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Sri Lanka: NGOs and peace-building in complex political emergencies

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ABSTRACT *This 'work in progress' gives an overview of the conceptual background and preliminary field work findings of a research programme investigating the consequences of violence and conflict in villages in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa Districts of eastern Sri Lanka.[1] Initial and speculative conclusions from these community surveys indicate that NGOs have only a limited impact on the local dynamics of conflict, and point to a need for NGOs to understand in more depth the complex historical and social aspects of protracted and violent conflict. To have any limited peace-building role NGOs must also undertake a more fine grained analysis of community social fabric and processes together with the associated economic, political and military factors.*

The starting point for the study was an analysis of the community level impacts of violent conflict and NGO interventions into communities in eastern Sri Lanka, particularly looking at actual or potential peace-building roles for NGOs. The research methodology employed three discrete surveys, each feeding into one another and building up the level of analysis from the micro to the macro:

- community village surveys (micro-level);
- in-depth NGO surveys (meso-level);
- survey of the Sri Lankan conflict (macro-level).

By focusing initially on the community-level dynamics and causes of conflict through an exploration of detailed case study material, it was planned that the analysis would be 'inside-out' rather than 'outside-in', bottom-up rather than top-down. The rationale for this approach was to ensure that the macro-policy recommendations would be based on a fine-grained analysis and understanding of processes at the community level. The data gathered from these surveys will help to address three key research questions:

(1) What impact do NGOs and other humanitarian agency interventions have on the dynamics of violent conflict?
(2) What kinds of interventions can contribute to a peace-building process?
(3) How can such interventions be supported, strengthened and replicated?

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Thematic issues

The theoretical underpinnings of the research draw from a multidisciplinary base including emergency relief, development and peace-building. Historically these have been treated as distinct disciplinary areas, each with their own practice and discourse. However, in recent years there has been some convergence of these paradigms which has become manifest in the form 'three-way programming', involving these interventions under the same programmatic umbrella. Because of an increasing acceptance of the need to respond to complex political emergencies (CPEs) in a more coherent and coordinated manner with a view to longer-term sustainability and capacity building, ideas that humanitarian aid can be both developmental and build longer-term capacities for peace have been developed.[2] The research themes incorporated the concepts of civil society, social capital, social energy, social fabric and peace-building.

The concept of 'civil society' is useful because it makes us ask important questions about fundamental relationships between state and society.[3] The term civil society was commonly linked in the late 1980s with people's political struggles around the world which were trying to build more democratic and inclusive societies, and gain access to power and economic wealth. Pearce reminds us that use of the term 'civil society' only to include NGOs and the 'good associations' of the poor and just, is too narrow.[4] Civil society includes the entire spectrum of associational life 'continuously threatened by "uncivil elements" that also flourish in societies'. Many developmental NGOs have become involved in wider issues, linking their 'traditional' developmental projects with initiatives which support and strengthen civil society, and the social fabric which underpins it. Social fabric is used here to describe relationships at a micro-level (as opposed to the more macro-level of civil society) of smaller communities and villages, and interpersonal relationships. In this sense it is about 'community building' and the myriad of interpersonal relationships which exists in households and communities. In heterogeneous communities groups which use 'small issues' projects such as the provision of credit, education and health care, and which cut across primordial loyalties such as ethnicity, language and religion, are receiving increasing attention and support.[5]

Social capital has been defined as 'features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit'.[6] Such norms and networks constitute endowments of capital for societies, and it has been postulated that, where norms and networks of civic engagement are lacking, as is often the case in internal wars, the potential for collective action would appear to be limited. Like civil society, there is a negative aspect to social capital because social capital for some implies social exclusion for others. Goodhand and Hulme use the term 'anti-social capital' to describe forms of engagement and networks which do not accrue endowments of capital for the benefit of society and are actually damaging.[7] They speculate that anti-social capital could be whipped up relatively quickly by conflict entrepreneurs in comparison to the long-term and incremental process of building up social capital.

Social energy is a term first used by Hirschman to describe and explain the

successful Latin American grassroots development projects of which he had experience in the early 1980s.[8] Such projects had achieved success through people's self-directed and creative efforts. Hirschman talked of the emergence of networks of social relations (we have used the term 'social fabric' in this context) that were more caring and less private, in which psychological factors appeared more crucial than material ones, and in which social energy animated individuals and groups to high levels of performance for some collective purpose. The theme of social energy was further developed by Uphoff while analysing his work on the Gal Oya irrigation project in Sri Lanka, and he put a theoretical framework around the concept.

> The very way in which we think about social structures and dynamics will need to change, with either–or presumptions giving way to both–and insights. Possibilities for mobilising underestimated and overlooked potentials in individual and collective endeavour should be identified and activated where these possibilities coexist with less promising possibilities. Material factors can present major constraints and also opportunities but they are less determinant ultimately than the mental and moral factors to be explored.[9]

Within the themes and concepts of social capital and social energy the research also investigated potential roles and difficulties for leadership within communities, and the relationship of such people with the various military and political frameworks.[10]

The term 'peace-building' has been the cause of much confusion and it is often used rather broadly to mean any activity undertaken with the purpose of preventing, alleviating or resolving conflict. Agencies have put such diverse activities as the provision of cooking utensils, rape and torture counselling, discussions of gender issues, health programmes and political mediation between conflicting parties all under the aegis of peace-building. A more focused definition of peace-building would incorporate activities which contribute to institutional and infrastructure work related to longer-term reconciliation and social integration activities. This would include the promotion of institutional and socioeconomic measures, at the local or national level, to address the underlying causes of conflict. Under this remit would also come pre-conflict work designed to strengthen a state of peacefulness and to prevent future outbreaks of violence, and post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies.[11]

