

“LISTEN TO THE WOMEN” LINKING RELIEF AGENCIES AND LOCAL CAPACITIES IN COMPLEX EMERGENCY OPERATIONS

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Introduction

Complex emergencies are comparable with modern crises, in that there are discrepancies between the realities in the field and how the situation is perceived and dealt with by those who move in to help. Complex emergencies can also be seen as the dire consequences of severe inequities in the global distribution of vulnerability. Scholars have called for new approaches to complex emergency management, in order to make relief more effective and to rebuild local resilience for when the next disaster hits. This has been the formal intention of humanitarian organisations and donors for a while already, but appears difficult to implement in practice – especially for relief agencies.

Systematic consultations with affected women and active use of women’s existing contingencies and capacities can not only bring about more effective and sustainable humanitarian relief work that counters the world’s vulnerability inequities. It can also support the affected communities in establishing a “self-sustaining peace”¹. In 2000, United Nations’ Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325, which requires United Nations (UN) agencies to mainstream a gender perspective into all activities related to the support, restoration and provision of peace and security. While many development agencies over the past few years have improved their routines on consultations with women, emergency relief agencies still tend to operate in a largely pre-designed and conventional crisis management manner. This corresponds with the notion of complex emergencies being perceived as ‘crises’, the way these are defined by for instance Rosenthal et al (2001). When there is an overwhelming sense of urgency, managers are faced with what they see as a dilemma between keeping control of the tasks at hand or to collect information through (time- and manpower-consuming) consultations.

From the perspective of crisis management theory and with the post-tsunami relief operation in Sri Lanka as a case study, this paper explores the nature of complex emergencies and discusses the operational challenges for the coordinators of humanitarian complex emergency operations in relation to communication with women’s local resources and contingencies.

The nature of complex emergencies

A disaster is an event which is commonly perceived as unforeseen and which poses severe threats to life, health, values and structures of the affected community (or communities). Although the terms ‘man-made’ and ‘natural’ disasters are still part of the disaster research

¹ Self-sustaining peace can be defined as a community’s “capacity to handle conflicts with empathy, creativity and by non-violent means” (Galtung, 1996).



vocabulary, it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly between the two. “Disasters are a complex mix of natural hazards and human action” (Wisner et al, 2004).

The term complex emergency first emerged in Africa in the late 1980s and it defines compound humanitarian disasters that are “of a multilateral nature [and] require a system-wide response” (Duffield, 1994). A complex emergency normally encompasses “extensive violence and loss of life, massive displacements of people, widespread damage to societies and economies, need for large scale, multi-faceted humanitarian assistance, hindrance or prevention of humanitarian assistance by political and military constraints and significant security risks for humanitarian relief workers in some areas”.² Complex emergencies are normally declared by the UN in order to mobilise its own agencies as well as the international community (including donors), when a natural disaster or sudden escalation of violence forces massive migration in an area that is already severely affected by weak infrastructure, poverty, food shortages and/or war. The UN’s mandate enables it to mobilise when the national state authorities in the affected area cannot cope and/or explicitly ask for external support.

Complex emergencies have much in common with modern crises, both in terms of characteristics and in how they are perceived and dealt with by those who move in to help. They seem to come as a surprise, there is loss of control, confusion and increasing uncertainty, there is a strong perception of time pressure, too much and too little information at the same time, many actors turn up and very often there is a breakdown of normal decision structures (Rosenthal et al, 2001). Rosenthal et al define a crisis as a “social construction” that should be “explored in terms of multiple realities”. They point to a widening gap between the actual nature of modern crises and conventional crisis management methods, and argue that “new crises require new ways of thinking”. K. Maynard points to a similar phenomenon in relation to complex emergencies: “The operational persistence of the old model of relief has created a fundamental gap between conventional methods of humanitarian assistance and the realities of modern disasters” (Maynard, 1999).

