



7th International Conference on Building Resilience; Using scientific knowledge to inform policy and practice in disaster risk reduction, ICBR2017, 27 – 29 November 2017, Bangkok, Thailand

Mainstreaming Social Transformation in Recovery and Development Projects: Case of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

There have been several key programmes for recovery and development in Sri Lanka which provided integrated support to returnees, host communities and other vulnerable groups with different needs, capacities and aspirations in the conflict affected areas. These projects and programmes have significant social transformational potential, but how to design and implement recovery and development interventions in order to bring about sustainable social transformation is a question that has not been fully answered yet. In this context, this research paper analyses series of projects which were designed to promote social transformation through its recovery and development interventions and suggests an analytical framework to mainstream the social transformation interventions into recovery and development. The methods involved the evaluation of ten selected recovery and development projects in northern and eastern region in Sri Lanka using qualitative data collection techniques including focus group discussions, key informant interviews and direct observation. Finally, the analysis presents a path to follow when mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects through the exploration of strategies, approaches, practices, experiences and lessons learned.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of the 7th International Conference on Building Resilience.

Keywords: Social Transformation, Recovery and Development, Social Change, Participatory process

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1. Introduction

Sri Lankan civil war which was ended in 2009, brought significant hardships to the whole country affecting society, natural and built environment and the economy of the country. Though the whole country was affected by the war, northern and eastern region was the main theatre of the devastating armed conflict between the Sri Lanka security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam that lasted for over three decades. This war had a devastating

impact on hundreds of communities in the war affected region, destroying lives, property, social networks and infrastructure. Community life was severely disrupted during and even after the period of conflict. In this context, revival and revamping of community life has been a major task in the recovery and rebuilding process. Accordingly, there have been several key programmes for recovery and development in Sri Lanka that provided integrated support to returnees, host communities and other vulnerable groups with different needs, capacities and aspirations in the conflict affected districts. These post war recovery and development interventions have a significant social transformational potential but whether this potential is realised or not depends on the way these projects are designed and implemented. The most critical question is how to design and implement recovery and development interventions in a post war situation in order to bring about sustainable social transformation – be they direct or indirect interventions. Within this context, this paper reports the key findings from a major exercise to collect, collate and present the experiences, results and lessons of “mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects” in a systematic way, based on post-conflict reconstruction projects in Sri Lanka.

Further, this paper explores the concepts, strategies, tools, processes and outcomes of various social transformation (ST) interventions which have been aimed at bringing about a major transformation in the communities. Finally, it suggests a path of change to be followed in mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects. It is intended to make the strategies, approaches, practices, experiences and lessons accessible to a wider audience of practitioners, government institutions, donors, civil society organisations and the public who are embarking on similar interventions, replicate positive impacts and avoid duplication as much as possible.

2. What is social transformation?

ST is defined as a fundamental shift in the way a society is organised. Theoretical literature on ST is diverse and wide ranging and emanates from a range of social sciences and other disciplines [1]. Social transformation implies a fundamental change in society, which can be contrasted with social change viewed as gradual or incremental changes over a period of time [2]. However, the most widely used term is *social change* which often refers to a spontaneous process of change brought about by societal level transitions. Much of this literature [3] & [4] deals with structural change and does not pay great attention to the role of social actors. Further, there has been an increasing recognition overtime of the role of collective and individual actors in bringing about change in the way societies and communities are organised. The focus here has been on the role of social movements, historical figures and social planning. While the former refers to organised social groups agitating for change, the latter refers to the activities of governments, planning agencies and civil society organisations that are aimed at bringing about changes at societal, community and even household levels. Accordingly, the concept of social change broadly refers to change at a macro societal level over time, or how diverse relations among individuals and groups (economic, social, cultural and political) change and adjust under the influence of forces of change and resistance. More recently, some development oriented civil society organisations have been inspired by the notion of theory of change [5]. The key assumption underlining this notion is that it is possible, based on knowledge and experience to configure the conditions needed to achieve the desired change in a given context [6]. [7] identified the need for on-going reflection and adaptation in order to ensure that civil society programmes are conflict sensitive.