> Peace building is the strategy which most directly tries to reverse the destructive processes that accompany violence. This involves a shift away from the warriors, with whom peace-keepers are mainly concerned, to the attitudes and socio-economic circumstances of ordinary people. Therefore it tends to concentrate on the context of the conflict rather than on the issues which divide the parties.[12]

By building social capital and local capacities for peace NGOs may be able to contribute to peace-building processes, but it is important not to exaggerate their potential impact in this area. What NGOs, most of whom struggle to work

apolitically in what is an intensely political situation, can do, is create humanitarian spaces and contexts, thus in creasing probabilities for peace-building, and be catalysts, facilitators and enablers for initiatives in situations of violent conflict. Becoming involved in peace-building work (such as non-violent conflict resolution and dialogue building) requires agency personnel to be taught a new range of appropriate skills to complement their technical expertise, and for donors and NGOs to take a much longer-term view of programming.[13] NGOs must also understand the mechanisms of war economies and the fact that the 'winners' in such situations will resist efforts at stopping the fighting and building a peace. Linked in with this point is the need for unravelling power relationships, and a political analysis at both local and national levels.

The conflicts in Sri Lanka

Over the past 25 years the government of Sri Lanka (GSL) has faced challenges from two sources.[14] First, in 1971 and more seriously in 1988/89, the Sinhalese Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)[15] mounted attacks on the state which resulted in bloody armed rebellions. Second, from the early 1970s, and with an increasing degree of ferocity, militant Tamil groups have been fighting for an independent country, 'Tamil Eelam', to be established in the north and east of Sri Lanka. One Tamil group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE),[16] has come to dominate this battle.[17] A critical turning-point in the national conflict occurred in July 1983 when anti-Tamil rioting, prompted by the ambushing and killing of a Sinhalese police patrol by Tamil militants, caused many deaths and the displacement of thousands of Tamils, both internally and to Tamil Nadu in India. Violence really took root in the eastern province in mid-April 1985 at Akkaraipattu, when clashes took place between the Tamil and Muslim population after militants had killed Muslims in Mannar. Tension increased again in August 1990 after the LTTE killed 140 Muslim worshippers at the mosque in Kattankudy, and also in October 1990 after the LTTE ordered all Muslims living in Jaffna, Maullaittivu, Kilinochi and Mannar Districts to leave or be killed.[18] The war dramatically escalated in 1995 after a breakdown in peace negotiations between the LTTE and GSL. Because the main thrust of the renewed GSL offensive was the recapture of Jaffna and the opening of the main road between Jaffna and Colombo, many combat troops were redeployed from the eastern province to the northern theatre of operations. However, sporadic fighting over territory has continued both in Batticaloa and Trincomalee Districts, with the use of terror tactics by all sides to control the population. The result is a fractured mosaic of communities living in an environment of fear and mistrust, with violence instigated often with impunity by a variety of Tamil militia groups working for the GSL, home guards, and some sections of the GSL armed forces.

The effects of the war have been enormous both in terms of economic loss and human suffering and relate to both short-term costs of the war and the more long-term and pervasive invisible costs of the conflict in terms of (1) the immediate reduction in availability of welfare and other infrastructure services available to people; and (2) long-term knock-on effects to the next generation.[19]

The term 'complex political emergency' has been used to describe situations which share some basic characteristics, including:

- the crisis is multidimensional with profound human suffering;
- the roots of the conflict are in part political, and may be complicated by natural disasters;
- one dimension of the emergency is that the state is contested or collapsed.

While it could be argued that the situation in Sri Lanka has these characteristics, many Sinhalese reject labelling the conflict as a CPE and describe the situation as one of an internal terrorist problem. Tamil parties, particularly the LTTE, see the conflict on the other hand as a liberation struggle. Such deep-rooted conflicts have always been 'complex' and critiques of the term argue that it implies a lack of willingness to engage with and understand the underlying causes and dynamics of conflicts, the implication being that the conflict is too 'complex' to understand and respond to.

> Reporters may suppose that aid workers they are talking to have techniques for collecting information that are, in some sense, scientific. But honest aid workers know different. (It's been said that when journalists don't know what is happening they call it 'chaos'; when aid workers don't know they call it a 'complex emergency').[20]

Within the conceptual framework of the research we viewed the conflict in Sri Lanka as a process which is multi-causal, operating at different levels (micro, meso and macro) which are intimately intertwined, subject to fluctuating phases of peace and violence, and one which so far has resisted many efforts at political and military resolution—both from internal and external sources.

NGOs in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a long tradition of NGOs and voluntary welfarist associations, but the 1980s and 1990s saw a rapid growth of foreign aid funding and a corresponding growth in NGOs whose activities include economic, religious and political concerns and whose intellectual approaches span a spectrum from political advocacy to neutral humanitarianism.[21] Some work closely with the GSL, while others are critical and distance themselves from the government programmes. Wanigaratne[22] and van Brabant[23] have traced the chequered history of relations between GSL and NGOs in Sri Lanka, and van Brabant describes the current relationship as one of 'suspicious co-operation'.

Because of the quite different nature of their work, there is often tension between relief and development organisations and agencies with more specific human rights and peace-building agendas.

