

# Putting houses in place:<sup>1</sup> rebuilding communities in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

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*This paper interrogates the social and political geographies of resettlement and reconstruction of temporary and permanent shelters, which are fundamental to rebuilding tsunami-affected communities. War and ethnic cleavages are an endemic feature of Sri Lanka's social polity, and uneven development processes in the country are clearly visible. This paper draws attention to these spaces of inequality by drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation carried out in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka. It argues that communities' concerns and anxieties regarding displacement and resettlement have tended to be articulated against prevailing fault lines of war and inequality. This is the backdrop against which communities negotiated the recovery process. My fieldwork shows that it is critical to understand that disaster and development relief are ingrained within context specificities. Relief efforts therefore need to recognise that the process of 'putting houses in place' should be embedded within local social relations.*

**Keywords:** inequality, recovery, spatial politics, Sri Lanka, tsunami

## Introduction

Post-tsunami Sri Lanka faces multi-layered challenges. The startling annihilation of human life and infrastructure that the island faced within hours of the December 2004 tsunami was by many counts catastrophic. Sri Lanka has also, however, been host to a protracted and bloodied ethnic war for more than two decades.

Despite a 20-year war displacing hundreds of thousands of people, during which temporary and eventually permanent relocation has been an enduring feature of social life, the hardship and adversity faced by displaced communities has often been lost on the national psyche. Because the war primarily affected isolated areas the communities worst hit by the conflict could often be ignored. The geographical locations of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, which are both war-ravaged, are physically distant from the Colombo-centric polity, and visits by civilians into these regions are rare due to security risks. Successive governments have also pandered to the bitter resentment espoused by ethno-nationalists in the south, and thus have found it politically convenient to downplay the misery of populations uprooted by war. This neglect of displaced communities was to change dramatically after the 2004 disaster. The tsunami affected numerous different communities and the swiftness with which it destroyed dwellings and displaced populations along 70 per cent of Sri Lanka's coastal belt could not be ignored. The devastation reached well into Sinhala communities in Southern Sri Lanka and, for once, the displacement and destruction became firmly ingrained in the public psyche. Consequently, contentious debates on where and how

to relocate displaced communities were argued vigorously in the mainstream media. Against the contiguous events of war and ‘natural’ disaster, how do communities begin to rebuild?

This paper interrogates the social and political geographies of resettlement and reconstruction for communities affected by the tsunami. It considers both temporary and permanent shelters of tsunami-affected communities. The study builds on a research project funded by the United Nations Children’s Fund–International Centre for Ethnic Studies (UNICEF–ICES), which focused on the distinct ways in which natural disasters were understood in Sri Lanka (de Mel and Ruwanpura, 2006). It differs, however, from parallel research exploring the politics of women’s livelihoods, which stems from the same study (Ruwanpura, forthcoming). Because Sri Lanka is beset with war, ethnic cleavages and uneven development processes, my research deepens the call for paying attention to the politics of inequality in tsunami-affected communities (Grundy-Warr and Sidaway, 2006; Hyndman, 2007; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007).

During my time in the field people in affected communities articulated their concerns regarding the material realities of displacement and resettlement in the post-tsunami period. Their anxieties echoed prevailing fault lines of war and inequality. For example, the different and contradictory dictates of the Liberation Tamil Tigers for Eelam (LTTE), the state and the LTTE–Karuna faction regarding the buffer zones to be maintained in Batticaloa is illustrative of the backdrop of war. These decrees impinged upon community efforts to rebuild permanent housing. Similar political dynamics have played into the physical act of building houses in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka. My research shows the importance of recognising the embedded social structures when ‘putting houses in place’ begins.

The next section of the paper offers an overview of the social and political situation in Sri Lanka. This is followed by the third section, which outlines the methodology adopted and my research positioning during the fieldwork period. An analysis of the recurring themes that arose during the fieldwork period is undertaken in section four. This part of the paper starts by examining the ways in which spatial politics coupled together with ethnicity and/or patronage was a critical demarcation of the ways in which affected people were able to access temporary or permanent shelters. Obtaining good quality temporary shelter was crucial, and people’s experiences of living in temporary accommodation were shaped by whether or not they had previously experienced displacement and relocation. Further issues in this section of the paper revolve around the emphasis that affected communities placed on the need for fairness in access to relocation and the gendered realities of rebuilding housing and homes. After exploring these issues in depth, the conclusion draws together the ways in which putting houses in place were marked by the prior socio-political locations of affected communities. Paying attention to the geographies of rebuilding is important because it reiterates how natural disasters do not provide clean slates full of new opportunities for disaster management. They are instead social processes infused with individual, family and community experiences of their previous socio-economic locations and the prevailing political climate.

## Sri Lankan sociality

Militarised violence characterises the Sri Lankan polity. Over the past two decades violence has become an insidious feature of Sri Lankan society, with the on-going ethnic war and JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna*: People's Liberation Party) insurrection during the late 1980s epitomising underlying ethnic differentiation, social tensions and economic inequities (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000; Goodhand et al., 2000; Uyangoda, 2005). Despite the war, however, Sri Lanka has maintained remarkably high human development indices for a developing country, and is also noted for its achievements in the area of gender equality (Humphries, 1993; UNDP, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

These contradictions in Sri Lanka lend themselves to uneven social processes and geographical spaces that affect the everyday life of diverse social groups. Moreover, the 'changing income-earning and asset acquiring opportunities that the post-liberalisation phase' brought about led to more uneven wealth distribution that further magnified and deepened social tensions (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000, pp. 103–105). The current poverty and social deprivation in the country point to fragmented development and patterns of social exclusion, both within conflict-affected communities and across Sri Lanka more widely (de Alwis, 2002; Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000).

Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka were the regional focus of a 12-month study, carried out from July 2005 to June 2006, which provides the material for this paper. These provinces were chosen because our larger UNICEF–ICES research project aimed to capture multi-faceted aspects of regional discrepancies and to unravel a spatially specific understanding of natural disasters. Although the fieldwork sites—Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa—were located within each of these provinces, the people's stories suggested 'missing storylines' since their narratives had often been displaced

or neglected (Glassman, 2005, p. 164). This paper concentrates on the manner in which local people and communities expressed their anxieties as they experienced their new-found, and sometimes ill-fitting, temporary and permanent residences.

Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa are both coastal towns, located in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka respectively (see Figure 1). As seaside/lagoon locations fishing is a primary occupation for a significant proportion of the local populations in both places. Apart from these commonalities, the areas are quite distinct.

Batticaloa's physical infrastructure has been destroyed by war leaving behind embattled ethnic communities. Poverty and socio-economic deprivation is also

**Figure 1** Map of Sri Lanka



**Source:** elaborated by the Cartographic Unit, School of Geography, University of Southampton.

**Table 1** Selected health indicators for the region vis-à-vis the national average

	National average (2000)	Batticaloa average (2000)
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 deaths)	11.2	15.8
Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 deaths)	92	117
Underweight children between 0 and 5 years (%)	29.4	53.2

Source: adapted from Sarvananthan (2007, p. 79).<sup>3</sup>

widespread. The demarcation of the district into government and LTTE-controlled areas, the sporadic clashes between the LTTE and the Karuna-led faction, restrictions on mobility due to security issues, and draconian tax burdens imposed upon local communities by the LTTE are all significant features of the area. These factors worsen the structures of poverty and bear negatively upon the economic welfare of local people (Goodhand et al., 2000; Sarvananthan, 2007). Sarvananthan (2007) uses data on health, education and per capita income to point to Batticaloa's deprivation. Selected health indicators show how the district falls below the national average (see Table 1).

The region is also well-known for matrilineal inheritance patterns in both Muslim and Tamil communities. Land and property are inherited to younger women through the mother's side, making the area socio-legally distinct from the rest of the country (McGilvray, 1982, 1989).

Hikkaduwa uses its coastal location to host beach-bound tourists, which has led to the growth of local enterprises. However, over the years, the tourist industry has undergone vicissitudes of change. The ethnic war and the JVP insurrection in 1987–89 (intensely battled out in the south) has meant that depending on tourism as a means of livelihood has carried hazards over which local communities have limited, if any, control. People in the area also live off the sea, through both fishing and environmentally destructive coral mining. The economic liberalisation policies implemented in 1977 brought with it service workers that commuted to Galle and occasionally even to Colombo. Income differentiation between social groups, such as fishermen, petty traders and service workers, within the area is not acute. However, the many hotels catering to an urban-based local tourist market has created a heightened sense of growing inequalities among local communities. Conspicuous consumption patterns among urban-based tourists feed into the perception that particular groups in Sri Lanka are thriving economically, thereby aggravating the politics of inequality (Dunham and Jayasuriya, 2000, p. 105).

## The fieldwork space

Fieldwork in Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa towns was undertaken as a three-member team, including two researchers (of which I was one) and a research assistant. Five fieldwork trips lasting between five and ten days were undertaken in each location

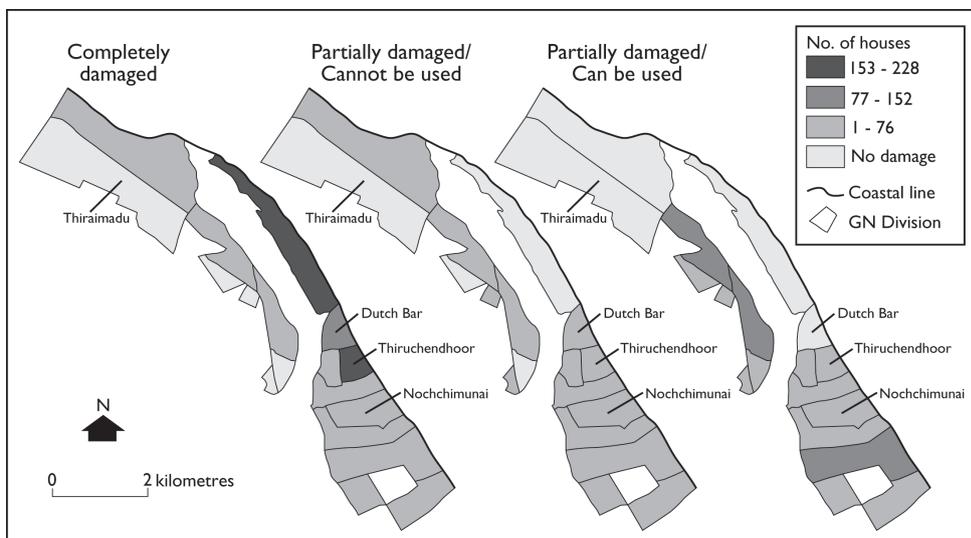
during 2005–06. This was determined by the resources allocated for field research in the larger UNICEF–ICES study. In–depth interviews and participant observation were used to gather information on women’s coping strategies and spatially specific experiences of community welfare in the rebuilding process. For this part of the research we spoke with a total of 20 women across the Burgher, Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities.

Local translators accompanied us in Batticaloa and would aide in conversation and dialogue when necessary. The ability to access Batticaloa was partially dictated by security conditions. Even though a delicate ceasefire was in existence during much of the fieldwork period, occasional skirmishes and violent eruptions were not uncommon. Hikkaduwa did not pose the same security challenges.

