

Research Summary: Conflict Prevention through Infrastructure Reconstruction

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Introduction

This is an account of a project to enhance the capacity of local stakeholders to deliver conflict sensitive infrastructure reconstruction programmes within the North and East of Sri Lanka, and thereby help to prevent future conflict in the region. The project incorporated a research study into the relationship between physical infrastructure reconstruction programmes and social cohesion among conflict affected people, and a series of dissemination events aimed at raising awareness and understanding among key stakeholders. The research study was designed to provide an insight into the critical components of adequate infrastructure and to establish how local people are currently engaged in the reconstruction process. Grounded theory was used as the target society was emerging from conflict and therefore it was important not to go with pre-conceived ideas. The findings of the study were based on the results of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the infrastructure reconstruction process.

Background

While war in the N&E of Sri Lanka has ended, peace, especially sustainable peace, is not so easily forthcoming. Post-conflict reconstruction supports the transition from conflict to peace through the rebuilding of the socio-economic framework of the society. However, there is a need to pay special attention to conflict dynamics that may arise through development work¹.

Sri Lanka has suffered terribly as a result of ethnic war; 30% of the territory and 15% of the population were devastated by the clashes between the government's armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2009, Sri Lanka was at the lead of populations displaced – as a proportion of population – in the South Asian region. Interest in helping to support a lasting resolution to the Sri Lanka conflict has led some to focus efforts on strengthening incentives for peace and reconciliation, including encouraging conflict sensitive approaches and supporting post conflict recovery & reconstruction². Physical infrastructure – broadly defined to include services that are essential ingredients to quality of life and economic activity³ – has the potential to connect or divide communities. Reconstructing physical infrastructure after a war can help in the peace building process through restoring dignity, providing much needed employment opportunity and promoting conflict sensitive approaches. Any physical reconstruction needs to be tailored to the needs of the affected people, including diverse ethnic groups. Precautions need to be taken to avoid repeating mistakes that occurred during post tsunami reconstruction efforts – lack of consideration of ethnic co-existence and taking steps to avoid any future potential conflicts among the communities⁴. Conflict also tends to deepen gender discrimination and disadvantages faced by women⁵. Similarly, young people, who have been born into and often participated in the war, must overcome persisting inequalities and differential access to opportunities⁶, while the elderly face challenging economic constraints and often require special care⁷.

There is growing recognition that reconstruction requires inter-disciplinary solutions; those professions traditionally involved in reconstruction of infrastructure – the construction industry – must understand the sensitive environment in which they will be operating⁸. Successful transitions to peace require a comprehensive approach and development assistance will play a key role in this process. However, a "mechanical-materialist approach" to reconstruction is incomplete and inadequate insofar as it neglects the dimension of human relationships. Understanding the needs of those living in the region will be vital if reconstruction is to help prevent future conflict.

In summary, persisting inequalities – vertical and horizontal – and differential access to opportunities can increase social tension and may lead back to conflict. Reconstruction programmes must be sensitive to the varying needs of different groups, while also addressing inequalities in access to infrastructure. Infrastructure that connects rather than divides different constituencies must also be identified and prioritised. In order to achieve this, there is a need to explore how different constituents affect the post-conflict reconstruction process, and how development interventions, and cultural contexts may change that role.

Methodology

It is against this background that the *Conflict Prevention through Infrastructure Reconstruction* project was initiated. The project is part of a longer term study into the relationship between physical infrastructure reconstruction programmes and social cohesion among conflict affected people in the North and East of Sri Lanka. This phase of the study aimed to provide an insight into the critical components of adequate infrastructure and to establish how local people are currently engaged in the reconstruction process.

The project was funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the British High Commission in Colombo. It was implemented by an international partnership of UK and Sri Lankan Higher Education Institutions and Sri Lankan Construction Professionals. The University of Salford's Centre for Disaster Resilience worked in partnership with the Social Policy and Analysis Research Centre, University of Colombo; the Department of Sociology, Eastern University; the Department of Sociology, University of Jaffna; and, the Chamber of Construction Industry Sri Lanka. Consequently, the project was able to draw upon a team of academics and professionals who represented the built environment, sociology and archaeology disciplines. The partnership also benefited from having partners who were based in the conflict affected regions of Sri Lanka, where much of the fieldwork was undertaken.

The study used grounded theory^{9 10} with the goal of establishing the relationship between physical infrastructure reconstruction programmes in post-conflict environments and social cohesion among conflict affected people in the region. Empirical data was from districts in the N&E provinces of Sri Lanka. Grounded theory was selected as the situation in these districts was still sensitive. Society was only recently emerging from conflict and therefore it was important not to go with pre-conceived ideas; some conventional theories and concepts may not have been applicable. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with community leaders within the target provinces, and with representatives from government, construction industry actors, and local and international NGOs. These were used to gain an insight on what the critical components are in adequate infrastructure, and how local people were engaged in the reconstruction process. Interview and focus group protocols were jointly developed by academics from the fields of built

environment, sociology and development. Analysis involved use of a defined coding paradigm¹¹ to examine causal conditions, phenomena context, intervening conditions, action strategies and consequences in the data. Towards the end of the project and in order to raise awareness of the project findings, a series of seminar events and meetings was held with key stakeholders, including central & local government and the construction industry.

