Waves of Disaster – Waves of Relief
An Ethnography of Humanitarian Assistance to
Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka

Report from a Minor Field Study

by

Jesper Bjarnesen

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Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology
Uppsala University

Supervisor: Ing-Britt Trankell
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Title
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Abstract
This paper applies an impressionistic and reflexive genre of ethnography to understand the ethnographer’s meeting with the humanitarian aid workers in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. It offers an analysis of the political atmosphere in the country prior to the tsunami as a central framework for understanding current tensions and debates over the distribution of tsunami aid resources, and traces the emergence of what has been termed Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork from April to July 2005 among aid workers at the central level in Colombo and a careful attention to the rhetorics and arguments that characterized the writings in the Sri Lankan press during this period, the paper argues that while public debates over tsunami aid distribution has been entwined with political rivalries between the Sri Lankan government, and Sinhala and Tamil nationalist groups, the everyday reality of international humanitarians evolved around the forming of a common development language to categorise the demands of the aid intervention and on the performances of individual organisations, personified by a limited number of individuals in the professional fora of the humanitarians in Colombo.

Keywords: Tsunami, Sri Lanka, humanitarian assistance, disaster, suffering, para-ethnography, cultures of expertise, reflexivity
List of Acronyms

ADB  Asian Development Bank
AIDS  Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
BBC  British Broadcasting Corporation
CEPA  Centre for Poverty Analysis
CHA  Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies
DRMU Disaster Relief Monitoring Unit
EU  European Union
HIC  Humanitarian Information Centre
HIV  Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRC  Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission
IDP  Internally Displaced Person
I/NGO  International or National Non-Governmental Organisation
JBIC  Japan Bank for International Cooperation
JHU  Jathika Hela Urumaya
JVP  Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LTTE  Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (“the Tamil Tigers”)
NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA  UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
Oxfam  Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
PR  Public Relations
SLIIR  Sri Lankan Institute for International Relations
TAFREN  Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation
TRO  Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation
UN  United Nations
UPFA  United People's Freedom Alliance
Q&A  Questions and answers

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Foreword

The front page photo* was taken in Thailand by the Danish photographer Martin Lehmann. It shows three white tourists on a beach surrounded by debris from the devastating tsunami that hit the region on 26 December 2004. In the background two local workers are busy rebuilding what was destroyed in the waves but they both pause to look at the photographer. The motif is powerful because of the stark contrasts it captures; the half-naked tourists, leisurely ‘working on their tan’ against the backdrop of devastation and the two busy workers who seem to be in another world, only a few metres apart. The female tourist, so bluntly intent on catching as much sun as possible may provoke us; not only is she not taking part in the recovery work which we know to be abundant, her lack of discretion encourages our condemnation and pinches at our own guiltiness for being so detached from the suffering of the many victims we have seen on TV – some of whom might have been our neighbours.

I have chosen to introduce my paper in this manner because I expect that the reader will be confronted with an underlying theme in the following pages. Implicitly, this paper is about detachment; about different groups of people sharing the same event but in different ways; about the haunting presence of suffering so close, and yet so far away. The tsunami brought us all together for a while; we were shocked by its images, we worried for its survivors, we mourned its victims. For a while. And then life moves on; even for the homeless survivors and the bereaved. For the people in focus here, the humanitarian aid workers in Colombo, detachment from the disaster victims were a basic premise of their work, and there was time for little else than the hectic meeting schedule. This detachment may shock the outside observer, in a similar way that the front page photo may shock us. The humanitarians, after all, are not only professionally obliged to care for the victims; they are perhaps the relief for us, the unaffected, as much as for them, the victims, and their detachment may haunt us as it counters the popular imagery of disaster relief. But to understand the workings of this line of work requires us to listen as unprejudiced as possible to their own accounts, and to acknowledge that these
people are experts in their field, and may after all be able to provide us all, victims as well as observers, with some relief.

Although the responsibility for this work lays with the author alone, it could not have been done without the inspiration and support of a number of people. First of all, I am grateful to the Minor Field Study programme under the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for their admirable initiative to promote knowledge and understanding across boarders. Ing-Britt Trankell, more than just my supervisor, has been a constant reassurance and has opened the world of anthropology for me in new ways during the process. Jan Ovesen has given me a confidence I am forever grateful for by making me believe that I have something to contribute to the discipline, and I owe the opportunity to Pelle Brandström who encouraged me to engage in the project in the first place. In Uppsala, I also owe special thanks to Mikael Kurkiala, whose innovative and inspirational teaching and thinking I will never forget.

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Finally, this project would not have been possible without the love and support of you, Malin.

* The front page photo recently received the Danish Press Photo of the Year Award, and is printed here with the permission of Per Folkver, Director of Photography at Politiken.
1. Introduction

Many have died. To say more is to simplify, but to fathom the statement is also to make the fact bearable [...] Many have died. How to give an account of these shocking events without giving in to a desire to shock? And more important, what does it mean to give such an account? That is the burden of this book

E. Valentine Daniel in Charred Lullabies

But what is our justification for looking? And what is our justification for turning away?

Susan D. Moeller in Compassion Fatigue

This paper is formulated with a concern similar to E. Valentine Daniel’s at heart; how to formulate a representation in the aftermath of the tsunami that encourages an understanding that goes further than the initial shock of the events; how to add an account to the many reports from the media that challenges the trivialisation of other people’s suffering that follows from detached observation. But what is our justification for looking? To watch is in some sense to consume; we look because we can, because we are safe and privileged to do so. We, who were not affected by the tsunami, looked in disbelief; we perhaps looked with empathy, we perhaps look on to learn something. But what does all this staring accomplish for the victims of the tsunami; both far and near? Perhaps we are as unjustified in looking as we are in looking away – perhaps our gazes mean more to ourselves than to those we observe.

This paper looks on. It looks not at the heart of the suffering that the tsunami caused but in several directions around it. It looks to learn something about the workings of humanitarian assistance in relation to a natural disaster, and it
does so by taking seriously the perceptions and interpretations of the experts of such work, rather than evaluating their performance. Two prominent anthropologists of disaster have argued that ‘[t]he value of ethnographic research is particularly evident during the process of reconstruction, when people must traverse the difficult path between restoration and change. This process of negotiation between what has been lost and what is to be reconstituted generally involves tensions among diverse interest groups and values’ (Oliver-Smith & Hofmann 2002: 12). I have attempted to conduct such an ethnography from the perspective, not of the Sri Lankans who were affected in the tsunami – and who face the gravest of challenges in remaking their world (Das et. al. 2001) – but from the perspective of humanitarian professionals whose challenge lies primarily in traversing the path between the demands of their organisation and their personal aspirations.

I thereby make myself guilty of the charges that Ravi Rajan has directed at Veena Das and her associates of a lack of a constructive criticism that might contribute to the task of post-disaster rehabilitation (Ravi Rajan 2002: 255-56), but I would argue that, as I hope to qualify through the approach of this paper, the answers to the challenges¹ ahead should not be found in opposition to, but rather in dialogue with the people who possess the professional expertise to convert ideas into practice.

Part I of the paper is dedicated to an analytical contextualisation of the three month fieldwork in Sri Lanka that it is based upon, although several empirical observations and reflections are included both implicitly and explicitly throughout. I begin with chapter 2 on methodological reflections, which unavoidably intertwine with issues of epistemology and analytical framework, where I introduce the notion of *para-ethnography* developed by Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus, and proceed with a long chapter 3 that

¹ During my fieldwork, however, I did indulge in such a criticism, and while the resulting recommendations (see Appendix or www.cepa.lk) may not be particularly valuable, the production of a brief paper in collaboration with a Sri Lankan humanitarian provided me with a position towards my informants that proved highly constructive and valuable.
discusses anthropological studies of Sri Lankan society prior to the tsunami in relation to the politics of humanitarian assistance.

Part II focuses on the devastating effects of the tsunami on Sri Lanka and discusses the understanding of such devastation in relation to the anthropological study of disaster.

Finally, Part III presents the bulk of my empirical material, presented in the framework of a para-ethnography of humanitarian assistance, before I briefly conclude by discussing the impressions of the study.

Part I: Contextualisation
2. Methodology: In Search of a Field of Vision

In this chapter, I outline my methodological reflections as they have developed through the duration of the study, and outline an overall analytical approach that combines the established wisdom of a conventional ethnographical approach to participant observation with a recent rethinking of the ethnography of cultures of expertise as a para-ethnography.

Introduction

Although Bronislaw Malinowski might be argued to represent a whole wave of fieldworkers, representing the scientific ideals of his time rather than an individual rethinking of the ethnographic method, it seems beyond doubt that '… the classical Malinowskian image of fieldwork (the lone, white, male fieldworker living for a year or more among the native villagers) functions as an archetype for normal anthropological practice' (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 11).

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2 See Barley (1986) for an amusing satire over this classical image.
Regardless of one’s field site or the nature of the phenomena one intends to study, most ethnographers still seem to envisage some variation over his eternal theme:

‘Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight …’ (Malinowski 1922: 4)

Most present-day anthropologists could easily list several epistemological objections to this image but the arduous journey “into the field” remains the rite de passage of aspiring anthropologists (Passaro 1997: 147), as is evident from the arrival anecdotes that still characterize the introductions of many monographs. At the heart of this image is the notion that ethnography boils down to the ethnographer’s personal journey into a strange world – be it inhabited by stock brokers, homeless New Yorkers, humanitarian aid workers or, for that matter, fellow ethnographers – a journey impossible to prepare for; a journey where one’s academic skills are not enough; a journey that involves every aspect of one’s personality (Amit 2000: 2). As Jackson puts it,

‘… the savoir faire on which your social survival and sense of self-worth depend stems not from any abstract understanding but from direct familiarity with a body of practical knowledge which informs every aspect of everyday life and can only be acquired gradually through trial and error … Understanding is a product less of your methodology than your mastery of basic social skills. And this demands tie and perseverance’ (Jackson 1995: 21, emphasis original)

The initiation into another everyday epitomizes the anthropological method of extended participant observation that continues to distinguish anthropology from its neighbouring disciplines in the views of many commentators inside as well as outside it (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 5; J. Jackson 1990: 17; Mintz 2000). As a rite of passage, the archetypical fieldwork experience in the form
reproduced by Jackson, bases the central challenge to the ethnographer on skills that cannot be taught, thereby contributing to the mysterious awe (J. Jackson 1990: 29) surrounding the long fieldwork; an awe that haunts many neophytes on their first days of fieldwork. My three month fieldwork in Sri Lanka from April to early July, that forms the basis of the present paper, was no different. Despite the accessibility of ethnographic material on Sri Lanka, and the overwhelming amount of media reports and early assessments of the tsunami by organisations such as the Red Cross and the UN, I arrived in Colombo with the same feeling of being alone in a strange and exotic place. As my empirical descriptions will illustrate shortly, my initial meetings with both international and Sri Lankan ‘humanitarians’ – the term I have chosen as the common denominator of anyone professionally involved with the post-tsunami relief effort – were characterised by the insecurity and gradual trial and error familiarisation with their savoir faire described by Jackson, echoing Malinowski’s acrhetypical descriptions. In that sense, the mysterious awe that continues to fill much methodological literature in anthropology served its purpose; I had been prepared more for the personal and existential strain of this process of familiarisation than for the practical conduct of any particular method, and these were the lessons I needed most in the first stages of fieldwork. From that basis, I developed my own ‘style’ of participant observation, the premises for which is the subject of the following paragraph.

**Participant observation**

While the epistemological premises of participant observation – a gradual acquisition of understanding through trial and error – have been praised by enthusiasts as an expression of a unique combination of inductive and deductive inquiry (Merleau-Ponty 1964:125), many questions have been raised regarding the nature of the knowledge acquired and the (power)

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3 I apply this term to illustrate the level of abstraction of this study, not because I would argue that there exists a homogenous group of people that match the label. It is my hope that the obvious generalisation implied by such a term will alert the reader to the basic premise that this study aims at generalised reflections on the workings of humanitarian assistance, thereby looking for similarities rather than differences among its subjects.
positioning expressed in the classical relation between the participant observer and his [sic] informants (cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986). It is to these questions that we now turn. I propose to consider these reflections in terms of ‘shifting positions’ as suggested by Gupta & Ferguson in their (1997) discussion of ‘the field’ in anthropology, which implies that the ethnographer actively seeks out contrasting positions to his/her field of interest out of an acknowledgement of the basic premise that all knowledge is positioned, and in an attempt to use this premise to enrich his/her ethnography.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964: 119) has suggested that the combination of objective analysis and lived experience (i.e. participation) is the central strength of anthropology, a view that is extended by Pierre Bourdieu who has attempted to reintroduce objectification as a justified goal and implicit condition of qualitative analysis: ‘…scientific objectivation is not complete unless it includes the point of view of the objectivizer and the interests he may have in objectivation’ (Bourdieu 2003: 284). This position invites a new, moderate, concept of observation that takes the postmodernist critique into consideration and works on the premise that the observer is always part of what s/he observes, and thereby transcends the postmodernist ambiguity towards the subjectivity of the observer and takes it as its point of departure.