The concept of ST as used in recent development literature seems to be akin to the notion of theory of change, rather than to the concept of social change as it appears in the classical social science literature. In this context, ST refers to a shift in the way communities are organized, either formally or informally, on one hand, to attain various social needs and goals and on the other to deal with external forces including other communities. More specifically, in this research paper, ST is understood as a process whereby intra-community (i.e. within a community) and inter-community (i.e. between communities) relations, including cooperation, conflicts, tensions, prejudices and discrimination – based on ethnicity, caste, religion, generation and socio-political affiliation – are transformed positively. In the North and East of Sri Lanka as well as selected areas both bordering the war affected regions and elsewhere, where the ST interventions have been carried out, various economic, social and political factors have contributed to conflict. As a consequence, ST is not simply a matter of restoring the pre-conflict status quo, but even changing some of the pre-conflict conditions in the communities. While the ethnic conflict followed the broad ethnic

divisions, there were other pre-existing issues, divisions, tensions and conflicts at a local level based on caste, religion and property relations. ST interventions also address these pre-existing issues using various strategies.

2.1 Social Transformation in North and East of Sri Lanka

In the North and East of Sri Lanka as well as in the other bordering war affected regions, ST is not simply a matter of restoring the pre-conflict status quo, but also changing some of the pre-conflict conditions in the communities. While the ethnic conflict followed the broad ethnic divisions, i.e. Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim ethnicities, there were other pre-existing issues, divisions, tensions and conflicts at a local level based on caste, religion and property relations. Therefore, it is a challenge for ST interventions in this region to address these issues using various strategies. These pre-conflict conditions and other contextual factors which need to be considered by any ST interventions in North and East of Sri Lanka are as follows.

2.2. Pre-Conflict Status

The northern and eastern region of Sri Lanka had been inhabited predominantly by Sri Lankan Tamils, at least until the time of political independence, but increasing voluntary and involuntary migration of other ethnic communities, particularly through new agricultural settlements, the ethnic composition of some parts of the north and east began to change. This was largely the result of the new emphasis of post-colonial economic policy of promoting agriculture in the dry-zone regions of Sri Lanka through a series of irrigation development projects [8]. Many settlements in the north and east indicated that these settlers belonging to different ethnic communities gradually developed mutually beneficial and cordial social, economic and cultural relationships over time and lived quite harmoniously. However, increasing politicization of ethnic relations in the country at the time of independence and thereafter, led to a situation where increasing competition for scarce resources such as land, employment and business opportunities was perceived by ethno-nationalist groups as one between ethnic communities. This is how the new peasant settlements in the north-east that accommodated settlers from the south were perceived as an attempt to change the ethnic composition of the region. The newly established import substitution industries in the north and the east also attracted employees from all parts of the country and increased the presence of non-Tamil speaking people in the north-east region. Likewise, there had been ethnic tensions in the north east and elsewhere prior to the escalation of ethnic violence since 1983. Yet, those incidents did not lead to serious inter-community hostilities.

2.3. Conflict status

However, the situation changed dramatically within the period of civil war from 1983 to 2009. The devastating conflict affected people in communities, destroying lives, property, social networks and infrastructure. Many settlements were totally displaced and the settlers moved into IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps in the area or migrated to other parts of the country. What is also noteworthy is that, even prior to the escalation of violence, many communities in these areas faced serious problems such as poverty, poor infrastructure, marginalization, unemployment, and caste discrimination. The communities, in particular their vulnerable segments such as women and youth were not organized in such a way as to either address local issues or deal with external agencies to solve their collective problems. The last phase of the war between 2008 and 2009 led to a rapid increase in displacement. Nearly 350,000 persons ended up in refugee camps as a result of the escalation of the conflict during this period. Since then, most of the displaced have returned to their traditional habitats, either on their own or with the help of state and non-state organisations. Therefore, apart from providing housing and physical infrastructure and restoring livelihoods, a major challenge has been to restore community life, create cohesive communities and repair strained relationships between groups and communities that have been engaged in violent conflict with each other. The conflict destroyed social and physical infrastructure such as roads, irrigation structures, harbours, markets, schools, health facilities, transport networks, livestock, electricity supplies and state and non-state buildings. Disruption of the functioning of state and non-state institutions deprived local population of access to many support services. The task of recovery involved resettling people and restoring their livelihoods as well as re-building social and physical infrastructure and providing essential services including those that should have been provided by the state and non-state agencies. Therefore, it is also an important task to build the capacities of these agencies so they would be able to do service provision better.

