

# **Disaster Response, Peace and Conflict in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka**

## **Part 1: The Congestion of Humanitarian Space**

**Simon Harris**

**February 2006**



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## About the Author

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## Summary

Devastating natural disasters occurring in countries affected by complex and protracted violent conflict present an entirely different set of humanitarian response challenges, opportunities and risks than are encountered when disaster strikes a region of peace. Drawing upon my personal experience of Sri Lanka's post-tsunami emergency, the growing literature that has emerged in that disasters' wake and building upon the insights of many local and international aid agency actors involved, these papers will explore the role that the humanitarian community plays in the nexus between disaster response, conflict and peace. Through these papers I aim to demonstrate that the international humanitarian relief regime in Sri Lanka largely failed to recognise the importance of adopting a conflict sensitive approach from the very outset of the emergency response. I contend that instead, the activities of many international aid agencies may have had a negative impact on the prospects of peace by undermining community relationships, altering social dynamics and eroding local capacities.

"Part 1: The congestion of humanitarian space", assesses what affect the rapid proliferation of the international aid community's presence in Sri Lanka has had on local level relationships and emergency response capacities. It contends that the burgeoning presence of aid agencies resulted in humanitarian assistance becoming a hotly contested and competitive activity. It goes on to identify the possible factors that have contributed to the rapid congestion of this space in suggesting an explanation of why the humanitarian communities' normative *standards appear to have failed*.

***The observations, views and interpretations expressed in this paper are those of the author. Responsibility for the content of Working Papers rests with the authors alone.***

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# **Contents**

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>The impact of post-tsunami humanitarian proliferation</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Interrogating post-tsunami humanitarian action</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>16</b>

# **Disaster Response, Peace and Conflict in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka**

## **Part 1:**

### **The Congestion of Humanitarian Space <sup>1</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

Within two days of the Indian Ocean tsunami striking Sri Lanka's coastline, the international humanitarian community had started to arrive in the island en masse. A few, such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Care, came to augment pre-existing country programmes with additional emergency response capabilities. Most however, were arriving in Sri Lanka for the first time. Although some were well known agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM); others, such as the Scientologists, were less well known in the emergency relief sector. Some came with a precise and targeted plan, but many had just a vague idea of good intentions.

By the end of the first month there were an estimated 300 new international non-governmental organisations (INGO's) operating in Sri Lanka, representing a four-fold increase over the pre-tsunami numbers (Evans, 2005). Of these, only about half had bothered to register their presence and purpose with Governments' emergency coordinating unit, the Centre for National Operations (CNO) (ibid). The rest were unaccounted for aid agencies, many of whom were distributing goods, services and funds in the affected areas without any comprehension of their impact on local dynamics, how they related to actual needs or whether they were duplicating of the work of other agencies

As emergency tsunami appeal funds in developed countries began to burgeon, the presence of new international aid agencies in Sri Lanka proliferated further. Organisations with an established country presence, who may have previously struggled

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented as "*Sri Lanka and the International Humanitarian Merry-go-Round*" at the "Workshop on Post-Tsunami Asia: Early Warning, Relief, Reconstruction and Peace Process"; Asian Studies Centre, St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford: 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2005.

to attract adequate programme funding or managed only modest budgets, suddenly found themselves with access to millions of pounds. However, they also discovered that they were competing for territory, partners and programmes with a host of new and similarly well resourced entrants to Sri Lanka's humanitarian 'market'.

The result was a return to what Nicholas Stockton termed the 'erosion of humanitarian space' and an apparent rejection of the humanitarian responsibility and accountability standards that the international community had hoped would, as David Rieff puts it, relegate 'the most egregious errors of the recent humanitarian past' to the history books (Rieff, 2005).

In this paper I will examine the impact that the post-tsunami proliferation of international aid agencies during the initial emergency relieve and rehabilitation phase of the disaster<sup>2</sup>, had on Sri Lanka's humanitarian space and operational environment. I will then go on to identify the possible factors that have contributed to the rapid congestion of this space in suggesting an explanation of why the humanitarian communities' normative standards appear to have failed.