While Jackson acknowledges the difficulties in acquiring the savoir faire to participate in the lives of his informants (1995: 21) and while he finds the term participant observation to be ‘oxymoronic’, since it ‘obscures the full force of the interplay between … cool inquiry and painful initiation … in ethnographic practice, and downplays the extent to which it is this turbulent merger of two countervailing traditions of knowledge which gives anthropology its singular character’ (ibid. 170), this approach nevertheless counters the point of departure of Bourdieu (and to some extent Gupta & Ferguson); that the epistemological contradiction implied in participant observation rests on the insurmountable difference between the worldview of the ethnographer and those of his/her informants. Accepting Jackson’s statement that ‘[a]nthropology begins with unity, not difference’ (Jackson 1995: 117), I
would argue, offers a more decisive challenge to the tendency to essentialise difference, still present in some of the arguments considered in this section.

**Participant Observation at Coordination Meetings**

With these methodological reflections in mind, I arrived in Sri Lanka intending to conduct participant observation as my primary source of data, combined with several variations of qualitative interviews as a way of qualifying my observations, and accessing the richer narratives of the humanitarians. I had expected to focus my attention on the employees of one humanitarian agency through an internship or a volunteer position but due to the hectic atmosphere of acuteness that still prevailed three months after the tsunami, no one I met were interested in taking on any new volunteers, since most agencies had been overrun by enthusiastic Westerners since the first week of January.

Forced to rethink my methodology on the basis of these rejections, and already engaged in several humanitarian coordination meetings on a regular basis, I gradually came to perceive the fora where representatives from various agencies would meet to share information and discuss current issues or challenges (see chapter 7 for a brief presentation of the main topics of these meetings) as the main site of my participant observation. This adjustment implied that my ‘field’ became radically delimited in terms of the time I was able to spend with informants, compared to my expectations of long days sharing the everyday of a limited group of employees in an organization. At the same time, I felt that my ‘field’ had been expanded in terms of the number of actors it included, since the three weekly meetings I had attended regularly had only a few of the same people present, and since the largest of these meetings housed between 50 and 90 individuals, representing almost as many organizations. It did not take long, however, before I knew most people by name and organization, and after about a month of participant observation I would notice newcomers immediately, and had become familiar with quite a few of the most regular attendees.
At every meeting, I would note down how many people were present; the agenda of the meeting; and as much as I could about the way people related to each other before, during, and after meetings. My work was aided by the regular distribution of printed meeting schedules and the opening round of introductions, where everyone present was asked to cite their name and organization. A great part of my sense of ‘immersion in the field’ was inspired by taking part in these rounds, and seeing my name on the participant list at the following meeting. Having noted as much of the interaction, body language, statements, and reactions of the participants as I could, I would often develop an interest in one or more of the people who stood out in some way. After a meeting I would rush through the groups of conversing humanitarians towards someone who had been particularly active, frustrated, or otherwise visible during the meeting, to request a meeting for an interview. Sometimes I would have conversations with the people sitting next to me, and sometimes the people I ended up talking to did not catch my interest until the after-meeting mingling.

**Conclusion: Para-ethnography?**

Based on these methodological considerations, I would argue that what conventional ethnographic methodologies based on, or in relation to, the classic Malinowskian image of extended participant observation had prepared me for was the arduous journey ‘into the field’ and the extent to which this access depended on my personal social skills, or savoir faire, as Jackson has argued.

What these conventional approaches had not anticipated was that my informants – ‘the humanitarians’ in Colombo – did not lead everyday lives that were accessible to me, the ethnographer. I have therefore had to rely on a recent proposal for a more radical rethinking of ethnographic practice in order to conceptualise what kind of data I was able to acquire in my field of vision. What I might have asked myself in preparation of my fieldwork among humanitarians is phrased convincingly by Douglas Holmes and George E. Marcus in their contribution to the newly published (2005) volume *Global*
Assemblages, edited by Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier: ‘Is the point of doing fieldwork among experts to do a conventional ethnography among them?’ (Holmes & Marcus 2005a: 236). Clearly, what my adjusted methodology amounted to was quite far from the conventional notion of prolonged immersion in the everyday lives of others. And perhaps this ‘style’ of fieldwork has to do with the characteristics of my informants – humanitarian aid professionals, or, indeed, experts – since even this analytical delimitation relates strictly to their professional lives, as opposed to, say, Jackson’s Warlpiri subjects who are studied more in the classical sense of ‘a people’. Holmes and Marcus, at least, ‘… believe that it is highly unlikely that a robust ethnography of “everyday life” can be done within these cultures of expertise, where the public and private spheres are strictly demarked’ (Holmes & Marcus 2005a 236). This approach facilitates the notion of different ‘styles’ of fieldwork that may be selected and adjusted in accordance with both the nature and scope of the subjects under investigation and the more practical aspects of ‘access to the field’ discussed above.

The most significant advantage in this framework is that it implies an explicit consideration of the ‘style’ of data it facilitates, as well as the positioning of the ethnographer it entails:

‘What is compelling about this approach to cultures of expertise is that it immediately provides a basis of exchange with expert subjects. By marking out the para-ethnographic character of their expert practices, an intricate basis of discussion is opened between the anthropologist and subject. The anthropologist’s presence in these domains is thereby legitimized and the basis for meaningful exchange is created. A critical seam is opened up – through a shared ethnographic practice – that allows the anthropologist entry into these intriguing cultural domains’ (Holmes & Marcus 2005a: 245)

The term introduced for this kind of data, para-ethnography, implies that experts – be they genetic engineers, central bankers, EU politicians, or, I would add, humanitarians – employ ‘… a self-conscious critical faculty’
(Holmes & Marcus 2005b: 1104) in their capacity as experts that bares resemblance to the fluctuation between lived experience and objective analysis, suggested by Merleau-Ponty as the central strength of anthropology in the discussion above (on page 8).

Conceptualising my engagement with the humanitarians as a para-ethnography provides a framework that more convincingly accounts for my gradual positioning in the field as a *collaborator* in the relief effort. This positioning is also inspired by the earlier work by Marcus (e.g. 1998) – and the more familiar ‘writing culture’ critique (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986) – rather than merely an observer, a position that eventually resulted in a cooperation with a Sri Lankan humanitarian in the production of a paper entitled ‘Challenges to the Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Process’ (see Appendix or www.cepa.lk), which was published as a contribution to the improvement of the reconstruction work. Most importantly, the framework accounts convincingly for the way in which the humanitarians were able to reflect on their own practices and perceptions, resulting in a ‘style’ of data that I have found very difficult to analyse in a more conventional understanding of ‘the native’s point of view’ (Geertz 1984).

To provide a satisfactory representation of the para-ethnographies of the humanitarians, and to acknowledge Bourdieu’s argument that ‘…scientific objectivation is not complete unless it includes the point of view of the objectivizer and the interests he may have in objectivation’ quoted above, I have chosen to present my data in the form of a reflexive narration, that merges several para-ethnographies with particular attention to my own positioning in them. Although applied retrospectively, this choice is inspired by Holmes and Marcus’ proposition that the para-ethnographic framework provides ‘... an access to a construction of an imaginary for fieldwork that can be shaped only by alliances with makers of visionary knowledge who are already in the scene or within the bounds of the field. The imaginaries of knowledge makers who have preceded the ethnographer are what the dreams of contemporary fieldwork are made of’ (Holmes & Marcus 2005b: 1101).
The crucial challenge to the Malinowskian archetype, then, lies in the ethnographer’s positioning as collaborator, rather than observer, of the subjects under study.

3. Politicised Identities in Sri Lanka

Before I turn to the first attempt at narrating a para-ethnographic account of the humanitarian assistance to post-tsunami Sri Lanka, it is important to contextualise these accounts in the wider socio-political scene upon which the reconstruction process is unfolding. This is perhaps of particular significance because of the tense political atmosphere in Sri Lanka that relates to the prolonged armed conflict that has plagued the country for more than two decades, despite several peace agreements – the most recent facilitated by Norwegian diplomats in 2002. The politicisation of ‘ethnicity’ in Sri Lanka has been eloquently and thoroughly described elsewhere, by authors such as E. Valentine Daniel (e.g. 1996) and Stanley Tambiah (e.g. 1992; 1995), and the following discussion does not pretend to supplement such works, but rather to apply their insights to the specific context of the post-tsunami situation, and the positioning of anthropology in the tense atmosphere of politicised identities in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The Sri Lankan sociologist Susantha Goonatilake has recently (2001) published a book entitled Anthropologizing Sri Lanka. A Eurocentric Misadventure, dedicated to a fierce critique of four of the most influential contributors to Sri Lankan anthropology; Stanley Tambiah, Gananath Obeyesekere, Richard Gombrich, and Bruce Kapferer. The overall argument of the book is that these writers form part of a pro-Tamil network of Sri Lankan and foreign scholars that produce seriously flawed, and politically charged accounts of Sri Lankan society.

In his review in Current Anthropology, a baffled Arjun Guneratne characterises Goonatilake’s work as a ‘… relentlessly angry and intemperate
book whose slash-and-burn approach undermines its own argument’ (Guneratne 2004: 718), and continues:

‘This book is a polemic against a scholarship that wittingly or unwittingly calls into question the grand narrative of Sinhala nationalism or appears to be critical of the Buddhist clergy. In this sense it is a salvo in Sri Lanka’s culture wars’ (ibid. 719)

So, why spend any more attention on such a radical book? Because Goonatilake has provided a recent illustration of something very central to Sri Lankan politics, especially from an anthropological perspective, namely the highly contested nature of political, religious, and ‘ethnic’ identities in Sri Lanka that also characterised the more publicized polemics surrounding Tambiah’s *Buddhism Betrayed?* a decade or so ago. Such debates cut to the core of postcolonial debates over anthropological representations, and illustrate that the constructivist understanding of identities as flexible and socially reproduced categories remains controversial in certain spheres. Thus, veteran historian K.M de Silva cautions us:

‘One needs to keep in mind the historical dimension of the rivalries [between proponents of the ‘Sinhalese’ and ‘Tamils’ in Sri Lanka], a palimpsest with layer upon layer of troubled historical memories, where the events of several centuries ago assume the immediacy of the previous weekend, and those of a thousand years, that of the last year. The country is haunted by a history that is agonizing to recall but hazardous to forget’ (de Silva 1998: 300)

Following the tsunami, debates over the dispersal of the humanitarian aid pledged to Sri Lanka became entangled in these debates, as controversy rose over a proposed ‘Joint Mechanism’ that was intended as coordinating agreement between Kumaratunga’s government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who control a section of the Northern part of the island. To a foreigner, arriving to Sri Lanka either as part of the humanitarian response to the tsunami, or as a student of anthropology, these agitated
debates, carried out in the media, and from late April also at political rallies and mass demonstrations, provided a complex and intimidating backdrop for our presence. The following section provides an account of my own encounter with these debates during my fieldwork, and is intended as an illustration of how the complex rivalries over political and ‘ethnic’ identities gradually became entangled in debates over aid distribution, and how these issues were experienced by outsiders such as myself and the newly arrived foreign humanitarians.

**The Politics of Humanitarian Aid**

It was a quiet Saturday in Colombo. My girlfriend and I had been at Odel’s – a fashionable shopping centre and one of the preferred hang-outs for expatriates and tourists in Colombo – drinking fresh fruit smoothies and looking through the endless racks of European brand clothes. I had picked up a fund raising pamphlet, placed accusingly close to the counter where you would pay for a new shirt in European prices before returning to the reality of a developing country outside the gates of this upper-class hideaway. The front of the pamphlet showed a picture of a house turned to ruins and read, “Has Tsunami relief become a blind spot for you?” It was marked with the logo of the ‘Odel Foundation’. Inside, a picture of a child sleeping in a small tent and a long text, starting with this appeal:

> With the number of Tsunami messages still being aired by the media [:] the constant appeals and requests for donations, it’s no wonder that a kind of public fatigue has set in.

But look at it this way. If you put aside your irritation for a moment, you can turn around the destiny of someone else. Completely change another’s future

I couldn’t help thinking of Susan Moeller’s (1999) discussion of the term ‘compassion fatigue’; ‘We’ve got compassion fatigue, we say, as if we have involuntarily contracted some kind of disease that we’re stuck with no matter what we might do’ (Moeller 1999: 9). It hadn’t occurred to me how far away
from the suffering we actually were, despite the fact that you can reach anywhere in Sri Lanka within the same day. The language in the pamphlet might as well have been printed in a similar pamphlet in Sweden. What public was it referring to? A global public fatigue or a Sri Lankan one? Clearly the clientele of Odel allowed for both interpretations but in any case the point that we all went through our business here, an eternity away from the IDP camps twenty minutes from Colombo was spelled out clearly, white letters on black.

In the end it said, ‘With formal channels for collection and disbursement of aid, very achievable targets and the backing of national organizations like the TAFREN\(^5\), ODEL knows exactly where every rupee is going’. I thought of the Donor Meeting, hosted by the Asian Development Bank, where Rachel Perera from TAFREN had given a ten second report on the delays of the district reports, and left the room of donor representatives roaring with rage. To the international agencies, TAFREN was a large part of the problem.

It always felt strange coming out into the street, passing the trishaws that you knew were out for the tourists, and heading for the bus stand. Such contrasts within such a limited space; the beggar on the corner, the vendors shouting at you and the infernal traffic on the wide boulevard, Dharmapala Mawatha, stretching towards City Hall and the smaller streets heading towards Galle Road and the sea. Today was quiet, hardly anyone around, and we decided to stroll down Dharmapala, along Viharamahadevi Park.