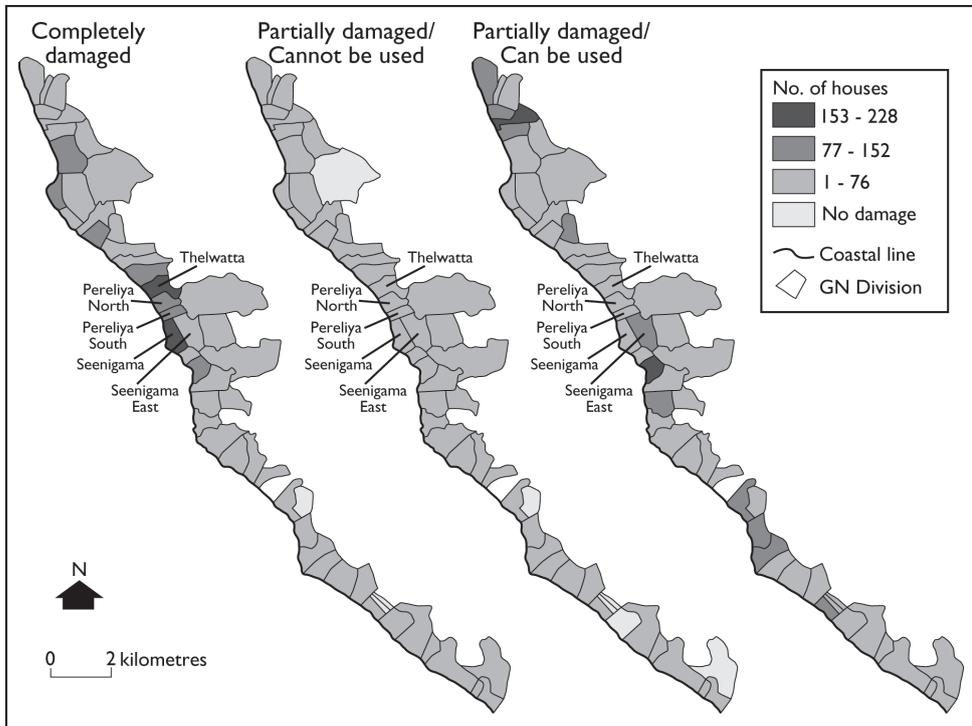
Previous fieldwork carried out in 1998–99 and 2004 in Batticaloa made the people, local institutional actors, and sections of the community familiar and easy to access. The research was conducted in Thiraimadu, Poonachchimoona<sup>4</sup> and Dutch Bar, all village divisions within the Batticaloa town limits (see Figure 2). Networks built during prior fieldwork visits were used to set up new contacts, with fieldwork journeys also providing an opportunity to renew old friendships and forge new alliances.

Hikkaduwa was less familiar. Although a destination or transit location on several travels, I had minimal prior contact with local people and community members. I used limited contact with a philanthropic organisation based in Hikkaduwa to access the area initially. After forging relationships with staff members at the foundation, they passed on information about tsunami–affected relatives and friends in neighbouring communities. Links with local people were quickly established. Our research centred around Pereliya, Seenigama and Thelwatta, which are coastal villages within the Hikkaduwa town division (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2** Map of Batticaloa: areas with damage to physical property



Source: adapted from UNDP (2005).

**Figure 3** Map of Hikkaduwa: areas with damage to physical property

Source: adapted from UNDP (2005).

Each conversation lasted between 45 minutes and one and a half hours, and we met a number of women and their families on more than one occasion because of recurring visits to each area. We also spoke with ten staff members of local foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) regarding their efforts at rebuilding temporary and permanent shelters. Conversations (lasting two to two and a half hours) with two priests, three government officers and two community activists were also used to complement and enrich our understandings of the local situation. This paper draws upon conversations with a total of 30 people. I follow established ethical conventions of using pseudonyms when presenting their voices.

Qualitative methods in doing fieldwork are increasingly advocated to supplement and enhance orthodox empirical techniques (Berik, 1997; McDonald, 1995; Pujol, 1997). Even though Goodhand et al. (2000, p. 393) point out that drawing wider conclusions from thick descriptions should be carefully motivated, grounded research is important because it gets 'to the location of the event, to the people affected, their homes, their economic activities and their communities in *real*. . . geographical space' (Wong, 2005, p. 259). Given the aims of the larger study, our thinking was that engaging in conversations and dialogue was the most appropriate way of unpacking the subtleties and tensions of local people's seemingly 'ordinary' lives.

My social background is distinct from that of our respondents and this is likely to have influenced my interactions and conversations with them.<sup>5</sup> Even though we

conveyed to the respondents that the interviews and conversations were only for research purposes, I am cognisant that their answers may well have been coloured by their view of our social differences. Speaking for the people is, therefore, not my purpose. Rather, this paper draws closely on their words and experiences in order to contribute to the incipient debates on the ‘before-and-after’ of the tsunami in Sri Lanka (de Mel, 2007; Hyndman, forthcoming).

## Resettlement and reconstruction: displacement and rebuilding communities

The damage the tsunami caused to physical infrastructure, in particular to houses and other buildings, has been tabulated by the Department of Census and Statistics (see Table 2).

Numerically, Sri Lanka has faced a monumental task in rebuilding houses and homes and offering shelter. It is critical to appreciate that this has not existed in a socio-political vacuum. By focusing on the ways in which members of the affected communities made sense of their temporary and permanent shelters, this research uncovers the surfacing of socio-economic and ethnic tensions. The experiences narrated by them convey the central importance of attending to the complexities and micro-politics of the lived realities within which natural disasters take place. The following sub-section explores the theme of ethnicity and patronage that surfaced during the fieldwork.