2.4 Social Transformation in the Context of Recovery and Development Projects

There have been several livelihood, infrastructure, housing and ST interventions that have been implemented through a series of community level projects. These were identified through a participatory process involving the members of the community and community leaders and local officials were also directly involved. Most of the interventions are implemented at a community level through a participatory process, though the entire process has been conceptualized and operationalized within a larger context involving stakeholders outside the individual communities. The ultimate objective of these interventions has been to bring about social transformation, social cohesion, and socio-economic recovery within and between conflict-affected communities. In other words, ST has been attempted directly and indirectly by developing interventions that had stand lone ST components as well as others that had alternative objectives but had elements of ST woven/mainstreamed into them. Within this context, many recovery and development projects which have been implemented at local, regional and national levels, have had a great potential to promote the concept of ST. However, whether this potential is harnessed or not depends on the way these projects are designed and implemented. This then brings out the key research question: how to design and implement recovery and development interventions in a post war situation in order to bring about sustainable social transformation. Accordingly, this research paper attempts to answer the above question by introducing a framework to follow when mainstreaming ST interventions into recovery and development projects. This was developed based on the analysis of some of the identified key development projects.

3. Methodology

With a view to responding to the research question as to how to mainstream the concept of ST in recovery and development projects, a detailed study was carried out on 10 selected recovery and development projects that were designed to mainstream the social transformation, hence the criteria for selection of case studies. The data collection was designed into two main stages; secondary data collection and primary data collection. Firstly, key project reports and other documentation were reviewed, and these included the initial project proposals, monitoring reports, evaluation reports and consultation reports. This desk based study was used to develop the initial fieldwork plan that included the selection of a sample project sites for field visits (including that of a project identified as “Mulli”), pilot testing of the methodology at several selected project sites, and planning and carrying out field visits to selected sample sites. Project sites visited were from 7 districts (Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Ampara, Jaffna and Hambantota). Through these field visits, qualitative data was collected at a community level, including focus group discussions with communities, and key informant interviews on identified cases. Interviewees had some form of link to ST interventions within their communities. The number of interviews conducted was 97. Quantitative data collection techniques such as community and household surveys were not employed as such data was already available from secondary sources such as project reports. Focus group discussions helped to get the views and experiences of a cross section of community as these groups were constituted to include different sections of the population. Further, key informant interviews generated valuable data on the context and the interventions. Case studies were primarily focused on individuals in terms of their trajectories and experiences both before and after project interventions. Field observations gave the opportunities to observe the communities and the changes in these communities due to external interventions and internal dynamics that have followed. The data gathered also helped to get acquainted with the nature of various interventions that have touched the lives of the community members, the nature and extent of change that has been effected, path of change, and the contextual factors that have been consequential for interventions and the outcomes. Apart from the project site visits, consultation workshops were also conducted in Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Polonnaruwa and Ampara. There were the major sources of information about the projects and their implementation at a district and community level. Further, primary data also helped identify the path of the change that has been effected by project interventions. It is worth noting, these data collection plans were associated with a much larger explorations whereas the focus of this paper is limited to mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects.