As we approached City Hall at the end of the park, we noticed the red flags on every sign-, and every lamp post, and a high pitch voice that rung across the empty boulevard through rusty loud speakers. I guessed that these were JVP\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Internally Displaced Person – a term commonly used by the UN and other humanitarian agencies for people who have been forced to evacuate their home due to conflicts, natural disasters or the like.

\(^5\) The Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation, headed by Mano Tittawella, which was established as the coordinating body for the post-tsunami reconstruction process by the Sri Lankan government (see page 28).

\(^6\) Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, a controversial Sinhala Buddhist nationalist party, at this point still part of the UPFA government, which was founded in relation to the 1971 youth
flags, since the posters celebrating the fortieth anniversary of this radical communist – turned government coalition party were all red and showed red flags waving in the wind. In front of City Hall the entire square had been fenced in and the fences stretched inside the park, concealing a large area from view with red and black sheets of plastic. To begin with, the only sound we heard was the chilling voice in the loudspeakers; as if the city had been evacuated and this voice was addressing the nation, all tucked in their homes with ears glued to the radio. The first time we heard the crowd cheer we both felt chills running down our backs. It sounded muted; as if coming from far away, and the idea of not knowing how many people were gathered was unsettling. We had read in the papers of the JVP rallies, their leaders accusing the international humanitarian agencies for taking over the country, blaming the President for allowing this to happen, and encouraging the crowd to ‘spit at the foreign aid workers’. For the first time in Sri Lanka, we felt unwelcome. We felt vulnerable.

Still unable to see neither speaker nor audience, we proceeded along the fences and away. The intense voice in the loudspeakers faded but my anxiety remained. Was this the beginning of proper riots? How many shared the JVP’s opinions? How did I feel about the charge that the humanitarians were taking over the country? Was I one of them? These questions stayed with me for weeks, but in all my time in Sri Lanka I only heard the rallies mentioned once at a meeting. This was at the monthly Donor Coordination Meeting where a prominent representative of civil society, the only civil society representative invited to these meetings I was told on another occasion, presented an appeal from ‘the Civil Initiative’, opposing the proposal by a group of JVP and JHU Members to Parliament that a select committee be appointed to investigate the workings of international and foreign-funded NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. This proposal came a few weeks after the JVP rally and followed a continued debate in the press over the role of international agencies in Sri Lanka. I never

riots as a communist youth party but has since become known as representing a ultra left-wing extremist politics.

7 Jathika Hela Urumaya, a recently founded political party of Buddhist monks, or bhikkhus.
heard this mentioned in the meetings where the international humanitarians actually participated but perhaps they had the talks elsewhere. At the Donor Meeting, a ‘background paper’ was distributed informing the donor representatives about what was labelled a ‘hate campaign’ against foreign and local NGOs. Here is an excerpt from the paper:

Recently at a meeting organized by the National Patriotic Front, Wimal Weerwansa, the Propaganda Secretary [of the JVP] made a virulent attack on the Multi-Lateral Agencies, International NGOs and NGOs. He called upon the people to spit on the NGOs on the road. His speech was a clear incitement to violence. The arguments which have been presented against NGOs are as follows.

- **That 70% of the money [are] spent on Hotels and salaries and that Tsunami funds are being misappropriated.**
- **That International NGOs are an instrument of Imperialism and have come here with a hidden agenda.**
- **That national NGOs are mere tools of Imperialism**
- **National NGOs engaged in advocacy work for peace and a negotiated solution stand for the division of the country etc.**

The motion presented in Parliament is a further continuation of this hate campaign and meant to intimidate organizations which are doing solid work in this country \(^8\)

The paper was not discussed at the meeting and the participants; representatives from the major donor agencies and the three banks (World Bank, ADB\(^9\), JBIC\(^10\)) seemed confident that the proposal would be denied by Parliament and that the hate campaign would soon blow over. I couldn’t help thinking that _they_ were not the ones going home by bus tonight, or walking past intimidating rallies on a quiet Saturday in Colombo.

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\(^8\) ‘Documentation on the NGO Appeal & Attacks on NGOs’, distributed at Donor Coordination Meeting 25\(^{th}\) May 2005.


\(^10\) The Japan Bank for International Cooperation.
Past and Present ‘Ethnic Politics’ in Sri Lanka

Having arrived in Sri Lanka with the impression that the 2002 peace agreement had meant a deciding stabilisation of the political atmosphere in Sri Lanka, it came as a surprise that the debate over aid distribution had taken such an aggressive and polarised tone, as Kristian Stokke has recently confirmed in his assessment of what he refers to as ‘the politicisation of disaster relief’ (Stokke 2005: 20). The hostility of Goonatilake’s book on the Western/Tamil conspiracy seemed to be unfolding in these debates, where Sinhala Buddhist nationalists lead the charges against a conspiracy between the LTTE, the international humanitarian organisations, and President Kumaratunga.

As de Silva suggested above, it seems clear that the concerns over a fair distribution of aid had indeed ignited the troubled historical memories of the so-called Sinhalese/Tamil conflict, and the suspicion towards the international organisations was linked in a similar way to century-old events with the immediacy of yesterday. This was clear from the debates surrounding the 2005 Development Forum – an annual conference where Donor and government representatives gather to discuss the development agenda for the following year. This year, of course, the tsunami had imposed itself on the agenda. For only the second time in its existence, the Development Forum was held on Sri Lankan soil in the city of Kandy, famous as a sacred site for Sri Lankan Buddhism, and custodian of the Buddha’s holy tooth relic.

This historical location of the conference sparked the imaginations of several newspaper columnists and political commentators, as the event was paralleled with the historical surrender of the Kandyan king to the British colonialists, in the Kandyan Convention of 1815. At the inaugural session of the Development Forum, the international representatives were abruptly confronted with their inscription in this interpretation of history, when an orange-robed monk – Ven. Athuraliye Rathana, the parliamentary leader of the JHU – caused great controversy by taking the floor and giving an unscheduled speech in which he accused the government of collaborating with
the LTTE. The following day he did the same during a session in parliament, where he stated: ‘A group of traitors disloyal to the Sinhala Kingdom betrayed the country to the British in 1815 in Kandy at the Magul Maduwa of the Temple of the Tooth. It seems history is being repeated before our very eyes as the second betrayal is taking place in Kandy itself. But I vow that the Sinhala Buddhist monks will do their duty to oppose and do the needful as in the past’ (Quoted on the front page of the Daily Mirror, 18 May 2005).

This rhetoric of betrayal was the central theme of Tambiah’s *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (1992), in which he analyses the history of the emergence of the phenomenon of ‘the political bikkhu’, the politically engaged Buddhist monk, which he traces back to the Buddhist revivalism of the early 1900s, centred around the charismatic figure of Angarika Dharmapala, and his cooperation with the American Theosophist Colonel Olcott (Tambiah 1992: 5; see also Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988).

What is important to acknowledge in this context is that political identities in Sri Lanka remain highly contested, as several nationalisms aligned in complex ways to counter what was perceived as a threat of foreign invasion under the cover of a humanitarian operation. The intricacies of the political conflict are too complex to discuss further in the present context, but it should be added, firstly, that although the conflict is often conceptualised as a division between two homogenous rivals; the Sinhala Buddhists and the Tamils, several competing nationalisms exist, and challenge this notion of bipolarity (Silva

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11 The title of Tambiah’s book questions a report by the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry published in 1956 (Tambiah 1992; 22), in which a Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is formulated in opposition to hostile invasion, firstly, historically from ‘the Tamils’ and secondly, with Western colonialism.
Secondly, despite the agitations of Ven. Athuraliye Rathana and others, ‘The conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils is not a clash of religions so much as one between two versions of linguistic nationalism’ (de Silva 1998: 111). In a sense, the centrality of language in the two dominant nationalisms may be said to facilitate the notion of bipolarity, since ‘[t]he relatively recent linguistic nationalism has displaced the importance of locality, thereby making linguistic identity primary, such that all speakers of Sinhala identify themselves against those who speak Tamil (Daniel 1996: 16; see also de Silva 1998: 46-68).
Part II: Waves of Disaster

Disasters take a people back to fundamentals. In their turmoil, disassembly, and reorganization, they expose essential rules of action, bare bones of behaviour, the roots of institutions, and the basic framework of organizations. They dissolve superfluous embellishment and dismantle unfounded or casual alliance. They erase the polish of recent development.

Hoffman & Oliver-Smith in *The Angry Earth*

4. The Tsunami

On the morning of 26 December 2004, Sri Lanka was hit by massive waves, caused by a massive earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. The waves that hit the Sri Lankan coast line, some more than ten metres tall, caused the largest natural disaster in the island’s history, killing more than 30,000 and displacing more than half a million from their homes. The tsunami caused most damage along the coast line from the Jaffna and Kilinochchi Districts in the North-Eastern to Matara and Galle District in the South, but only the Mannar District, on the North-Western side of the island is said to have been left untouched by the devastation. The hardest hit district was Ampara, where more than 10,000 people lost their lives. Further north, many of the affected people were living in IDP camps due to the prolonged armed conflict.
5. The Anthropology of Disaster

With an event as destructive and as profiled as the South-East Asian tsunami, questioning definitions of a disaster seems irrelevant; surely what struck Sri Lanka was the epitomic natural disaster, as implied by this section’s opening quote, and elaborated by Anthony Oliver-Smith in the first chapter of the same volume – *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* – which presented the first collection of anthropological contributions to disaster studies: ‘Disasters are totalizing events. As they unfold, all dimensions of a social structural formation and the totality of its relations with its environment may become involved, affected, and focused’ (Oliver-Smith 1999: 20).

But analytically as well as in popular conceptualisations, definitions of what constitutes a disaster, and what such a term implies, is less clear, as Allen & Seaton argue in relation to the international media coverage of ‘ethnic’ wars:

‘Famine, civil war, atrocities and natural disasters are quite different events, yet they have become increasingly conflated in international media accounts, and perhaps in political calculation as well ... In part, this merging of the categories of disaster has come about because they are, in fact, very closely related phenomena ... However, there are clear advantages in the previous view of politically neutral disasters for agencies who have to try to move the sympathy of donors, they find it easier to argue for the relief of innocent victims of circumstance. The complex interconnections of problems that lead to catastrophes is getting more difficult to communicate when there is so much emphasis on ‘hot’ news’ (Allen & Seaton 1999: 53-54)

Despite their different focus, Allen & Seaton raise an important issue, namely the agency implied by the notion of a disaster. As Oliver-Smith argues, ‘[w]hile the stress on the nonroutine dimension of disasters seems close to common logic, these descriptions seem to incorporate an almost functionalist assumption of general societal equilibrium prior to disaster onset. Such an assumption dangerously ignores that most disasters are ultimately explainable in terms of the normal order. That is, the risks that people run in their natural environments are by and large manageable, but the forms and structures of
ordinary life, particularly those associated with the disadvantages suffered by third-world societies, accentuate the risk and the resulting disaster impact’ (Oliver-Smith 1999: 23).

What often escapes the common usage of the term disaster is that they are perhaps not equally totalizing to all parts of an affected society, and that the degree of vulnerability of a population depends on e.g. social, political, and economic factors as well as the physical exposure to the source, or agent, of the disaster. As Ravi Rajan argues in relation to the fatal chemical disaster in Bhopal in December 1984, ‘… it is critical to locate the social production of vulnerability in a wider, political frame (Ravi Rajan 2002: 249, see also Oliver-Smith 1999: 27). He analyses the response of the Indian state to the gas leak in terms of ‘a politics of missing expertise’ (ibid.), implying that the victims were not as randomly affected as the notion of a disaster might connote, but represented a segment of society, particularly vulnerable due to their socio-economic marginalisation. I will elaborate in this notion of vulnerability shortly (on page 26), and conclude the discussion of an anthropological approach to the study of disaster by returning to the issue of the totalising aspect of a natural disaster such as the tsunami.

For although the social and political factors surrounding and preceding a disaster play a crucial role in the level of destruction it causes – as the remainder of this paper will confirm – it must be acknowledged that more immediate factors such as the scale of the event itself obviously plays a part in the scale of the devastation it causes. Susanna Hoffman distinguishes between three aspects of size; ‘… the enormity of the calamitous event, the relative numbers of the population impacted, and the extent of the damage wreaked’ (Hoffman 1999: 305) and discusses these interrelated aspects with regard to the amount of change that a disaster is likely to cause, since

‘Ethnographic fieldwork clearly reveals that disasters affect religion and ritual, economics and politics, kinship and associations … They stir conflict. If not actual change, disasters certainly bring about the potential for change. Disasters often expose to both insiders and outsiders
conditions that need alteration. Whether such changes are realized or not enters the inquiry. Undeniably, the introduction of change versus retention of the former state of affairs sparks contention among the many disaster parties and factions’ (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 1999: 10)

It may be too early to estimate the amount of change brought about in Sri Lanka by the tsunami, but it will prove significant later on to include such considerations in the equation. This aspect of an anthropological study of the tsunami also serves to remind us that what initially appeared to be insurmountable devastation may prove to have less impact in time; ‘… immediately after a disaster, to many – especially those experiencing the event – it appears that a host of changes occur, or will occur, in social formulations and habit. To those investigating a disaster months or years later, the opposite seems true, that little or no change eventuates’ (Hoffman 1999: 306).

