

Resilient People – The Sri Lankan Experience

Sri Lanka has suffered civil strife in the form of a 30 year protracted war in the North and an armed insurrection in the south both of which affected and displaced tens of thousands. The 2004 Tsunami and the last phase of the war (Aug 2006 to May 2009) were arguably the period of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in Sri Lanka. Interestingly the Tsunami also hit war affected communities in the north and east between two phases of the war.

It is the resilience of these communities in the North and East of Sri Lanka, affected by multiple displacement of war, the Tsunami and annual droughts and floods that is an example to us all. When the cease fire agreement was signed in February 2002 the UN estimated a million displaced people in Sri Lanka. The Tsunami displaced over a million people and the last phase of the war displaced almost five hundred thousand people. The numbers significant for a small country exacerbated by the fact that entire communities were displaced losing all they had.

Last week marks the 7th anniversary of the end of the war and people have resilient rising like the phoenix from the ashes. As communities arrived in the now infamous internment camps of Manik farm they were mobilised to continue to serve their fellow men and women as they had been doing through the war. They helped in setting up shelter, kitchens and communal spaces. It was people cooking for themselves that saved the community from starvation as both the state and Ngo's were unable to provide food for such large numbers on their own. They worked to set up water and sanitation facilities and volunteered to cook in the communal kitchens and to take care of the sick in make shift hospitals. They walked the length and breadth of the camps collecting information to unite families, creating awareness of good hygiene practices and keeping the environment clean. They helped construct schools and teachers and volunteers came forward to keep the children occupied by starting to teach them.

We as humanitarian mobilized and facilitated people to be the first respondents working for their own welfare and looking after themselves. I am sure that this is the case in most places of the world where the victims are the first to respond and are best positioned to join the response themselves. Do we as humanitarians recognise and give due regard for the role of people in their own rehabilitation. Do we give them a role in our policies and practices ? Do we recognise that engaging people in the response contributes to their resilience by using their skill and abilities to serve the response ?

Our lesson is that the best responses were those that recognised the affected communities as key role in the response. By and large the state and agencies only engaged the victims when they (the state and agencies) were unable to manage the situation instead of ensuring a role for the affected in the design and ensuring that state and agency workers had the skills of mobilizing and organizing people.

In December 2009 people in Manik farm were returned to their areas (back to war torn areas with basics). It is a testament to these people that again they pulled themselves together and set themselves up again. A testament to their resilience to survive, recover and restart their lives again and again. I hope that we can ensure that our SOP's, strategies and practices ensure a victim centred response which ensure a role for affected in the steps and process of recovery saluting them and not looking on them as victims.