> I don't even speak to human rights organisations—when Amnesty International are in town, I stay away—its far too politically sensitive. We're mandated to deliver our programmes and nothing more. (NGO Director)

There has been a proliferation of NGOs in the east, and they have diverse backgrounds, agendas and activities. We might divide local NGOs into first and

second generation organisations. The first generation NGOs come from a church-based, welfare and charity background and many were functioning before the conflict. Many are staffed by retired government civil servants and have a strong service ethic. Second generation organisations are a more recent phenomenon, and have mushroomed largely as a result of the availability of foreign funding since the early 1990s, when the conflict intensified. They tend to be staffed by younger, middle class technocrats and have more of a contractor ethic. Another group of organisations identified during the research may constitute a third generation of NGOs that is emerging in 'uncleared' (see below) areas. One such organisation, called KPNDU, is a community-based group of young activists working largely on a voluntary basis, but with sensitive support from a donor agency. Unlike most other NGOs, their focus is on community empowerment, leadership development and institution-building. Whether such an organisation constitutes a new category of NGOs emerging in uncleared areas is difficult to tell at this stage.

In addition to the local NGOs a number of international NGOs are working in the east, including Save the Children Fund (SCF), Oxfam and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Most of these organisations started work as relief agencies in the north and east, although some like SCF and Oxfam have moved increasingly into rehabilitation and development activities. Apart from ICRC (and to a limited extent UNHCR) few organisations are involved in protection and human rights and even fewer are working in the areas of conflict resolution and peace-building. Quaker Peace and Service are the only international agencies working in the east in this particular field.

Therefore, it is important to specify which kinds of NGOs are being referred to when we talk about their performance in the area of peace-building. Most organisations working in the east lay no claim to being able to build peace so it may be unfair to criticise them for not doing so. As outlined earlier, the east is a shattered mosaic of communities divided by ethnic fault lines. Territory is demarcated into 'cleared' and 'uncleared' areas. These terms, coined by the GSL carry a set of assumptions that often do not reflect the situation on the ground. A cleared area is assumed to be one that is under the control of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, where there is no 'terrorist' presence, there is a level of protection and stability and the population is receiving the same public entitlements as elsewhere in the country. 'Uncleared' areas are those which remain under the military control of the LTTE. The reality on the ground is more complex and fluid than these terms imply. Two of the surveyed villages are officially in cleared areas. However, it would be more accurate to describe them as 'grey' areas of disputed territory, subject to ongoing instability and sporadic violence. SCF(UK), who work in the east, have described these so-called grey areas as follows:

> [In] much of the eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and to a lesser extent Amparai, outside of the main towns, GSL power is minimal with a very strong LTTE presence. Ethnically mixed and vulnerable to sporadic upsurges in fighting the civilian population in these areas is extremely vulnerable.[24]

Coordination sometimes appears to be uneven, haphazard and at the worst

non-existent. Relationships between NGOs are usually a mix of collaboration and competition. During some periods, when interests coincide, NGOs can collaborate well. At other times there can be intense competition between them, usually over matters of influence, funding and resources. To tackle problems of coordination and communication the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) was established in Colombo with a mission to 'enhance the quality, the effectiveness, professionalism and the transparency of the members' [NGOs] work'.[25]

Emerging findings—impacts and implications

The following sections map out some of the initial research findings based on community surveys conducted in four war-affected villages in the Eastern Districts of Batticaloa and Trincomalee, two in government-controlled areas and two in LTTE-controlled areas.

- M and S are officially deemed cleared areas, although both are situated in unstable, 'grey' areas. M is a mixed Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim community, whereas S is purely Tamil but neighbours a Muslim village. S is primarily a fishing community and M is primarily a farming community.
- IM and K are both Tamil communities situated in uncleared areas. They are isolated rural communities, situated, at the time of the research, some distance away from the front lines. IM and K combine both fishing and farming.

At this stage of the research our findings are tentative and speculative, although patterns and common themes are beginning to emerge. We first outline some of the findings about the communities themselves and in the light of this, return to debates outlined above on NGOs and peace-building.

Impact of conflict on communities

A narrative of violence.

> Peace is when an unmarried girl can go out in all her jewellery at night, and then come back home without being interfered with. (Community member, Batticaloa)

A striking feature in all four communities was the pervasiveness of violence. Everybody has a story to tell about how their daily lives have been affected. There were marked differences, however, between the grey areas, situated on ethnic fault lines and the uncleared areas located some distance away from a front line. In M and S violence was more random and unpredictable, these villages are situated in a 'twilight zone' in which no side has clear control of the territory and are subject to incursions from a number of Tamil militant groups.[26] In eastern Sri Lanka there has been some 'privatisation' of warfare to these militant groups, and some describe this as the GSL trying to fight a war 'on the cheap' by harnessing tensions within civil society.[27] The Tamil militant groups, and the Muslim and Sinhalese home guards, are all examples of this phenomenon.

'Top-down violence' fuelled by conflict entrepreneurs has created the conditions in which bottom-up violence can thrive. The corroding effect on social

relations is illustrated by increased reported incidents of robbery, alcoholism and suicide. The lack of security has also had a marked effect on mobility. People in S, for example, never go to the neighbouring Muslim village and the children are scared to go to school:

> We are frightened of going through the jungle to school because of the Rasiq group and the Muslims. (Interview, 1998)

Women are particularly vulnerable in this climate of insecurity:

> When the Rasiq group come all the women from a neighbourhood move into one house, because we are afraid. (Interview, 1998)

However in some respects the conflict has created new forms of mobility for women. They have been forced into the public realm because they have either become heads of households or men's mobility has become more restricted. Women have taken on new roles because in some respects they are less vulnerable than the men: women cross road blocks, go to the army to complain about the militant groups or to get their men folk out of detention, they go to the market to sell fish or produce, and many have had to go to the Middle East to find work. Therefore there are important gender differences in how security has had an impact on mobility.

Local economy: markets and mudaladis. The conflict in the east has led to the loss of productive assets, the disruption of markets and a lack of long-term investment. Traditional sources of livelihood such as fishing and paddy farming have been disrupted and there has a been a diversification into alternative economic activities such as brick making, petty trade and small businesses. As mentioned above, women are increasingly having to find employment in the Middle East to supplement income.