### **The impact of post-tsunami humanitarian proliferation**

Working with the bi-lateral donor liaison desk at the CNO during the first few weeks of the post-tsunami period, and my involvement in two subsequent field visits combining both research and small-scale aid delivery<sup>3</sup>, enabled me to informally elicit the opinions and experiences of humanitarian actors and affected individuals through. These encounters revealed a number of commonly expressed issues concerning the impact of international humanitarian interventions at different levels. I will illustrate these by

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<sup>2</sup> This paper covers the period from the end of December 2004 through to the end of May 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The distribution of privately donated non-food relief and children's toys to tsunami affected communities in Batticaloa District in the East during the first week of January 2005.

drawing on brief examples of national, local NGO, community and individual household level impacts.

The first example looks at one of the national implications of international humanitarian assistance. Every Thursday morning during the first few weeks following the tsunami, the Director of the CNO and Ministerial Secretaries conducted a briefing session for the press, international NGO's and donors to update them on progress and key developments in the emergency relief phase of the disaster response. These sessions frequently included a list of international pledges and donations which on one occasion included notice of 50,000 metric tonnes of rice offered by the Government of Taiwan. This prompted a member of the audience to question why such a gift should be accepted since there was no food security problem amongst the tsunami affected population. Furthermore, the speaker noted, since the domestic rice harvest was due, wouldn't the influx of so much free rice have a detrimental impact on the livelihoods of small-scale farmers by depressing market prices. This, it was argued, would reduce the farmers' capacity to earn enough to repay loans taken to grow this harvest and accumulate the capital required for the next season. Surely it is better, he counselled, to reject this offer, which, although well intentioned, is likely to do more harm than good. 'No', replied the CNO Director, 'at times like these we cannot afford to look a gift horse in the mouth' (CNO, 2005).

The main purpose of this example is to highlight that the effects of international humanitarian assistance are often contingent upon the attitudes and actions of others, such as the recipient State. A comparison of the ways in which humanitarian aid goods

and equipment were received by the Sri Lankan and Indonesian airport authorities further underlines the role that the recipient state can play in managing international assistance.<sup>4</sup>

In Ache the airport was under military control. Aid flights required prior approval for landing and all incoming goods were subject to inspection and registration. They could only be cleared and transported to affected areas under the supervision of the military. Although these impositions clearly raise other ethical implications regarding the involvement of the military and the impartiality of humanitarian aid, it was at least regulated and coordinated compared with Sri Lanka's model. Sri Lanka's only international airport received hundreds of aid flights during the first week. According to a senior Sri Lankan Airlines employee working at the airport, the majority of these were unplanned arrivals from European Governments and aid agencies. There was no procedure in place to register imports and cargos were routinely collected direct from the plane without any official documentation, processing, knowledge of where it was going or who had taken it.<sup>5</sup> Reports later emerged of unregistered aid agencies travelling from village to village distributing goods in the affected areas without any comprehension of their impact on local dynamics, how they related to actual needs or whether they were duplicating of the work of other agencies (Evans, op cit).

The second example reveals how competition between international humanitarian agencies over local partnerships and personnel, affected the relationship between domestic NGO's and their constituents. The tsunami did not just create the conditions for a plethora of new international humanitarian actors to engage in Sri Lanka, but also provided the catalyst for hundreds of new local NGO's to emerge (ibid). Many of these were undoubtedly attracted by the sudden availability of international humanitarian funding. The INGO's were however, to their credit, somewhat circumspect in their regard

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<sup>4</sup> Authors' discussions with UN aid workers and bi-lateral donor assessment team personnel who had conducted missions in both Sri Lanka and Ache, January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Authors' discussion with senior Sri Lankan Airlines employee, January 2005.

of newly formed local NGO's and preferred to enter into funding or sub-contracting partnerships with agencies who had an established track record of community development work.

Unfortunately there were relatively few local organisations who could meet the INGO's criteria of a 'good' partner. That is, those that had the capacity to make a swift transition from development to emergency relief oriented operations and who, in doing so, were able to rapidly and accountably assimilate significantly larger amounts of funding. The result was what one aid worker in the East described as a 'bidding war' with different agencies competing with each other to secure the best local partners (Rigby, 2005).

