PUTTING HOUSES IN PLACE*:
RE-BUIDLING COMMUNITIES IN POST-TSUNAMI SRI LANKA**

Keywords: Inequality, Recovery, Spatial Politics, Sri Lanka, Tsunami

(FORTHCOMING Disasters)

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* The title of this paper is inspired by Mona Domash and Joni Seager’s similarly entitled book Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World. I generously borrow and revise their title while acknowledging that there are the authors of such creativity.

** ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This paper draws on my research in collaboration with Dr. Neloufer de Mel for an UNICEF-ICES study, which was published in Colombo, Sri Lanka as a co-authored report Gendering the Tsunami: Women’s Experiences from Sri Lanka. Anushaya Collure’s research assistance was critical for animating my thinking on the multiple social issues we came across during our field visits. I also want to thank Eshani Ruwanpura for her patient reading and making critical suggestions to tighten this article. All errors, however, remain my own.
PUTTING HOUSES IN PLACE*: RE-BUIDLING COMMUNITIES IN POST-TSUNAMI SRI LANKA**

Abstract: This paper interrogates the geographies of resettlement and reconstruction, both temporary and permanent shelters, which is fundamental to rebuilding tsunami-affected communities. War and ethnic cleavages are an endemic feature of Sri Lanka’s social polity. Uneven development processes too are visible. There is, therefore, a need to pay attention to the spaces of inequality. This paper draws upon in-depth interviews and participant observation research done in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka. It argues that communities’ concerns and anxieties regarding displacement and resettlement tended to be articulated against prevailing fault-lines of war and inequality. This is the backdrop against which communities negotiated the recovery process. My fieldwork shows how it is critical to understand that disaster and development relief should be ingrained within context specificities. These efforts recognize the embeddings of the social processes of "putting houses in place".

Keywords: Inequality, Recovery, Spatial Politics, Sri Lanka, Tsunami

1. Introduction

Post-tsunami Sri Lanka faces multi-layered challenges. The startling annihilation of human life and infrastructure the island faced within hours of the tsunami was by many counts catastrophic. Sri Lanka has also, however, been host to a protracted and bloodied ethnic war for over two decades.

Despite a twenty-year war displacing hundreds of thousands of people, where temporary and eventually permanent relocation is an enduring feature of the social polity, the hardship and adversity faced by displaced communities was often lost on

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Because the war primarily affected isolated areas and communities, they could often be ignored. For example, the regional locations of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, which are war-ravaged, are physically distant. Moreover, the war has made civil visits into these regions rare. In contrast, the tsunami affected different and numerous communities, and thus had to be recognized. Additionally, because each government has pandered to the bitter resentment espoused by ethno-nationalists in the South, neglecting and downplaying the misery of war-affected displaced communities was politically convenient. This was to dramatically change. The swiftness with which the tsunami destroyed dwellings and displaced communities along 70 per cent of Sri Lanka’s coastal belt could not be ignored. Equally, the devastation and destruction of the tsunami reached well into Sinhala communities in Southern Sri Lanka. On this occasion, the displacement and destruction became firmly ingrained in the public psyche. Consequently, contentious debates on where and how to relocate displaced communities penetrated the mainstream media vigorously. Against the contiguous events of war and “natural” disaster, how do communities begin to rebuild?

This paper interrogates the geographies of resettlement and reconstruction for communities affected by the tsunami. I focus both on temporary and permanent shelters of tsunami-affected communities in this article. This piece builds upon an UNICEF-ICES (United Nations Children’s Fund-International Centre for Ethnic Studies) funded research project focusing on the distinct ways in which “natural” disasters were understood in Sri Lanka (De Mel and Ruwanpura 2007), but differs from parallel research exploring the politics of women’s livelihoods that stem from the same study (Ruwanpura 2007b). Because Sri Lanka is beset with war, ethnic cleavages, and uneven development processes, my research deepens the call for paying attention to the politics of inequality in tsunami affected communities (Grundy-Warr and Sidaway, 2006; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007; Hyndman, 2007a).

During my time in the field people in affected communities articulated their concerns regarding the material realities of displacement and resettlement in the post-tsunami
period. Their anxieties echoed prevailing fault-lines of war and inequality. The different and contradictory dictates by the LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tigers for Eelam), the state and the LTTE-Karuna faction on the buffer zones to be maintained in Batticalo is illustrative of the backdrop of war. These decrees impinged upon community efforts to rebuild permanent housing. Similar political dynamics factor into the physical act building houses in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka. My research shows the importance of recognizing the embedded social structures when “putting houses in place” began.