“Complex emergencies have no clear beginning nor end and the return to ‘normalcy’ is lengthy,” states R.H. Green and I.I.Ahmed (1999). In parallel with modern crises, complex emergencies can be regarded as non-confined processes that are part of or manifestations of problems that are global in nature (Huntington, 1996). As members of the modern “world risk society”, U. Beck states that we are becoming cosmopolitan rather than national citizens. The global nature of modern risks and our means of dealing with them are diminishing the role of the nation state (Beck, 2005). This can be interpreted in relation to the notion that modern hazards transgress national borders and that our exposure to them is more closely linked to our individual wealth, power and access to information than to our nationality. It can also be related to the political weakening of third world governments that perpetuates and even deepens third world citizens’ poverty and consequent vulnerability. Looking specifically at complex emergencies, M. Duffield puts a similar notion more explicitly into a political context by stating that “humanitarian aid is the North’s principal means of political crisis management in a now marginal South” (Duffield, 1994). These statements point to the fact that the global distribution of resilience and vulnerability is closely linked to the world’s unequal distribution of power and wealth. B. Wisner et al discusses vulnerability in a political context and states that “people’s exposure to risk differs according to their class, whether they are male or female, what their ethnicity is, what age group they belong to, whether they are disabled or not, their immigration status and so forth” (Wisner et al, 2004).

The theory presented above indicates that complex emergencies should be seen as the ultimate human ‘cost’ of severe inequities in the global distribution of vulnerability. Both Wisner et al and Maynard argue that disasters would not cause the human suffering we are witnessing in complex emergencies, if people hadn’t had their capacities and resilience

² <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/exception-docs/AboutFTS/Definitions-Glossary.doc>



reduced by social, political or economical factors, as well as by war. Inspired by Beck's writings, Wisner et al argue that "international efforts to 'manage' aspects of the impacts of hurricanes, droughts and volcanoes on behalf of poor, former colonial countries could [...] be considered a form of ecological modernisation. However, the fatal flaw in ecological modernisation is that it never deals with the root cause" (Wisner et al, 2004). Like Rosenthal questions the effectiveness of conventional crisis management, Wisner et al reject "those definitions of vulnerability that focus exclusively on the ability of a system to cope with risk or loss" (ibid.). If this is the case then complex emergency operations should aim to restore the affected population's resilience and contribute to the building of a "self-sustaining peace" (Maynard, 1999). "Relief has been, and probably always will be, the only chance for those affected to survive," writes B. Munslow and C. Brown (1999). "The problem is that relief aid has become seen as a policy in its own right, and has become detached from an overall policy to engender peace" (ibid.).

Different agendas, different modes

In most complex emergency operations, relief agencies and development agencies often work side by side, but the challenge seems to be to bridge the differences in their operational focus. Whereas relief agencies work with a short-term timeframe and tremendous pressure to cater for a wide range of needs on a massive scale within a very limited space of time, development agencies tend to focus on long-term, sustainable solutions that are designed in relation to the (often) ongoing conflict and the general cultural context. "Because of the quite different nature of their work," write J. Goodhand and N. Lewer, "there is often tension between relief and development organisations and agencies with more specific human rights and peace-building agendas" (Goodhand and Lewer, 1999). Goodhand and Lewer distinguish between 'development agencies' and 'agencies with more specific human rights and peace-building agendas'. However, many development agencies have adopted a much stronger awareness of the link between human rights, peace-building and development over the seven years that have passed since their article was published, and the distinction may no longer be as striking as the divide between relief- and development agendas and activities. When discussing UN complex emergency operations throughout the 1990s, B. Munslow and C. Brown point to "the lack of a common, coordinated plan and structure of action that involved a transitional bridge between emergency relief work and redevelopment, and a joint control body to oversee the work of both parties" (Munslow and Brown, 1999). K. van Brabant notes that "the real reason why agencies find it so difficult to coordinate is that they want to maintain their independence and individual profile" (van Brabant, 1997).

