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FOREIGN AID AND CONFLICT

POST-TSUNAMI FISHERIES' RECOVERY INTERVENTIONS IN THE WAR-AFFECTED TRINCOMALEE DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA

Philippe Gazagne

The effect of humanitarian and development interventions in conflict zones has recently become subject of intense debate. Badly managed or uncoordinated assistance may have a negative influence on relations between social groups, exacerbate animosities and violence, induce protracted hostilities and undermine local capacities (Anderson 1999). The recent tsunami has been followed by an unprecedented level of international solidarity and flow of resources into Sri Lanka. My ongoing research aims to highlight the effect of post-tsunami rehabilitation interventions on existing socio-economic structures and power relationships, with a focus on both the positive and negative consequences of these processes for transition from war to peace. It will more specifically study the case of stakeholders and institutions related to the fishing trade, as this sector is characterised by complex economic relations and conflicting fishery rights.

In March 2006, after a brief but intensive period of empirical investigation in the Trincomalee area[1], a new cycle of violence broke out, with frustrating but also fruitful consequences for my inquiry. Through direct observation, collection of testimony, following rumours, and the reading of reports, I have experienced how this latest cycle of violence erupted. This has taken me into fresh considerations that I will share with you here, as an introduction to my research. Through a dialogue between theory and empirical observation, by looking first at the challenges of building peace in so-called post-conflict phases, then throughout a brief glance at the nature of the fisheries trade system, this article will emphasise the need to better visualise one fundamental aspects that conventional humanitarian and development practices are frequently blind to, namely relationships and their inherent mechanisms of power.

Insights from the reality of volatile «post-conflict» phases

The case of Sri Lanka demonstrates to what extent peace building is an extremely complex process. So-called post-conflict phases are extremely fragile and include persistent episodes of violence[2]. My recent field research in Trincomalee has taken me into the temporality of peace processes. Building peace is not a linear endeavour. I had been carrying out research in a fairly calm atmosphere, questioning my interlocutors about trade rivalries and

[1] The district of Trincomalee is one of the areas most disputed and most badly affected by violence in the island. One of its characteristics is its demography: the three main ethno-religious communities of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are roughly represented in equal proportion.

[2] Since the ceasefire agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002, different patterns of violence have arisen, particularly in the East, which has become an area of great concern. The emergence of the Karuna break-away faction of the LTTE and other forces have notably exposed the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict. Since the recent presidential elections, one can observe mounting levels of violence.

complementarities in the area. The collected statements, although pragmatic and severe, appeared nevertheless to be full of hope, with eloquent ways of downplaying investigated divisions. Subsequent to the assassination of one key local Tamil political figure and to a bomb explosion in the vegetable market in Trincomalee town, the scenery suddenly changed dramatically, escalating into severe periods of violence. In the midst of claymore mine explosions followed by ruthless night searches by security forces, targeted killings, riots organised by gangs burning shops and looting goods through the trading area, a deep sense of mistrust and fear became easily palpable.

Looking at the interplay between the local social fabric of relationships and the wider political economy of violent conflict

The fact that markets and businesses were targeted is suggestive of trade and entrepreneurship rivalries in Trincomalee, where enmities have been acute, particularly within the fish and the vegetable markets. Peace and violence are not in the exclusive hands of a small number of war entrepreneurs and political actors. In the literature on the political economy of civil wars, most analyses have focused on the interests of and the resources mobilised by war factions (Keen 1998; Ballentine and Sherman 2003), therefore giving us a narrow perspective on the dynamics of violence. Much less attention has been paid to the micro-level practices of civilians caught in violent conflict. Facing security restrictions, narrowed livelihood prospects and access to commodities and markets, civilians in war-affected eastern Sri Lanka have adapted their socio-economic strategies, seeking to combine different sources of income. Having experienced the outbreak of this latest cycle of violence has deepen my conviction that there is a need better to understand how these micro-level strategies interplay with violent conflict[3].

Through inspiring talks and observations, a series of questions came to my mind. Looking at the spark that lightened the recent and past episodes of violence, what struck me was that the events at their origin, be it the erection of a Buddha statue, the killing of schoolboys, the assassination of a local leader, the desecration of a mosque or a temple, local elections or all manner of frightening rumour happen in many places in the country. Why is it that some localities turn to violence and some do not, when they experience times of tension? One hypothesis can be found in Ashutosh Varshney's research (2002), looking at Hindu-Muslim relations in India. According to his findings, cities with cross-cutting networks and institutions seem to be more capable of controlling and extinguishing violent crises. The existence of Hindu-Muslim traders cooperatives, cross-communal business organisations and trade unions as well as joint community development committees appears to have manifest effects in reducing violence.

As it has been nicely expressed by Lederach (2005), peace building requires a vision of relationships. The most difficult task when it comes to building after a war is not the physical infrastructure but the reweaving of the social fabric of relationships. Older times of hostility have produced a complex process of mixing and «violent unmixing» of people (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001) and stimulated significant social change. Socio-economic structures, institutions, and relations between individuals and social groups have been shaken and contribute to different patterns that may give rise to either constructive or destructive processes. These transformations need to be understood.

The fish trade system, a complex web of transactions...

The fisheries sector was recently severely shaken by the tsunami and was subsequently massively targeted by aid programmes. In this context, this section briefly introduces the fisheries sector and some significant issues affecting «fishing communities». At the surface, fish trade may look rather disconnected to violent conflict and the war economy. However, there are scores of issues related to conflict in the fisheries sector: security concerns, conflicting fishing rights, time and space restrictions imposed by the state, uneven development, smuggling, sensitive seasonal migratory behaviour, forced displacement, etc.