4. Path of Change: Analytical Framework

The research findings revealed that, in the context of selected projects, ST has been attempted directly and indirectly by developing interventions that had stand lone ST components as well as others that had alternative objectives but had elements of ST woven/mainstreamed into them. In general, it is the synergy of diverse

interventions such as CBO strengthening, beneficiary participation, women and youth empowerment, provision of basic infrastructure, livelihood development and activities promoting social cohesion, which have contributed to social transformation at a community level. This has been a unique feature of ST Interventions concerned. Accordingly, what is evident from the findings is that various ST interventions are expected to contribute to not only meeting the various needs of effected communities and individuals, but also bring about significant change in the way the communities are organised and connected to the wider structures and processes with a view to achieving the broader objectives of the projects. At the initial stage of the project, implementing agencies have conducted consultations at community level and consultations with other stakeholders at different levels. These initial consultations have provided a basis not only for the identification of specific needs of communities and households but also for understanding the wider context of the issues to be addressed over time and across the communities and regions. The lessons learned from this analysis has helped to identify the paths towards the social transformation, understand wider context of issues, identify the divers of ST interventions and identify community focused projects that contribute to the implementation of ST interventions. The comparative analysis of these projects point to the possible paths of change where ST interventions lead to a significant positive transformation of the community. This analytical framework suggests the path of change to be followed in mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects. This analytical framework is presented in Figure 1.

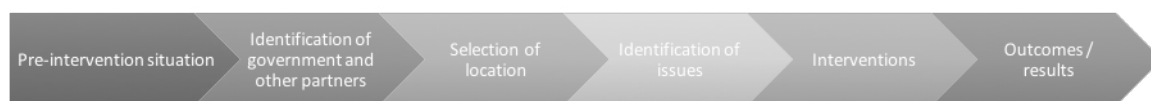


Figure 1: Analytical framework for path of change

The analytical framework given above indicates the stages of the path of change through which such targets or outcomes are to be achieved. In other words, the analytical framework encompasses the entire range of themes mentioned above. Ensuring sustainability is critical from the point of view of beneficiaries as their future well-being depends on the extent to which the positive changes are sustained over time, beyond the project period. Inter-project and intra-project synergy is important as it indicates how individual project interventions are facilitated by the presence of other interventions, either within or outside the project. These are discussed below in detail.

5. Findings and discussion

The various stages of the path of change identified above are derived from the overall implementation experience with respect to various ST interventions under the investigated projects. While the presentation here is based on a certain level of abstraction from the actual experience, the path is not always or not necessarily linear. For instance, strong political influences or unexpected increase in the number of prospective beneficiaries cannot be overlooked in the implementation of interventions such as housing or livelihood support. Measures need to be taken to accommodate new demand arising out of unexpected events. For instance, building their capacities enable communities to take alternative project support from other resources. In sections below, the already introduced path of change is further discussed, focusing attention on various interventions that have resulted in an unprecedented social transformation. Accordingly, this discussion presents the practical implementation of this analytical framework with reference to a single case entitled “Mulli”.

5.1 Pre-intervention situation

The first step of the process is to identify the pre-intervention situation. This needs to be done through consultations with the community and other stakeholders. This step enables the identification of root causes for the current situation and the issues in the wider context that need to be solved through the ST interventions. Accordingly, the pre-intervention situation of Mulli is as follows: Mulli has been a socially marginalised, conflict affected village in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The inhabitants of this village were displaced in 1987 and the residents from Mulli lived in IDP camps from 1987-1995 but returned to the village in 1996. According to local sources, they were not displaced thereafter. This community was largely neglected by the higher caste communities in the vicinity and government officials and remained marginalized from the higher caste mainstream Tamil community. The villagers engaged in relatively marginal livelihood activities such as casual labour. The village community has remained endogamous, with almost no marital relations with neighbouring communities, and was characterized by lack of

access to basic socio-economic facilities and services. Houses and infrastructure destroyed, inhabitants suffered from chronic poverty and inadequate community capacity. Interviews with key informants in the village showed that low status has been the result of a number of factors; nature of livelihoods, inability to move from low paying, low skilled employment to other jobs, low educational attainment, negative perception of the community by the others outside the community.