Furthermore, the attention to change inevitably obliges a related analytical attention to the social and political characteristics of the affected societies prior to the disaster. I have already provided a brief contextualisation of the current debates concerning the distribution of aid (see page 14), and the following section concludes the analytical contextualisation of the particulars of the Sri Lankan society prior to the tsunami by discussing the notion of vulnerability outlined in this section in relation to, firstly, the various forms of symbolism that lends itself to both analytical and popular imaginations of the tsunami, and, secondly, to the growing literature on marginality and structural violence, that may serve as a further awareness to the importance of relating the social production of vulnerability in a wider, political frame.

6. Disaster Symbolism and the Politics of Marginalisation
As with the troubled historical memories that are evoked in the continued conflict between Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist nationalisms, the magnitude of the tsunami invites to its own symbolism (cf. Hoffman 2002) – as the title of this paper exemplifies. In the October 2005 assessment of the Human Rights Center of the University of California, Harvey Weinstein writes:
‘The 2002 agreement to cease hostilities brought a significant measure of relief. On December 26, 2004, that peace ended abruptly with fifteen minutes of terror as the tsunami lashed the coasts of the island nation’ (Weinstein 2005: 57)

In this imagery, the prolonged political conflict in Sri Lanka and the proliferated use of the term ‘terror’ to signify, well, many things in the wake of 9/11 and ‘the War against Terror’ is, perhaps unintentionally, conflated with the effects of a natural disaster. This kind of word play – again, the title of my paper included – while providing an imagery that is easily grasped by the media and the public, risks blurring more than it illustrates, as Allen & Seaton argued above. During my fieldwork I often heard people saying that ‘the tsunami didn’t discriminate…’ meaning that the ‘blind destruction’ of the waves did not discriminate Sinhala from Tamil, poor from rich, etc. In the newspapers as well this argument was forwarded as a cry for reconciliation and cooperation in dire times, as a wake-up call to those who insisted on division and hostility between ‘ethnic’ groups and political parties over the distribution of aid.

Although many of these metaphors and word plays are formulated with noble intentions; most often to either emphasise the scale of the destruction of the tsunami or to call attention to the prolonged human suffering caused by Sri Lanka’s political conflict and the vast poverty, we risk more than just trivialising the many forms of suffering into one big ‘wave’. Firstly, as I implied above, the confusion of natural disasters with the consequences of an armed conflict confuses the place of agency by conflating the destructive force of a natural disaster with that of deliberate persecution and strategic violence against civilians (the literature on these horrible acts over decades are fortunately well known, see e.g. Daniel 1996; Tambiah 1992; de Silva 1998). Secondly, and perhaps less obvious and therefore much more problematic, the logic that ‘the tsunami did not discriminate’ risks blurring the many forms of discrimination that increase the vulnerability of marginalised groups to other forms of suffering, including that brought on by a tsunami.
An understanding of social vulnerability that seems to supplement the one discussed above in relation to the writers in *The Angry Earth* is central to the concept of ‘structural violence’, recently reintroduced by Paul Farmer in several works in relation to the victims of HIV/AIDS in Haiti (e.g. Farmer 2004a; 2004b). Inspired by liberation theology, and phrased in a human rights framework, Farmer’s notion of structural violence offers a critique of the tendency to universalise, or totalise, suffering beyond specific socio-economic and socio-political contexts, thereby ignoring the unfortunate predictability in the dispersal of vulnerability in any society:

‘The point is merely to call for more fine-grained and systemic analyses of power and privilege in discussions of who is likely to suffer and in what ways…One of the unfortunate sequelae of identity politics has been the obscuring of structural violence, which metes out injuries of vastly different severity’ (Farmer 2004b: 288)

In this context, the structural violence of ‘ethnic’ as well as caste\(^\text{12}\) politics in Sri Lanka may be said to have increased the vulnerability of specific populations, implying that while the tsunami itself may not have discriminated, the effects of the waves nevertheless illustrate the deeply ingrained social divisions in Sri Lankan society. For example, the Southern coastline of the island is inhabited by many of the poorest Sri Lankans, and many informants claimed that the government had previously attempted to clear the coast of the increasing numbers of shanty shacks. This part of the island is said to be dominated by poor Sinhalese and it was from here that the riots of the early 1970ies, lead by the JVP and its supporters (Tambiah 1992:

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\(^{12}\) This issue of caste was mentioned by several para-ethnographers as an important aspect of social vulnerability in Sri Lanka, but its complexities are beyond the capacity of the present study (see e.g. Silva (ed.) 2004; Mc Gilvray 1982; R.L. Stirrat 1982).
were mounted, making it the centre of the state’s reprisals that left the area in ruins.

The east coast, of course, suffered the most in terms of direct destruction, and many people in the area were living in camps as conflict-related IDPs prior to the tsunami, some for more than a decade. Here, again, the destruction of the waves cannot be seen in isolation from the patterns of structural violence it washed over – and apparently exacerbated rather than eradicated. The population here is categorised as mainly Tamil and Muslim, and the area has been plagued by attacks from both sides as a part of the active attempts at forced segregation, or ‘unmixing’ (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2002: 46) of people along the boarder-zones by actors on both sides of the conflict.

The contextualizing portion of this paper, then, has cautioned against a simplification of the so-called ‘ethnic’ conflict in Sri Lanka, and emphasized the interconnectedness of structural violence and physical devastation in the understanding of a disaster. It has also described an atmosphere of agitated political contestation over the distribution of humanitarian aid and the proposal of a ‘Joint Mechanism’ between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Although the empirical descriptions of the remainder of the paper turns towards the humanitarians, and shows that to be able to function in the hectic pace, and complex bureaucracy, of the relief work requires you to turn your attention away from the suffering, and the sociopolitical context it is a part of, the reader should be well prepared to keep these issues in mind, and reflect upon the contrasting worlds represented in the totality of this paper, as it has been experienced through the shifting positionings during the fieldwork of this ethnographer.
Part III: Waves of Relief

‘... people working in development aid often overestimate their own importance. It is easy to forget that, for many intended to be on the receiving end, the effects of what developers do are peripheral or even entirely irrelevant. At the same time, the pressures placed on developers are often overlooked by critics – pressures of time, the need for accountability, an obligation to show expertise, and pressures faced by partner organizations who need to retain and pay staff

Crewe & Harrison in Whose Development?

7. The Aid Bureaucracy in Sri Lanka

Within a few days of the tsunami, military staff from more than fifteen countries had arrived on the island and the largest humanitarian intervention in Sri Lankan history was underway. The relief efforts were initially coordinated from the President’s Office in Colombo until a special Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation, known as TAFREN, had been established, along with the special UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA, and as the individual humanitarian agencies, both national and foreign, gradually established their own offices.

Prior to the tsunami, the UN as well as several other international agencies were already present in the country due to the prolonged armed conflict, but the inflow of international staff was overwhelming, and still causing logistical problems during my fieldwork several months after the tsunami. In the next paragraph I present some of the central issues discussed at the meetings I attended.
Humanitarian Coordination Meetings in Colombo

As I outlined in chapter 2 (page 11), my main site of participant observation consisted of three different coordination meetings, held on a regular basis at different locations in Colombo, and – with a few exceptions – attended by representatives from different organisations.

In order to give the reader an impression of what topics were discussed at the meetings I attended, I will focus on the most populous venue; the Friday morning Operational Meeting, hosted by the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) at the Sri Lankan Institute for International Relations. This meeting was open for representatives of international and national NGOs (I/NGOs) involved with post-tsunami relief work and was intended to provide updates and overviews of the relief effort in order to facilitate the work of the individual organizations and avoid ‘duplication’ of programmes – in other words to facilitate the coordination of relief aid to secure an equal distribution throughout the affected areas. The Operational Meetings were chaired by the director of CHA, Jeevan Thiagaraja, and besides from introducing the various presentations and reports he would take some time to contribute with his own analysis of the challenges ahead, and would often appeal for a joint stand vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan government and for a relief effort where the many organisations involved would prioritise an efficient distribution of relief over the specific policy interests of individual organisations. During the three months I took part in these meetings, ‘lack of coordination’ was the topic that most often came up in presentations and the following discussions. It is not entirely clear to me what that implied, since one might argue that the Operational Meeting might be considered a forum through which ‘coordination’ should be achieved – and since these discussions were not directed at a specific organisation or coordinating body. One major topic that may be seen as an attempt to apply this wish for better coordination into practice was the mainstreaming of the sectoral approach to relief aid, implying that all programmes be directed at specific sectors of needs, such as the ‘livelihoods’ sector where programmes were intended to assist tsunami victims in regaining their possibility to work – either by replacing lost tools or
by re-educating people whose occupation prior to the disaster was not likely to provide a satisfactory income post-tsunami. Other sectors included the fisheries-, health, and psycho-social sectors and many debates at the Operational Meetings focused on how to apply these categorisations to a complex reality, where several sectors might apply to the same person, or indeed the same need. Fisheries, for example, was argued by some to fall under the livelihoods category, but by others to require specific attention – similar to the agricultural sector – as opposed to trading and other occupations not involving production of raw materials.

The specific substance of meetings may be difficult for outsiders to appreciate, as it was for me – particularly in the first month – since debates and rationalisations were formulated in the professional terminology that is characteristic of development and humanitarian aid policy documents – what Crewe & Harrison refer to as ‘development language’ (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 73). I would argue that as an anthropologist I am best qualified to comment on how the Operational Meeting provided a forum where this particular discourse was formulated and negotiated, since this was – to me – the most significant development in the three months of participant observation. When I joined the meetings in early April, the numbers of sectors appropriate as well as the definitions of these sectors were still under negotiation, while in June they were more or less agreed upon and applied by most organisations in order to facilitate a standardised description and evaluation of specific projects.

In this setting, I began my dialogue with the humanitarians, through casual conversations as well as more structured interviews. The remainder of the paper reflects upon the para-ethnographies that were produced through these dialogues, in order to illustrate the inner workings of the humanitarian assistance to post-tsunami Sri Lanka.
8. A Humanitarian Para-Ethnography, part I

In my first weeks in Colombo, I was mainly trying to make contacts with organisations with the intention to suggest myself for some sort of internship through which I would be able to conduct extended participant observation. This had been the basic intention of my research proposal, but I had not been able to make any definite arrangements beforehand, since the Scandinavian main offices were reluctant to give out contact information about their staff in Sri Lanka. But I had been consoled from all sides with the promise that once I got there I would have no problem making the necessary arrangements. One of the first places I went to was the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies (CHA).

I first arranged a meeting with Bernadine, who presented herself as responsible for the CHA volunteer program. She appeared to be very interested in having me work for CHA as a volunteer, which was exactly what I was hoping for. She said that they had had a lot of international volunteers coming in immediately after the tsunami, but that now – in early April – things had calmed down and they had three people at the Colombo office at the moment; a Japanese, an American and a Canadian. After a fifteen minute talk, where I got the impression that everything was set, and that what remained were formalities, she said with a slight shift of tone, ‘… but you’d better talk to Jeevan about it’. I was told that Jeevan was the director, and at the time, I thought I was merely to be introduced to him as part of making ‘the round’ of the office. Jeevan was busy all day, so I scheduled an appointment for the following week – he had no openings before Thursday!

The following Thursday I arrived at CHA, suddenly feeling the pressure of a job interview sneak up on me, and frantically waving the front of my finest, newly ironed, shirt to dry the dark sweat stains after the 40 minute bus ride though the receding morning rush hour traffic. I was told by the ever-smiling receptionist that Jeevan was running a little late, and I took a seat soothingly near one of the electric fans. After reading through three morning papers and noting that I had now waited for a little over half an hour, the phone in the
reception rang, and after a brief acknowledging mumble, the receptionist told me that Jeevan was ready to see me. During the walk up the stairs and to the end of the hall to his office, the sense of formality in this meeting struck me, and I felt my palms beginning to moist all over again.

Jeevan greeted me from behind his dark wooden desk. He was younger than I expected, and his short dark hair and bronzed glasses made me think of the way American officers look in Vietnam movies. He asked me to sit, and said ‘I will be with you in a moment’, something I had never experienced before; I was in his presence, but he was clearly not ‘with me’ yet… What would *that* be like, I wondered? After a few very long minutes, he looked up from his papers and now, clearly, he was with me. With a firm gaze, that made me shrink in my seat, he asked me, ‘how long will this take?’ This question came as the first surprise of our conversation. For an ethnographer, who is interested in long casual talks that will let him or her glance into the world of another, being pressed for time is not the best starting point. ‘Half an hour, or so…?’ I replied hesitantly. ‘I can give you twenty minutes’ he said with a kind smile, as if he was being generous – which I am sure he was. ‘So, what can I do for you?’

The remainder of our conversation still stands somewhat unclear to me. I had arrived with two purposes; firstly, to seal the deal on my volunteer position at CHA, and secondly to conduct a casual interview with him, as one of the principal actors in the Sri Lankan NGO community. The first point was discarded within seconds. I am not sure whether it was him or myself who concluded that there would not be room for another intern at the moment, but that is what happened; he never apologized, or even gave the impression of rejecting me, but somehow we suddenly agreed that it was better that I look elsewhere for a position.