The next section of the paper offers an overview of the Sri Lankan situation. This is followed by section 3, which outlines the methodology adopted and my research positioning during the fieldwork period. An analysis of the recurring themes that arose during the fieldwork period is undertaken in section 4. This part of the paper starts by examining the ways in which spatial politics coupled together with ethnicity and/or patronage was a critical demarcation of the ways in which affected people were able to access temporary or permanent shelters. Obtaining quality temporary shelter was crucial as people’s experiences of living in temporary accommodation were marked by their previous experiences of familiarity with or novelty of displacement and relocation. Further issues in this segment of the paper revolve around the emphasis affected communities placed on the need for fairness in access to relocation and the gendered realities of rebuilding housing and homes. After exploring these issues in depth, the conclusion draws together the ways in which putting houses in place for affected communities were marked by their prior socio-political locations. Paying attention to the geographies of rebuilding is important because it reiterates how natural disasters are not ‘clean states’ full of new opportunities for disaster management. They are instead social processes infused with individual, family and community experiences of their previous locations and the prevailing political climate.
2. The Sri Lankan Sociality

Militarised violence characterises the Sri Lankan polity. Over the past two decades violence has become an insidious feature of Sri Lankan society, with the on-going ethnic war and JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna: People's Liberation Party) insurrection during the late 1980s epitomizing underlying ethnic differentiation, social tensions and economic inequities (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000; Goodhand et al., 2000; Uyangoda, 2005). Despite a war, however, Sri Lanka has held on remarkably well to high HDI (Human Development Indices) for a developing country, which is also touted for its gender equality achievements (Humphries, 1993; UNDP, 2001).

These contradictions in Sri Lanka lend itself to uneven social processes and geographical spaces that affect the everyday life of diverse social groups. Moreover, the “changing income-earning and asset acquiring opportunities that the post-liberalization phase” brought about had distributional impacts with perceptions magnifying and exaggerating social tensions (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000:103-5). The poverty and social deprivation then point to fragmented development and patterns of social exclusion, within conflict-affected communities and across Sri Lanka more widely (ibid; de Alwis, 2002).

Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka were the regional focus of a 12-month long study, carried out from July 2005 to June 2006. These provinces were chosen because the larger research project aimed to capture multi-faceted aspects to regional discrepancies and unravel the spatially specific understandings of “natural” disasters. Although the fieldwork sites – Hikkaduwa and Batticaloa, respectively – were concentrated within each of these provincial entities, the peoples’ stories suggested “missing story lines” (Glassman, 2005, p.164). This article zones in on the manner in which local people and communities expressed their anxieties as they experienced their new-found, and sometimes ill-fitting, temporary and permanent residences.
Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa are both coastal towns located in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka, correspondingly. As seaside/lagoon locations they host fishing communities - a primary occupation for a significant proportion of the local communities. Apart from these commonalities, the areas are different.

Map 1 here:

Batticaloa’s physical infrastructure has been destroyed by war leaving behind embattled ethnic communities. Poverty and socio-economic deprivation is also widespread. The demarcation of the district into government and LTTE-controlled areas, the sporadic clashes between the LTTE and Karuna-led faction, security-led immobility plus draconian tax burdens imposed upon local communities by the LTTE are all significant features. All these attributes worsen the structures of poverty and negatively bear upon the economic welfare of local people (Goodhand et al., 2000; Sarvananthan, 2007). Sarvananthan (2007) uses data on health, education, and per capita income to point to Batticaloa’s deprivation. Selected health indicators show how the district falls below the national average.

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<tr>
<td>Infant Mortality Rate</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per 1,000 deaths)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal Mortality Rate</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per 100,000 deaths)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underweight Children</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>53.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>between 0-5 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Source: Adapted from Sarvananthan 2007:79)</td>
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The region at the same time, however, is well-known for matrilineal inheritance patterns and communities among Muslims and Tamils. Because land and property are inherited to younger women through the mother’s side, it is socio-legally distinct from the rest of the country (McGilvray, 1982; 1989).
Hikkaduwa utilizes its coastal location to host beach-bound tourists, which has led to local enterprises. Yet, the tourist industry has undergone vicissitudes of change. The ethnic war and the JVP insurrection in 1987-89 (intensely battled out in the South) meant that depending on tourism as a means of livelihood carries hazards over which local communities have limited, if any, control. People in the area have also live off the sea, through fishing, as well as environmentally destructive coral mining. The economic liberalization policies implemented in 1977 brought with it service workers that commuted to Galle and occasionally even to Colombo. Income differentiation between social groups, such as fishermen, petty traders, and service workers, within the area is not acute. However, the many hotels catering to an urban-based local tourist market has meant a heightened acuity among local communities of growing inequalities. Conspicuous consumption patterns among urban-based local tourists feed into the perception that particular groups are economically thriving, aggravating politics of inequality (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000, p.105).

3. The Fieldwork Space

The fieldwork in Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa towns was undertaken as a three-member team, including the research assistant. My task in the field was as that of a co-researcher. Five fieldwork trips lasting between 5-10 days were undertaken in each location. This was determined by the resources allocated for field-research in the larger study. In-depth interviews and participant-observations were used to gather information on women’s coping strategies and spatially specific experiences of community welfare in the rebuilding process. We spoke with a total of twenty women across the Burgher, Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities.

Local translators accompanied us in Batticaloa, and would aide in conversation and dialogue when/where necessary. The ability to access Batticaloa was partially dictated by security conditions. Even though a delicate cease-fire was in existence
during much of the fieldwork period, occasional skirmishes and violent eruptions were not uncommon. Hikkaduwa did not pose the same security challenges.

Fieldwork done in 1998-99 and 2004 in Batticaloa made the people, local institutional actors, and sections of the community familiar and easy to access. Thiraimadu, Poonachchimoonai, and Dutch Bar, which are all village divisions within the Batticaloa town limits, were the areas that this research was conducted in. Networks built from prior times were used to set up new contacts, with fieldwork journeys also becoming an opportunity to renew old friendships and forge new alliances.