Scholars working on crisis management theory often emphasize the role that local capacities play in the imminent aftermath of a disaster (among them Quarantelli, Thierney and Stallen). Research conducted in the 1980s revealed that the vast majority of those rescued during the first 48 hours of studied disasters had been helped by fellow citizens and/or the immediate local community. Research has also highlighted that, "contrary to widespread belief, citizens do not panic in disaster situations. [...] Citizens often prove to be the most effective kind of emergency personnel" (Helsloot and Ruitenbergh, 2004). This is often also the experience of humanitarian relief workers. A study conducted among tsunami-affected communities in India and Sri Lanka "suggest that it was neighbours and untrained local volunteers who contributed the most in rescue efforts and who provided immediate relief" (Thomas and Ramalingam, 2005).

While warning of the "naïveté" it would be to "cast civil society as composed solely of 'angelic groups'", R.H. Green and I.I. Ahmed stress the importance of civil society involvement in complex emergencies where violent conflict is part of the picture. "Civil society can make important contributions by providing basic essential services at the local and national levels." (Green and Ahmed, 1999). "Even if [the agencies'] role is restricted to the building of wells and latrines," state Goodhand and Lewer (1999), "these activities should be



based on a more fine-grained analysis and understanding of community processes and structures and more detailed and nuanced conflict analysis”. This may, however, lie at the core of the coordination difficulties. While development agencies focus on local capacities and the involvement of the affected community in rehabilitation and peace-building, this requires knowledge about the culture and the conflict at hand – a ‘time consuming’ task in the eyes of many relief agencies. ‘Time’ – to ask, listen, learn, understand, rethink and redesign - seems to be the one asset that will always remain extremely scarce within conventional crisis management and current emergency relief practice.

Women’s vulnerability and resilience capacities

Women normally constitute the majority of adult civilians that are affected by violent conflict. 80 per cent of the world’s 40 million refugee and IDPs are women and children (UN, 2001). While suffering from the same resilience reduction as men due to the political, social, ethnic and geographical reasons referred to by Wisner et al (2004), women affected by complex emergencies are exposed to additional risks that are specific to their gender. The term gender-based violence (GBV) encompasses violence inflicted on women (or men, although the term is predominantly used to describe violence against women) solely because of their gender and/or perceived status as a sexual object. The term GBV encompasses genital mutilation, rape and other sexual assaults, domestic violence, sexual slavery and sexual favours in trade of food or assistance. In a forced migration setting, humanitarian organisations can almost invariably regard GBV a latent threat to their female beneficiaries (Olsen and Scharffscher, 2004).

On the other hand, women also represent great capacities in terms of restoring community resilience, rehabilitation and peace-building - the way out of complex emergencies. In a report to UNSC in 2002, UN’s Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed how women make “a critical difference in the promotion of peace, particularly in preserving social order and educating for peace.” He also pointed to the fact that women “have organized groups, across party and ethnic lines, advocating for peace, and have been active in reconciliation efforts, often with the support of regional and international networks” and noted that “greater attention to the gender norms and customs of a society can [...] provide useful insights” (UNSC, 2002).

Resolution 1325, referred to in the introduction of this paper, is one of several UN announcements that over the past few years have pointed to the need for stronger involvement of women in UN’s activities including complex emergency operations. It seems evident that the international consensus regarding the involvement of women would now have been implemented by systematic consultations with women in the initial stages of a complex emergency operation. If this is not the case, could the reasons why be linked to the operational environment of complex emergencies as outlined above? And what could be the implications for the effectiveness of relief work if the women affected by a complex emergency are not listened to?

