other sponsorship programs are used by swindlers with “entrepreneurship” skills to set up web sites to address the emotion, sorrow and compassion of the human species. Some websites collecting money used names with creditably to fund raise sometimes even without the knowledge of the person/s. Other’s names have been used as board members of trust funds. Unsuspecting prominent members have lent their names at times. There should not be any problem if it was with their consent and the money was going to be used for a good cause. However there is a need to be conscious of such processes.

One of the biggest problems of the Tsunami was: the unexpected tragedy struck “ill-equipped” Nations. Sri Lanka is run by politicians and administrators except in some ministries such as the Health Ministry. While administrators should be considered as a particular type of professional and although most of them did an excellent job in managing the disaster, there was no technical - professional input in most of the ministries concerned to effectively advise on strategies. With or without a Tsunami it is a tragedy that struck Sri Lanka few decades ago. I met a person from the Ministry of social welfare in Indonesia who was doing work in Aceh. He was a PhD in sociology, trained in

Melbourne. Poor structures, capacity and policies in Sri Lanka as well as “turf protection” in administration would hardly address the problems of tsunami or otherwise. The lack of effectiveness of programs in relation to the Tsunami is due to lack of a professional approach in related fields. The NCPA could only stretch to a maximum considering the limited human professional and monetary resources. What has been seen in the Health sector is the “fight for Turf” (“Territory”) even in spite of professionals. “Fight for the Turf” is usually seen all over the world in the midst of personnel “insecurity” in their relative fields. Tsunami is an ideal “eye opener” to the government of Sri Lanka to infuse technical professionalism into systems while the administration continues confined to their mandate and to specialize in particular fields, without transferring them from one ministry to the other or the “pool” after a stipulated period or when the governments change. Technical decisions should be taken by appropriate ‘non-political, technically competent, experienced persons who should be accountable. This will prevent political agendas at the expense development. It is also important to attract professionals to ministries by giving adequate remuneration such as (at least) in universities and allow / support further specialization in the relevant field to make the posts attractive. Reward and appreciation of the good work is a must. In some progressive countries such as Singapore, the politicians especially ministers have to be professionals in their relevant fields.

Politicization for power

When we talk about lack of professionalism in the system of governance we need to look at the role of Power and Politics. From the early seventies we have seen a gradual process of politicians taking over the power to control the system of governance for their benefit of maintaining and capture of Power through constitutions of 1972 and 1978. We have seen a process of “Permanent” Secretaries becoming “Temporary” Secretaries who have to go with the exit of governments. We have also come across a previous President who was suspicious of professionals ridiculed and put them down at every juncture during which time there was an exodus of technically qualified experts out of the country. **It also does not mean** that administrators are not ‘professionals’ and that all professionals are not possible to be manipulated. Although being able to be manipulated by politicians does not apply to every administrator it is easier for a politician to manipulate a non technical

administrator than professionals in the relevant field/s for their own gain. We have also seen UN agencies that manipulate to implement their agendas including through the Tsunami assistance, (possibly private – climb up the ladder or inexperience) through government agencies that lack professional capacity rather than through agencies that may question or challenge the ‘unprofessional’ strategies. They have even gone to the extent of trying to weaken these agencies they do not seem to like. There is no doubt that this is not the policy of these organizations, and where is the accountability of these personnel who have messed things up? This indicates that it is a universal weakness, but more so in some developing countries. The future for development in Sri Lanka is bleak unless we recognize this aspect of the need to professionalize the system of governance and also attract them to contribute. On the other hand it does not mean we need to get expatriates who are paid huge sums of money. Very often they are cronies of the politicians for mutual benefits. Many doctors have not left the country because the benefit of doing private practice is available to them although they may not have contributed much for policy or attitudes, their contribution to the health care has been significant.