Violence has clearly played a role in shaping economic relations, and, conversely economic agendas may also shape and sustain the conflict. In wartime opportunistic behaviour becomes more profitable and in the East a wartime economy has emerged, shaped, to an extent, by violence and predatory behaviour. The dividing line between opportunistic behaviour and criminality is unclear. An example of the former might be the role of the *mudaladis* in exploiting fishermen's lack of mobility and bargaining power to keep fish prices down.[28] Alternatively the armed forces extorting bribes at check posts, or the Sri Lankan navy taking fishing catches constitute examples of criminality. Whether it is pillage, protection or monopolistic control of trade, the link between violence and economic gain is clear. The LTTE, the Sri Lankan army, the home guards and the Tamil militant groups are all 'winners' in the sense that for them there are clear economic advantages in the continuation of conflict. There is a deliberate strategy behind much of what appears to be random violence.

There is also a strong ethnic dimension to the war economy. It would appear that Muslims are well-placed to exploit opportunities, since they have links with both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities (including the armed groups of each). As a result they own or control much of the transport and trading enterprises

which link Colombo and the east. The relationship between Tamils and Muslims is an ambiguous one—on the one hand there is a great deal of suspicion and hostility, but on the other there is a level of economic interdependence:

> the only relations we have with Muslims are now based on business. (Interview, 1998)

Social capital.

> We feel hatred in our hearts but we still play football with them. (A Tamil youth talking about his Muslim neighbours at S village, Sri Lanka, March 1998)

The key forces shaping the institutional environment are the LTTE, the SLAF (Sri Lankan Armed Forces), the home guards and the Tamil militant groups. Violence has created new incentive structures and new hierarchies that have undermined the previous institutional arrangements.

An understanding of the social history of the villages is a necessary starting point for an exploration of social capital. M and S are front line villages that have been living at the sharp end of the conflict in the east for many years. Both originated in government colonisation programmes in the 1950s, and each has experienced repeated cycles of violence and displacement. Both villages are situated along ethnic fault lines: M contains members of all three communities, while S is a Tamil village neighbouring a Muslim community. From the time they originated until now these villages have been in a state of flux. The glue binding these communities together was always fairly weak, but the conflict has loosened social bonds even further. This manifests itself in the sparseness of the organisational landscape in both villages. In S, apart from the temple society, few pre-war organisations are now functioning, and in M the only organisations working at a village level are new ones formed to get assistance from NGOs. These new organisations are dependent on external support and lack roots and strong leadership.

K and IM, in contrast, are established settlements with long histories. Although they have experienced displacement and sporadic violence, their relative isolation and distance from the front line have provided them with some measure of stability. The fact that they are under LTTE control means that coercion and violence are an ever present threat, but the sources and nature of the violence are more predictable than in M and S. As a result there is a measure of confidence and stability which is lacking in the two front line villages. Local organisations tend to be more diverse and deeply rooted in K and IM. For example, there are four temple societies in IM which still play a central role in the community, while in contrast the temple society in M has only a dozen or so members and is peripheral to the life of most of the villagers. In IM there is also an active fishing society, a women's savings group, a school development committee and a rural development society. The overall picture in K and IM is of a more dynamic organisational environment than in M and S.

A common observation in the east is that Muslim communities have a richer and denser organisational life than Tamil communities. The mosque tends to play a more central role in the life of a community than the temple; in addition

to its cultural and social functions it also has an organisational and leadership role. Moreover, the Muslim community has a stronger political leadership who can represent their interests in both the economic and political realms. This combination of an organised civil society and strong political leadership has helped mitigate some of the effects of the conflict on Muslim communities.

Tamils, however, often see the Muslim capacity to organise themselves in pejorative terms. Social capital is seen as the solidarity or 'anti-social capital' required to mobilise Muslims against Tamils. This illustrates the 'dark side' to social capital, which on the one hand may be expressed in terms of a solidarity within a given community, but at the same time is being exploited to generate social cleavages. This is a characteristic of the way in which the war has been fought in the east. Experience shows that generating 'pro-social' capital between communities is a long-term incremental process, while the conflict entrepreneurs can destroy this capital in no time at all.

Leadership. Research from elsewhere demonstrates the importance of leadership in helping reinforce social consensus in conflict-affected communities.[29] In the four villages we can identify leadership roles in different spheres. The *mudaladis* for example have a leadership function in the economic sphere, although by bribing people elected into the village committees their influence extends beyond this. They also have an important social role:

> there are several of them. They come to our festivals and help contribute to death donation societies. (Interview, 1998)

However, there was little evidence of a strong civic leadership with the power to create social or civic energy. Traditional leaders, like the headman, now have limited power and status. Because of the climate of insecurity leaders are afraid to take a position that will leave them exposed and vulnerable. There is a self-limiting mechanism which prevents figures who might potentially take on a leadership role from 'putting their head above the parapet', and this atmosphere of intimidation prevents the social entrepreneurs in the community from emerging. Perhaps we can identify new forms of leadership developing among the women and the youth. In S, for example, women organised a demonstration against alcohol which was one rare example where people were willing to take a public stand on a particular issue. Also, in IM one of the reasons for a more dynamic organisational environment was the emergence of a number of young leaders. However, the space for local leadership is extremely limited. It is possible to demonstrate about alcohol but it is not possible to talk about human rights abuses. There is some latitude in terms of social organisations, but there is no latitude when it comes to politics. The following incident indicates where leadership within the Tamil and Muslim communities lies and how power is exerted:

> Recently there was a bomb blast in Eravur town and a Tamil died. When the Tamils came to try to collect the body, Muslims started to assault them. So then the LTTE

> sent a warning to the Muslim MP in Eravur, that there would be serious trouble if the Muslims didn't let them collect the body. Eventually the LTTE and the MPs met and brought about a settlement. (Interview, 1998)

Conclusions from the community surveys. The following are some of the initial conclusions we can draw from the community surveys:

1. In grey areas, levels of random violence and instability are greater. The key issue is not so much whether it is a cleared or uncleared area as whether it is situated near to a contested, front line position.
2. Violence has played a major role in shaping and reordering economic and social relations in such areas.
3. Grey areas are characterised by an environment of impunity in which opportunistic behaviour prevails.
4. A war economy has developed in such areas in which warring groups and *mudaladi* middlemen have a vested interest in the continuation of instability and conflict.
5. Social capital has been transformed by the conflict. In areas of instability the impact on social relations within and between communities has been much more corrosive than in areas situated further away from the front lines. Close proximity and a recent history of violence have bred fear and mistrust between the different communities.
6. Local leadership has been a major casualty of the war; the climate of fear and intimidation has prevented a civic leadership from emerging.

In the light of these findings, we now turn to the question of whether NGOs can have a peace-building role in situations of protracted conflict. One of our research hypotheses is that NGOs have a positive or negative impact on the local dynamics of conflict through building or undermining community endowments of social capital.

NGOs and peace-building: some initial findings

The following are some rather speculative conclusions based on findings from the community surveys:

NGOs have an impact in terms of mitigating the effects of the conflict on the most vulnerable

> they are like gods to us. (Interview, 1998)

At the level of distributing resources and playing a witnessing role, NGOs are helping mitigate some of the impacts of conflict on the most vulnerable sections of the population. In some of the villages people mentioned the importance of having outsiders come to visit the village.

> when the Rasiq group came we were glad to see you here because we knew nothing would happen then. It gave us courage. (Interview, 1998)

This watchdog role was perceived to be particularly important in the grey zones where human rights abuses were most pervasive.

NGOs have a limited impact on the local dynamics of the conflict

There is little evidence to show that NGOs—international or local—are having any kind of impact on the conflict at a local level through building endowments of social capital. At the moment it would be true to say that 'three-way programming' has not got any further than the hyperbole of project proposals. Even when this was a stated objective as in M, the NGO concerned misread the situation and exacerbated underlying tensions between the three ethnic groups. In many cases NGOs were cutting against the grain of existing social structures and processes. One organisation, for example, initiated credit groups based around temples, which in turn reinforced underlying caste conflicts. Perhaps organisations like KPNDU offer a glimmer of light as they are based in the area and support community action in a low key, sensitive way. Also significant was the fact that donor support was similarly low key and sensitive.

In areas as complex and turbulent as eastern Sri Lanka, the belief that complex changes can be engineered, especially by outsiders, looks almost risible. One could argue that NGOs should forget claims about peace-building (often foisted on them by donors) and be more realistic about what they can achieve in areas of protracted conflict. Rather than attempting social engineering, many NGOs argue that they should stick to their mandate of providing relief and alleviating suffering.

It is true that the space for innovative and creative programming is extremely limited, and any activities which challenge the structures of violence will be stamped out. While many NGOs are well-placed to comment on the links between deprivation and bottom-up violence, they may be less able to influence top-down violence because they lack the diplomatic weight of government.[30] However, there needs to be at least an analysis of how to modify the system of incentives and disincentives within which those producing violence are operating. There are also opportunities to build social capital and support local institutions in more discrete and low key interventions, as KPNDU have demonstrated. However, there are a number of factors which mitigate against NGOs exploiting such opportunities:

> They come for a short period and then they wash their hands and go. (Interview, 1998)

NGOs have a mixed reputation in the villages. There are accusations of corruption and, in fact, one local NGO is currently being taken to court by an international NGO for misuse of funds. Another NGO in S allegedly disappeared with the villagers' savings. People see NGOs coming and going and have little faith in their ability to stay the course and maintain an ongoing presence in the village.

> Many people come in white vehicles with flags on, they distribute something and then we never see them again. (Interview, 1998)

One NGO staff member who worked as a social mobiliser in her own village

described the difficulties she experienced acting as the interface between her community and the NGO. She said that:

> I feel like a dancer. (Interview, 1998)

The dancer in Tamil culture is traditionally a prostitute for the king. This gives an insight into community perceptions of NGOs: they are seen as distant figures dispensing largesse to grateful subjects. The mobiliser was in the invidious position of trying to 'dance' between the king and his subjects and to meet the differing demands of the two parties.

> NGO workers must have very straight, very strong backbones. (NGO worker)

To build closer links with communities demands a greater depth and level of engagement than most NGOs have demonstrated in the villages surveyed. What the villager sees is a succession of organisations with short attention spans and shallow analysis, descending on them briefly to dispense largesse (often to the wrong people) and then leaving never to be seen again. Where an NGO came consistently to a village and built up a long-term relationship, this was commented upon and obviously appreciated. ICRC's mobile clinic in IM, for example, was seen as a dependable point of contact with the outside world.

Hearts without minds: an anarchy of good intentions

> they need to discuss more strategic issues, rather than how many sarees have been delivered. (NGO worker talking about other NGOs in Batticaloa)

Many NGOs programmes were not preceded by rigorous contextual analysis. An inability to invest time in understanding the social history of the village often led to poor programming decisions. This included: the poor targeting of beneficiaries (fishing boats for example would end up in the hands of *mudaladis*), the identification of 'leaders' who had no local authority, and the creation of village organisations that exacerbated underlying ethnic or caste tensions.