Method

The empirical material for this article is based on fieldwork over a six-month period, from January to July 2005. The author worked for UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on the post-tsunami operation in Sri Lanka from January to April 2005. She was based in the capital Colombo and spent some time in affected areas in the eastern part of the country. In addition, she was hired by the UN in connection with a Lessons Learned conference on the tsunami operation, held in Colombo in June 2005. During these periods the author observed and took notes, both on how she conducted her own work and what she saw as constraints and challenges for herself and colleagues, and how she perceived the humanitarian operation in general. Particular attention was paid to gender



mainstreaming activities, consultations with women as part of project design and reports/analyses, as well as agency initiatives that aimed to support affected women's protection and resilience capacities. Between April and July 2005, the author conducted 53 interviews with managers and key personnel (such as gender advisors and special consultants) in all UN agencies with a presence in Sri Lanka and in selected international and national non-government organisations (NGOs). Sri Lankan feminist researchers, civil servants and senior officials representing Sri Lankan authorities were also interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. All interviews took place in Colombo and in the eastern town of Batticaloa. Document studies, literature searches and unrecorded consultations with other relevant individuals (such as NGO staff, UN staff engaged in other complex emergency operations and Sri Lankans who were indirectly affected by the tsunami) also formed part of the study. The empirical material presented in this paper constitute however the first stage of a larger analytical process and does not reflect the width of the information that has been collected.

Post-tsunami relief coordination in Sri Lanka

Early in the morning on December 26th 2004, the shores of 12 countries in Southeast Asia were struck by a tsunami that killed between 200.000 and 240.000 people.³ Homes, livelihoods and infrastructure were destroyed in a matter of minutes and across the region approximately five million persons found themselves in need of immediate assistance. Indonesia and Sri Lanka were hardest hit and throughout the first half of 2005 these two countries became recipients of an unprecedented mobilisation of international aid and attention.

At the time of the tsunami Sri Lanka had already for years been in a situation labelled 'complex political emergency' (Goodhand and Lewer, 1999) and 'complex emergency' (OCHA, 2002). Political violence erupted in 1971 and turned into civil war in 1983. A cease-fire between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was brokered in February 2002, but at the time of the tsunami the situation was unstable with incidents of random violence and attacks by various political, religious and militant groups. In addition to a considerable Tamil Diaspora across the world today, the violent conflict in Sri Lanka has produced approximately 800.000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and killed well over 60.000 people (UNDP/UNFPA, 2001).

Three main relief coordination entities emerged in the immediate wake of the tsunami, and they reacted to the situation in seemingly different ways. These were the GoSL, the LTTE (that controls some of the tsunami-affected areas in the North and the Northeast), and the UN. For the purpose of the analysis presented in this paper, the LTTE coordination will not be discussed in much detail while the UN entity will be divided into two sub-entities: The UN presence already established in Sri Lanka to assist in the conflict-related development and rehabilitation process, and the UN presence that was established in Sri Lanka specifically for the post-tsunami relief operation. The term 'presence' is deliberately used as the divide relates to groups of staff rather than agencies. Some agencies function as both development and relief agencies, depending on the mission at hand and the staff who are there to deal with it. The categorisation is relevant in this paper as the two types of UN presence were different in a way that clearly protracted the dilemma of 'control versus knowledge'. The practical approach to the situation by all coordination entities may be linked to their different organisational 'modus operandi', and how managers and staff perceived the 'crisis'.

For the GoSL, functions from Presidential level to public servants in the affected districts were taken by surprise and quite soon the normal decision procedures were replaced by what

³ Figures still vary greatly. The UN refers to about 200.000 persons confirmed dead while there are indications of a significant number of unreported casualties.



was believed to be more appropriate structures. With support from the UN, the Centre for National Operations (CNO) was set up in lieu of the already existing National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC), reportedly in an attempt to gain a better overview and control over the various aspects of national, local and non-government relief activities as well as to produce information on the nature and extent of loss and damages. Influenced by a strong sense of urgency and the non-routine nature of the tasks at hand, CNO was initially staffed by volunteers and headed by a person handpicked by the President. Desks responsible for the various relief sectors⁴ were established, but a couple of weeks passed before these desks were effectively linked up with and staffed by relevant state departments and/or Ministries. Although accustomed to war-related calamities, national contingencies did not seem prepared for a disaster of this magnitude and there were few 'pre-designed' solutions to problems that occurred. Due to the war, the infrastructure and logistical lines to the East and Northeast were already very weak pre-tsunami, which also hampered the relief work and the flow of information. However, more than anything, the hierarchical culture of the state bureaucracy influenced on how information was collected from the affected areas: Government Agents (GAs)⁵ were responsible for providing different types of reports to the CNO, but they were poorly resourced and with volunteers receiving and processing information and figures, CNO's reports were repeatedly questioned in terms of accuracy. The information-generating procedures were not changed during the emergency relief period but they were gradually strengthened by more organised staffing of the desks (until the CNO suddenly ceased operations on February 4th) and by international support, both at national and district level (for instance through supplies of IT equipment).