Baffled by this turn of events, I asked him to tell me about his impressions of the humanitarian assistance following the tsunami, to at least get out of his office with a little bit of material. Although not the most clearly formulated
question, I felt that I delivered a quite appropriate opening question for a casual qualitative interview. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked in an accommodating yet impatient tone. I told him that I had just arrived in Sri Lanka and was interested in his experiences since I would be doing a small ethnographic project on humanitarian assistance after the tsunami. ‘What is it that you want to know?’ he specified. ‘Well’, I stammered, baffled by the authority of his voice; it was never authoritative in the way some public officials or, say, police officers can be, it was his calmness and his way of ‘cutting to the chase’ that was so unsettling, and yet admirable. ‘How can I put it’, I tried again. ‘I am just trying to learn as much as I can about what has been going on here since the tsunami…’ He spoke briefly about the achievements so far, and the challenges ahead, as if he was dictating a letter or delivering a speech, and then he suddenly said, ‘I am sorry but I don’t have much time right now’. I immediately felt tremendously guilty for taking up his time, and I apologised for keeping him, while finding my feet and collecting my bag. Fortunately, I remembered to ask his permission for joining the meetings of a ‘Working Group for Disaster Monitoring’ that I had seen posted in the reception, but apart from that, I left with nothing.

Abruptly awoken by the shock of the heat and humidity out on the street, I looked at the clock on my cell phone and realised that the whole endeavour had taken less than fifteen minutes! Only then did it really occur to me that the volunteer position that I had almost taken for granted an hour ago had evaporated before my eyes, and I briefly considered returning to the office and look up Bernadine again. But I didn’t. Jeevan’s authority still weighed heavily on me. The next day I spoke with the information manager at CHA, Judy, whom I had met before and felt a good connection with, and told her that although Bernadine had seemed interested Jeevan had rejected my request for a volunteer position. Silence. She just smiled. I asked whether there would be any sense in talking to Bernadine again, but Judy said that if Jeevan had said no, there wasn’t much anyone else could do about it. It would be two months before I spoke with Jeevan in his office again and this time, I came prepared.
Reflections

This initial meeting with a humanitarian, who became one of my primary para-ethnographers, was indeed the beginning of a painful initiation to another everyday, as the conventional ethnographic wisdom had cautioned me. Throughout this, and similar early encounters with the professionalism and fast pace of the humanitarians left me feeling baffled and awkward on several occasions, without ever feeling disliked or offended in any way. As I will show later on, what helped me out of this state of bewilderment, and into the world of the humanitarians, may be understood as the gradual development of a collaboration in which I contributed my analytical skills in discussions of relief-related issues in exchange for the informants’ formulation of para-ethnographic accounts.

The following section discusses another aspect of the savoir faire of the humanitarians on the basis of an event in the final month of my fieldwork. Here, my sense of security had improved considerably, and I had become familiar with both the various arenas for the coordination of the relief effort and the personal qualities of an accomplished humanitarian to the point of taking them for granted. Breaking the chronology in my account, in relation to the previous section, is intended to contrast the two modes of participant observation as clearly as possible, in order to show how not only my personal experience differs, but also the level of detail in the observations.

9. ‘Humanitarian’ and ‘Ethnic’ Politics

Towards the end of my fieldwork, the weekly I/NGO\(^\text{13}\) Operational Meeting had become a familiar venue to me, and my participant observation had in some ways become focused on the substance of presentations and the achievements of various fact finding missions and working groups and less interested in the interactions between attendees and the ‘imponderabilia of everyday life’ (Malinowski 1922: 18) at such meetings that had filled my notebook in the first months of participant observation. Although I was aware

\(^{13}\) International or National Non-Governmental Organisation.
that my observations were changing their attention away from the immediate
to the substance of the ‘development language’ (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 73)
of the humanitarians, reflecting my ‘inculturation’ into their circles but also
my lack of methodological stringency, I struggled to continue ‘exoticising’ a
field that I had come to take a more participatory interest in, for example by
drafting a *brief* with one humanitarian on our views of the ‘Challenges to the
Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Process’ (see Appendix or www.cepa.lk). It
took a particular incidence at a Operational Meeting to make me realise how
deeply I had become intellectually and emotionally involved ‘in the field’, and
make me return to a slightly more detached mode of observation.

The presentation that marked a turning point in my reflections over my
positioning in ‘the field’ was long awaited. To me, and to many others I had
talked to, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), said to be the
development organisation of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), had long been an
intriguing but elusive presence at many meetings, mainly through the passive
presence of one representative whom I had seen in several fora but never had
the chance to meet. There had been a steady increase in the number of
participants at the Friday morning Operational Meetings, hosted by CHA, but
on this day the auditorium was almost full, making the number of participants
close to one hundred. I am not to say whether this was occasioned by the
scheduled presentation by the TRO but it emphasised the atmosphere that this
was indeed a special Friday.

Towards the end of the meeting Jeevan, as always the facilitator of the
meeting, finally introduced the three man team from the TRO, saying that we
were fortunate to have them speak to us about their experiences from the
North and that this dialogue was crucial to a successful coordination of
reconstruction activities.

The man I had seen before, Nimalen, took over the microphone and thanked
for the opportunity to share some of the experiences of the TRO. He spoke in
a clear voice and spoke with a relaxed smile on his lips that made you pay
attention. After presenting the two men beside him, he abruptly ended his speech and turned the microphone over to the Director of Planning, a short man in a grey suit and large glasses with a dark frame. He stepped up on the podium and began a power point presentation in a low monotonous voice that came as a sharp contrast to the relaxed style of Nimalen a moment earlier. The next ten minutes felt like ages and this is when I became aware, once more, of the postures and body language of the other attendees. I noted that some were filling out a questionnaire that had been handed out at the entrance, that some were whispering together, and that people generally did not seem interested in the presentation.

The Director of Planning finished his presentation and Nimalen said something I could not make out while passing the microphone over to the third man. He began a presentation that dealt with the importance of considering the effects of the war alongside those of the tsunami but, again, his low voice and heavy accent made it difficult for me to follow, despite the interesting topic. As I noted my frustration grow, and saw my feelings confirmed in the looks and postures of other attendees I began reflecting on the importance of personality, or charisma, of individual representatives to the image of a particular organisation. Jeevan had always been the CHA impersonated, and when other CHA people made unclear or nervous presentations he would sum it up and bring issues forward in a convincing way. Nimalen seemed to have the same potential but he remained in the background, adding to the frustration.

The following round of ‘Q&A’ did little to relieve our disappointment. Nimalen left the answers to the two presenters and their answers were as incomprehensible as their presentations. An Oxfam representative in the audience asked the same question three times without receiving a satisfying answer. The third time he asked the question he rephrased it in a way that

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14 The round of Questions and Answers that would conclude such presentations in all the fora I attended.
15 Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, a well-known international non-governmental organisation – originating in Britain, but with departments worldwide.
seemed so impatient that it was almost embarrassing; ‘When can we start the reconstruction work?, he asked, overarticulating every word, ‘and what do you want us to do?! We haven’t been told anything, and Oxfam is ready with the staff, the resources, and everything!’ The Director of Planning gave a long reply, repeating that the work had already started and listing a lot of achievements by the TRO and their cooperation with the Red Cross. Although this was a highly interesting confrontation, the TRO representative seemingly telling the INGO representative that they were managing just fine, it has taken me a long time to lay aside my frustration with the Planning Director’s lack of rhetorical skills, which made his speech incomprehensible and his posture and attitude seem mockingly indifferent. I did not have a chance to speak with him, and I will refrain from speculating further about his intentions and perceptions of the forum and the Oxfam representative but the incidence made it clear to me that in this world of ‘front stage’ representations, in Goffman’s well-known terms (Goffman 1959), performance truly matters, and the performance of one reflects back on an entire organisation. Many of us left the meeting deeply disappointed and frustrated with much more than a twenty minute waste of time; we were frustrated with the TRO, if not the Tamil Tigers writ large!

When the meeting ended I was curious to hear the reactions of the people I knew and I told myself to put my own frustration aside and give the others the chance to explain what had just taken place in a more positive light. This did not happen. Halfway through the lobby heated debates were taking place all around me and I joined a group that I was most familiar with. Caroline was agitated, trying to lower her voice as she spoke. ‘I can’t believe he let those two morons do the whole thing!’ she complained to us, speaking of Nimalen who, I would learn later, was actually a good friend. Raji agreed but added, ‘but you know, it’s not easy for those guys, you know, English is, like, their third language, you know, and they’re not used to this kind of thing’. ‘Don’t defend them’ Caroline responded, ‘don’t make this into a Tamil thing; this is just about bad preparation. They just don’t give a fuck!’ We had drifted across the street to Barrista’s where Raji and I had agreed to meet for coffee. He had
been seeing Caroline for a few months and since we had broken away from the crowd I felt like a fifth wheel and told Raji that we could talk some other time. Caroline worked for a British INGO and had arrived after the tsunami. Raji had left his job as a human rights lawyer in London to ‘return’ to Sri Lanka where his parents had lived before the conflict erupted in the 1980ies. He was planning to buy land in his father’s hometown in Jaffna but since the tsunami he had been working at CHA and had just agreed to stay with them in a more permanent position.

Reflections

The failure of the TRO representatives to conduct their presentation in a fashion that appealed to the audience of humanitarians was met with frustration and little sympathy for possible language difficulties or other impairing factors. The heated atmosphere that followed the meeting indicates that many people were offended by the incomprehensibility of the two speakers, and the lack of involvement by Nimalen, who seemed to have a different authority, and ability to ‘talk the talk’ of the humanitarians. Was this another case of a person with charisma, and two presenters without? It seems clear that the performance at significant events such as the Operational Meeting influences the perception of not only the individual representative(s) but the entire organisation. This is but one in several in which the boundaries between an individual and the organisation he/she represents tended to be blurred in the savoir faire of the humanitarians. Another example of this was the common habit of greeting a newcomer – as I myself was positioned at one point – with a business card in your hand, and the title of your organisation immediately following your name as you present yourself. I had some initial trouble coming up with a similar greeting, since I had no such card, and since my atypical purpose in their midst did not translate easily into a brief label of my affiliation (I finally chose “Jesper Bjarnesen, Uppsala University” as my greeting, which seemed acceptable to most).

In my outline of Holmes & Marcus’ notion of para-ethnography in the methodology section of this paper, I took as my point of departure their
argument that ‘cultures of expertise’, by their strict division of the public and private sphere, does not allow for the practice of conventional ethnography. Arguing that the private sphere may not be relevant to an ethnography of a culture of expertise such as the present one, however, lacks the attention to the ‘degrees’ of publicity that were clearly a significant factor in my own and others’ reception of the TRO presentation; we were instead inclined to speculate about the reasons for the low standard, and even take offence of it. Here, Goffman’s notion of back stage activities, that are only accessible to the ‘insiders’ may provide a framework for distinguishing between various degrees of publicity. Caroline and Raji, as personal friends of Nimalen, were even more frustrated with his passivity than I was, although Raji took to defending him out of his own concerns with the political marginality of Tamils in Colombo.

The great anticipation proceeding this particular presentation, of course, must be understood in relation to the particulars of the politicisation of ethnicity in Sri Lanka, as outlined above. Despite Jeevan’s enthusiasm, though, the general lack of patience with the Tamil presenters seems to indicate that the humanitarians did not ascribe the same importance to a constructive dialogue with the representatives of the TRO on this occasion. This reflects a general tendency in the humanitarian para-ethnographies to speak highly of conflict-awareness and sensitivity in principle but not take it seriously in practice.

I proceed with an account of my first real collaboration with Jeevan in which I, on his initiative, gradually abandoned the more conventional role of the ethnographer and engaged in the sort of dialogue that may be thought of as a para-ethnography. This section also illustrates Jeevan’s ability to critically review his own practices and conventions and engage in the sort of analytical fluctuation, characteristic of ethnographic analysis.
10. A Humanitarian Para-Ethnography, part II

At my second interview with Jeevan, in his office at CHA, I felt prepared. I had gained some confidence as a humanitarian insider, from talking to a lot of other actors, participating in several meetings every week, and from becoming more acquainted with some of the humanitarians in less formal settings. I had by now learned many of the words and abbreviations that were important for being part of this ‘development language’, and finally, I had seen Jeevan so often in the role of convenor at the Operational Meetings, and in the role of diplomatic representative of the I/NGOs vis-à-vis the Human Rights Commission at the Working Group sessions that I felt more prepared for his awe inspiring charisma. And of course, the fact that he knew my name and what I was doing by now was a great comfort. I entered his office with the mental preparedness of a prize fighter entering the ring, and shook his hand, firmly and with a steady gaze, this time.

Apart from feeling more at ease with the situation, compared to my first meeting with Jeevan where everything felt unfamiliar, and pulled my attention in all directions at the same time, I had gradually been adjusting my methodology, including my opening question, the degree of structuring, and the degree of specificity in my questions. I was prepared to speak more than I had wanted initially; I had moved from a casual interview set up where I was intent on letting the conversation ‘snowball’ along, exploring topics that I could not have predicted beforehand, through a semi-structured interview with a list of themes as my question guide to a more tightly structured form, with to-the-point questions in a prioritised order, so that I would at least have introduced the most important questions if the meeting was cut short.

