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Lessons to be learnt from Tsunami Reconstruction Process for the development of the North and the East of Sri Lanka

On this fifth anniversary of the Tsunami, Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) remembers with great sadness all those who lost their lives, the surviving family members and those who lost their property. It is time to reflect on and learn lessons from the great challenges that we faced with the tragedy when Sri Lanka stands an exponential development potential aftermath of the war. Such reflection would be, in turn the true tribute to those who lost their lives and others who survived with enormous difficulties.

In 2007, TISL obtained complaints relating to the reconstruction process with the principal objective of drawing attention of the relevant authorities to such problems. The complaints received were perused, categorized and forwarded to the relevant government agencies. However, there was no response from any of the government agencies on them. The major issues raised in the complaints were sub-standard quality of the newly received houses, petty corruption by the government officers at the local level and high politicization in the selection of beneficiaries. These problems still lie unexplained undermining the level of confidence among the general public about the state. Thus unfortunately Sri Lanka has failed to learn lessons of governance challenges from post tsunami experience.

The lack of legitimised right to information law or any practice promoting right to information for the people was one of the key problems that marred the tsunami reconstruction process with a significant element of information withholding and a general clamming up by government officials when such information is requested. When information was requested about the utilization of the money received during the recovery process, some government officers refrained from providing them possibly due to fear of persecution by higher authorities in their department and ministries.

It is extremely important to draw attention to these issues in the context of reconstruction in the North and East of Sri Lanka where immense damage is caused on human lives and property together with the fact that huge sums of capital is flowing into the region at present. The three major concerns which the government failed to address in the Tsunami Reconstruction Process will equally be applicable and will jeopardise the post- conflict development in the North and the East unless necessary action is taken immediately. These are: a) the need for participatory development process including planning and implementation through legitimate public institutions based in the areas themselves, b) the restructuring of centralised, narrowly politicised and non-representative administrative mechanisms so that they are more accountable and transparent to local communities, and c) the de-politicisation of the communities at the local level. Similar to the Tsunami reconstruction process, the reconstruction of the North and the East poses a great risk of corruption because of large sums involved, the lack of local accountability or even participation of beneficiaries and the excessive centralization of decision-making.

A brief Financial Analysis

The following table shows the financial situation of Tsunami Reconstruction work by the end of the year

2006. This is the money received through the government approved channels by various donors. This information was obtained from the Development Assistance Data Base (DAD) in March 2007. However, this information is not currently available for the public as the DAD website doesn't exist anymore.

TISL's effort to obtain the most recent financial information was met with lackluster responses by the officials. TISL's observation in this regard was that officials were either reluctant to divulge the proper information or that they did not have the accurate figures about current expenditure status.

Available statistics as per March 2007:

Committed (USD)	Disbursed (USD)	Expended (USD)
2,126,771,858	1,075,375,348	603,443,908

Note:

- Committed funds - Funds promised by the donors
- Disbursed - Funds handed over to the implementing agencies
- Expended - Funds spent on various projects

According to the available information, there is a difference between the committed and the disbursed funds. When inquired about this difference, the implementing agencies informed TISL that the amounts of money initially promised was not disbursed by the donors, mainly due to the deadlines of these projects not being met. Some donors have not been satisfied with the progress of the projects and have therefore withdrawn from their commitment after paying the first installment.

The difference between the disbursed and the expended has been a controversial issue that does not have a credible explanation. While some officials were reluctant to divulge the information, there were some responsible bodies, who implied that the funds have been utilized by the government for other purposes.

There is no precise evidence to explain the missing sum of USD 471, 931,440. Some government officials rejected the fact of such a missing amount though they have failed to give any explanation about the figures produced.

When the higher officials at Auditor General's Department of Sri Lanka were contacted in December 2009, TISL was informed that there is no audit conducted on funds received for Tsunami Reconstruction process since the last audit by the former Auditor General in 2005.

Conclusion

- a. TISL believes that it is a prime right of the people in Sri Lanka to know the true picture of the Tsunami recovery process. Therefore, the government should take every possible step to assure and respect the right to information of the general public of the country. Thus an audit should be done by the government to explain the utilization of the money received and the challenges faced.
- b. All steps should be taken to arrest and remedy the existing problems in the recovery process. The participation of the public is paramount in this regard.
- c. A special Committee of the Public Accounts Committee or an Independent Commission be constituted to review any remaining issues relating to the Tsunami Recovery Process and make necessary recommendations and lessons learnt as related guidelines for the future.
- e. TISL reiterates the importance of collating and documenting all the information of Tsunami 2004 in relation to both the relief and recovery process. Such deliberation is important in the context of current development in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Unless the political leadership is committed to these recommendations, similar unfortunate experience will be repeated in the reconstruction of the North and the East of Sri Lanka.

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Notes to Editors:

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) is the National Chapter of Transparency International (TI), the leading global movement against corruption. TISL is one of over 90 Chapters in the Transparency International Global Network fighting the menace of corruption.

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