Map 2 & 3 here:

Hikkaduwa was less familiar. Although a destination or transit location on several travels, I had minimal prior contact with local people and community members. I used limited contact with a philanthropic organisation based in Hikkaduwa to initially access the area. After forging relationships with staff members at the foundation, they passed on information about tsunami-affected relatives and friends in neighbouring communities. Links with local people were quickly established. Our research centred around Peraliya, Seenigama, and Telwatte, which are coastal villages within the Hikkaduwa town division.

Each conversation lasted between 45 minutes to over 1 and ½ hours, and we met a number of women and their families on more than one occasion because of recurring visits to each area. We also spoke with ten staff members of local foundations and non-governmental organizations regarding their efforts at rebuilding temporary and permanent shelters. Conversations (lasting 2 to 2 and ½ hours) with two religious priests, three government officers, and two community activists were also used to complement and enrich understandings of the local situation. This article draws upon conversations with a total of thirty people. I follow established ethical conventions of using pseudonyms when presenting their voices.
Qualitative methods in doing fieldwork are progressively advocated to supplement and extend beyond orthodox empirical techniques (McDonald, 1995; Berik, 1997; Pujol, 1997). Even as Goodhand et al. (2000, p 393) point out that drawing wider conclusions from thick descriptions should be carefully motivated, grounded research is important because it gets “to the location of the event, to the people affected, their homes, their economic activities and their communities in real…geographical space” (Wong, 2005, p. 259). Given the aims of the larger study, our thinking was that engaging in conversations and dialogue was more appropriate to unpack the subtleties and tensions of local people's seemingly “ordinary” lives.

As a researcher from a different social location, the interactions I had with many respondents is likely to have influenced each conversational situations in various ways. Even though we conveyed to the respondents that the interviews and conversations were only for research purposes, I'm cognisant that local people may still have coloured their answers in varying ways. Speaking for the people is, therefore, not my purpose. Rather, this article modestly endeavours to be an interlocutor seeking to add to the incipient debates on the “before-and-after” of the tsunami in Sri Lanka (de Mel, 2007; Hyndman 2007a, 2007b).

4. Resettlement and Reconstruction: Displacement & Re-Building Communities

The damage the tsunami caused to physical infrastructure, in particular to houses and buildings is tabulated by the Department of Census and Statistics as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Buildings (excl. houses)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely &amp; partially damaged (can not be used)</td>
<td>88,544</td>
<td>4,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially damaged (can not be used)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially damaged (can be used)</td>
<td>38,561</td>
<td>5,125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Damaged Property</strong></td>
<td>127,105</td>
<td>11,002</td>
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Numerically, Sri Lanka had a monumental task ahead in rebuilding houses and homes. Nevertheless, rebuilding houses and offering shelter does not exist in a socio-political vacuum. By focusing on the ways in which members of the affected communities made sense of their temporary and permanent shelters, this research uncovers the surfacing of socio-economic and ethnic tensions. The experiences narrated by them convey the central import of paying attention to the complexities and micro-politics of effectuated realities within which “natural” disasters take place. The following sub-section begins by exploring the theme of ethnicity and patronage that surfaced during the fieldwork.

4.1 Ethnicity and Patronage
The ways in which prevailing political turmoil and ethnic tensions coloured the experiences of ethnic communities is difficult to discount. The social location of ethnic communities was a critical marker in the ways in which they were able to access (or, not) temporary shelters. Indeed the ethnic positioning coming together with exposure to war-related impacts was also relevant for how they made sense of their living experiences in provisional accommodation. Recording these instances uncover the regional discrepancies as well.

A disproportionate burden of the on-going ethnic war has been borne by Tamils. Displacement has been an indelible reality of their daily existence, particularly in war-ravaged parts of Eastern Sri Lanka, where provisional or permanent evacuation at critical moments has been common (Goodhand et al., 2000). The turbulent experiences they have undergone have thus strengthened their ability to adapt to wildly fluctuating circumstances over which they have no control. The temporary shelters in the housing camps were harsh. Living in dwellings made of corrugated iron, which would heat-up quickly under the hot sun and as equally lead to mild flooding when monsoonal rains through overflowing drains, illustrates this hardship. Yet, they had a sense of make-do as well as optimism. With regards to the latter,
they were confident that they will get permanent housing within a reasonable time period – and some were bold or optimistic to note this as a two year span.

Q: *When do you think you will get permanent housing?*
A: *They have told us that we will get our new housing in two years time. I think that they will stick to their word.*
Q: *Stick to their word?*
A: *Yes, because the tsunami came unexpectedly. It is not like the war. All of us were displaced in a matter of minutes. There is a lot of international support, and it will be hard to ignore us. But I'm sure that we will get permanent housing within this time period.*

(Madhuri, a 25-year old woman and mother of two boys from Batticaloa)

“We will get our permanent house built in two years time. They have told us this. They will need two years because they will build the new place well, with solid construction material for example.”

(Renuka, a 42-year old woman from Batticaloa)

More significantly and quite unexpectedly, many expressed contentment with how their lives were shaping in comparison to their pre-tsunami living. They attributed this partly to their ability to eke out a living because, for example, the transitory shelters were located on soil that was *nallam* (good) for home garden cultivation. Their satisfaction was linked less to the structural situation of housing and had much more to do with the ability to go about with a sense of ‘normalcy’.