### Ethnicity and patronage

The ways in which prevailing political turmoil and ethnic tensions shaped the experiences of different communities cannot be ignored. The social location of ethnic groups was a critical marker in the ways in which they were able to access (or not) temporary shelters. Indeed their ethnic positioning, along with their exposure to the impacts of war, was also relevant for how they made sense of their living experiences in provisional accommodation. Recording these experiences uncovers the significance of regional discrepancies as well.

A disproportionate burden of the ongoing ethnic war has been borne by Tamils. Displacement has been an indelible reality of their daily existence, particularly in

**Table 2** Destroyed and damaged property in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

	Housing	Buildings (excl. houses)
Completely and partially damaged (cannot be used)	88,544	4,650
Partially damaged (cannot be used)	–	1,227
Partially damaged (can be used)	38,561	5,125
<b>Total damaged property</b>	<b>127,105</b>	<b>11,002</b>

Source: adapted from the Department of Census and Statistics (2005).

war-ravaged parts of Eastern Sri Lanka where provisional or permanent evacuation at critical moments has been common (Goodhand et al., 2000). The turbulent experiences they have undergone have thus strengthened their ability to adapt to wildly fluctuating circumstances over which they have no control. The temporary shelters in the housing camps were harsh. Living in dwellings made of corrugated iron, which would heat-up quickly under the hot sun and were susceptible to flooding in the monsoon rains, illustrates this hardship. Yet, the Tamils had a sense of ‘making-do’ as well as optimism. With regards to the latter, they were confident that they would receive permanent housing within a reasonable time period—some were bold enough to predict this as within two years.

*Q: When do you think you will get permanent housing?*

*A: They have told us that we will get our new housing in two years’ time. I think that they will stick to their word.*

*Q: Stick to their word?*

*A: Yes, because the tsunami came unexpectedly. It is not like the war. All of us were displaced in a matter of minutes. There is a lot of international support, and it will be hard to ignore us. But I’m sure that we will get permanent housing within this time period.*

*(Madhuri, a 25-year-old woman and mother of two boys from Batticaloa.)*

*We will get our permanent house built in two years’ time. They have told us this. They will need two years because they will build the new place well, with solid construction material, for example.* (Renuka, a 42-year-old woman from Batticaloa.)

More significantly, and quite unexpectedly, many expressed contentment with how their lives were shaping up in comparison with their pre-tsunami existence. They attributed this partly to their ability to eke out a living because, for example, the transitory shelters were located on soil that was *nallam* (good) for home garden cultivation. Their satisfaction was linked less to the structural situation of housing and more to the ability to go about with a sense of ‘normalcy’.

Similarly, Soundarie, a 41-year-old Tamil woman who lost her 17-year-old son to the tsunami, expressed her approval of the permanent house newly built for her by the local Catholic church in the Dutch Bar area of Batticaloa:

*This new house is better than the earlier one. This is built with brick and this is very strong. The roof too is hardy. There is proper concrete foundation and the roofing has tiles.*

Soundarie’s endorsement of better quality housing resonates with the sentiments expressed by families in the Thiramaidu temporary camp, suggesting that they had previously lived in conditions of poverty and deprivation. In that context they had lost their few possessions to the tsunami, and their low quality makeshift homes had been easily demolished by the tsunami waves. This points to the inequalities in the pre-existing political economy in Sri Lanka, which made the tsunami into the

humanitarian disaster that it became (de Mel, 2007; Hyndman, 2007; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007; Uyangoda, 2005).

Despite the tsunami leading initially to considerable public and personal loss, Rigg et al. (2005, p. 377) point out that the tsunami in Thailand also ‘afforded [people] an opportunity which would not have otherwise have arisen, namely the opportunity to move to a larger, permanent and prime corner plot’. Sri Lankans had comparable experiences in so far as the tsunami brought with it opportunities such as better quality shelters. Soundarie’s unambiguous appreciation of her new home is indicative of the upside of the tsunami catastrophe. Likewise, Madhavi, a 27-year-old Sinhala woman from Hikkuduwa, explained how they reconstructed their destroyed (old) house and how the old house compares with the new one:

*With the money we saved we renovated the house and enlarged it. I did not pay a brick-layer to plaster walls. I did it myself. Everyone was sad when the house was completely destroyed by the tsunami. . . . The house we have got from the foundation is quite solid. It is plastered and colour-washed nicely.*

The few Sinhala women who had come into possession of permanent housing expressed a degree of satisfaction with their new dwellings. And others who were yet to own such dwellings would point to houses already built, which they perceived to be of good quality.

In contrast, the experiences of the Muslim community in Poonachchimoona supports Uyangoda’s (2005) view that this was the community to have suffered worst in the Eastern Province. Muslim families received limited formal assistance—whether through the government or NGOs—and where there was external support it was linked to previous rights-based work.<sup>6</sup> Where material support was given it was haphazard at best. This was reflected in the housing conditions of the Muslim families, which were either plastic tents or shacks put together with plastic coverings (given by a leading Sri Lankan bank in the days immediately following the tsunami) and low-quality timber found through their own initiative. Nearly a year after the disaster they continued to dwell in flimsy shacks and had not received any official information or support with regards to obtaining permanent housing, despite promises from a Hong Kong-based group. Hafsa, a 38-year-old woman from Batticaloa, said that ‘because of the land problem [the lack of clarity regarding the buffer-zone] we don’t know anything about our permanent housing. But Hong Kong people said that they will build houses.’

A report on the current status of donor built housing in Batticaloa and Galle districts (Hikkaduwa falls under the latter district) notes the slow process of reconstruction and regional differences (see Table 3). While there are no existing data relating specifically to ethnicity in any of the areas, the district disparities may indicate the ways in which marginalised ethnic communities were easily neglected. This, in turn, supports the anecdotal information provided by the Muslim community that its members suffered the most in the tsunami’s aftermath.