LTTE reacted to the tsunami by activating the logistical network that had been set up for military activities. The network had been designed in a way that involved the civilian population in the provision of logistical supplies, and so it was based on flexibility, local knowledge and informal lines of communication. This made it relatively efficient in terms of providing quick and appropriate relief to affected populations. There were ad hoc solutions but by and large they appeared to be based on local knowledge, and there was a strong involvement (if not dependency) on civilian resilience and capacities. LTTE's challenge was rather the difficulties in receiving international relief supplies due to GoSL restrictions on transport and supplies. This indicated the start of a rapidly growing politicising of the post-tsunami relief and reconstruction in Sri Lanka, which is typical of many complex emergency operations.

The scale of the human suffering after the tsunami prompted President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga to ask for international humanitarian assistance. UN declared the post-tsunami situation in Southeast Asia a complex emergency and personnel were mobilised from all corners of the world. Within the UN many staff were transferred from Headquarters or from missions in other complex emergency areas in order to 'kick-start' a large-scale relief operation. UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UN-DAC) Teams landed in Colombo less than 48 hours after the tsunami had hit, and a Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC) was set up along with a UN-OCHA office within few days. On January 6th 2005, a so-called Flash Appeal⁶ was published indicating the needs and planned relief projects within various relief sectors, according to UN's Flash Appeal template. The Flash Appeal was based on information gathered by teams specifically trained for quick assessment in chaotic circumstances. They were not in-depth and the information was basically intended to indicate

⁴ Relief work is traditionally divided into different sectors such as shelter, water/sanitation, nutrition, livelihoods, protection and health, but the range of sectors varies between different emergencies.

⁵ The public administration of each district (of which there are 14) is headed by a centrally appointed representative from the Sri Lankan authorities: The Government Agent (GA).

⁶ <http://ochaonline.un.org/cap2005/webpage.asp?Page=1184>



to donors the scale and nature of needs, how the UN and implementing organisations⁷ planned to work to meet these needs and what it would cost to do it. Beyond the initial UN-DAC missions, the emergency teams concentrated on the collection, analysis and dissemination of information that was available from trusted sources. These sources were predominantly UN staff and the CNO (to the extent where CNO's figures corresponded with UN estimates). Staff appeared to apply their experience from previous complex emergency missions within a framework of pre-designed routines. Solutions to most of the problems that occurred were either found in a routine manner or through consultations with UN colleagues or Headquarters. Since most were mobilised on short notice many stayed in Sri Lanka only for limited periods of time, such as one month. As far as the author was able to register, no Sri Lankans were hired by the UN for this work except as drivers and secretaries.