Although the importance of winning hearts and minds is well known to protagonists in conflicts, some NGOs appear to be using their hearts but not their minds. What we see more often than not is the 'anarchy of good intentions'. Programmes are based on the need to do good rather than on hard-headed analysis of the situation and the factors causing underlying vulnerability. Few NGOs, for example, appeared to engage in serious analysis of the war economy, how it functions and how their programmes could possibly feed into it or alter incentive systems. The roadblock stranglehold on the economies in the uncleared areas is a case in point. A careful analysis of this situation by NGOs might lead to 'smarter', more strategic interventions that trying to decrease the stranglehold—either as individual organisations or collectively.

Winning hearts and using their minds: creativity, risk taking, and creating probabilities for peace

> They give us what they want, not what we want. (Interview, 1998)

In general the NGO community, particularly local NGOs tends to be quite conservative and risk-averse. Although human rights abuses are pervasive, few

organisations are involved in this area, although many villagers mentioned the witnessing role of NGOs. In the militarised environment of the east this is perhaps understandable and 'field craft' becomes an essential tool for survival. Ethical positions are applied selectively so NGOs may make a public statement on the lack of humanitarian assistance for war widows, but are reluctant to 'go public' on human rights abuses by the Tamil militant groups. A bunker mentality, though understandable in the circumstances, mitigates against creative thinking and the identification of opportunities when they appear. In S, for example, villagers were beginning to rebuild economic links with the neighbouring Muslim village. However, the active local NGO focused its programmes only on S and perhaps missed an opportunity to support and diffuse social capital between the two communities. In such a fluid environment, timing is critical—an organisation has to be smart enough and flexible enough to respond quickly before the 'critical incident' has passed. The women's march against alcohol in S is a good example of a case where timely, sensitive intervention could stimulate the diffusion of social energy and civic leadership. There may be an analogy here with desert ecology: during the drought years, plants remain dormant. There is only a brief window of opportunity when the rains come and during this time there is a period of intense activity. Similarly, in terms of peace-building, NGOs may have to undergo long periods of 'drought' but, if they can identify when the 'rain' is coming and respond quickly and appropriately when it does, they may have a disproportionate impact. When, for example, the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities first returned to M there may have been an opportunity to develop cross-community links and organisations at the outset. However, that opportunity appears to have been lost and now attitudes and enmities have hardened, so that naive attempts at social engineering only exacerbate tensions.

Although NGOs are working at the margins and may never be the 'leading edge' in peace-building processes, important changes often come from the margins. As Uphoff argues, people's behaviour is probabilistic:

> Although we cannot know for certain what the consequences of individual and group efforts will be, because of the probabilistic and uncertain nature of the world around us, we can reasonably presume that it is possible for individuals to alter the course of events and thereby to affect outcomes.[31]

The sources of change in society are often highly motivated, atypical individuals who break the mould. In a negative sense, 'conflict entrepreneurs', are precisely this. By exploiting 'anti-social capital' they can generate the potential for high levels of violence. Conversely, 'peace entrepreneurs' may seek to diffuse ideas and generate social energy that transforms social structures and social relations so that the likelihood of peaceableness is increased. KPNDU's activities might be interpreted in these terms—their programmes, in a small-scale, low key way, help stimulate and nurture a local leadership. In such an environment, 'transformation by stealth' may be the most appropriate (and only possible) strategy.

Finally, an important theme to come out of the community surveys is that each

area has its own unique 'micro-climate', and 'off the peg' programmes are just not appropriate. If you change the context you change the problem. If NGOs are going to be serious, they have to customise their programmes much more than they do at present. For example, a credit programme that worked in a cleared area, cannot be transferred blindly into an uncleared area, where the economic constraints and incentives are entirely different.

Impartiality and neutrality

> NGOs—they are all Tamils—do you know any Muslim NGOs? (Interview with Muslim woman, 1998)

As mentioned already, NGOs may have a 'comparative disadvantage' in the area of peace-building, first because they lack the analysis and skills, and second because of their own agendas and backgrounds. The majority of NGOs in the east are Tamil-led, dealing primarily with the needs of that section of the population. For many Tamils, NGOs represent an alternative career path:

> From the 1980s onwards the political option hasn't been open for Tamils, so NGOs have offered an alternative career path for Tamil leaders. (Tamil NGO leader)

NGOs perhaps represent a politically safe option for Tamils with leadership ambitions. It may be the case that NGOs, as in Latin America,[32] are a kind of training ground for future leaders. During the conflict they are held in 'cold storage' but when more conducive conditions return they will emerge to take on a more prominent civic or political role. The main point here, however, is that local NGOs are often seen as being partisan by the Muslim and Sinhalese communities. In the northern peninsular of Jaffna, for example, the government has effectively put a freeze on local NGO activities because of their perceived connections with the LTTE. In such a fractured environment, neutrality and impartiality are essential credentials for organisations trying to work at an inter-community level. SEDEC, a catholic church-based NGO with constituencies throughout the island, is one of a number of local organisation which has the potential to perform such a role. However, many NGOs, even those with a multi-ethnic constituency, are afraid to put their heads above the parapet.

Coordination: the 'herding cats' syndrome

Eastern Sri Lanka resonates with other conflict zones in terms of the unregulated growth of NGOs who are competing for a share of the aid market. Villagers and government officials all complained about NGOs lack of coordination with one another and with the government.