Imaginative communication of research results

A majority of the projects studied were donor funded and state agencies were responsible for implementation. Typically, contractors came from outside the region; they often had their own supplies and workers brought from outside the host community. Many local people felt that they did not have opportunity to engage in construction work, and gain experience and economic benefits from this activity.

In many situations, the beneficiaries belonged to diverse communities with a history of inter-community conflict and tension. The projects had not been planned in such a way as to reduce such conflicts and tensions. Indeed, some projects have reinforced them, rather than reducing them and this was evident in both the North and East. Comparative analysis revealed an improved understanding of how infrastructure reconstruction programmes affect social cohesion, including concerns in infrastructure development surrounding: marginalisation of beneficiaries; segregated infrastructure that reinforces divisions; inadequate consultation with target population; and, a lack of economic opportunities for local people despite large-scale construction activity.

It was apparent that much of the physical infrastructure development has been doing little to strengthen relations among communities. Indeed, it is sometimes exacerbating existing tensions or creating new tensions. Much of the infrastructure development is externally driven and there is inadequate consultation with affected and often vulnerable groups. The resultant infrastructure does not meet the needs of marginalised groups, and can create or heighten tensions within and/or among ethnic / religious groups. Although the reconstruction activity has the potential to contribute to and stimulate the local economy, many local people and small construction firms feel excluded from the construction process and its benefits. They are unable to benefit through jobs and market access. They also believe that the large overseas or 'external' contractors that are undertaking much of the work in current projects are unfamiliar with and/or unsympathetic to local cultural needs.

In order to increase the likelihood that these findings will be used in practice, an impact plan was written by the research team. Target groups of the project – including key stakeholders and decision makers involved or affected by the reconstruction process – were identified and engaged at an early stage with a view to raising awareness and understanding of how infrastructure can connect and divide communities. This early engagement was intended to contextualise the findings, but also increase the likelihood of the project achieving a tangible impact upon on identified target groups and beneficiaries through obtaining support for sustainable implementation of post-conflict recovery and rehabilitation practices. The impact plan included a clear set of activities that promoted collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the life of the project, rather than merely through dissemination at the end of the project. These activities included stakeholder engagement workshops, non-technical summaries, and direct interaction of the research team with the beneficiaries in local languages. Some other policy influences that are envisaged include the shift of attention among certain government policies: to use much needed infrastructure reconstruction projects as a basis to promote inter-ethnic co-existence among conflict-affected communities. With this goal in mind, a policy briefing was written and communicated to key stakeholders in order to raise awareness of the project findings.

Conclusion and future work

The project has contributed to the capacity development of local stakeholders to deliver conflict sensitive infrastructure reconstruction programmes within the North and East of Sri Lanka, and thereby will help to prevent future conflict in the region. Engagement of key stakeholders through this project has helped to highlight the concerns, opportunities and challenges among them, but it also suggests that there remains inadequate understanding or monitoring of the socio-economic impact of infrastructure projects. From the results of this study, it is apparent that much of the current physical infrastructure development is doing little to strengthen relations among communities. As such, the scale of the problem is larger than originally understood and there remains an urgent need to further sensitise key stakeholders regarding the principles of socially inclusive and equitable infrastructure development, including donors, national and local authorities, and contractors. There is also a need to develop and institutionalise grievance redress mechanisms for marginalised and vulnerable groups such as ex-combatants, youth, women and disabled, and to monitor and evaluate the social and economic impact of infrastructure development. Finally, there is a clear need to increase market access for the North and East construction industry, including local entrepreneurs and labour.

¹ International Crisis Group (2009) Asia Report No. 165: Development Assistance and Conflict in Lanka: Lessons from the Eastern Province. International Assistance Group.

² Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2009) Retrieved from <http://fco.gov.uk/en/about-thefco/country-profiles/asia-oceania/sri-lanka?profile=all>.

³ Palliyaguru, R. & Amaratunga, D. (2008) Managing disaster risks through quality infrastructure and vice versa: Post-disaster infrastructure reconstruction practices, *Journal of Structural Survey*, Vol. 26 (5), pp. 426-434.

⁴ Pandagoda, D. (2009) Views of the Conflict affected persons/IDPs and host communities. Seminar on Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, 19 June 2009, Galadari Hotel, Colombo.

⁵ Hettige, S. & Salih, Z. (2010) Concerns of Youth Affected by Civil Conflict in Sri Lanka In *The Challenge of Youth Employment in Sri Lanka* (ed). Gunatilaka, R., Mayer, M. & Vodopivec, M. The World Bank.

⁶ Hettige, S. (2008) Youth and Peace building in Sri Lanka. Draft Country paper prepared for the Commonwealth Youth Ministers' Conference, April, 2008, Colombo.

⁷ MacDonald, D. (2010) Assessment Report: The Vulnerability of Older Persons in Post-conflict Osh, Kyrgyz Republic. HelpAge International.

⁸ Haigh, R. and Amaratunga, D. (2010) An integrative review of the built environment's role in the development of society's resilience to disasters, *Intl. Jnl of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*, Vol. 1(1), pp11-24.

⁹ Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Sociology Press.

¹⁰ Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory, procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.