

Post-Tsunami Recovery Efforts Unintentionally Contribute to Emerging Social Vulnerabilities

Key Findings

Social vulnerability in post-tsunami recovery is not well understood

- Whilst a considerable amount of literature on the post 2004 Tsunami recovery has been produced, it is characterised by a lack of primary data and substantiated arguments about the causes of social vulnerability emerging in the recovery efforts.
- The material reviewed often includes a poor description of the process by which data and information are generated, and whilst vulnerability is mentioned it is rarely systematically investigated.
- Due to tremendous public pressure and a competitive environment between stakeholders, organisations prioritise the speed of recovery and the effectiveness of aid delivery. Little explicit attention is paid to identifying vulnerable groups and the underlying causes of their vulnerabilities.
- In the absence of relevant data and substantiated arguments it is difficult to obtain a good understanding of who is vulnerable in a post-disaster situation, the reasons for their vulnerabilities, and what measures might be most appropriate and effective in reducing them.

New vulnerabilities are emerging during the recovery

- Of the 11 vulnerable groups identified in the selected literature, the following are considered the most vulnerable: displaced people; women; children; families; farmers; and victims from other emergencies.
- People engaged in 'traditional' livelihoods such as fishing and farming receive more attention in the literature than those who derive their livelihoods from emerging sectors, such as small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- The identified vulnerabilities relate predominantly to social and institutional factors and these are not always captured in the sectoral and bio-physical assessments that dominate the literature.
- New vulnerabilities are emerging during the longer-term post-disaster recovery. 75 % of the vulnerabilities identified in the literature can be attributed to the recovery process. Aid delivery and other external interventions were identified as the causes of vulnerability for almost 50% of all vulnerabilities documented in the literature.





The research was motivated by findings from vulnerability and capacity assessments carried out by SEI in Sri Lanka in collaboration with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Sri Lankan Red Cross Society (SLRC). These had raised concerns that new vulnerabilities had been emerging in communities severely affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, most notably amongst marginalised social groups. Acknowledging that vulnerability is a concept that is often referred to but rarely systematically applied in practice, SEI conducted a meta-analysis of 382 selected documents relating to post-tsunami recovery with the aim to identify key factors that have contributed to hazard vulnerability and emerging vulnerabilities in post-disaster recovery in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.



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The findings indicate that post-tsunami relief and recovery activities in Sri Lanka and Indonesia have in some cases contributed to the exacerbation of existing, and the emergence of new, social vulnerabilities. Hence, there is an urgent need for actors working in post-disaster recovery to learn to build social resilience against hazards and other socio-economic and environmental shocks.

The explicit identification of vulnerable groups and the consideration of how to best address their vulnerabilities and build resilience must be based on an improved assessment of social vulnerabilities. Resilience building for (and by) vulnerable groups is only one of many competing agendas humanitarian 'communities of practice' are subject to. Recovery efforts are often governed by relationships that are continuously redefined by a diverse set of actors, and is characterised by the urgency of aid delivery, competition between actors and the politicisation of aid.



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Consequently, many recovery efforts do not explicitly aim to reduce the existing underlying factors that contribute to social vulnerabilities to hazards and limited attention is paid to the process by which knowledge is generated. Many so-called 'fact finding' and 'verification' missions undertaken by agencies include very little information on the sources of information and contain generalised findings and common "truths" that are assumed to be relevant in the context of quite specific vulnerable groups.



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This policy brief is based on the research report "Vulnerability in the Context of Post 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami Recovery: Lessons for Building More Resilient Coastal Communities. A Synthesis of Documented Factors Contributing to Tsunami Related Vulnerabilities in Sri Lanka and Indonesia", by Rasmus Klocker Larsen, Fiona Miller and Frank Thomalla, published by Stockholm Environment Institute (2008).

Recommendations

To enable a substantiated and knowledge driven debate for sustainable recovery

The value of vulnerability assessment is that it enables a focus on the vulnerable groups and identifies the underlying causes of negative outcomes, allowing for a clearer prioritisation and focus for action.

A mental and methodological shift must occur in order to address the emerging vulnerabilities that are currently a serious challenge for a sustainable recovery in coastal communities.

Substantiating arguments based on primary data, and providing a detailed account of the methodology with which insights are obtained is vital in enabling a constructive data and knowledge driven debate for sustainable post-disaster recovery. It also allows for improved monitoring and evaluation, and greater agency accountability.

To support inclusive and transparent negotiations of contested decisions and policies

To prevent aid delivery in coastal communities from adding to pre-existing resource conflicts and community tensions, contested benefit distribution and coastal zone policies must be openly debated and fairly resolved.

Recovery can only act as a platform for social change if the persisting culture of gender inequality and marginalisation is challenged by transforming the high awareness of gender inequalities into action.

There is a need to improve mechanisms for cooperation between actors of the recovery community and to acknowledge and move away from the highly politicised nature of aid delivery. Transparent assessments of the state of corruption are needed.

To shift from controlling the recovery chaos to enabling people in their own recovery

Without holistic people-centred approaches that enable people to take control of their own recovery, the disconnect between international and local responses and the mismatch between interventions and the underlying vulnerability contexts will persist.

Actors in post-disaster recovery need to become enablers of vulnerable people's recovery, self-organisation and coping.

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