Similarly, Soundarie, a 41-year old Tamil woman who lost her 17-year old son to the tsunami, expressed her approval of the newly built permanent house by the local Catholic parish church in the Dutch-Bar area as follows:

“This new house is better than the earlier one. This is built with brick and this is very strong. The roof too is hardy. There is proper concrete foundation and the roofing has tiles.”

Soundarie’s endorsement of better quality housing resonates with the sentiments expressed by families in the Thiramaidu temporary camp, which suggests conditions of poverty and deprivation. It is against this milieu within which they lost their few possessions to the tsunami, where grinding poverty and low quality makeshift homes
are likely to have been easily demolished through the tsunami waves. These aspects thus point to the political economy setting that made the tsunami the humanitarian disaster that it became in Sri Lanka (Uyangoda, 2005; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007; Hyndman, 2007a; de Mel, 2007).

Despite the tsunami initially leading to a considerable public and personal loss, Rigg et al (2005, p. 377) point out how the tsunami in Thailand also “afforded an opportunity which would not have otherwise have arisen, namely the opportunity to move to a larger, permanent and prime corner plot”. Sri Lankan’s had comparable experiences where the tsunami brought with it opportunities such as better quality shelters. Soundarie’s unambiguous appreciation of her new home is indicative of the lopsided upshot of the tsunami catastrophe. Likewise, Madhavi, a 27-year old Sinhala woman from Hikkuduwa explained the ways in which they constructed their destroyed (old) house and how the old house compares with the new:

“With the money we saved we renovated the house and enlarged it. I did not pay a bricklayer to plaster walls. I did it myself. Everyone was sad when house was completely destroyed by the tsunami…. The house we have got from the foundation is quite solid. It is plastered and colour-washed nicely.”

The few Sinhala women who had come into possession of permanent housing expressed a degree of satisfaction with their new dwellings. And others who were yet to own such dwellings would point to houses built, which they perceived to be of good condition.

In contrast, Muslim community in Poonachchimoonai offer credence to Uyangoda’s (2005, p.343) view that this was the community to have suffered worst in the Eastern Province. The Muslim families received limited formal assistance, whether through the government or NGOs – and where there was external support it was linked to previous rights-based work. Where material support was given this was haphazard at best. This was reflected in the housing conditions of the Muslim families, which
were either plastic tents or shacks put together with plastic coverings (given by a leading Sri Lankan bank in the days immediately following the tsunami) and low-quality timber found through their own initiative. Nearly a year after they continued to dwell in flimsy shacks and had not received any official information or support with regards to obtaining permanent housing despite promises by a Hong Kong-based group. *Hafsa*, a 38-year old woman from Batticaloa said that “*because of the land problem* (meaning the lack of clarity regarding the buffer-zone) we don’t know anything about our permanent housing. But Hong Kong people said that they will build house.”

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<tr>
<td>Total Houses Damaged</td>
<td>4,426</td>
<td>5,196</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Houses to be built</td>
<td>3,665</td>
<td>4,718</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction status (in progress)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of units completed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>1,951</td>
</tr>
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(Donor Built Housing: Adapted from Institute of Policy Studies 2005 and 2006)

A current status of donor built housing in Batticaloa and Galle districts (Hikkaduwa falls under the latter district) notes the slow process of reconstruction and regional differences for the two districts. While there are no existing data for break-down according to the ethnicity in any of the areas, the district disparities alone may suffer some credence as to the ways in which marginal ethnic communities were easily neglected. Against this backdrop, one can only surmise that the anecdotes provided by the Muslims do hold water.

Partly the unsettling aspects to Muslim community’s lived realities point to the ways in which state and LTTE buffer-zone bans caused havoc and insecurity in people’s lives (Uyangoda, 2005; Hyndman, 2007a). This is overlaid with the apparently
callous disregard for the everyday difficulties lack of proper housing brings about. These Muslims reckoned that because their previous housing fell just within the 200 meter buffer zone, they were yet to be allocated land in the interior areas. The efforts to secure land and housing for relocation was done via an all-men village committee advocating their case with the Gramasevaka (Village Official), yet they were of the impression that they did not receive adequate consideration because their voice and concerns did not carry the same weight as Tamils in the area.

Muslims were the weakest link in the “peace talks” that was shakily proceeding in the background between the LTTE and the state since 2002 (Uyangoda, 2005, p.343). Their visibility, at best is peripheral to the prevailing ethno-nationalist warring and peace discourse. The experience of the Muslims in Poonachchimoonai may be illustrative of the concrete ways in which this political omission of minority interests was percolating in the post-tsunami period. The failure to receive adequate supportive measures suggests the ways in which marginal and politically invisible social groups fall within the gaps of available social protective mechanisms and humanitarian efforts (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p.18). The occasional skirmishes erupting in the area only add to the vulnerability of such groups. Coupled together with the haphazard and ambiguous instituting of buffer zones, the rebuilding efforts of the post-tsunami period “created spaces of fear and mistrust around which party politics and nationalist tensions were organized” (Hyndman, 2007a, p.366). People’s ability to access permanent or temporary accommodation was not merely dictated by humanitarian losses. Instead they were also shaped by a confluence of grounded political realities where the ways in which each ethnic community was able to (or, not) garner political patronage was equally crucial for their social and domestic welfare.