A medium sized local NGO in Trincomalee in the East of Sri Lanka that I have given the pseudonym, TARGO<sup>6</sup>, reported that it was approached by at least ten different international agencies with offers of funding. Although the director of TARGO was concerned that her organisation did not have sufficient capacity to undertake the type of projects and the amount of funding being offered, she felt pressured to accept by both the beneficiaries that TARGO worked with, and by the actions of other new and pre-existing local NGO's. TARGO's director lamented that:

We are forced to accept funds we don't have the capacity to utilise because if we refuse we will loose face [with their beneficiary constituency] and other local NGO's will take both the money and our people anyway. (TARGO Director, 2005).

The director of another local NGO in the same area, BARGO<sup>7</sup>, described how his organisation had been 'robbed' of its operational capacity by the influx of international agencies. BARGO had been involved in the construction of transitional shelters and had both an extremely competent site planner and water / sanitation engineer on their staff.

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<sup>6</sup> The organisation preferred not to be named due to security and funding concerns.

<sup>7</sup> Also a pseudonym for the same reasons as above.

Within weeks of being awarded a project to construct hundreds of shelters both of these staff members had been 'poached' by international organisations, who were also involved in transitional shelter construction, but were offering salaries far greater than BARGO could afford to match (BARGO Director, 2005).

The next example looks at impact of international humanitarian rivalry on the affected communities themselves. Sudahena, (not its real name), is a small fishing village, on a particularly badly affected stretch of the southern coast, somewhere between the cities of Matara and Galle. Most of the houses in Sudahena were severely damaged and lay with the government declared coastal exclusion zone which prohibits construction within a 100 meters of the mean high-tide mark. Their houses therefore needed to be relocated and rebuilt elsewhere. A international private sector company who had had a factory in the area for many years and close links with the affected community volunteered to fund the reconstruction. They were allocated land prime land by the local government overlooking a beautiful bay just outside the buffer zone and adjacent to the main road linking all the southern coastal cities and towns. All this seemed to be an ideal solution for the homeless villagers until their idyllic, accessible and media friendly location was noticed by a European INGO that had recently arrived in Sri Lanka looking for ways to help. The INGO approached the Sudahena community with an offer of assistance. The community explained that they did not need any help but the INGO was not to be deterred. They hired some thugs in the nearby city Matara and dispatched them to Sudahena with instructions to try and turn the community against their original benefactors with offers of better quality housing, upstairs housing, new fittings and furniture etc, etc. The people of Sudahena soon grew confused and angry. Tensions grew between members of the community who felt that they should stick with locally based international company that they had known for years, and those who thought that the

international NGO offered them a better deal. Threats, intimidation and violence were employed by the INGO's thugs in trying to elicit support. Eventually however their coercive and divisive tactics were rejected and the community once again embraced the support of their original donor.

My final examples in this section demonstrate how the proliferation of international humanitarian aid agencies have affected the lives of families and individuals by radically and rapidly altering the dynamics and pricing of livelihoods, markets, goods and services.

The most obvious and dramatic change has been the boom in the construction industry. The tsunami damaged or destroyed some 140,000 homes, as well as hundreds of business properties, public buildings, utilities and infrastructure. Many INGO's are involved in providing shelters for displaced persons by either working operationally, or sub-contracting to local NGO's and construction firms. This has created an enormous demand for building materials and construction labour which has resulted in escalating costs. For example, the daily wage of a skilled mason or carpenter has risen from about Rupees 500 (£2.50) to about Rupees 1,500 (£7.50). In Batticaloa I met a lower middle-class family who were unable to repair their tsunami damaged house due as they could not afford the labour or materials but were unable to claim government compensation because their property lay outside the Government declared coastal re-construction exclusion zone.