**Table 3** Progress data on donor built housing

District	Batticaloa (August 2005)	Galle (August 2005)	Batticaloa (September 2006)	Galle (September 2006)
Total no. of houses damaged	4,426	5,196	–	–
No. of houses to be built	3,665	4,718	–	–
Construction status (in progress)	37	667	872	935
No. of units completed	3	183	406	1,951

**Source:** adapted from Institute of Policy Studies (2005, 2006).

The lived realities of the Muslim community point to the ways in which the state and LTTE buffer zone bans caused havoc and insecurity in people's lives (Hyndman, 2007; Uyangoda, 2005). This is overlaid with the apparently callous disregard for the everyday difficulties created by a lack of proper housing. These Muslims believed that because their previous housing fell just within the 200-metre buffer zone, they were yet to be allocated land in the interior areas. Their efforts to secure land and housing for relocation were made by an all-male village committee advocating their case with the *gramasevaka* (village official), yet they had the impression that they did not receive adequate consideration because their voice and concerns did not carry the same weight as Tamils in the area.

Muslims were the weakest link in the 'peace talks' that were shakily proceeding in the background between the LTTE and the state since 2002 (Uyangoda, 2005, p. 343). Their visibility is at best peripheral to the prevailing ethno-nationalist warring and peace discourse. The experience of the Muslims in Poonachchimonai may be illustrative of the concrete ways in which this political omission of minority interests was becoming manifest in the post-tsunami period. The failure to receive adequate supportive measures suggests that marginal and politically invisible social groups were falling between the gaps of available protective mechanisms and humanitarian efforts (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p. 18). The occasional skirmishes erupting in the area have only added to the vulnerability of such groups. Coupled together with the haphazard and ambiguous instituting of buffer zones, the rebuilding efforts of the post-tsunami period 'created spaces of fear and mistrust around which party politics and nationalist tensions were organised' (Hyndman, 2007, p. 366). People's ability to access permanent or temporary accommodation was not, therefore, merely dictated by humanitarian losses. Instead they were also shaped by a confluence of grounded political realities whereby the ability of each ethnic community to garner political patronage was crucial for their social and domestic welfare.

### Familiarity and novelty

Ethnic differentiation was also an issue in terms of how people made sense of their new temporary or permanent spaces. De Mel and Ruwanpura (2006) show how Burghers living in Batticaloa experienced the ethnic war in two incongruous ways.

As a community living in the area, they ‘were affected by the social and political changes wrought by war, its daily curfews, *hartals*, electricity cuts, disruption of schooling’ and so forth (de Mel and Ruwanpura, 2006, p. 25). Yet because the community actively maintained a stance of neutrality in the ethnic war, they were not directly targeted by either the state or the LTTE during the armed violence (de Mel and Ruwanpura, 2006; see also de Mel, 2007). Displacement was a new experience for the Burghers. Likewise for the Sinhalese in Southern Sri Lanka displacement was a novel occurrence. Consequently both these ethnic communities vociferously noted the problems and difficulties of their temporary living quarters.

Both the Burghers and Sinhalese were keen to point to the harsh conditions under which they resided. But the bleakness of temporary shelters was not the only concern voiced by these ethnic communities: they also pointed to the lack of inclusion in the consultation process that led to their resettlement. They felt that it was this absence of discussion that created subsequent problems with their temporary housing, including the inappropriate use of raw material, the problematic structures, and the use and abuse of sheltering facilities. The accompanying anxieties were captured in the following ways by a couple of Sinhala men in Pereliya and Thelwatta (Hikkaduwa) and a Burgher woman theoretically residing in Thiraimadu (Batticaloa):

*The temporary shelter we live in now is not suitable for rainy and windy weather. Our health is affected too. Look at this plastic, look at the timber used. Is this appropriate for local housing? (Hettige, a 54-year-old man in Pereliya.)*

*Take a look around and note the number of houses that are unoccupied. The agency just came and built wooden houses. They did not ask who owned and wanted houses. So people who had extended family or property in the interior moved to those places, but nominally hold on to a temporary shelter here. They do this because they do not want to miss out on any benefits that are distributed. But do the agencies ever wonder about the wastage of resources that they contribute towards by not asking and assessing the needs of each local community? I don’t mean to criticise the agency but it is hard not to be concerned with the squander of resources. (Jameiz-aiyya, a 67-year-old man from Thelwatta.)*

*The transitional accommodation in Thiraimadu is difficult to live in, especially during the rainy season. The rain water comes into the house. The corrugated iron roof is hot in the day and makes a loud noise when the winds are strong. It is difficult to cook in the kitchen too. That is why all the kitchens are covered against the wind coming in and that makes it impossible to stay inside as the kitchen fills with smoke. There are common toilets for about four to five families and tube-wells made for us. A couple of my sisters-in-law and their children live next to our house in Thiraimadu. When these houses were distributed we were asked which houses we would like to occupy. So we live here, like we lived in the Dutch Bar... We don’t live in the house in Thiraimadu. We come here in the evening and on holidays. We live in the town in my grandmother’s house, as it is easy for my children to go to school. We heard that there are thefts happening in the camp. (Helen, a 34-year-old nominal resident of the Thiraimadu camp, Batticaloa.)*

Regardless of the grievances expressed, a significant proportion of families did live in temporary dwellings. They endured the daily distress because the opportunities to live in alternative accommodation were limited. By and large they did not have middle-class connections they could draw upon to make the shift to more suitable living arrangements. The newness of displacement coupled together with their economic deprivation and the discomfort of living in transitional shelters made their everyday living hard. The voices of Jameiz-aiyya, Hettige and Helen epitomise the resentment felt at their exclusion from a consultative process that affected their living conditions in multiple ways. Key to this viewpoint was the wastage of resources that they saw taking place because of this lack of engagement with affected communities regarding their needs. Indeed, against the seeming availability of resources, the cruelty of not being included in the consultative processes was, to them, indicative of the numerous ways in which vested groups maintained socio-economic inequities. These incidents support the wider point made by Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p. 4) that allocation and programming was less about assessed needs and more about public and media interest, coupled together with 'the unprecedented funding available'.

