



## Flood Recovery: A Case Study from Sri Lanka

The two days of torrential rains in May 2003 accompanied by heavy winds and landslides caused the worst floods Sri Lanka has known since 1947. Nearly 750,000 people were affected and 35,750 houses damaged in six districts: Ratnapura, Hambantota, Matara, Galle, Kalutara and Nuwara-Eliya. According to official estimates of the government, approximately 235 people died and 17 people went missing. Almost 10,000 people lived in camps set up in temples, schools in highly unhygienic conditions.

<i>Impact Summary</i>	
<i>Description of damages</i>	<i>Magnitude</i>
Deaths	235
Displaced persons (May 2003)	9,930
Temporary camps (May 2003)	56
Damaged water wells (May 2003)	16,056
Damaged schools	154
Landslide prone locations	260
Houses destroyed	10,024
Houses damaged	25,726

The impact on the social services and utilities was similarly considerable, amounting to rehabilitation costs of nearly USD 70 million. The national government swung into action as soon as the magnitude of the disaster was gauged. A Cabinet Sub-Committee was put in place with a senior Minister as chair to coordinate response activities. A coordinating room (Colombo Operations Unit) was set up with assistance from the UN.

### The Intervention

The army and navy were deployed to the affected areas to distribute relief items including food and non-food items to the people, and to collect relevant data. Task forces comprising of relevant ministries and UN agencies were established in a matter of days for Water and Sanitation, Health, and Food Security, and Education. UN Agencies, including UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, and FAO, actively supported the government through relief activities, needs assessment, and quick impact projects. UNDP Sri Lanka deployed UN Volunteers (UNVs) from UNDP India, with technical expertise in disaster response, to the affected districts where they worked directly with the District Government Agents (GAs). Simultaneously, major infrastructure like power lines, main roads, and telephone lines were restored as a matter of priority, marking the transition from relief to recovery which included rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged houses, as well as other physical and social infrastructure.

The recovery programme launched by the government with assistance from international agencies, donors and local NGOs aimed to restore services and help the affected populace return to their pre-disaster level of functioning. The major objective was to complete the rebuilding of damaged houses within 99 days.

Irrigation structures and flood protection systems were repaired with available funds. Private sector, NGO, UN and international agency contributions were received for rehabilitation of damaged wells, schools and some minor irrigation structures.



The largest component of the recovery programme was the reconstruction of housing that commenced in July 2004 with World Bank support of SLR 1500 million (approximately USD 16 million), actively involving the communities. Various actors were involved in this massive housing reconstruction process in nearly 50 Divisions of affected districts, including the beneficiaries, NGOs, village, divisional and district administrations, professional institutions like the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (SLIA), technical agencies like the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO), the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) and the Cabinet Sub-Committee that over-looked the whole process.

The reconstruction process began with a decision on the financial assistance for each affected family. Three categories of assistance were made available based on the extent of damage. The first category of beneficiaries received financial support of SLR 100,000 (approx. USD 1,000) and a piece of land for families which had to be relocated due to landslides destroying not only their dwelling units but also the land on which they had settled, or due to threat of landslides. The second category of families which had completely lost their houses, due to landslides or floods got also SLR 100,000. Families whose houses had been partially damaged got up to SLR 40,000 (approx. USD 400).

NBRO clearance on safety from landslides was made mandatory for each site where houses had been damaged. Different types of plans to suit various locations, site and soil conditions, slope and other criteria were prepared by SLIA and NHDA for adoption by the community. In cases where NGOs provided material or financial assistance, the government accordingly reduced its contributions to ensure equity.

A few districts managed to finish the reconstruction in the anticipated time and families were able to move back into their own houses enabling them to recover.

### **Lessons Learned**

While there was a lot of international attention and support during the emergency response phase, a major disaster in another part of the world diverted much of the attention from the government appeal. Not much aid was received afterwards.

Many lessons were learned from the disaster, such as the need for proper institutional arrangements and mechanisms both for response and the longer-term recovery process at the national, district, and divisional levels. The categorisation of damage to a house based on the severity, for example was arbitrary, and highly subject to bias and influence. Day by day, increasing numbers of partially damaged houses were shown as fully damaged houses.

The district and divisional secretaries acutely felt the shortage of technical officers to monitor the construction which made it difficult to keep within set targets.

Some NGOs provided bigger houses than the government programme which caused resentment on the side of beneficiaries.

Many of the houses that were damaged by landslides should not have been located in those sites, as these were high risk areas according to landslide hazard zonation maps of the NBRO. The challenge remains to learn from the disaster and to incorporate the risk assessment and mapping into the normal development process.

While much of the attention was focused on recovery from physical damage, psycho-social or trauma counselling for the affected populace was largely ignored in many areas.

### **Recommendations**

The National Disaster Management Centre needs strengthening and to be vested with more authority to play an important role in the response and recovery process. District and divisional focal points should be established, mirroring the functions of the national centre, and formal plans drawn up.

The lessons learnt during the recovery should be incorporated into the ongoing development planning and implementation process at all levels.

There has to be stronger coordination between NGOs and the government organisations to ensure that valuable resources- both material and human- are not wasted in duplication of efforts.

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