4.2 Familiarity and Novelty

Ethnic differentiation was also an issue in how affected people and communities made sense of their new temporary or permanent spaces. De Mel and Ruwanpura (2006) show how Burghers living in Batticaloa experienced the ethnic war in two
incongruous ways. As a community living in the area, they “were affected by the social and political changes wrought by war, its daily curfews, hartial, electricity cuts, disruption of schooling” and so forth (2006, p. 25). Yet because the community actively maintained a stance of neutrality in the ethnic war, they were not directly targeted by either the state or the LTTE during the armed violence (ibid; see also de Mel 2007). Displacement for the Burghers was new-fangled. For the Sinhalese in Southern Sri Lanka displacement was a novel occurrence as well. Consequently both these ethnic communities vociferously noted the problems and difficulties of their temporary living quarters.

Both the Burghers and Sinhalese were keen to point to the harsh conditions under which they resided. The bleakness of temporary shelters was not the only concern voiced by these ethnic communities, they also pointed to the lack of inclusion in the consultation process that lead to their resettlement. They felt that it was this absence of discussion that lead to subsequent problems with their temporary housing, including the inappropriate use of raw material, the problematic aspects to structures, and the use and abuse of sheltering facilities. The surrounding anxieties were captured in the following ways by a couple of Sinhala men in Peraliya (Hikkaduwa) and a Burgher woman theoretically residing in Thiraimadu (Batticaloa).

“*The temporary shelter we live in now is not suitable for rainy and windy weather. Our health is affected too. Look at this plastic, look at the timber used. Is this appropriate for local housing?*”
(Hettige, a 54-year old man in Peraliya)

“Take a look around and note the number of houses that are unoccupied. The agency just came and built wood houses. They did not ask who owned and wanted houses. So people who had extended family or property in the interior moved to those places, but nominally hold onto a temporary shelter. They do this so that they do not want to miss out on any benefits that are distributed. But do the agencies ever wonder about the wastage of resources that they contribute towards by not asking and assessing the needs of each local community? I don’t mean to
criticise the agency but it is hard not to be concerned with the squander of resources.”
(Jameiz-aiyya, a 67 year old man from Telwatte)

“The transitional accommodation in Thiraimadu is difficult to live in, especially during the rainy season. The rain water comes into the house. The corrugated iron roof is hot in the day and makes a loud noise when the winds are strong. It is difficult to cook in the kitchen too. That is why all the kitchens are covered against the wind coming in and that makes it impossible to stay inside as the kitchen fills with smoke. There are common toilets for about 4-5 families and tube-wells made for us. A couple of my sister’s-in-law and their children live next to our house in Thiraimadu. When these houses were distributed we were asked which houses we would like to occupy. So we live here, like we lived in the Dutch Bar…. We don’t live in the house in Thiraimadu. We come here in the evening and on holidays. We live in the town in my grandmother’s house, as it is easy for my children to go to school. We heard that there are thefts happening in the camp…."
(Helen, a 34-year old nominal resident of the Thiramaidu Camp, Batticaloa).

Regardless of the grievances expressed, a significant proportion of families did live in temporary dwellings. They endured the daily distress because the opportunities to live in alternative accommodation were limited. By and large they did not have the middle-class connections they could draw upon to make the shift to more suitable living arrangements. The newness of displacement coupled together with their economic deprivation and the discomfort of living in transitional shelters made their everyday living hard. Jameiz-aiyya, Hettige’s and Helen’s voices epitomise the resentment voiced at their exclusion from a consultative process that bore upon their living conditions in multiple ways. Quite vital to this viewpoint was the wastage of resources that they saw taking place because of this lack of engagement with affected communities regarding their needs. Indeed against the seeming availability of resources, the cruelty of not including them in the deliberative processes was reflective to them of the numerous ways in which vested groups maintained socio-economic inequities. These incidents are supportive of the wider point made by Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p.4) that allocation and programming was less about
assessed needs and more about public and media interest coupled together with “the unprecedented funding available.”

Helen’s narration at the same time captures the compounding of prior socio-economic inequities in the contemporaneous post-tsunami situation. Families that had an advantageous social network were able to utilize their existing base to nominally stake claims to temporary shelters with weekly visits so as to not lose out in the allocation of permanent housing. They, thus, exploited their class base to live in more habitable settings. These social practices were found to prevail across ethnic groups in the East as well as the South, symptomatic of the class prerogatives that made split housing arrangements possible. Predictable as such social practice may be, the disquiet expressed by economically deprived classes on resource wastage and duplication of housing serves as an essential reminder of the exacerbation of social tensions. This is an outcome of the insufficient attention paid to embedded structures that clearly come into play in post-disaster attempts at rebuilding communities. The contrasting experiences of people across class background testify that “affected people and communities are not homogenous entities”. Moreover, it suggests how risk analysis that took place in the immediate post-tsunami period missed out “more complex aspects” (Telford and Cosgrave 2007, p.17-18).