Other examples of lost or altered livelihoods were reported by informants in Trincomalee where humanitarian assistance was being seen to undermine ethnically stratified labour and boat ownership in the fishing industry (Ribgy 2005; and

Respondents T1, T2 and T3, 2005)<sup>8</sup>. Members of the Sinhalese community expressed concern that the distribution of fishing boats by INGO's to individuals meant that Tamils could now own their means of production rather than renting it from the local Sinhalese 'fisher barons'. Furthermore, they did not need the cash loans, which had previously shackled them to a relationship of debt repayment with the Sinhalese moneylenders, because the state benefits for housing reconstruction and INGO support for livelihood development were covering their major overheads. New access to markets also enabled them to bi-pass the traditional middleman who, in Trincomalee, were also generally from the Sinhalese community. The perceived threat to Sinhalese livelihood resources was also being appropriated and reinforced by nationalist political interests, such as the JVP, towards violent expression in protest over Government proposals for a Joint Mechanism with the LTTE (ibid)<sup>9</sup>.

To what extent can these examples be interpreted or extrapolated as indicative of a pervasive culture of humanitarian misconduct in Sri Lanka during the first few months of the international aid community's post-tsunami response? Although not every international aid agency would have engaged in actions contrary to established humanitarian standards and best practice guidelines, out of the fifty-plus interviews I conducted amongst Sri Lanka's local and international humanitarian actors on three separate visits between January and May 2005, all of the respondents reported that inter-agency rivalry over territory, partners, personnel and projects was, and continued to be, a serious threat to effective relief and reconstruction.

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<sup>8</sup> The Respondents T1, T2 and T3 are all Sri Lankan staff members of local or international NGO's working in Trincomalee who preferred not to be named due to security concerns.

<sup>9</sup> Since January 2005, the Government of Sri Lanka has been attempting to secure a mechanism through which it could cooperate with the Tamil separatist movement in the north and east, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to deliver international humanitarian aid funding to tsunami affected people in areas of LTTE control. This possibility of this 'Joint Mechanism' has been extremely unpopular with the Government Sinhalese nationalist coalition partner the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) who have threatened to withdraw their support and force elections if the Joint Mechanism goes ahead.

The impact of international humanitarian action has not been uniformly negative. To a large extent the scale and speed of INGO interventions has helped backstop what many view as the Government's limited capacity to provide a quick and effective response to the disaster. The economy has been stimulated by the inflow of foreign currency and international debt relief. The rapid expansion of the construction industry and service sectors in catering to the demands of reconstruction and the humanitarian community may have helped off-set losses to the economy caused by the disruption to the fishing and tourism industries. At an individual livelihoods level the shift in economic relationships, such as the new ownership of fishing boats for example, may represent a substantive social change and more equitable redistribution of wealth than could previously have been thought possible.

However, many international humanitarian interventions in Sri Lanka are acting as community 'dividers'(Anderson, 1999) by failing to consider the implications of their actions in relation to the context of the operational environment. As Uyangoda counsels, in the case of tsunami affected Sri Lanka 'We must never ignore the fact that this tsunami disaster occurred ... against the backdrop of an ethno-political civil war' (Uyangoda 2005).

Unfortunately the plethora of post-tsunami activity in Sri Lanka has largely failed to recognise that inappropriately planned and implemented emergency relief and reconstruction aid could, in the context of a conflict-affected environment, potentially fuel or sustain conflicts (Anderson, op cit). For example, directing aid to some affected groups but not to others, has, as the Local Capacities for Peace Project<sup>10</sup> warn 'exacerbate(d) intergroup jealousies and tensions' (quoted in Galama and van Tongeren,

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<sup>10</sup> The Local Capacities for Peace Project was study conducted by the Collaborative for Development Action (Cambridge, Mass., US) that examined the activities of over a hundred NGO's working in conflict affected countries and culminated in the publication of Mary Anderson's book, *Do No Harm: How aid can support peace or war*.

2002: 164). Divisions between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government over the modalities for creating a joint mechanism for the distribution of relief assistance and funds in the Tamil Tiger controlled areas of the north are reflected in local level disputes over ethnic disparities in the access to and provision of aid.

Furthermore, when there is inter-agency rivalry between INGO's competing for partners and projects, 'the implicit ethical message is that, when one disagrees with others, it is not necessary to cooperate with them. This is one of the fundamental *modus operandi* of conflict' (ibid: 165).

Had international humanitarian interventions understood the dynamics of conflict and the role of assistance in informing such relationships, they might actually have helped contribute to peace building by tackling the underlying structures and root causes, or more minimally, by at least not making situations worse.