> NGOs duplicate one another and fight with each other. People in the village are confused about NGOs. In the long term we can't rely on NGOs, what we need is self sustainability. After the war, NGOs will close down. We want permanent projects for village development and income generation. (Government official)

The fact that there are three different NGO consortia in Batticaloa gives some

indication of the lack of effective NGO coordination in the district. Batticaloa is proof of the saying that everyone wants coordination, but no-one wants to be coordinated. At the village level we often see a free-for-all. When one maps NGO involvement in a village over a 10-year period, it is striking just how many organisations have come and gone, and how little is left behind as a result. NGO policies and programmes frequently contradict one another: for example, in the same village one provides grants and another loans, or one pays for pre-school teachers' salaries and another does not.

Conclusions

The initial findings outlined above may give an unduly negative picture of NGO performance. This is based largely on findings from our four community-based field surveys. We recognise that, although this is an important part of the picture, it is not the whole picture, and we have still to complete in-depth surveys of agencies, a macro-survey of the humanitarian aid agencies in Sri Lanka, a review of donor policy and a macro-survey of the Sri Lankan conflict. These surveys will supplement the 'view from the village' and provide more insights into the constraints on NGOs and the kinds of factors that limit NGO performance and impact. This will provide a more rounded picture of the real world problems faced by NGOs and help in the development of recommendations for improved policy and practice.

Nevertheless, we have found that the conflict in the east has broadly undermined and transformed social capital and local associational life in the villages surveyed. The impact has been greatest in the front line villages (in grey areas) which have experienced the highest levels of instability and random violence. The impact of NGOs on the processes which promote or mitigate violence has been limited and their main role has been the short-term delivery of relief assistance. One conclusion that we might draw from this is that NGOs should stick to a minimalist relief response in fractured, conflictual environments. Claims that they can affect social engineering seem to be unfounded if one looks at the wider forces at play in CPEs.

However, we have argued that, even if NGOs do not lay claim to a peace-building role, they should look beyond the mere provision of palliatives. At the very least NGOs need to gain a better grasp of the complexity of historical and social detail. Even if their role is restricted to the building of wells and latrines, 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.

Another lesson to be learned is that, if NGOs are serious about getting involved in peace-building, they need to develop more sophisticated tools and capacities. Of the interventions observed that claimed to have a peace-building element, few had seemed to progress beyond the model of 'encouraging people to sit under a tree to talk to each other'. Such approaches have been criticised[33] and are based on an unrealistic assessment of civil society in fractured, conflict ridden societies. Hard-headed political and economic analysis and an understanding of

the processes that promote or mitigate violent conflict are important prerequisites for agencies involved in peace-building.

Notes

[1] The research has bought together two projects funded by the UK Department For International Development (DFID). These are: (1) the Consortium for Complex Political Emergencies (COPE) programme, 'Complex Political Emergencies: From Relief Work to Sustainable Development?', being carried out by the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford; the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex; the Centre for Development Studies, University of Leeds; the Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development, London; and (2) 'The Contribution of NGOs to Peacebuilding' research programme, being carried out by the Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester and the International NGO Training and Research Centre, Oxford. For fuller details and descriptions of the research, see Consortium for Political Emergencies (COPE), 'Proposal for a programme of research', submitted to the Overseas Development Administration, February 1997; COPE, 'Briefing paper: Complex political emergencies: from relief work to sustainable development', briefing paper for Department For International Development, November 1997; and J Goodhand & D Hulme, 'NGOs and complex political emergencies'. Working Paper No. 1, University of Manchester and INTRAC, October 1997. The Sri Lanka research is part of a broader programme, with case studies in Liberia, Afghanistan, the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa, which is also addressing related policy questions:

- What can be done to prevent, mitigate or resolve complex political emergencies (CPES)?
- How can emergency relief be effectively delivered and in a way that avoids fuelling conflict or undermining development?
- What can be done, even during emergency periods, to promote development, rehabilitation and sustainable peace?

The final research findings will provide guidelines for policy makers and practitioners on how to support and strengthen NGO and other humanitarian agency capacities to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict in CPES.

[2] These views, for example, are reflected in the UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA) 1996 briefing paper, *Conflict Reduction Through The Aid Programme : A Briefing For Agencies Seeking Support For Conflict Reduction Activities*, Conflict Policy Unit, Emergency Aid Department. The paper stated that the ODA could support aid activities which prepare for, prevent, and mitigate the effects of violent conflict. Aid projects could, the paper argued, be designed to contribute to conflict prevention, resolution or reduction by building either the will, or the capacity of the state and civil society to create an environment in which differences could be resolved without recourse to violence.

[3] See, for example, E Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, London: Penguin, 1994; C Harris & E Dunn (eds), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, London: Routledge, 1996; M Ignatieff, 'On civil society. Why Eastern Europe's revolutions could succeed', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995; and K Tester, *Civil Society*, London: Routledge, 1992.

[4] J Pearce, 'Civil society: trick or treat?, Keynote address to CIIR AGM, London, 18 October 1996.

[5] A Whaites, 'Let's get civil society straight: NGOs and political theory', *Development in Practice*, 6(3), 1996, pp 240–244; M Anderson. 'Humanitarian and development assistance: impacts on conflict', in *A Symposium on the Role of NGO Emergency Assistance in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation. Copenhagen, 9–10 March 1995*, Geneva: International Council for Voluntary Agencies, Humanitarian Affairs Series, No 8, 1995, pp 20–24.

[6] R Putnam (with R Leonard & R Y Nanett), *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions In Modern Italy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

[7] Goodhand & Hulme, *NGOs and Complex Political Emergencies*.

[8] A Hirschman, *Getting Ahead Collectively: Grassroots Experiences in Latin America*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1984.

[9] N Uphoff, *Learning From Gal Oya. Possibilities For Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science*, London: IT Publications, 1996, p 374.

[10] For an interesting discussion and analysis of different leadership bases, see J P Lederach, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation In Divided Societies*, Washington, DC: Institute Of Peace Press, 1997.