5.2 Identification of government and CBO partners

For the successful implementation of ST interventions, two important factors need to be considered from an institutional perspective. One is the identification of the institutional structure of the area that has a bearing on the practical implementation of the ST interventions, a process that involves the help and contribution from various parties and the facilitation by various institutions. Second is to get the help of the CBOs as these can play a vital role in reaching to the community level and implementing the ST intervention at the local level. In the case of Mulli, the state had already established its authority in the region following the conclusion of the war, the cooperation and the support of the government, the relevant state institutions, both national and local, as well as other key stakeholders such as the military and political leaders, were preconditions for successfully carrying out any external project interventions. Accordingly, the process of launching any interventions needed to be preceded by the granting of initial approval by the relevant state authorities.

5.3 Selection of location

The analysis reveals that the selection of location needs to be done at two scales: Macro scale and micro scale. At the macro scale, there needs to be an effort to target as many vulnerable communities as feasible through various interventions including the selection of beneficiary communities on the basis of vulnerability criteria such as the adverse impact of the conflict, poverty and marginalization the well as poor infrastructure and remote geographical location. Due to their extreme vulnerability, partly owing to past experience of social exclusion such as poverty and lack of basic infrastructure facilities like roads, market access, and irrigation. Therefore, if the ST interventions are to be implemented in a particular area, as in this case to the northern region in Sri Lanka, the locations or the communities need to be identified at macro scale where the ST interventions are needed. At micro scale, the baseline data collection can be used for the finalization of sub-project locations through the identification of the vulnerable nature of the community and its generally marginalized position among the villages within that region or district. In the case Mulli, consultations between the project staff and government officials at various levels (e.g. both DS and District levels) have facilitated the identification of target communities based on prior knowledge and baseline data and the fact that that the location was not covered by other recovery and development agencies.

5.4 Identification of issues and designing of interventions

Identification of issues, is one of the most important tasks within the overall process, because the identification of key issues within a selected community help determine the types of ST interventions needed and how these issues need to be addressed through project interventions. Accordingly, these key issues have been identified through a participatory process involving the members of the community, community leaders and local officials. Participatory tools such as focus group discussions and the participatory appraisals such as conflict analysis, household surveys, wealth ranking, village transit walks, problem tree analysis, resource inventory, SWOT analysis, village mapping, and mobility mapping have been used to identify and prioritise issues. Accordingly, the issues identified in Mulli included: Women deserted by husbands, child labour, teenage marriages, alcoholism, lack of social development, poor housing and lack of infrastructure facilities. After the identification of issues, ST interventions have been designed to bring about a transformation of the prevailing adverse situation, often following a preliminary analysis of structural and social dynamics within or between communities using certain participatory needs assessments tools. Given the participatory nature, members of the community have been able to provide in-depth data on local issues and also possible remedial actions. Accordingly, it can be noted that these participatory tools have also helped to develop community action plans, which have been used as the basis for implementing various interventions together with government institutions and CBOs.

5.5 Interventions

The projects that were analysed involved interventions that are implemented at a community level through a participatory process, though the entire process has been conceptualized and operationalized within a larger context involving stakeholders outside the individual communities. The basic idea here is that social transformation cannot be brought about without reaching to the local or the community level. Therefore, the implementation of ST interventions has to be done through a series of community focused projects using the participatory approach. Accordingly, three main ST intervention strategies can be identified in this Mulli case study:

a).CBO strengthening and partner capacity building - The strengthening of local CBOs through various capacity building exercises such as exchange visits, various training programmes, and networking with other stakeholders has been a key driver of change in the village. Though local CBO's such as youth clubs existed in the village, they were neither supported nor recognized by external agencies. Nor were they given any tangible assistance by way of training, material support and external exposure. The project interventions have facilitated these CBO's to become active partners in project implementation including local level decision-making such as beneficiary selection, housing and infrastructure decisions.

b) Youth and women empowerment - Given the pre-existing vulnerable position of women and youth, women and youth empowerment through strategies such as skill development, livelihood support, leadership and other types of training has brought them into the foreground. Interviews with women and youth leaders showed that they were satisfied with the new opportunities they were afforded to play significant leadership roles in the transformation of the village from a marginalised and impoverished community to one which is increasingly connected to the outside world in terms of new economic activities, housing, infrastructure and environmental management participation in wider social and political processes and linkages with external institutions, both state and non-state.

c). Community mobilization through participatory community tools – these tools used in the identification of community needs have enabled the community members to articulate the local issues such as caste discrimination, under age marriage and school drop outs and incorporate them into community action plans that were developed by project staff and community leaders and implemented through a participatory process. This has meant a greater sense of ownership and responsibility among community members.