4.3 Relocation & Impartiality

Hyndman (2007a) notes how the geographical “fix” of buffer zones advocated by the state and the LTTE did not offer a clear rationale and as result created uncertainty and insecurity. This process fanned “flames of political controversy between the major political parties and among the various ethno-national groups” (Hyndman 2007a:365). Together with the social insecurity and political wrangling, came the widespread perception that affected communities – and in particular the fishing communities – objected to relocating into the interior of the country (Bastian 2005, Philips 2005, Shanmugaratnam 2005). Loss of livelihood to dispossession was the most commonly cited reasons, and is captured by Imali and Hettige’s (wife and husband, respectively) sentiments:
“Our family wants to retain this plot of land (even if it is in the buffer zone) and do not want to go to the interior of the country. Because we are fisher folk, we want to be close to the sea as it is convenient for the men to go to sea. If we lived in the interior of the country our men won’t be able to do their work properly. Sometimes we might also lose the chance of extra earnings by selling the fish that our men bring home, or make dried fish out of them. But if we are given a house just beyond the 100 meter cut-off point this would not hinder our work patterns in a way that is detrimental to our livelihoods. Still, I would like to keep this shelter.”

Yet during the fieldwork, the story line that emerged hinted at complexities that extended beyond that continually recounted in the public imaginary. There was no collective consensus that echoed obstinate refusal to relocate into interior areas. Some affected families did welcome such transfers because they viewed it as an upward move. There was, however, the perception that relocation had to be fair and equitable. In fact, whether people opposed or welcomed relocation was repeatedly couched in terms of the need to maintain equity and fairness.

The resistance towards relocation, where this existed, conveyed mistrust of the motivations – whether of the state or the LTTE – that was circulating in current thinking on coastal conservation. In fact, there was suspicion and unease regarding the new found zeal for coastal conservation, when existing policies were flagrantly flouted – particularly by the tourist industry. Continuing on with the conversation with Imali and Hettige, their thoughts best convey the contentious aspects that have come to dictate the public imaginary:

“…..There is also talk that the state is hoping to clear the coastline so that they can beautify the beach areas, make it more attractive for the tourist and the tourism industry. This means that the government is not so interested in our welfare but more so in exploiting our misfortune to benefit business interests and tourists.”

They – among other affected persons living in temporary shelters – pointed to events occurring on the ground to justify their standpoint. Within a 200 meter distance
from where the fieldwork was being conducted, there was a private hospital funded by foreign collaboration in Peraliya. This construction had obtained government approval but fell well within the 100-meter buffer zone. The discrepancy between the ways in which regulations are implemented for local communities and foreign bodies is a matter of legitimate concern that feeds into a sense of aggrieved injustice. In fact Hettige cynically went onto note “With the next tsunami, it is not only us who will be swept away but also hospitalised patients. Unless, the hospital is going to market itself as a way of rich and fee-paying patients getting a ticket from the hospital-bed to heaven!”

In Peraliya, it was the state and its capriciously implemented policies that were attacked and opposed. The LTTE was under no less criticism in Batticaloa. They too were challenged as to whose interest they were espousing through the buffer-zones implemented in the Eastern Province. While the coastal areas of Batticaloa where the fieldwork was done were in “cleared” areas, instructions by the LTTE carried weight and were adhered to. However, the intent of the LTTE was challenged on similar grounds to Southern Sri Lanka. A religious priest actively involved in assessing and responding to the needs of affected communities in addition to rebuilding permanent houses for affected communities in Batticaloa insisted that we should drive along the coastline to see preliminary signs of clearing up beach areas. He mentioned that these operations suggested a different play of things to come. He contended that the welfare of tsunami-affected communities was the last thing that was on LTTE’s mind in the current cleaning-up operations that were undertaken. Consequently, a protest march was undertaken to reinforce the disquiet the local community felt about this under the slogan “THE LAGOON IS OUR LIFE AND THE SEA IS OUR HOME – KEEP YOUR HANDS-OFF THEM”. Hence, where permanent relocation and resettlement barred communities from effectively and efficiently engaging livelihoods or simply getting back to a sense of normalcy, their sense of injustice was aggravated by the perception that the interest of capital was overriding the needs and priorities of affected communities.
Amongst the cross-ethnic group of people who were willing to relocate and resettle in interior areas, their compliance was dependent upon perceived notions of fairness. They emphasised that as long as they received property that was commensurate with that which they considered to be fair compensation for that lost in the tsunami waves then this would be a fair deal. Under these conditions then the shift to the interior of the country was not necessarily a negative turn. In fact, Geeta a 44-year old woman from Telwatte, went onto offer her seal of approval for an impending relocation into the interior by stating “The land in the interior is very good. It is productive land. But it should not be too far into the country. I personally prefer a house close by to my husband’s workplace in Ambalangoda…. We could build a temporary house on our land by the main road, but we don’t want to live there anymore in case a tsunami happens again.” Fearful recollections of tsunami waves, its aftermath, and a sense of anxiety about encountering another similar calamity together with “bettering” their standard of living were prime movers for those willing to move and settle in places away from the coastline. They all, however, iterated that equity and a sense of fair-play were fundamental to their making the permanent shifts to new locations. Impartiality was an underlying motivator that shaped and influenced the resettlement process.