We sat down and I thanked him for his time and informed him that this would take between twenty minutes and half an hour. He consented, and leaned back in his chair. Curiously, my more aggressive approach was creating the rapport that was completely lacking at our first meeting. At this stage of the fieldwork I had developed an idea of an ‘ethnography of meetings’, and I always asked informants whom I had seen at meetings their opinion of the forum and in a sense took our common experience as the point of departure for the talk.
Jeevan had not only been present, but had been the convenor, to at least half of the meetings I had attended so I was very eager to hear his views on the two main fora I had experienced him in.

I asked him about the Working Group, expecting him to have a speech ready about the purpose and mandate of the forum. ‘What do you think?’ he asked, with sincere interest. I was baffled once again. The little positivist writhed inside me; wouldn’t I be ‘contaminating the data’ by speaking my opinion – and speaking first at that?! Fortunately I overcame that fear and said that I was disappointed that there was little debate at the sessions, and that we would mostly hear a long briefing from the DRMU\(^{16}\), that didn’t really open up for discussion. I had been attending these sessions – every Wednesday at 7.30 A.M. – since my second week in the country and had often been annoyed with the lack of substance in the meetings. To tell by the conversations I had after these sessions, most people in the group were much more frustrated than I was. In these conversations, Jeevan had sometimes been the target of part of the frustration, since the sessions were held at CHA with him as the co-convenor. Most sessions would in fact be a conversation between him and Mr. Fernando from the Human Rights Commission (HRC), in which Jeevan with the tact of a senior diplomat would challenge the HRC reports from the districts and ask for further research and new initiatives.

In this light, I expected Jeevan to take on a defensive role in our conversation but instead he took my critique further. ‘Mr. Fernando is a highly respected senior official and it is important to keep the ties with the government this way, but their reports are next to useless because they insist on doing everything themselves’. He told me a little more about Mr. Fernando and then added that ‘… another thing is that there is no participation around the table. People attend, and the important agencies are there but they don’t contribute’. I thought of Mike who had complained about the early start of the sessions

\(^{16}\) The Disaster Relief Monitoring Unit, a small group appointed under the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission to monitor and evaluate the tsunami-related humanitarian assistance – both national and international.
and Nimalen from TRO, who at this point remained a mysteriously anonymous figure to me, and the young Australian with dreadlocks who had complained to me after one of the first meetings that ‘this was a complete waste of time!’

But mostly I was exited by the friendly tone between us; after all this was the man who had elegantly disposed of me in less than fifteen minutes the last time we met this way. The conversation turned to the other forum that I had wanted to discuss with him; the Friday morning Operational Meetings at the Sri Lankan Institute for International Relations (SLIIR). Again, Jeevan first asked me of my opinion and I said that I was impressed with the turn out, that the crowd of participants seemed to be increasing (I had noted this during my participant observation, where I would conduct a quick count of heads as the microphone was passed around and people introduced themselves), but that I had noticed how Jeevan had often asked for comments from the floor without receiving any. He replied that ‘people just come to get the updates. And that’s okay, but if we want to make an impact as the biggest sector in the reconstruction we have to stand together – and that’s not happening’. I added that perhaps the forum was just too large to have debates, and took the opportunity to ask where he felt the most important discussions were held. He agreed that it might not be the best setting for open discussions but restated that people held back and just came for the updates.

My final question – remember we were on a tight schedule as usual – concerned the recently held Development Forum in Kandy, where Jeevan had represented the entire I/NGO sector and delivered a speech on achievements and challenges. It had been publicized on the CHA website a few days earlier and I had read it the night before. ‘Did you get my presentation?’ he asked, as if I was a colleague. ‘Yeah, I read it yesterday’ I replied, trying not to reveal anything else. ‘Well, it pretty much says it all’, he looked at his watch, ‘it’s important to be transparent and state the problems as they are – that’s what I always try to do, even if it offends some people’. I asked him about the Forum; had he achieved what he wanted? He said that a lot of good promises
had been made but that you never knew whether they would be held. His secretary appeared in the door and it was time for me to leave. We shook hands and smiled. ‘See you on Wednesday’ he said.

Reflections
This account of my second interview with Jeevan illustrates how we developed our para-ethnography through a dialogue that demanded the equal collaboration of the ethnographer; this time, Jeevan perceived me as someone he could engage in dialogue – as opposed to our first meeting, where he politely disposed of me. His attitude towards the meetings that he played a crucial role in – as convenor of the Operational Meetings and co-convenor of the Working Group sessions – was surprisingly critical; his interest did not seem to be in defending the fora against my criticism but rather in developing ideas about their strengths and weaknesses – what Holmes & Marcus characterise as ‘… a self-conscious critical faculty in expert domains as a way of dealing with contradictions, exceptions, and facts that are fugitive, suggesting a social realm and social processes not in alignment with conventional representations and reigning modes of analysis’ (Marcus & Holmes 2005b: 1104).

The next section provides rich illustration of the workings of humanitarian assistance, as interpreted in dialogue with another para-ethnographer, Mike, whose assessments and analyses also transcend the divide between analyst and subject and insists on dialogue.

11. The International Humanitarian Assistance to Sri Lanka
I had arranged the interview with Mike after an Operational Meeting, and we had agreed to meet at Barrista’s after the same meeting the following week, a café across the street from SLIIR, where the Operational Meetings were held. I had been to the place a few times before. Entering it from the hectic traffic of Horton Place, a broad boulevard which was always congested in the busy hours of the morning and the afternoon, provided the familiar sensorial shock
of stepping from the humid heat and polluted noise of the exterior into the
calm “musac” and sharp coolness of the air-conditioned interior of many such
hideouts of the Colombo elite. Our table was the only one by the window,
giving Mike and I a view of the parking spaces in front of the café, and of the
hectic traffic buzzing by on the street.

This meeting was long awaited. Mike was one of the busiest people I met and
did not hesitate to tell you so. We rescheduled this meeting several times and
when he finally took time for it, it was in the company of a new intern in the
organisation where Mike held a senior position. Mike was probably the most
visible figure in the fora I became acquainted with. I think my first feeling of
disappointment – that he did not consider this a private talk with a like-minded
– made me revise not only our ‘relationship’ but also my agenda for the
interview, and it says a lot about the way I had positioned myself towards
Mike. He was the first person among the humanitarians to remember my
name, and someone I suddenly began chatting with on the way out of
meetings; particularly after the Working Group on Disaster Relief sessions at
CHA. So, to me, this interview was not ‘appointment ethnography’, but a get-
together over coffee with someone I had long wanted to speak in depth with.
With the presence of the intern, I readjusted this expectation and considered it
a slightly more formal interview. Particularly with Mike, but also generally
with the people I have talked to, I often had the feeling that they had said the
same lines several times before; that their answers to my questions were
statements that they used often – as if they were quoting themselves. I was
very impressed with Mike’s experience as an interviewee, and I couldn’t help
noticing it, since he spoke in a different tone than when I had chatted with him
after meetings, or at the bar. He seemed to have a ‘narrative mode’, where he
spoke almost as if he was reading off a page; with fewer hesitations, and with
many words and phrases that I had heard from others, and read in policy
papers before. He also took his time asking me what I was ‘after’, and
throughout the interview would ask me to elaborate my question, and would
comment his own answers, saying, for example, ‘okay, that is not a very clear
way to put it’ or ‘sorry I don’t think I’m answering your question’.

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I had one overall guiding principle with my interviews in this period: to keep the talks centred on the purposes of meetings, since I had by now become keen on exploring the ‘ethnography of meetings’ that I had come to develop. I therefore asked Mike about the Working Group at CHA, organised by the Disaster Relief Monitoring Unit (DRMU) under the Human Rights Commission. He said that he took time for it because he considered it an investment, since he had experiences of giving up on fora that had turned out to become influential in making policy. He expressed admiration for the head of the Human Rights Commission (HRC), Mrs. Coomaswamy, whom he believed answered directly to parliament, and said that her authority gave credibility to the DRMU. That being said, he didn’t feel that the working group had developed a clear purpose yet and he was generally dissatisfied with the HRC field reports. In other words, he was still hoping for something useful to come of it, despite its current flaws, but, he noted with a despairing gesture, ‘I still don’t even know exactly what the DRMU’s mandate is!’

I noted that Jeevan, who co-hosted the sessions, seemed equally frustrated and this turned the topic over to CHA, and Jeevan in particular. Mike had known Jeevan for several years, since Mike had worked for a number of smaller NGOs prior to the tsunami, and he said of Jeevan that ‘… he has a heart this big [indicates the size of his entire chest] and he engages in, well, everything! And I love him to death, but he often ends up taking on too much and disappointing people, you know?’ He continued by saying that CHA was part of a group of elite organisations in Colombo but as an elite educated abroad they – and they acknowledged this themselves – were ‘disconnected from the people’. ‘But he knows a lot about this place’, he added, ‘and he really does a great job, right?’ I asked him what he thought Jeevan knew a lot about and he explained that he saw Jeevan as one of the most knowledgeable of Sri Lankan politics – and definitely the most well-informed; ‘he reads six newspapers every morning! And he knows all the right people, so there isn’t much going on here that he doesn’t know about’. I asked whether Mike read the papers, and he said – with his ‘being busy’ expression, ‘I wish I could, but I just don’t
have the time! … I don’t know how he does it, I mean, I get up at six and never go to bed before midnight!’

After telling me more of his busy schedule he added that although it would have been good to read the papers, he felt quite up to date, and said the he would hear of the main news from the people at his office and on the radio in the car. He told me that he had worked in Sri Lanka for eight years now, in various organisations, and that that gave him an understanding that was more important than following the news on a day to day basis. With the authority of a man with a longer experience in the country than most foreigners, he proceeded to give me his interpretation of the political climate in Sri Lanka in relation to the tsunami. ‘You know, the tsunami couldn’t have struck at a worse time. The new government [which had been in power for 18 months at the time] has meant a general setback in governance, and when the tsunami hit the president drew back any power left [at the district- and lower levels of the state]; In the first weeks we operated from the President’s office! We sat there – all of us – in one big room; we didn’t open our own offices right away, you know. And she [the President] was controlling everything. Talk about recentralisation!’ I asked him of his experiences with the former government. ‘I had a very good working relationship with the former government. They were dedicated to peace, and this was actually the time when CHA and those guys became influential, you know. But all that changed with the new government – and got even worse after the tsunami’.

Although I wish I had probed more into all this – was the president there? Were the humanitarian agencies given orders, or did they operate freely? How had the situation gotten worse after the tsunami; wasn’t it to be expected that things were unsettled after a major natural disaster? – I picked up the thread of my question guide, since Mike’s driver had just pulled up in front of the café, and I knew my time with him was almost up. I noted that the political situation here seemed very interesting, and also very difficult for me to understand, as an outsider, and asked him whether he felt that the other humanitarians were experiencing the same kind of difficulty. ‘They don’t give a shit!’ he
exclaimed, taking an applauding giggle from the intern. ‘Most of them don’t’. ‘The agencies provide no briefing before sending people out, and for the immediate relief work it might not be all that important. But the same thing happened here, and it’s a big weakness that people don’t know how to behave, because they annoy the Sri Lankans, and the Sri Lankans annoy them, which affects the working environment’. With the time pressure beginning to affect my concentration, I asked him to elaborate, and he gave me the example of the Western principle of calling people by their first name, which was very offending to Sri Lankans. And if a Sri Lankan insisted on being called ‘Mr. So and so’, the European would get offended and regard him [sic] as arrogant or worse.

Mike signalled to his driver that they would be out in five minutes. ‘They’re probably pissed by now; I should have been back half an hour ago, he smiled to me’, letting me know that he was doing me a favour. I thanked him, and said that I just wanted to know about one more thing, thinking to myself that I had saved the best for last, and thereby forced him to give a brief answer to the topic I had most wanted to discuss with him. I asked him how he thought the reconstruction was going. He sighed. ‘Well I don’t know’, he started, ‘first of all, because of all the money, the agencies have no choice but to stay for at least three years. You know, since the money is strictly for the tsunami, which makes it very difficult to spend, since you have to do something about the war-affected IDPs and all that’. I had heard this before; since the tsunami funds collected around the world were earmarked for the tsunami, the humanitarians had great difficulties designing projects and cooperating with local organisations, who worked on a community basis. This implied taking other needs into consideration as well, such as those of the people who had been living in camps for almost twenty years because of the ‘ethnic cleansing’ or ‘unmixing’ that had been part of the prolonged political conflict. Some were even saying that if the war-affected IDPs were ignored it would lead to new conflicts and more violence. Mike continued, ‘Relief people are different from development people, you know. They’re more like the military; used to “quick and dirty” kinds of deals, you know, chain smoking, always wired on
coffee or pills or whatever. They choose to see this as a veery looong ['dragging out the words to illustrate how long this was taking'] emergency phase…’ We all laughed at the image of high-wired relief people working in an emergency pace for months on end, and I thought of the people I had seen him with at a bar some time ago; all younger than him, all confrontational in their attitude, and with Mike in the middle of them as the sole non-smoker holding his glass of beer and looking very lonely.