My field research started with a swift, informal inductive learning process, asking naïve queries to more or less informed interlocutors that I had approached assuming they were experts[4]. For someone who has never caught a fish in his life and whose closest experience of fishing happened

[3] In Sri Lanka, similar micro-level approaches to the conflict have been taken by Goodhand *et al.* (2000) and Korf (2005), but remain largely neglected.

[4] Their level of technical knowledge happened to be surprisingly extremely disparate.

to be a famous Hemingway's novel read two decades ago, it was quite an innovative experience to get into an odd jargon connected to the art of «how to get a full size harvest on board a 32-feet vessel». I questioned a wide range of individuals: government officials (namely an assistant director of fisheries, a fisheries inspector and a marine engineer assistant), private actors such as traders, auctioneers in the fish market, fish vendors, fishermen, one trader's accountant, a chairman and a secretary of a fishermen cooperative society, programme officers for bilateral and multilateral agencies, and international and national non governmental organisations.

Through the collection of statements, lengthy and time-consuming explanations, as well as short comments, hesitant or suspicious silences that came out of my conversations, through the compilation of pretended wages, profit or catches and the analysis of traders' book accounts, I came to realise the magnitude of trade in fisheries, which encompasses a compound and complex web of socio-economic relations. In this learning process, it clearly appeared that generic terms commonly used by many practitioners such as «beneficiaries» or «fishing community» lack conceptual clarity and are descriptively weak. A first step to an enhanced awareness of the mentioned issues would be to recognise the heterogeneity within the «fishing community» (Creech 2005, 2006). First, households' economic levels differ substantially according to the kind of activity they are involved in. The fish trade system involves many stakeholders, from fish labourers, fishermen who own or rent fishing craft and gear, fish vendors who purchase fish from the fish landing sites and sell them to the *mudalalis* who distribute the fish within the district as well as to other districts, etc. The *mudalalis* might be from outside the fishing community and play a preponderant role in linking the local production system to national/international markets, thus in determining the price of the fish, in shaping market conditions, distribution of profits and financial relationships.

One of the very few anthropological study of a fishing village in Sri Lanka (Alexander 1995) underlines how essential the credit-trade relation is in fisheries, significantly more pronounced than in any other sector. Thus the fish trade system strongly depends on credit and one of its important aspects is the extent of trust between the actors. This trade system through *mudalalis* and its associated web of other transactions has for long been commonly criticised as exploitative of the fishermen (FAO 1997). On the other hand, middle men are also considered by fishermen as a vital component to overcome the uncertainties inherent in the highly perishable and fluctuating character of fish production. Nevertheless, the reciprocal character of their relationship seems to vary widely, from a fine reciprocity where by the fishermen gain a guaranteed market and support for unexpected or exceptional events (such as repairs, ceremonies and other superfluous consumption), to intimidation involving even physical violence. Thus, the content of middlemen-fishermen relationships fluctuates considerably, according to the local political economy: distribution of power and interests, ownership of means of production, dependency on external market (Alexander 1995), etc. These local political economic settings have been significantly altered by the war.

... in multifaceted interplay with a protracted conflict

In the Trincomalee district, local contexts have been quite variegated, both in geographic terms and over time. Geographic and time restriction of fishing, destruction of fish preservation facilities, division into government-held and LTTE-held areas and related restrictions, higher risk of movements and forced displacement have altered economic structures and processes: the interdependence patterns between stakeholders, the weakening, creation or splitting of fishermen cooperative societies, often along ethnic lines under the patronage of political actors, the establishment of novel marketing routes and isolated supply chain, etc. Along with these processes, one can observe many lines of complementary and conflicting relationships, among fishermen, traders, fishery authorities, security forces, the LTTE, other political groups, etc. It is thus in the midst of intense social transformation that a storm of project interventions have been implemented in the aftermath of the tsunami, targeting affected fishing communities. Interventions have mostly focused on the restoration and provision of fishing assets such as boats, nets and engines, either directly to the beneficiaries or through fishermen cooperative societies.

Better assess local power structures

In a context of scarce economic alternatives, any input becomes a contested resource. Humanitarian and development interventions in conflict settings cannot be implemented without a clear understanding of indigenous economic and political relations. Organisations acting in such environment have an ethical responsibility to pre-assess the local context, in order to prevent negative and unintended consequences on the conflict dynamics. This supposes that one gives oneself

the means of understanding a plurality of local social logics. The fisheries sector encompasses complex economic relations and potentially conflicting power structures that have linkages with the wider political context. How has this vast post-tsunami provision of resources transformed these socio-economic structures and power relationships, in which violent conflict is embedded? How do political and economic actors adjust and interact in order to get access to resources provided by aid agencies or control over targeted institutions? What are the positive and negative effects of these processes from a perspective of transition from war to peace? To answer these questions, we need to visualise two fundamental features that conventional practices frequently omit from the picture, namely power relationships and the past that stretches behind us. By combining social network analysis and multi-sited ethnography, this ongoing research aims to offer a longitudinal and dynamic perspective in order to unveil the plurality of social logics and relations that cut across institutions and reveal the way in which different social categories such as ethnicity, occupation, class, caste, generation and gender interact in these processes.

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Philippe Gazagne is currently conducting his PhD research in development studies (at the Graduate Institute in Development Studies in Geneva). He has carried out several fieldworks in war- and tsunami-affected eastern Sri Lanka since 2003. His research project aims to gain understanding of the interrelations between development and conflict, with a special focus on assessing the effect of international processes (institutionalised assistance and transnational migratory networks) on credit-trade relations, power and conflict at the local level. In this perspective, he has been reflecting about critical issues raised by development practice in conflict-affected settings and ways to make conflict sensitivity more tangible for development work.

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