The ways in which social inequalities were ignored or exacerbated in the resettlement and rebuilding phase is also made apparent in the ways in which gender issues and relations were dealt with. These issues are the focus of the final part of this section.

4.4. Gendered Realities

Sri Lanka’s property rights regime has been upheld as a feminist nirvana for its bilateral and matrilineal inheritance patterns through customary and codified law (McGilvray, 1982; 1989; Agarwal, 1996). In much of the country, at the death of the husband/father ½ share passes onto the wife/mother and the other ½ share are equally shared among the children irrespective of their gender. In other words, there is no gender inequity in the customary and codified inheritance system. Eastern Sri Lanka is even more remarkable because property inheritance passes through the
mother’s line. Here it is only daughters that have a right to the parental (usually maternal) property, and usually property is divided amongst daughters – with son’s leaving the parental homes (and hence any stake to it) upon their marriage.

These gender-equitable property rights regimes initially came under gradual assault in parts of the country through the Mahaweli Accelerated Development Programme (Rajapakse, 1989). Somewhat disturbingly the lack of awareness of these property rights regimes was common currency amongst philanthropic organizations and non-governmental organizations that were actively involved in rebuilding permanent shelter for tsunami-affected communities.

“No one has mentioned to me about the property rights regime and the bilateral inheritance system...Right now, the land is brought in the name of the foundation and at the time of handing over the new house, a legal title is done for each block of land and house. This is usually in the man’s name...We didn’t think about instances where the house before belonged to women.”

(Head of a philanthropic foundation).

“This land used to belong to me. This is where we had the house. With the new house, the title of the house is in my husband’s name”

(Madhavi, a 26-year old woman from Hikkaduwa)

Consequently, families were permanently resettled with title deeds of the land or house granted to men, which overrode generations of customary and codified inheritance patterns that are gender sensitive. Resettlement that is not cognisant and aware of the need to protect and promote prevailing gender sensitive legal systems is hardly evidence of “building back better”. Institutional actors involved in “putting houses in place” need to be made aware that their role is not simply about philanthropic goodwill (Bermeo, 2006). Their involvement must also entail responsibility to preserve those pillars of society that promote social egalitarianism and gender justice. Efforts to rebuild communities is not simply about building homes – as significant as this is for affected families in dire straits – it is also about
embedding these endeavours within wider structures that already have a gender inclusive base. An absence is likely to create new tensions that may potentially undermine long term social stability because of the close relationship between everyday violence and inequitable property ownership. Indeed the evidence goes contrary to the win-win situations of joint-titling increasingly instituted by neighbouring India (Datta, 2006). Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p.15) point out how land rights is an example of a factor that international agencies have had to deal with that is outside the ambit of competencies. The downside of institutional lapses is displacing and overturning customary laws that protect women’s rights and interest, which can all too easily be read as the entrance of patriarchal interest through the backdoor.

Ignoring the need to enhance egalitarian gender relations also lurks in the ways in which there is little cognition of gender norms, which was evident in the designing of ‘homes’. Spatial organization of home spaces is gendered. There is a distinct gender dimensions in the ways in which space is used and designed within a certain kind-of modernity (McDowell, 1999; Domosh and Seager, 2001). The explicit or implicit gam-udawa (village re-awakening) impulses motivating some institutional actors to be drawn into rebuilding communities, however, came at the cost of not taking on board household members daily living rituals in rural areas. This was particularly marked where Colombo-based architects were used to design houses in rural areas, where houses were built with half-walled kitchens unsuitable for the windy coastal belt. Women cooking using kerosene stoves complained how the winds would blow away the flames, making cooking time onerous. Half-walled kitchens also did not adequately offer them a secluded space since they were subject to the gaze of passers-by. Therefore, the kitchen was not a space they could go into without “proper” clothing.

The disjuncture between lived and designed spaces was then not merely a matter of practicality – although it was this too. It was also about gender signifiers that Colombo-based architects perhaps do not even begin to consider because urban-
based kitchen spaces of upper-classes are more than likely to be used and run by
domestic servants. Along with the gender gaps noted are also the urban-rural
differences that are invariably perpetuated through institutional actors involved in
goodwill and charity, exposing the hierarchical spaces and biases perpetuated during
the post-tsunami “building back better” phase.

Gender divergence on the ground occurred at multiple levels. The spatial scale of
transitory shelters also had its gender markers. A couple of instances repeatedly
manifested during conversations with men and women in the fieldwork sites. In the
temporary dwellings in Hikkaduwa, the common bathing and latrine facilities was a
point of consternation. Many residents felt that openness of these ablution facilities
was not sensitive to young women and teenage girls that had to use the amenities,
and where some families had relatives in the interior it was not uncommon for
family members to use these alternatives every few days. Kimali expressed her
annoyance regarding this matter, in the following way: “Can I get my teenage daughter
use these facilities? It is all open, see, take a look! I send her to my relatives place every few
days so that she can shower there without any harassment, gazing, and taunting.”