‘So there’s a lot of money’, I asked, still smiling. He laughed again. ‘There’s an obscene amount of money!’ We all laughed, but then he returned to his narrating mode for the last time, and continued, ‘The problem is that there is too much to spend, let alone administer; when I worked for [an international NGO] I administered, like, a half, maybe one million dollars – which was huge job in Sri Lanka! And here, the amounts are fifty times that! In additional administration requirements alone, that is a very big job!’ He drank the last of his cappuccino and signalled his driver. ‘But it might turn out alright. The tsunami is an opportunity to “Build Back Better”, as Clinton is saying, and I think that is the way to do it’. He was already standing, and apologised for having to leave, as I thanked him for his time.

**Reflections**

As I have implied, the para-ethnography I developed with Mike did not restrict itself to this one meeting, but was begun through casual conversations before or after a meeting, and was continued after this interview with conversations that have better enabled me to provide this account. As with my collaboration with Jeevan, these para-ethnographies speak for themselves, and my reflections should merely be seen as a broader contextualisation within an anthropological framework, and outside the local context that these experts are so familiar with. Mike summarised many of the views and opinions that I have heard repeatedly throughout my fieldwork, but more eloquently than I would be able to myself, and it is in this way that I believe that an ethnography of a culture of expertise can gain a lot from the principle of para-ethnography.
One theme in this dialogue was the attitude of the humanitarians towards the Sri Lankan sociocultural and political context, an interest that I have already implied was quite marginal to the humanitarians writ large, primarily – as Mike himself argued – because the hectic pace and complicated bureaucracy of this culture of expertise is more than a full time job, and perhaps because there are no expectations from employers or colleagues to be engaged in such issues as the cultural norms of politeness, or the political sensitivity connected to ‘ethnic’ labels.

In the contextualising portion of this paper, I outlined Susanna Hoffman’s discussion of natural disasters as agents of change, and argued that although it may still be too early to estimate how and to what extent the tsunami has changed Sri Lankan society, an awareness of this factor might be useful in understanding the humanitarian relief effort. In Mike’s para-ethnography of Sri Lankan politics, he argues that the urgent response to the tsunami had resulted in a recentralisation of political power around the President’s Office, and that this new scenario had further impaired an already weakened working relationship with the new UPFA\textsuperscript{17} government.

Finally, Mike raised the issue of the predicament of humanitarian aid in contrast to development aid, and implied that the scope of the tsunami posed a challenge to the humanitarian aid approach, which was more attuned to a short-term, acute intervention than a longer term processual approach. The demand for a longer term commitment, paradoxically, was said to be sustained further by the magnitude of the funds pledged from around the world – funds that generally were strictly earmarked for tsunami related activities, creating a risk for confrontations and a further complicated working environment in relation to the conflict-related IDPs who – in principle – have not been considered as part of the post-tsunami reconstruction. The UN Special Envoy for the tsunami, former US President Bill Clinton had advocated the “Build

\textsuperscript{17} The United People’s Freedom Alliance, a minority coalition government between President Chandrika’s People’s Alliance (PA) and the JVP. This government replaced the United National Front government, lead by the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) after the president dissolved Parliament in February 2004.
Back Better” concept on behalf of the UN system, but the humanitarians had generally failed, so far, to include the conflict related social and material devastation in these agendas.

Since both the recent adjustments of conventional ethnography and the principles of para-ethnography demand a heightened reflexivity of the ethnographer, and since I have attempted an active shifting of positioning during my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, the following section is intended to illustrate how this strategy is challenged by the inevitable and elusive shift of perspective implied in becoming familiar with a once new and strange environment. But as the general intention has been throughout this paper, the account is more than a mere illustration of a single analytical proposition, and should be seen as providing a further insight into the workings of the humanitarian culture of expertise.

12. Becoming a Humanitarian

The first time I truly felt that I had become ‘part of the field’ was at a Friday morning Operational Meeting at SLIIR – as always hosted by Jeevan from CHA. Looking back, of course, I had had the feeling a lot longer, but it took a special event to make me realize it. In my fieldnotes, I now recognize the prose of familiarity; the detailed descriptions of the room, of the people present, of their body language and so on have been replaced by brief and to the point notes on the essence of the presentations and the arguments. Abbreviations, technical terms and all the other development language is noted without the question marks and confused and curious parentheses that filled my early notes and with them a large amount of my inquisitiveness towards my main characters has almost evaporated. My notes are filled with confidence in these people; in their good intentions; their authority, and fundamentally in their rationality.

I have noted one of Jeevan’s familiar arguments in its essence; that the humanitarian agencies are the largest sector post-tsunami, but largely uncoordinated! I read the exclamation point as much as my outburst of ‘amen’, or ‘hear hear’ as his rhetorical underlining. The notes of an insider; a devoted follower.
But this feeling was not clear to me at the time. It only dawned on me later in that meeting, when my loyalty suddenly became very manifest, in the presence of an (other) outsider; an intruder! As the final point of the morning’s agenda, Jeevan introduced Alex, a British journalist from the BBC, who had just arrived in Sri Lanka to collect material for the BBC’s six month follow-up on the tsunami. We had been warned – or made aware – that this was coming; the world demanded results for their generosity, and the press would be washing in as the six month mark of the tsunami was approaching. Alex was the first many of us had seen of it. Experienced with taking the stage he received the microphone from Jeevan and, as he spoke, began pacing the space in front of the podium; as a wild animal paces along the bars of its cage in a zoo, in front of its spectators. He introduced the theme of the segment he was preparing: Are businesses helping or hindering the aid effort? But his opening question to the room seemed much more focused, and hinted at a different agenda. ‘What is not being reported; what is going wrong?’, he asked with the intonation of an experienced speaker. The silence from the room was roaring, and he continued, ‘what is the thing causing you the biggest problem you are facing in your work?’, and suggested that the international coverage he represented might help us with these problems.

As usual no people responded to the invitation to participate in a debate; Jeevan had noted this to me as a general problem with this forum, but perhaps the large room and the growing number of participants – more than people’s involvement – was to blame? Finally hands were raised, and Alex directed his assistant to bring a microphone to a man who introduced himself as Günther from an Austrian organisation. He said that the biggest problem he faced in his work was that the lack of money post-tsunami had meant that very few people could afford to pay a dowry, which meant that very few people were getting married, which meant that a growing number of people were committing suicide out of despair. I have never heard this line of reasoning, before or after, and I wondered whether this was an act of spite towards the journalist or the words of a newcomer to this forum, since I had never noticed him before. The next comment brought up a more familiar issue; that of the disparity
between attention given to the war affected and tsunami affected IDPs as a source of conflict, and the difficulty involved in handling this for the agencies present, since they were working with earmarked funds, given specifically for tsunami-related relief.

Alex was clearly not satisfied with these remarks, and he focused his inquiry further. ‘Why are people still living in tents?’, he asked, the theme of the role of businesses ever fading. This stirred the crowd a little, and Carol Novlak responded that many things depended on the passing of new laws, and that this work required a lot of patience; ‘give us a little credit’, she ended – summing up our collective hostility towards his agenda. Someone said that there was the problem of dependency, that ‘people want everything to be given; they sell aid things’ and then shifted into the sort of mechanical aid talk that I had stopped noticing at these meetings; ‘we need psychosocial empowerment programmes!’ Caroline, Raji’s girlfriend, interjected that ‘just because people are selling things they don’t need, does that mean they’re dependent?!’ – a defence of the faceless victims now made out to be becoming the cause of their problems that was much appreciated in the heated discussions I took part in after the meeting. ‘The land issues are the major problem’, she continued bringing the drift towards Alex’ agenda to an abrupt end.

Alex returned to his professed agenda; ‘what about the international businesses’, he asked, ‘have they helped?’ Jeevan took over the microphone from Caroline, and with it her determination not to indulge in the mud-throwing that Alex was looking for. Jeevan said that he saw no ulterior motives in the conduct of the international businesses – evoking both the authority of his eloquence and of his role as the calm analyst of the forum – and added that there might be some that were less user friendly than others. He elegantly shifted the subject to his familiar agenda, and lectured Alex with a paternal gaze and a patient voice that almost seemed mocking, that there were three major issues; poverty, the conflict, and the tsunami, and that these issues were intertwined and could not be treated separately. ‘We are the biggest intervening body’, he berated, ’we can’t avoid that label, and we will
be held responsible’. This was now as much a speech to us, the humanitarians, as to Alex, the media. ‘Pushing to deliver alone is not good enough’, he charged the journalist who was listening patiently and indolently, and continued by formulating what we all felt; that the media ought to account for the successes as much as the failures, and that the task of reconstruction was bound to proceed with flaws and failures, since the world had never seen such a task, and since the difficult political situation in Sri Lanka was making everything even harder. His closing remark summed his point up with less diplomacy: ‘The businesses are doing a good job; it’s easy to do bashing just because they PR it!’ He never lost his awe of paternal calm and temperance but the exclamation point that ended his speech could not have been clearer, had it been slammed upon the white board in red graffiti.

The following silence sounded of collective agreement; we had found our common cause, and Alex was its target. Although perfectly poised, he seemed aware of his defeat. His final attempt hinted at a slight desperation; ‘That is good news’, he said – his intonation dulling his sarcasm – ‘but we’re looking for the bad news’. After a few obvious comments from the room, pointing out that there are no simple answers and so on, Alex’ time was up, and he politely thanked us for our time. The meeting ended with a few announcements; business went on as usual, the invasion of the media had been elegantly resisted and the familiar rhythm of the meeting felt like a forceful demonstration of how little we would allow it to mean to us. Alex was forgotten before he left the room and I felt proud to be a humanitarian! In the lobby I chatted with Gerda from HIC\(^\text{18}\) and a few others. Their smiles of recognition and our shared laughs over the successful defeat of the media felt like a soothing relief of my frustrations over being marginal to their world. I felt part of it all. I felt that I belonged.

**Reflections**

\(^\text{18}\) The UN’s Humanitarian Information Centre, whose job it was to coordinate and distribute information on damages, assistance programmes and ‘gaps’ in the humanitarian assistance. In this context, the specificities of her organisation are not as important as the notion of familiarity implied in simply being able to associate a name and an organisation with a person in the large group of humanitarians.
Of course, this bliss only lasted so long, and as I started questioning our hostility towards the BBC’s hunt for ‘bad stories’ and was reminded of my own scepticism towards the practice of the humanitarians, I was reacquainted with my marginality – a shifting of positions that has occasioned many reflections and pointed towards new fields of investigation, despite its unintentional character. What the notion of shifting positions still facilitates, however, is that these contextual and spontaneous fluctuations are an analytical resource to be utilized rather than an intellectual inconsistency to be lamented.

This account involves a host of issues related to the workings of the humanitarian culture of expertise, including the expectations of tangible results from a global public, materialised for the humanitarians in the pressure of the global media. Furthermore, the response of the humanitarians to Alex’ hunt for ‘bad stories’ brought out, firstly, the standard formulas of the development language that characterised many meetings – such as the interconnectedness of the conflict, the general impoverishment of the population, and the tsunami; the centrality of the national debates over a revision of laws related to land rights that had halted the reconstruction effort in the coastal areas because of the newly imposed ‘buffer zone’ rule that banished all new constructions in a 100-200 meter belt from the coast; and the need for a common stance among the humanitarian agencies to offer a serious challenge to the national bureaucracy. Secondly, this occasion brought out an unusual degree of collective solidarity among the humanitarians, a unanimity that was often called for but rarely manifested in more decisive matters, such as a common I/NGO statement to present at the Donor Forum in Kandy, which was consequently authored by Jeevan.

The final section of this attempt to account for a para-ethnographic collaboration serves as my *departure anecdote*, and further establishes my shifting positioning in the field, as well as the self-conscious faculty that characterised the para-ethnographers in this culture of expertise.

My last interview with Jeevan was rescheduled twice and was finally carried out a few days before I left Sri Lanka. We met in his office and he asked me about my work and I told him that I was quite pleased, and that I would be leaving soon. I informed him that I had requested the meeting to talk to him briefly about my paper, and then to ask his opinion about the paper I was writing with Prashan from CEPA\(^{19}\), and that I needed fifteen, perhaps twenty minutes.

He asked me about this paper and I gave him a copy of our bullet points; we had been writing for a few weeks and I had enlarged the main arguments and assigned them to bullet points so that it would be easier for my informants to read through it during an interview; my intention had been to conduct a whole round of interviews on the basis of this paper but time ran out and Jeevan was the only one to comment explicitly on it. I told Jeevan that I had been in Ampara with Prashan to do an initial assessment for CEPA and that the paper was being written on the basis of that trip and the combined impressions from Colombo of Prashan and I. He nodded as he read through it, taking his time with each point. He then picked up a pen and went through it again, ticking off each bullet point, as a teacher corrects a page of algebra exercises.

‘Why do you write that there is “a severe lack of camp management in Ampara district”’; he asked, still looking at the paper in front of him, ‘that’s true of the entire country, isn’t it?’ I had first thought that he would object to the claim, since I had always seen his role as the spokesperson of the humanitarians, who, after all, were the people responsible for the maintenance of camps. ‘We’ve only been to Ampara’ I replied, scribbling like crazy, ‘don’t you think it’s better to be as specific as possible?’ ‘You should talk to our people downstairs. The girls have been collecting data from all the districts;

\(^{19}\) Centre for Poverty Analysis, a Sri Lankan research organisation, specialised in NGO consultancy on poverty-, and conflict related issues. CEPA had established their own fund in response to the tsunami and were conducting an assessment of which community based organizations to channel the funds through.
you can get the data there’. I thanked him for the hint and got the name of the person to see. ‘You checked all the others…?’ I asked. ‘Good observations’ he said ‘I agree with all of it and I think it is important that it is published. What will you do with it?’ I told him that it would be published on CEPA’s website as soon as possible.