The UN's Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka was the Country manager of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which had an established pre-tsunami presence in Sri Lanka. When the post-tsunami operation was declared a complex emergency, he was appointed Humanitarian Coordinator, which meant that he became in charge of the humanitarian relief operation in addition to the ongoing, conflict-related development and rehabilitation work. The Humanitarian Coordinator appeared intent on placing the relief operation into the context of ongoing political processes, and he seemed sceptical of initiatives or activities that could threaten the reputation and goodwill of the UN within Sri Lanka. So did many of the UN representation that conducted development and rehabilitation work in Sri Lanka prior to the tsunami. 'Pre-tsunami' UN representatives were predominantly concerned with how to conduct the relief operation in a manner that would be politically and culturally appropriate, and in a way that would not harm the ceasefire or general peace-process. Emphasis was put on the involvement and support of UN's existing presence in most of the districts that had been affected. Apart from agency field offices and activities, this presence consisted for instance of networks of locally and internationally recruited UN Volunteers (UNVs). It was often referred to the fact that "Sri Lanka does not have a failed state. So we [the UN] are here to support the Sri Lankan authorities, not to take over what they are supposed to do themselves". There was a significant sense of hesitance and self-censorship in terms of issues that were perceived as 'sensitive', such as human rights and protection. "The easy thing is to be kicked out," commented one UN manager. "The difficult thing is to stay".

The two different approaches within the UN system appeared to create some conflict. On the one hand in relation to the perception of urgency and to what degree the relief work should be of a pre-designed or consultancy-based nature. A UN representative who was part of the 'emergency mode' coordination entity noted that "you have very long-standing group of people here [...], you have a country that has been development and conflict focused. [...]. So you come in where the pace and method of working, well, it needs to adjust to a disaster, and I think it has pretty slow in doing that." On the other hand in relation to cultural and political sensitivity. Managers and staff who had worked in Sri Lanka for some time kept referring to "the complexity of the situation here" and the fact that "it takes a very long time to get to know this country and perhaps we never will and that's why we should be humble".

It is worth mentioning that the majority of International NGOs that came to Sri Lanka to take part in the post-tsunami operation did not report systematically to or communicate with to any

⁷ Organisations that collaborate with the UN to implement a project, usually under a sub-contracting relationship. These can be national government institutions, national or international NGOs, or other organizations such as private sector (source: <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/exception-docs/AboutFTS/Definitions-Glossary.doc>).



of the coordination entities described above.⁸ The Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) had been established prior to the tsunami as a coordination body for the conflict-related activities of National and International NGOs, expanded their presence after the tsunami but had no formal power to coordinate the activities of any of its members. Meetings were however held on a regular basis and information was disseminated gradually in order to encourage voluntary adherence to standards, guidelines and the principles of “Do no harm”⁹.

Consultations with women in affected areas

In the eastern town of Batticaloa, as in many affected towns and villages, most of the initial relief work was conducted by members of the local community. Batticaloa is located in an area that is severely affected by the war, and many national and international NGOs were involved in extensive development and rehabilitation activities there at the time of the tsunami. Batticaloa also has several NGOs run by women and working especially for women. Some of these became involved in the initial relief work, and among the post-tsunami initiatives in Batticaloa was a gender watch-list, published at regular intervals. The gender watch-list was intended as a reporting channel for GBV, to make sure incidents received due attention by the humanitarian community.

One local women’s organisation started to arrange regular meetings where female representatives from affected communities and IDP camps/groups, NGOs, district authorities and health services were invited. The meetings were held in Tamil with translators present, and while local organisations and some international development agencies would come, international relief agencies were scarcely represented. One of the strengths of these meetings was that the participants often knew each other. They had knowledge of the realism of different solutions to problems that were voiced, in relation to social and religious norms, community structures and the resources that were available. They were also able to quickly identify individuals and families who were particularly vulnerable and discuss what support would be the most appropriate in order to retain the dignity and social situation of those involved.

When international relief organisations and supplies arrived in Batticaloa, few of the resources described above were consulted or involved as information gathering, new coordination structures and meeting schedules were established. Relief was delivered to affected populations parallel with some local relief activities and meetings that were organised by the local civil society often went unnoticed or were ignored by the international relief community. Some of this was corrected as international coordination gradually improved but by that time several of the local initiatives no longer existed. The gender watch-list was never fully acknowledged by the CNO or the UN coordination structures in Colombo, except within UN’s ‘working groups’ on gender and on HIV/AIDS. Early reports of rapes of female tsunami victims promoted calls for confirmed documentation but were later dismissed as unsubstantiated rumours.