### **Interrogating post-tsunami humanitarian action**

Having examined some of the consequences of the inappropriate and unethical behaviour exhibited by international aid agencies in post-tsunami Sri Lanka and their lack of conflict sensitivity in planning their interventions, this section attempts to explain the apparent rejection of humanitarian standards in terms of an operational crisis in which established norms were both challenged and overthrown by the disasters' unique set of characteristics. Why did so many agencies, many of whom had no or little previous experience of field operations, feel compelled to establish a presence in Sri Lanka?

Based on observations in the UK, Sri Lanka and discussions with humanitarian actors, individual donors and fundraisers in both countries I have identified six factors relating to the tsunami disaster which I believe have contributed to the trajectories of

humanitarian action in the field and which go beyond the factors common to most disaster situations (factors such as need, urgency, media coverage and agency appeals).

**Timing:** The date of the tsunami's occurrence and its unexpectedness were the two most significant aspects of timing that helped inform the trajectory of the disaster response. As the tsunami struck in the early hours of December 26<sup>th</sup>, the day after Christmas and a Sunday holiday, the western public awoke from their previous day's yuletide celebrations and festivities. Populist notions relating to the 'true' spirit of Christmas would have struck a poignant cord and provided a timely stimulus for giving as news of death, devastation and destruction disturbed the tradition of seasonal good-cheer. Any other day of the year and the tragedy may not have pricked the public conscience in quite the same way.

The other key aspect of timing was the way in which the tsunami took everyone by surprise. Sudden and unforeseen tragedies may be more likely to elicit a sympathetic response than protracted emergencies.

**Location:** Most people in the West are familiar with South and East Asia as a tourist destination. Thailand for example has long been a European charter flight favourite for holiday makers, Sri Lanka's tourist industry has rapidly developed since the ceasefire between the Government and Tamil Tigers in 2001 and the Maldives is synonymous with the concept of the luxury paradise island hideaway. The majority of people in the UK for instance, even if they haven't been to one of these destinations themselves, probably either know someone who has, aspire to go, or at least have flicked through a tour brochure or watched an episode of 'Wish You Were Here' in which they were featured. By comparison, countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia struggle to establish such intimate bonds of familiarity with the West and are therefore less likely to stimulate the public's generosity to the same degree.

**Causality:** The bond of familiarity established by virtue of location is further echoed through that of causality. Whilst few in the affluent West are really able to identify with the levels of poverty, conflict, starvation and disease that is experienced by millions of people in Africa and Asia, the juxtaposition of sea and sun in the context of the tsunami disaster would have been a familiar setting for anyone who had ever experienced a sea-side holiday whether at home or abroad. All those who have played amongst the surf and have perhaps been caught off-guard or knocked breathless for a moment by the waves, will appreciate the power of the ocean and can start to imagine, in some small way, the meaning of tsunami in much more tangible terms than they can envisage the chronic conditions of war and want.

**Novelty:** During the two decades since the Ethiopian famine of the 1980's and the subsequent Band Aid appeal, the Western public have been exposed to an unending succession of natural and man-made disasters, each of which called out, through humanitarian agency campaigns and media images, for a portion of their generosity. Had the public become over-sensitised to these forms of misery and suffering? Did they require a bigger and 'better' focus for their philanthropy?

The factors of scale, timing, location and causality surrounding the tsunami seemed to combine to form a sense of novelty that may have helped fuel the philanthropic response. Whilst there have, in the past, been both human and natural disasters involving greater numbers, the occurrence of a tsunami is a relatively rare event. When it happens the day after Christmas, is multi centred and involves western tourists, then the element of spectacle is enhanced.

**Momentum:** The number of appeals and fund raising initiatives in response to the tsunami disaster were unprecedented. With everyone seemingly giving something there becomes a point when, because of the weight of moral or social peer pressure and the

sheer momentum of visible philanthropy, it becomes virtually impossible not to contribute. This momentum was augmented by successive upward revisions in the total number of deaths emerging from Sri Lanka and Indonesia as full scale of the disaster unfolded during the first two weeks of the response.