Helen's narrative also captures the compounding effect of prior socio-economic inequalities in the post-tsunami situation. Families that had an advantageous social network were able to use their existing base to stake claims to temporary shelters with weekly visits so as not to lose out on the allocation of permanent housing. Meanwhile, they exploited their class base to live in more habitable settings. These social practices were found to prevail across ethnic groups in the east as well as the south, symptomatic of the class prerogatives that made split housing arrangements possible. Predictable as such social practice may be, the disquiet expressed by economically deprived classes regarding resource wastage and duplication of housing serves as an essential reminder of the exacerbation of social tensions. This is an outcome of the insufficient attention paid to historically embedded structures that clearly come into play in post-disaster efforts to rebuild communities. The contrasting experiences of people with different class backgrounds illustrates that 'affected people and communities are not homogenous entities': it also suggests that the risk analysis that took place in the immediate post-tsunami period missed out 'more complex aspects' (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, pp. 17–18).

### Relocation and impartiality

Hyndman (2007) notes how the geographical 'fix' of buffer zones advocated by the state and the LTTE did not offer a clear rationale and as a result created uncertainty and insecurity. This process fanned 'flames of political controversy between the major political parties and among the various ethno-national groups' (Hyndman, 2007, p. 365). Together with the social insecurity and political wrangling came the widespread perception that affected communities—and in particular the fishing communities—objected to relocating into the interior of the country (Bastian, 2005; Philips, 2005; Shanmugaratnam, 2005). Loss of livelihood due to dispossession of

land and property was the most commonly cited reason for this objection, and is captured by the sentiments of Hettige and his wife Imali:

*Our family wants to retain this plot of land (even if it is in the buffer zone) and do not want to go to the interior of the country. Because we are fisher folk we want to be close to the sea as it is convenient for the men to go to sea. If we lived in the interior of the country our men won't be able to do their work properly. Sometimes we might also lose the chance of extra earnings by selling the fish that our men bring home, or make dried fish out of them. But if we are given a house just beyond the 100-metre cut-off point this would not hinder our work patterns in a way that is detrimental to our livelihoods. Still, I would like to keep this shelter.*

During fieldwork, however, different storylines emerged that hinted at a more complex situation than the standard objections continually expressed in public discourse. There was clearly no collective consensus regarding relocation into interior areas. Some affected families welcomed such transfers because they viewed it as an upward move. But there was the perception that relocation had to be fair and equitable: both opposition to and welcoming of relocation was repeatedly couched in terms of the need to maintain equity and fairness.

The resistance towards relocation also conveyed a general mistrust of motivations—whether of the state or the LTTE—behind the current thinking on coastal conservation. There was suspicion and unease towards the new found zeal for environmental protection when existing conservation policies were flagrantly flouted—particularly by the tourist industry. Again the words of Imali and Hettige best convey the contentious aspects that are being widely discussed by local communities:

*There is also talk that the state is hoping to clear the coastline so that they can beautify the beach areas, make it more attractive for the tourist and the tourism industry. This means that the government is not so interested in our welfare but more so in exploiting our misfortune to benefit business interests and tourists.*

Like other affected people living in temporary shelters, Imali and Hettige pointed to events occurring on the ground to justify their standpoint. Two hundred metres from where fieldwork was being conducted there was a private hospital funded by foreign donors in Pereliya. This construction had obtained government approval even though it fell well within the 100-metre buffer zone. The discrepancy in the ways in which regulations are implemented for local communities and for foreign organisations is a matter of legitimate concern that feeds into a sense of aggrieved injustice. In fact, Hettige cynically went on to note: 'With the next tsunami, it is not only us who will be swept away but also hospitalised patients. Unless the hospital is going to market itself as a way for rich and fee-paying patients to get a ticket from the hospital bed to heaven!'

In Pereliya, it was the state and its capriciously implemented policies that were attacked and opposed. In Batticaloa, The LTTE was under no less criticism. They

too were challenged as to whose interests they were serving through the buffer-zones implemented in the Eastern Province. While the coastal areas of Batticaloa where fieldwork was carried out were in 'cleared' areas, but instructions by the LTTE carried weight and were adhered to. However, the intent of the LTTE was challenged on similar grounds to the objections expressed in Southern Sri Lanka. A priest actively involved in assessing and responding to the needs of affected communities, in addition to rebuilding permanent houses for those in Batticaloa, insisted that we drive along the coastline to see preliminary signs of cleaning up beach areas. These operations, he suggested, indicated a different play of things to come. He contended that the welfare of tsunami-affected communities was the last thing on the LTTE's mind: the current clean-up operations were more to do with developing tourist resorts. Consequently, a protest march was undertaken to express the disquiet the local community felt, under the slogan: *'The lagoon is our life and the sea is our home—Keep your hands off them!'* Hence, where permanent relocation and resettlement barred communities from effectively engaging in their livelihoods or simply returning to a state of normalcy, their sense of injustice was aggravated by the belief that capitalist interests were overriding the needs and priorities of affected communities.