‘What was it about your paper?’ he asked; we were approaching the end of the meeting. ‘I just wanted to ask your permission to write about you and the meetings in my paper’, I said. He gave me back the paper and said ‘sure, just let me know what you write before you publish it. When are you going back?’ We stood up and I packed my things while we talked. ‘Next week’ but I think I might travel a bit before that; I haven’t seen much of the island yet’. The conversation turned to casual chit chat as he walked me to the door. ‘It has been a pleasure’, I said as I shook his hand. ‘Good luck’, he replied ‘let me know when you’re back’. We smiled, and I left his office for the last time.

14. In Conclusion

In the workings of the humanitarian culture of expertise, as it has been experienced through this study and described in this paper, there is little time for consideration of the social and political world around, unless it interferes directly with your work. More important is the ability to make yourself understood, and to evoke authority and respect through your public ‘performance’ (Goffman 1959).

In Sri Lanka, the politics of humanitarian assistance gradually became entangled in the country’s broader political history, especially with regard to the rivalry between proponents of Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and may thereby have occasioned critical changes in the already fragile peace process (cf. Stokke 2005).

To understand these dynamics, it is important to consider the political and social marginalisation of particular groups among the tsunami victims, since
these positions vis-á-vis the state have important implications for the extent of people’s vulnerability towards a natural disaster and their possibility for recovery. The work of the humanitarians I have experienced in Sri Lanka was carried out primarily at the central level of relief coordination, where the victims were a distant presence which might be shocking to outside observers, as it was for me in the early stages of fieldwork. However, I have attempted to portray the humanitarians through collaboration rather than moralisation, and believe that such an approach provides insights into the workings of humanitarian assistance that may facilitate dialogues between different interest groups in such similar situations, and provide an understanding of some of the most recent changes in the political environment in Sri Lanka.

**Postscript**

At the most general level, this paper has portrayed the lives of the humanitarians in the subtle context of the suffering of the Sri Lankan tsunami victims and the agitated political debates surrounding the distribution of humanitarian assistance.

This, then, may be seen as a portrayal of detachment. As with the tourists in the front page photo, the Western observer of the suffering of the tsunami is also in need of relief, from the agony of our own detachment, and the people we most easily identify with – at a distance – are required to enact what we, the detached observers, cannot. This initial shock, of the alleged indifference of the tourists and the alleged detachment of the humanitarians may turn us away from an understanding of the wider context for their conduct, and impair a dialogue across alleged divides.

By engaging in a para-ethnographic account with the humanitarian culture of expertise, I have attempted to engage in such a dialogue.
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Challenges to the Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Process

by Jesper Bjarnesen, Uppsala University

&

Prashan Thalayasingam, Centre for Poverty Analysis
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Introduction
This brief is mainly intended for actors involved in the post-tsunami reconstruction process in Sri Lanka, and is intended as a constructive contribution to the improvement of current practices. The authors take full responsibility for the views expressed, which may differ from the official views of their respective institutions.

As the six month review by the international media ebbs out, and the post-tsunami relief effort enters a phase that aims at more long-term interventions, lessons from the first six months remain relevant to the continued interventions. On the basis of fieldwork conducted from April to June in Colombo, a brief field visit to Ampara District in May, and our experience from development related work and studies through several years, we offer our perceptions of the remaining challenges to a sustainable and conflict sensitive coordination of the post-tsunami reconstruction process.

As the principal conclusion of our investigations, and above any other consideration, we wish to stress that it is vital that the tsunami be considered one of three major current challenges to the prosperity of Sri Lanka, the others
being the continued civil conflict and poverty. Consequently, aid to tsunami affected people cannot be separated from other development efforts. Conflict-related IDPs must be accommodated alongside the tsunami-related IDPs in order to avoid creating further tensions between groups and communities.

Approached in such a way the tsunami may still be seen as providing an opportunity for a more holistic development effort as well as a stepping stone for a lasting peace, despite some early set backs.

Keeping this overall predicament in mind, we now turn to a series of core challenges and recommendations to the reconstruction process. The first section considers the overall challenge of the sector wide approach that has by now become part of the policy framework of most agencies involved, and the following section present seven core coordination challenges, accompanied by specific recommendations for their alleviation.

**Structural challenges**

The sector wide approach poses an inherent challenge to coordination because its simplicity on policy and central planning level does not reflect the situation on the ground, e.g. in terms of the significant overlap between sectors such as livelihoods, micro-finance, fisheries/agriculture. This is also reflected in the lack of standardization of assessments from the Districts; there seems to be a lack of agreement on which information falls under what sector, causing distrust in the credibility of assessments in Colombo and frustration on District and Division level.

Furthermore, the South Western coastal areas have received a relatively high amount of aid and attention from international organisations because of their convenient proximity to Colombo. Conversely other areas such as Ampara are receiving proportionately less attention. It is vital that the rationale for projects working in certain areas, and certain areas receiving proportionately less aid be made public. The dearth of information regarding these issues leads to the supposition that some communities are getting more assistance than others. This perception of bias feeds into existing conflict patterns and existing ideas of discrimination and favouritism and it is essential that a conflict sensitive
framework is taken into consideration in every relief or development intervention.

These structural challenges lead us to recommend a broader geographical approach to replace the sector wide approach which seems to be causing more confusion and conflict than genuine relief. A geographical approach would involve looking at affected districts as units, being aware of the pre-tsunami development needs, and their pre-existing livelihood patterns and capabilities. It is necessary then that following the tsunami, development takes place in the district as a whole and not simply in the narrow strip of coastal land that was affected by the tsunami. The real development needs and conflict related needs and the districts own capabilities and coping strategies have to be examined and supported. This seeks to eliminate growing competition and resentment between tsunami affected people and other people who live in the area who were not directly affected.

Within the framework of these overall structural recommendations a number of specific challenges to a coordinated relief effort remain relevant as post-tsunami interventions begin to operate with a longer timeframe, and therefore become closer linked to other development efforts.

**Core Coordination challenges**

**Challenge 1**

Based on our experiences in Ampara District we note a severe lack of camp management due mainly to a lack in continuity of aid and service provision by international organisations and responsible government bodies. The lack of standardization in the services provided by the different institutions involved in the maintenance of different camps and the significant variation in supplies as well as in systems of monitoring and reporting has caused a situation where some camps are not receiving vital supplies or, at best, a situation where camp maintenance is sporadic and where these discrepancies are not communicated back to the responsible institutions.
**Recommendation 1**
It is important that the bodies responsible for the coordination of these interventions, e.g. TAFREN on the side of the government; OCHA within the UN system; and the NGO consortia on District level, take a more proactive approach to information gathering and analysis. Where information is lacking or unreliable it is the responsibility of these bodies to retract information and share it in a standardized format. Lack of capacity or resources – human or otherwise – is not an acceptable excuse considering the generosity of the international community following the tsunami!

**Challenge 2**
Information sharing between humanitarian agencies is hampered by competition over beneficiaries and “attractive” projects, and by the pressure from organisation Head Quarters (as well as the international media/public) to spend funds quickly.

One of the most important challenges to reconstruction coordination is the reluctance of international organisations to share information on needs and on ongoing projects despite their pledges for accountability and transparency. Attractive projects are still those that promise a relatively uncomplicated expenditure of large sums, since the expectations from both organisational Head Quarters and the general public in the West is focused on quick results, not on long term sustainability.

This might be a central factor in the tendency for international organisations to work around local organisations and neglecting principles of participatory development in their practice.

**Recommendation 2**
It is the responsibility of INGOs to take seriously the task of providing clear and regular information about their activities – future as well as ongoing – in order to inform the expectations of beneficiaries and the international public and media, e.g. in relation to the quality and variation in transitional shelters,
and in terms of expenditure – e.g. their considerations regarding long-term versus short-term interventions, and the interconnectedness of broader poverty and conflict related issues to the post-tsunami reconstruction.

In this regard it is recommended that INGOs prioritise the task of advocating the public, media, and organisational Head Quarters in Europe and the US that these complex issues are interlinked and must be addressed jointly, i.e. that funds earmarked for the tsunami are best spent in interventions that work on a broader, or more holistic, basis.

**Challenge 3**
The flow of information between the hierarchical government administrative structures continues to be the way in which information concerning post-tsunami assistance, relief, and reconstruction is being relayed. The urgency of the task required that extraordinary efforts be made to improve communication between these levels, and between various government sectors and other partners in relief and reconstruction.

Following the tsunami, however, decision making has been further centralised in Colombo, causing a significant rigidity in the government response to reconstruction requirements due to the delays in communication from local to central levels and back.

**Recommendation 3**
It is imperative that the central government administration allows a genuine decentralisation of decision making with regard to post-tsunami reconstruction and that international organisations both insist on and assist in this process without overriding local government officials. It is enough for INGOs to “step back” and let the process proceed in its own pace; what is need is firm advocacy and active engagement in achieving a continuous commitment from government officials at central, District, and Division level.

**Challenge 4**
Mechanisms created to and already in place to facilitate coordination are not being used and parallel structures are being set up and used. This creates obvious problems for coordination with differential levels of communication, transparency and openness in participation being displayed by various structures. This practice clearly contradicts the policy emphasis of INGOs on government and local partner ownership of the reconstruction process.

**Recommendation 4**

INGOs and donors need to produce clear and common demands for monitoring and evaluation standards and negotiate these with the government coordinating bodies. This is not primarily to serve international conditionalities but rather to help build trust between the reconstruction partners. The purpose of this should be to build trust between reconstruction partners rather than serve international conditionalities. Much of this responsibility falls on the international partners, since they display a clear lack of trust among themselves (cf. Challenge 2). The GoSL on its side has a responsibility to communicate clear demands to the international partners rather than continuing its current practice of keeping a straight face in official discussions only to resist international demands in practice, e.g. by exceeding deadlines, or producing vague and elusive policy documents etc.

**Challenge 5**

As the public debacles over the Joint Mechanism/P-TOMS have recently illustrated, the political atmosphere in Sri Lanka is marked by continued post-conflict ‘ethnic’ tensions and the unresolved negotiations of a sustainable peace. This implies that statements and actions by international agencies as well as government representatives may become part of the public debates regarding these issues, which risks serious delays in the implementation of reconstruction initiatives.

**Recommendation 5**

It is important that all agencies involved in the reconstruction process become more explicitly aware of their public image and the impression they convey
about themselves and their work. It is necessary to increase the amount of information accessible about the work of all agencies involved in post tsunami reconstruction and to deal substantively with any misconceptions that may have emerged.

The tense political atmosphere underlines the need for a committed and genuine communication of ongoing and planned activities to the Sri Lankan public (cf. Recommendation 2).

**Challenge 6**

There is a glaring lack of distinction between tsunami affected people in terms of socio-economic standing, social networks, savings, etc. in most reconstruction interventions. It is rarely acknowledged that the affected people are not a homogenous mass, but that they have different requirements in every aspect of an intervention.

**Recommendation 6**

In this context it is important to acknowledge that many of the tsunami affected people were already vulnerable and marginalised before the tsunami, due to socio-economic standing, caste etc. Their lack of voice and influence as a part of civil society may account for the slow progress in the reconstruction, and it is the responsibility of all agencies involved to insist on these people being heard and taken seriously. Conversely many of the people who were affected by the tsunami were not vulnerable or marginalized but were simply made so by the tsunami. They had high standards of living owned economic assets and had a generally high level of well being. While the destruction caused by the tsunami would impact on their social and economic conditions, they may also have access to savings, better networks and opportunities that would make their recovery process different from people who were vulnerable before the disaster. This distinction must also be taken into account when planning and providing assistance.
In order to assess these factors census statistics should be taken into consideration, e.g. on housing, economic, and occupational status prior to the tsunami.

Furthermore, it is recommended that humanitarian agencies prioritise an assessment of the capacities of affected people, in order to use their competences more actively in the reconstruction process and to avoid the pacification of affected people, particularly those living in IDP camps.

**Challenge 7**

Current livelihood reconstruction initiatives seem to be based on either an overly simplified focus on fisheries and agriculture or on elusive schemes of micro-finance support that lack guidelines and focus. There is a risk of re-educating beneficiaries to occupations with little or no future prospects.

**Recommendation 7**

Livelihood interventions need to be based on thorough considerations of market linkages and requirements, and take other ‘sectors’ such as infrastructure as well as psychosocial rehabilitation and youth training or education into consideration. It should look at providing entrepreneurship training, and business development skills. It should look to introduce new technologies and new forms of livelihoods in a manner that is compatible with and supported by existing more traditional livelihoods. It should be the aim of these interventions to take livelihoods further than prior to the tsunami (to “Build Back Better”, even in terms of human capacities) by inspiring the creativity of local partners and beneficiaries to imagine alternative occupations that will enrich the Sri Lankan job market in the future. In this respect it should also consider the links between livelihood activities and other sectors addressing particularly the problematic false separation of infrastructure, shelter and even fisheries and agriculture from livelihoods.

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