

Coping with Catastrophe: Balancing Indigenous Efforts with International Aid

By
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In their own unforeseeable and tragic way, the giant tsunami tidal waves set off by a massive earth quake off the Indonesian coast on December 26, 2004 created a community of sorrow and suffering that momentarily united the people of the Indian Ocean Rim and concerned people all over the world. Televised images of the catastrophe and the agony of those affected led to a worldwide reaction of shock, concern and solidarity. Members of the South Asia Institute, with its long history of engagement with South and Southeast Asia, were similarly affected. Many were approached by the media for expert interviews, and, particularly in view of the reputed branch office of the South Asia Institute in Colombo, for more detailed field reports. At a personal level, members of the Institute contributed funds generously through the Association of Friends and Supporters of the SAI. These funds were transmitted to specific projects in Sri Lanka like one concerned with the rebuilding of a school.

The disaster left behind a number of questions with regard to the modality, morality and efficacy of aid, the competing and converging responsibilities of the state and civil society in coping with disaster and the policy options of international financial and political organisations. Now that the immediate crisis is over and 24-hour news coverage has moved over to other trouble spots of the world, the time for sober reflection and stock-taking of the events and their aftermath has come.

The questions that we need to reflect on cut across most of the disciplines represented in the South Asia Institute. An important political question concerns the reactions of governments and media in the Indian Ocean region itself. While most opened up their national territories, air space and territorial waters to international relief agencies, the Indian decision not to follow suit caused general surprise and incomprehension.

The scholarly community at the South Asia Institute, engaged in the research and teaching of development, disaster management, public policy and ecology in the region is looking once again at the questions that the catastrophe has brought to light. The questions touch upon politics, economy, history and geography to the more intimate aspects of identity, vulnerability and trauma. Have the governments of the region, some of whom have acquired the capacity to launch space satellites and other sophisticated technology, failed their people, by not anticipating the crisis and installing a tsunami warning system? More pertinently, what mechanism can be conceptualised for a regional coordination of relief when natural disasters strike, particularly in the case of those whose intensity is well beyond the coping capacity of individual states? How can one decide what are the most important local needs? How can aid be made effective in the long-term, and sustainable? What kind of foreign aid by the way of disaster relief is relevant and appropriate in the sense that it does not stymie indigenous institutional innovation? Most delicately, what policies should be made to protect the identity and dignity of vulnerable populations from the negative side-effects of private relief organisations?

These questions featured prominently in a podium discussion organised by the South Asia Institute on February 17, 2005. The intention behind the interdisciplinary seminar was to bring together experts, policy makers, the media and concerned members of the public. Held in the heart of the Old Town of Heidelberg, the occasion generated a lively debate. The South Asia Institute plans to draw on the insights gained in the process to put together an interdisciplinary research project on disaster management which will hopefully help answering some of the questions raised above.