Among the cross-ethnic group of people who were willing to relocate and resettle in interior areas, compliance was dependent upon perceived notions of fairness. They emphasised that as long as they received property that was commensurate with the homes they lost in the tsunami then this would be a fair deal. Under these conditions the shift to the interior of the country was not necessarily a negative turn. In fact, Geeta, a 44-year-old woman from Thelwatta, went on to offer her seal of approval for an impending relocation into the interior by stating:

*The land in the interior is very good. It is productive land. But it should not be too far into the country. I personally prefer a house close by to my husband's workplace in Ambalangoda . . . We could build a temporary house on our land by the main road, but we don't want to live there anymore in case a tsunami happens again.*

Fearful recollections of tsunami waves, their aftermath, and a sense of anxiety about encountering another similar calamity, together with 'bettering' their standard of living, were prime motivators for those willing to move and settle in places away from the coastline. They all, however, iterated that equity and a sense of fair play were fundamental to their making permanent shifts to new locations. Impartiality was therefore an underlying motivator that shaped and influenced the resettlement process.

The ways in which social inequalities were ignored or exacerbated in the resettlement and rebuilding phase is also made apparent in the ways in which gender issues and relations were dealt with. These issues are the focus of the final part of this section.

### Gendered realities

Sri Lanka's property rights regime has been upheld as a feminist nirvana due to its bilateral and matrilineal inheritance patterns based on customary and codified law

(Agarwal, 1996; McGilvray, 1982, 1989). In much of the country, at the death of a husband/father half the share of the inheritance passes to the wife/mother and the other half is equally shared among the children, irrespective of their gender. In other words, there is no gender inequity in the customary and codified inheritance system. Eastern Sri Lanka is even more remarkable because property inheritance passes directly through the mother's line. Here it is only daughters that have a right to the parental (usually maternal) property, and usually property is divided among daughters—with sons leaving the parental home (and hence relinquishing any stake in it) upon their marriage.

These gender-equitable property rights regimes started to come under gradual assault during the 1980s through the Mahaweli Accelerated Development Programme (Rajapakse, 1989). Somewhat disturbingly, a lack of awareness of these property rights regimes was also common among philanthropic and non-governmental organisations<sup>7</sup> actively involved in building permanent shelters for tsunami-affected communities.

*No one has mentioned to me about the property rights regime and the bilateral inheritance system. . . Right now, the land is bought in the name of the foundation and at the time of handing over the new house, a legal title is done for each block of land and house. This is usually in the man's name. . . We didn't think about instances where the house before belonged to women. (Head of a philanthropic foundation.)*

*This land used to belong to me. This is where we had the house. With the new house, the title of the house is in my husband's name. (Madhavi, a 26-year-old woman from Hikkaduwa.)*

Consequently, families were permanently resettled with title deeds of the land or house granted to men, which overrode generations of customary and codified inheritance patterns that are gender sensitive. Such resettlement processes, ignoring the need to protect and promote prevailing gender sensitive legal systems, is hardly evidence of 'building back better'. Institutional actors involved in 'putting houses in place' need to be made aware that their role is not simply about philanthropic goodwill (Bermeo, 2006). Their involvement must also entail responsibility to preserve those pillars of society that promote social egalitarianism, in particular gender equality. Efforts to rebuild communities is not simply about constructing homes—as significant as this is for affected families in dire straits—but also about embedding these endeavours within wider structures that already have a gender inclusive base. A failure to do this is likely to create new tensions that may undermine long-term social stability because of the close relationship between everyday violence and inequitable property ownership. Indeed the evidence of this in post-tsunami Sri Lanka contrasts sharply with the positive impact of joint-titling that is increasingly instituted in neighbouring India (Datta, 2006). Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p. 15) point out that land rights is one of several factors that international agencies have had to deal with, but which lie outside their competencies. This has led to the displacing and overturning of customary laws protecting women's rights

and interests, which can all too easily be read as the entrance of patriarchal power through the backdoor.

The way in which international agencies sometimes ignore the need to enhance egalitarian gender relations can be seen in their lack of awareness of gender norms. This was evident in the designing of resettlement homes. The spatial organisation of the home is gendered according to different kinds of modernity (Domosh and Seager, 2001; McDowell, 1999). The explicit or implicit *gam-udawa* (village re-awakening)<sup>8</sup> impulses motivating non-governmental institutional actors to help rebuild communities meant that the practices of everyday life in these communities were not taken into account when the new homes were designed. This was particularly marked in the case of the Colombo-based architects who designed houses in rural areas with half-walled kitchens—totally unsuitable for the windy coastal belt. Women complained that the winds would blow away the flames from their kerosene stoves, making cooking very onerous. Half-walled kitchens also failed to offer them a private space since it left them open to the gaze of passers-by: as a result, the kitchen was not a space they could go into without ‘proper’ clothing.

As this last point indicates, the disjuncture between lived and designed spaces was not just a matter of practicality. It was also about local gender relations, which Colombo-based architects perhaps did not begin to consider because the urban kitchens of the middle and upper classes are mostly used and run by domestic servants.<sup>9</sup> As this suggests, urban–rural differences, as well as class and regional hierarchies, were clearly highlighted through the actions and attitudes of institutional actors involved in helping to ‘build back better’ the tsunami-affected communities.

Gender relations arose as an issue at multiple levels. The spatial organisation of transitory shelters was particularly marked by gender discrepancies. Conversations with men and women in the fieldwork sites repeatedly came round to two particular examples of this. In the temporary dwellings in Hikkaduwa, the common bathing and latrine facilities were a point of consternation. Many residents felt that the openness of these amenities was not sensitive to the needs of the young women and teenage girls who had to use them: for families with relatives in the interior, their wives and daughters had to make use of these facilities every few days. Kimali expressed her annoyance regarding this matter in the following way: ‘Can I get my teenage daughter to use these facilities? It is all open, see, take a look! I send her to my relatives place every few days so that she can shower there without any harassment, gazing and taunting.’