[11] K Kumar (ed), *Rebuilding Societies After Civil War: Critical Roles For International Assistance*, London: Lynne Rienner, 1997.

[12] S Ryan (1990) cited in K Bush, 'Fitting the pieces together. Canadian contributions to the challenge of rebuilding wartorn societies', paper presented to the International Developmental Research Centre, July 1995.

[13] There are few NGOs who are mandated specifically to work in this type of intervention, and those that do regularly experience difficulties in their relationships with the various parties. Most of these centre around claims of bias towards one side or another, of unwelcome interference in internal affairs, or of using their NGO position as a platform for biased advocacy.

[14] There is an extensive literature which describes and analyses the protracted conflict in Sri Lanka. For introductory reading, see S Bose, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and The Tamil Eelam Movement*, London: Sage, 1994; A Bullion, *India, Sri Lanka and The Tamil Crisis 1976–1994*, London: Pinter, 1995; R Gunaratna, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka. The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies*, Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1994; Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Crisis and National Security*, Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1998; R Hoole, D Somasundaram, K Sritharan & R Thiranagama, *The Broken Palmyra*, Claremont: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1990; K Loganathan, *Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities. Past Attempts At Resolving Ethnic Conflict*, University of Colombo: Faculty of Law, Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, 1996; E O'Ballance, *The Cyanide War: Tamil Insurrection in Sri Lanka 1973–1988*, London: Brasseys, 1989; K Rupesinghe (ed), *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka. Efforts, Failures and Lessons*, London: International Alert, 1998; and C R de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1987.

[15] The JVP was formed in 1967 and was also known as the People's Liberation Front and the Sinhalese National Liberation Front. Led by Rohan Wijeweera, the JVP was a revolutionary Marxist organisation which also mixed in elements of Sinhala chauvinism. Support came mostly from jobless middle and lower class Sinhalese youth and students, mainly from rural areas. It was organised with tight security in a classic cell structure. The leadership and the JVP was effectively destroyed in a bloody fight with the security forces in 1989. See A C Alles, *The JVP 1969–1989*, Colombo: Lake House Publishers, 1990; C Chandrapena, *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror. The JVP Insurrection 1987–1989*, Colombo: Lake House, 1991; and R Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka, A Lost Revolution? The Inside Story of the JVP*, Colombo: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1995.

[16] See M Joshi. 'On the razor's edge: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Strategic Digest*, XXVI(9), 1996, pp 1380–1397; N Ram, 'Understanding Prabakaran's LTTE' in V Suryanarayan (ed), *Sri Lankan Crisis and India's Response*, New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991; and M R Narayan Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerrillas*, Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994.

[17] While most of the fighting, which has been frequently characterised by extreme acts of cruelty and barbarity on all sides, has been concentrated in the northern and eastern provinces, the LTTE have carried out alleged assassination and suicide bombing attacks on civilian and economic targets in the capital Colombo, which have resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure running into tens of millions of dollars. More recently these have include the killing of President Premadasa in 1993; the blowing up of oil storage depots (October 1995), of the Central Bank Building (January 1996), of a Dehiwela commuter train (July 1996) and of the World Trade Centre (October 1997). The LTTE was also blamed for a bomb attack on the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, one of Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist shrines.

[18] E Nissan, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, London: Minority Rights Group International, 1996; K Sivathamby. 'The Sri Lankan crisis and Muslim–Tamil relationships: a socio-political view', *Facts of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Social Scientists Association, 1987.

[19] As in many wars civilian deaths and injuries have been high, and there are tens of thousands of displaced people. By 1996 Central Bank reports indicated a total expenditure on defence by the GSL as amounting to some 46 billion rupees, or 6% of GDP. See *The Cost of the War*, Colombo, National Peace Council, January 1998.

[20] John Ryle, Lost explorers in the disaster zone. London: *Guardian*, November 1997.

[21] Some local NGOs have strong caste and ethnic associations and this can actually increase tensions within and between communities.

[22] R Wanigaratne, 'The state–NGO relationship in Sri Lanka: rights, interests and accountability', in D Hulme & M Edwards (eds), *NGOs, States and Donors. Too Close For Comfort?*, London: Macmillan, 1997, pp 216–231.

[23] K van Brabant, NGO–government relations in Sri Lanka', in J Bennet (ed), *NGOs and Governments. A Review of Current Practice for Southern and Eastern NGOs*, Oxford: INTRAC/ICVA, 1997.

[24] See A Wheatley, *Situation Report: Children Affected by Armed Conflict in North and East Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Save The Children Fund, February 1998.

[25] Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, *Yearbook 1997. Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, 1998.

[26] These Tamil militant groups are anti-LTTE and fight alongside GSL armed forces. They include PLOTE, EPRFL, TELO and particularly in the Batticaloa District an organisation known as the Rasiq Group.

[27] See D Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Adelphi Paper 320, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998.

[28] A *mudaladi* is a businessman.

[29] J Boyden & S Gibbs, *Children of War. Responses to Psycho-Social Distress in Cambodia*, Geneva: UNRISID, 1997.

[30] Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, p 77.
[31] Uphoff, *Learning from Gal Oya.*
[32] E Garloa, 'Indigenous NGOs as strategic institutions: managing the relationship with government and resource agencies', *World Development*, 15, Supplement, 1987, pp 113–120.
[33] See M Duffield, 'Evaluating conflict resolutions—contexts, models and methodology', in G Sorbo, J Macrae & L Wohlgemuth (eds), *NGOs in Conflict. An Evaluation of International Alert*, Oslo: Michelsen Institute, 1997.
[34] P Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Curry, 1996, p 3.