The transitory camp in Batticaloa was no different. The lack of sensitivity to gender
proprieties was heightened because the men and women’s washing facilities were
located adjoining each other. “We have one shared toilet for four houses. There are no
fences to separate the facilities between men and women. It is all open” said Amita from
Batticaloa. Not unexpectedly there have been accusations and counter-charges of
improper sexual behaviour, family squabbles, and domestic jealousies between and
amongst the residents. Whilst the social strains within the camp are not astonishing,
the repeated lapses on the part of humanitarian agencies working in Eastern Sri
Lanka were – in particular against a backdrop where previous academic-activist
research had pointed to similar concerns (de Alwis & Hyndman, 2002; Hyndman &
de Alwis, 2003).
5. An Unfinished Agenda?

Disaster and development relief is widely upheld, particularly in the developing world. Sri Lanka is no exception. Given its bloodied contemporary history with a protracted ethnic war and violence, disaster and humanitarian relief is as part of the country’s social fabric as is the war itself. Yet there were notable lapses in the recovery process. Partially, these failures demonstrate the wider context which had to do with the “isolated and short-term approaches” adopted by a media-driven public outpouring of aid spending where there was a discernible disjuncture between an absence of assessment and actual needs of affected communities (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). They attribute this to a variety of factors and failures of the wider humanitarian and aid community, but crucial to their analysis was that an opportunity was missed to put “affected communities in the driving seat” (ibid, p.22).

Based on my fieldwork, this paper seeks to add to emergent analysis pointing to how affected communities themselves are likely to negotiate the recovery process in very diverse ways because of their ethnic, class, and gender positioning. In Southern and Eastern Sri Lanka, the multiple intersections of spaces of inequality and the existing ethnic politics surfaced in the numerous conversations with local communities. These dynamics underscore the ways in which existing fault-lines and socio-economic vulnerabilities are unlikely to dissipate merely through the massive outpouring of aid and external interventions. Indeed, where there was a lack of local positioning and awareness of the local micro-politics, the rebuilding of communities was either exacerbating exclusionary sensibilities or sharpening of uneven socio-economic processes. Or, put differently, it is important to pay close attention to the complexities inherent in local communities because of the profoundly discriminatory manner in which “pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others pay a higher price” (Seager, 2006, p.3). Equally, troubling was the undermining of customary matrilineal and bilateral property rights laws in Sri Lanka, which have been the vanguard of emancipatory spaces for women, through post-tsunami gender-blind practices of building houses and titling property.
Phases of recovery, however, are not strictly defined and are open-ended (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p.15). It is likely to take years, if not decades, for affected communities from the contingent disasters (the war and tsunami) afflicting Sri Lanka to overcome the adversity they continually face. The agenda of re-building communities in Sri Lanka remains unfinished. In this respect the open-endedness also offers the possibility for optimistic and promising scenarios. The recognition that “natural disasters” may be triggered by sudden earthly forces (an earthquake), but they become colossal disasters because of prevailing political economy conditions (Pelling 2001) is a nascent step towards acknowledging that these tragic moments do not offer clean states full of new opportunities for disaster management. “Building back better” would then have to be about enhancing opportunities for affected communities through a reduction in the everyday structural vulnerabilities faced. This requires consistent focusing in on the class, ethnic and gendered positioning of affected communities and being actively aware of the intersections between social, economic, and political processes. ‘Putting houses in place’ then is more than just a physical endeavour and becomes an embedded process as it should be.

References


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i Dunham & Jayasuriya (2000) point out how war-affected regions have witnessed deterioration in mean incomes with a sharply negative impact upon health, education, and other welfare service provisioning (2000, p.101). Therefore, ‘national’ level indicators need to be treated with some level of caution.

ii For detailed figures on education, per capita income, and other related indices I refer the interested reader to Sarvananthan (2007).

iii This is noted as Nachchimoonai in the map below.

iv Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p.21) point out how the “urgency to spend money visibly, worked against making the best use of local and national capacities”. This point is worthwhile emphasizing because a Batticaloa-based NGO had worked with the community on awareness-raising activities for the past six year. Goodhand et al. (2000, p. 404) note that such process-based work as “the most contingent and the most difficult to engineer” and hence such activities tend to be overlooked by the aid community. SURIYA, the NGO in question, continued to be involved with the community in such rights based activities, especially attempting to ensure that the communities did voice their legitimate concerns to the relevant governmental bodies. Their commitment to the location is unsurprising and supports the analysis that NGOs grounded in the lived realities of communities acquire a
commitment to work through difficult and different tensions transient development workers and institutional actors may not necessarily show (Ruwanpura, 2007a).

vi Hettige and Imali were probably the most vociferous opponents of relocating into the interior. By end of last year (2006), however, they had relocated into another house away from the original destroyed property. While I have not been to speak with them since their move in residence, I can only hazard that they would have been persuaded that they did get a ‘fair deal’ to have shifted.

vii The exceptions were NGOs that worked within a feminist mandate that held legal clinics on making affected communities women aware of their codified property rights (De Mel, 2007, p. 8).

viii In one instance, the philanthropic organization involved was in the midst of rectifying these gendered lapses. De Mel & Ruwanpura (2006, p. 32) in a similar vein note the equally key point that “while the lack of consultation by the state is denounced unequivocally by villagers” the limits to facilities offered by philanthropic and NGO institutional actors had to be elicited and “even then the criticism was carefully tempered with praise for on-going efforts. This points to the complex power nexus in which visible philanthropic foundations acting as service providers occupy a position of hegemony…, which also marks a shift of social and political capital from the state to the individual/private sector”.