5.6 Outcomes/ Results

As the last stage of the process, the analytical framework used suggests to evaluate the outcomes and results against the pre-intervention situation and the local issues. This allows the stakeholders to identify the changes achieved through the ST interventions and then the lessons learned for the future interventions. In the projects that were analysed, this has been done using both field work and field reports. In the specific case study of Mulli, some of the changes point to a significant structural transformation, both within the community and in its relationship to other communities in the area. Low caste communities in caste ridden Jaffna peninsula have remained socially, culturally, and even economically marginalized for generations. Interviews suggest that the villagers and community leaders do no longer feel that they are members of a neglected community as they participate in a wider network of actors including external agencies and state institutions. The fact that they are empowered to take part in the decision-making processes with regard to development and change in their own community has given them a sense of inclusion as against social exclusion and marginalization in the past. The community leaders and community members are actively engaged in community development work and deal with external agencies as equal partners.

The path of change followed in mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects can be summarised as follows (Table 1) :

| Path of Change | |
|---|--|
| Pre-Intervention Situation | Lack of access to basic socio-economic facilities and services; houses and infrastructure destroyed: poverty and inadequate community capacity |
| Identification of government and CBO partners | High level official consultations followed by discussions with field level officials and community leaders. |
| Selection of Location | Permanent resettlement; poverty; lack of infrastructure facilities; location not covered by other recovery and development agencies |
| Identification of issues | Community participatory methods and tools or market assessments using gender and conflict lens |

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Designing of Interventions | Identification of priorities - housing, infrastructure, livelihoods, capacity building, etc. |
| Interventions | ST mainstreamed into livelihoods, housing, infrastructure and environmental management |
| Outcomes/ Results | Reduction in poverty, emergence of community leaders as powerful change agents, community cohesion, collaboration among different social groups, CBO institutional strengthening, Reduction of social problems, Change of communal ideas among school children |

Table 1: Path of change in mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects

6. Conclusion

The discussion at the outset of the paper pointed out that there was a strong need for social transformation interventions in the north and eastern region of Sri Lanka partly due to some of the conditions that predated the conflict and partly due to the consequences of the civil and military conflict. There have been many projects and programmes to facilitate recovery and development in the region after the war. While the relevance and the value of social transformation in post-conflict development and reconstruction is widely recognized, the question as to how to incorporate it in the context of actual recovery and development projects has remained largely unexplored.

In this context, this research paper suggests a path to follow when mainstreaming ST interventions into recovery and development projects. This path was discussed based on the analysis of ten selected projects which were designed to promote social transformation. Accordingly, this analysis emphasizes four distinct features in mainstreaming ST interventions into recovery and development projects. First is, in practice, diverse ST interventions need to be implemented through a series of projects rather by way of stand-alone projects. Second important feature is that, in a situation where different communities display different vulnerabilities, ST interventions need to vary according to the type and nature of the community. Third important feature is the participatory process. And the last is ensuring sustainability of change brought about by these interventions, which need to be considered in all stages, but especially at the stages of design of interventions and implementation.

Ensuring sustainability is critical from the point of view of beneficiaries as their future well-being depends on the extent to which the positive changes are sustained over time, beyond the project period. Inter-project and intra-project synergy is important as it indicates how individual project interventions are facilitated by the presence of other interventions, either within or outside the project. It is therefore, necessary to take measures to ensure sustainability of positive improvements brought about by the projects. The strengthening and empowerment of CBO's is a critical factor contributing to the sustainability of positive changes achieved.

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