

The Role of Civil Society Organizations and Politicians in Disaster Management in Sri Lanka: A Study of Post-tsunami Rehabilitation Work

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The tsunami that hit the coasts of Sri Lanka on 26th December 2004 made a massive devastation to human, physical and natural resources in thirteen out of the twenty-five districts of the island. The percentage of the coastal population affected range from less than 20 per cent in the southern coast, up to 78 to 80 per cent in the east coast. Apart from loss of life of about 40,000 people, nearly half a million of persons were displaced. The estimated damage to private properties and infrastructure was about US\$ 480 million. As the state alone was unable to respond to a disaster of this magnitude, it sought assistance of NGOs, international donors and private-sector to assist the rehabilitation and, reconstruction process.

In this scenario, the role of civil society organizations became vital as the donors believe that their ability to reach the real victims is much more higher than the government machinery and delivery of aid can be done in an effective manner. Thus, many international donors channelled their aids through national and local NGOs by creating a barrier to work patron – client relations in aid delivery. This mechanism adopted in the aid delivery was seen by some, particularly local politicians, as a corrupt method of practice. In fact, some of the politicians thus began to ally with NGOs in the delivery of emergency relief aid and post-tsunami rehabilitation work. This novel tendency that could be observed in the south coast is the point of argument of this study. It attempts to investigate what socio-economic factors or processors have been influenced in shifting the conventional role of the politicians to a different role played by civil society organizations. The present study argues that the Sri Lankan civil society organizations do not engage in a project of empowerment of people, but they too are sharing the same role of politicians. Such a situation had arisen because those politicians lost a space to engage in patron -client politics due to various pressures from structural adjustment policies adopted that limited or made a constraint to their role in economic management.

Key Words: Tsunami, Rehabilitation and reconstruction, politicians, Civil society

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