At Colombo level, consultations concerning affected women’s vulnerability were regarded as a protection issue and thereby ‘sensitive’ and difficult to deal with in the speedy manner that was the case with for instance food distribution or well cleaning. While many ‘emergency mode’ coordination entities showed a preference for what was referred to as “first things

⁸ Sri Lankan authorities introduced routines for NGO registration and reporting through the establishment of the Centre for Non Governmental Services (CNGS) on March 7th 2005, some time after the initial emergency was declared over.

⁹ ‘Do No Harm’ is a concept developed by M. B. Anderson (1999) and the Collaborative for Development Action, which analyses how aid can support peace or war. One tool within the concept is ‘Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment’ (PCIA), applied to the Sri Lankan context by a group of partners including CHA: <http://www.humanitarian-srilanka.org/PCIA/index.php>



first”, ‘development mode’ entities were aware of the issue but found it difficult to deal with in terms of its “sensitivity”. There was no unwillingness to “consult and include the women”. It just didn’t happen in practice in any systematic manner, except by certain dedicated groups and individuals, most of whom had been involved with women’s issues and the curbing of GBV prior to the tsunami. A national TV advert campaign to raise awareness about GBV was stopped when the tsunami happened. “Well, other issues suddenly seemed more important,” one UN member of staff commented. “We will put it back on later, hopefully in the autumn.” When one manager reported to other UN managers that affected women were selling sex in exchange for baby food and vegetables, she met scepticism. “I think there are so many other things they’re worrying about, so many priorities. There isn’t hard data. And it’s sensitive.”

Discussion and conclusion

The empirical data presented above indicate clear differences in how the post-tsunami situation was perceived and reacted to by the different relief coordination entities. Whereas the coordination conducted by the national authorities bore the hallmarks of ‘conventional crisis management’, the UN presence that was already established in Sri Lanka appeared to focus strongly on the UN mandate - which in essence was to support the state in the post-conflict rehabilitation - to the extent of some self-restraint. For entirely distinct reasons, both LTTE and the new UN presence were already on ‘high alert’ and reacted in a ‘routine-like’ fashion and with pre-designed solutions. However, UN’s ‘relief mode’ preparedness did not display the “new ways of thinking” that may be needed for “the realities of modern disasters”. UN staff who were in a ‘relief mode’ produced a substantial amount of ‘information’ and project plans with an almost significant disregard for the knowledge and resources that were available through consultations and local involvement. UN’s ‘development mode’ coordination, on the other hand, encompassed the involvement of local capacities and knowledge networks, but it took some time before these were brought into relief-related decision-making. ‘Development mode’ hesitance seemed to irritate ‘relief mode’ staff and the ‘relief mode’ sense of hurry seemed to worry ‘development mode’ staff. The conflict between the two operational modes appears to have been solved by sharing tasks along the lines of concerns, priorities and operational mode. Consultations with affected women, however, appeared to be conducted by neither of the two UN relief coordination entities but rather by dedicated groups and individuals. Reports of GBV were questioned by decision-makers in term of validity, which may be linked to the attention given to the political aspect of UN’s activities and the fact that ‘protection’ was seen as ‘sensitive’ and therefore difficult to handle when things were moving much faster than normal.

In the wake of the tsunami, Sri Lankan women clearly represented resilience capacities that were both efficient and culturally appropriate. There are also indications that women’s organisations worked across ethnic divides in a way that supported the peace-building and reconciliation process in their area. The women were however not consulted, their capacities were not supported, nor were they involved in the planning and implementation of UN’s relief coordination.

The tsunami-affected women were the ones that lost out. While their national state authorities reacted to the tsunami in a manner that appeared heavily flawed in terms of efficient crisis management, the empirical data in this paper suggest that women’s own local relief initiatives were sidelined by international ‘relief mode’ activities. By the time the culturally more sensitive ‘development mode’ coordination entities were able to correct the ‘sidelining’, the harm had already been done.



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