***Western Involvement:*** Hundreds of Western holiday-makers died in the tsunami and thousands more were affected. Their plight featured heavily in the Western media and besides 9/11, few recent tragedies have involved so many nationals from Western countries. This raises the uncomfortable suggestion that the humanitarian response may not have been so generous had the number of Western tourists involved been negligible?

The tsunami brought together a fusion of timing, location, scale, causality and spectacle, aligned with factors relating to the number of western victims involved, the urgency of the humanitarian need, the extent of media coverage and the sheer momentum of public giving. Individually, some of these components are common to many emergencies. Taken together however, they are unlikely to ever be repeated.

These unique characteristics stimulated an unprecedented outpouring of public and state generosity in predominantly western aid donating countries which, it is my contention, in turn placed a double burden of humanitarian and financial responsibility, together with the weight of both public and government expectations, upon individual aid agencies to act quickly and purposefully in the field.

The desire to satisfy these expectations and live up to the perceived responsibilities resulted in a rapid and unplanned deployment of multiple humanitarian agencies to the field where, in Sri Lanka, they encountered a limited humanitarian space

that had already become increasingly congested by the post-ceasefire proliferation of aid agencies during the past three years<sup>11</sup>.

Having accepted unprecedented amounts of funding from the home country's public and Governments, these agencies then had to justify their presence or risk undermining their humanitarian credibility and consequently their future capacity to attract funding. Compelled to perform humanitarian good in the right place at the right time, in a congested humanitarian space with limited opportunity to access territory, partners and projects, many INGO's appear to have forsaken the best practice guidelines of coordination, participation, accountability and transparency of action that are prescribed in the Code of Conduct (IFRC et al, 1994) and the Sphere Standards (2004).

## **Conclusion**

Whilst the momentum of the international response makes it difficult to envisage how this merry-go-round could have been prevented, a revision of humanitarian coordination practices by both the aid donating countries and by the receiving country may have helped. On the aid donating side let us take the example of the UK's Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) which coordinates the humanitarian fundraising appeals of the country's leading aid agencies. Although this system is lauded for streamlining the appeal process, reducing the risk of competitive fundraising and focusing on beneficiary needs, cooperation between DEC partners at a UK level is largely forgotten once those funds reach the field. If the DEC's joint agency fundraising process could be mirrored by a consolidation of operational practices, for instance a core group of agencies implementing on behalf of a larger UK based group, then many of the field based rivalries that emerged in Sri Lanka could be avoided.

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<sup>11</sup> A Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in February 2002 created the conditions for a pre-post conflict escalation of humanitarian assistance prompted by the prospects of bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor aid for post-conflict reconstruction.

Similarly, if recipient countries recognise that more is not necessarily better when it comes to operational humanitarian activity, they could simply restrict the number of agencies arriving in-country and instead insist on the channelling of funding to augment the capacity of pre-existing organisations with the local knowledge to deliver targeted, culturally and politically sensitive assistance. However, at times of profound national crisis such as the tsunami, it requires a very strong state indeed to confront and stem the tide of international assistance. Although two other tsunami-affected countries were able to partly succeed in this (India because of its vast domestic resources and Indonesia's Banda Ache because of its military control), Sri Lanka was wholly unprepared for either the disaster itself, or the "second tsunami" of humanitarian assistance that followed.<sup>12</sup>

Although the prevention of unlimited access to disaster zones or a reform of field coordination and collaboration may help ensure that humanitarian standards are maintained, there is a more fundamental change that needs to take place at the organisational level of each aid agency. This paper has demonstrated how the post-disaster congestion of humanitarian space in tsunami-affected Sri Lanka has contributed to the erosion of local emergency capacities, has altered the trajectories of local relationships and diminished community level prospects for peace. The adoption of a conflict aware perspective in emergency relief programming by the agencies concerned could have prevented many of the conflict and context insensitive excesses witnessed during the first six months of the tsunami response. This theme is developed in Part 2 where we explore the reasons why international aid agencies are frequently so conflict insensitive and what can be done about it.

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<sup>12</sup> The arrival of international aid agencies was frequently referred to as a "second tsunami" in the Sri Lankan media.

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