The transitory camp in Batticaloa was no different. The lack of sensitivity to gender proprieties was heightened because the men’s and women’s washing facilities were located adjoining each other. ‘We have one shared toilet for four houses,’ said Amita from Batticaloa. ‘There are no fences to separate the facilities between men and women. It is all open.’ Consequently, there have been accusations and counter-charges of improper sexual behaviour, family squabbles and domestic jealousies between the residents. Such social strains within the camp could only be expected. What is more surprising is the repeated failure on the part of humanitarian

agencies working in Eastern Sri Lanka to show some awareness of and sensitivity towards local gender relations—especially as previous academic-activist research has pointed directly to such concerns (de Alwis and Hyndman, 2002; Hyndman and de Alwis, 2003).

### **An unfinished agenda?**

Disaster relief is widespread, particularly in the developing world. Sri Lanka is no exception. Given its bloodied recent history of protracted ethnic conflict, humanitarian relief has become part of the country's social fabric. However, aid agencies lapsed in a number of ways in the post-tsunami recovery process. To some extent, this reflected the wider context of 'isolated and short-term approaches' funded by a media-driven public outpouring of aid, which led to a failure to assess the actual needs of affected communities (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p. 16). This has been attributed to a variety of factors within the humanitarian and aid community, but as a result an important opportunity was missed to put 'affected communities in the driving seat' (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p. 22).

Based on my fieldwork, this paper has sought to build on emerging analyses that point to the diverse ways in which affected communities themselves negotiate the recovery process due their different ethnic, class and gender positionings. In Southern and Eastern Sri Lanka, the multiple intersecting spaces of inequality and existing ethnic politics surfaced regularly in our numerous conversations with local communities. These dynamics underscore the fact that existing fault lines and socio-economic vulnerabilities are unlikely to dissipate merely due to the massive outpouring of aid and external interventions. Indeed, where there was a lack of awareness of local social and political relations, the rebuilding of communities was either exacerbating exclusionary sensibilities or sharpening uneven socio-economic processes. In other words, it is crucial to pay close attention to the prior complexities inherent in local communities because of the profoundly discriminatory manner in which 'pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others pay a higher price' (Seager, 2006, p. 3). Particularly troubling was the undermining of customary matrilineal and bilateral property rights laws—the vanguard of emancipatory spaces for women in Sri Lanka—through post-tsunami gender-blind practices of house building and property titling.

Phases of recovery, however, are open-ended rather than strictly defined (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p. 15). It is likely to take years, if not decades, for communities affected by the two disasters afflicting Sri Lanka (war and the tsunami) to overcome the adversity they continually face. The agenda of rebuilding communities remains unfinished. In this respect the open-endedness also offers the possibility for more optimistic and promising scenarios. The recognition that natural disasters may be triggered by sudden earthly forces (such as an earthquake) but become colossal disasters because of prevailing political and economic conditions (Pelling, 2001) is a nascent step towards acknowledging that these tragic moments do not offer clean

slates full of new opportunities for disaster management. The concept of ‘building back better’ should instead be aimed at enhancing opportunities for affected communities by reducing their everyday structural vulnerabilities. This requires paying constant attention to their class, ethnic and gender positioning and being actively aware of the intersections between social, economic and political processes. With this approach, ‘putting houses in place’ becomes not just a physical endeavour but also a process embedded in local social relations.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper was inspired by Domosh and Seager’s similarly entitled book *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (2001). I gratefully borrow and revise their title while acknowledging that they are the authors of such creativity.

<sup>2</sup> Dunham and Jayasuriya (2000, p. 101) point out how war-affected regions in Sri Lanka have witnessed deterioration in mean incomes with a sharply negative impact upon health, education and other welfare service provisioning. National level indicators therefore need to be treated with some level of caution.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed figures on education, per capita income and other related indices see Sarvananthan (2007).

<sup>4</sup> This is noted as Nochchimunai in the map below.

<sup>5</sup> My background is in the English-speaking, middle-class society of Colombo.

<sup>6</sup> Telford and Cosgrave (2007, p. 21) point out that the ‘urgency to spend money visibly, worked against making the best use of local and national capacities’. This point is worth emphasising because a Batticaloa-based NGO had worked with the community on awareness-raising activities for the past six years. Goodhand et al. (2000, p. 404) note that such process-based work is ‘the most contingent and the most difficult to engineer’ and hence such activities tend to be overlooked by the aid community. SURIYA, the NGO in question, continued to be involved with the community in such rights-based activities, especially in attempting to ensure that the community

- voiced its legitimate concerns to the relevant governmental bodies. Their commitment to the location is unsurprising and supports the analysis that NGOs grounded in the lived realities of communities acquire a commitment to work through difficult and different tensions, which transient development workers and institutional actors may not necessarily show (Ruwanpura, 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> The exceptions were NGOs that worked within a feminist mandate. These held legal clinics to help make women from affected communities aware of their codified property rights (de Mel, 2007, p. 8).
- <sup>8</sup> This refers to efforts by Sri Lankan organisations and institutions to build villages that conform to a romanticised urban view of homogenous, harmonious village life.
- <sup>9</sup> In one instance, the philanthropic organisation involved was in the midst of rectifying these gendered mistakes. In a similar vein, de Mel and Ruwanpura (2006, p. 32) note the equally key point that ‘while the lack of consultation by the state is denounced unequivocally by villagers’ the limits to facilities provided by philanthropic and NGO institutional actors had to be elicited, and ‘even then the criticism was carefully tempered with praise for on-going efforts’. This points to the complex power nexus ‘in which visible philanthropic foundations acting as service providers occupy a position of hegemony. . . which also marks a shift of social and political capital from the state to the individual/private sector’ (de Mel and Ruwanpura, 2006, p. 32).

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