It is also important to realize that the professional capacity of some local /International smaller organizations that wish/ed to help in the tsunami was also lacking. They came with money, but was not capable of doing projects on their own and heavily relied on the government system that was already stretched beyond their capacity. I feel that these donors should understand reality of the poor capacity while realizing their own limited capacity without complaining.

Sometimes the “true” professional capacities of even larger organizations including Internationals are/were lacking. These organizations were/are not willing to get advice/consultations from local professionals. They try to “implement” their policies (which are not in their mandate) through organizations lacking professional capacity. If these organizations have “true” professional capacity, they would never have taken such decisions. Sometimes, the rush is to finish money allocation by the end of the financial year to demonstrate efficiency. Sometimes organizations issue statements without any advice from local professionals.

Entrepreneurship

Response to social tragedy acute or chronic lies in the professional capacity to act appropriately and the entrepreneurship skills of a population. Although one may presume social entrepreneurs are only a few in a million/s, it is a relative phenomenon and where this skill may be prevalent in different capacities across society. It also depends on whether these skills are used either for the benefit of society or for personal benefit. Unfortunately a majority of persons are in the business community where they use this exemplary skill for their own benefit. It also does not mean that social entrepreneurs should not look after themselves from a personal aspect. The other groups of entrepreneurs are crooks who use their skills of getting other people's confidence to benefit themselves. In countries where there is instability, there is a focus on survival which is one of the main reasons why people use their entrepreneurship for personal benefit, while it does not mean it does not happen in the developed Western communities. Greed is not specific to communities but a trait of *Homo sapiens*. Although we cannot expect thousands of great social entrepreneurs such as King Dharma-Ashoka or Mahatma Gandhi who will be the leaders and the guiding force, we should develop relative skills in the ordinary people even to a lesser extent which will help to bring about effective positive social change whether it is in an acute tragedy or in a chronic process such as conflict or poverty.

Those organizations and people who are still holding on to tsunami money may develop second thoughts now that the emotions of the Tsunami have gone. My appeal is to think of other long term plans which may be not what you in-fact collected money for and it may not be tangible, For example psycho-social rehabilitation projects are not tangible but extremely important – and is not necessarily for Tsunami affected. Vocational training for youth affected by the tsunami or otherwise is important. Although the training is not tangible, the schools would be. After all we do not want our children and adults to be dependent on giveaways and make them future beggars or crooks. We want them to be strong, empowered and be able to stand on their own feet.

Another issue needs to be addressed: We are helping the Tsunami affected population and orphans. What about the “Non-affected”, who were in the proximity and also poor. A poor child was overhead at a presentation of gifts to orphans. “I wish my parents were washed away”. It is a natural feelings though the fundamental weakness of humans “Jealously”

When I did some rehabilitation work at ‘Bindunawewa’ the centre for child / youths, I once took some amenities for them. On the other side of the fence were drug addicts in a rehabilitation program. They shouted and said “why do you want to give people who have killed our people? We also need those things”. When I got an International Agency to give the ‘Boys’ beds and mattresses, people in the area commented, “why do you want to give them? My boy sleeps on the floor”. The tragic attack on the camp by villagers which left 26 dead is an unthinkable incident. Although not justifying the act, we must learn from past experience. We should therefore think of helping the general population and children as well, and not only those who were directly affected.

Value of the rupee

Over the last few years we have watched helplessly the downfall of our rupee! Why is that other developing countries like India, Nepal, Pakistan or the Maldives have kept their rupee value stable? Now we have a chance to get the rupee back to our previous proud value with all the dollars coming in! We do not want to know what they do with the dollars as long as it comes into the country! Should this be our attitude? Our rupee fell because we stopped producing and started importing which was for the ultimate benefit of the business community (that imported) and the fringe benefits for the politicians and some officials in the name of a free economy! It does not mean we have to go back to the sixties and early seventies. Why can’t we strategize to promote exports while discouraging non-essential luxuries? We may all suffer to an extent, but it is a sacrifice worth for the sake of the country without depending to come up temporarily on Tsunami benevolence alone!

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