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## Provision of Social Infrastructure for Resettled Victims of the 2004 Tsunami: Evidence from the grass roots

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### Abstract

2004 Indian ocean tsunami is one of the deadliest disasters in the history of Sri Lanka, which led to the loss of family members, employment, inherited lands and houses, regular income, and former social standing of the coastal population of the country. Studies show that social infrastructure is one of the critical components in promoting social well-being of disaster victims, particularly for the affected population who had lost their tangible and intangible assets and had been resettled away from their familiar environments. Hence, the aim of this study is to examine the adequacy of social infrastructure provision for the resettled population. Case study approach has been adopted as the main method for this study. Accordingly, five tsunami resettlement sites were selected as cases in the Galle district, which is one of the highly affected districts in the country. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, informal discussions and field observations were employed as data collection techniques. The findings of the study revealed that the provision of essential social infrastructure facilities to improve the quality of life of the people in one resettlement site has been highly successful. While in others, either the basic facilities had not been adequate, or they were provided at the initial stages but since then has been neglected by both the external agencies as well as the communities. As a result, most of the settlers are facing hardships even today, and some have moved back to their original coastal settlements, at least partly due to poor social infrastructure in the new settlement.

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## 1. Introduction

Social infrastructure is of vital importance to promote the social well-being of the victims affected by disasters, particularly those displaced populations who had lost their tangible and intangible assets and had been relocated away from their familiar environments. Thousands of people who were displaced from their homes or residences due to the Tsunami that occurred in December 2004, were resettled either in their former villages or newly built villages. The introduction of a 100-meter-wide buffer zone on the coast had also prevented the affected people from settling down in their former homes. The government, local private institutions, international non-governmental organisations and local and foreign business firms provided houses and other infrastructure facilities for the settlers in the new villages. When rebuilding the lives of these victims, social infrastructure facilities had to be provided along with houses. It is not possible to re-establish the lives of victims without services such as education and health facilities as well as financial services and transport. Therefore, reestablishing the lives of victims and constructing social infrastructure had to take place simultaneously. In this context, the main focus of the paper is based on the consideration of social infrastructure as an effective means of promoting community resilience after the tsunami.

## 2. Literature review

On December 26th 2004, one-third of Sri Lanka's coastal area was devastated by the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Around 552,000 people have been displaced during this event [1]. Implementation of the buffer zone policy of the government to restrict the reconstruction along the coast, made the displaced people more vulnerable. Consequently, it prompted a considerable amount of involuntary relocations [2]. Gunawardena and Wickramasinghe [3] stated that, among tsunami-induced displacements, 40% of the households have resettled in different locations.

Moving people to a different location generally, results in social disruptions as communities lose access to their social infrastructure and their capacity to produce community resources [4]. The displaced communities have often been resettled in existing facilities in the host environment or new developments. Practices and systems for waste disposal, energy usage, health and safety procedures, and environmental care would be different or inadequate in the new built environment compared to that which the displaced community was used to. Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid in this context to enable the displaced community to the built environment in which it is relocated. Also, it is important to minimise the incompatibility between the lifestyles of displaced community and what the built environment and its infrastructure facilities offer.

Numerous studies have been undertaken immediately following the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami, particularly from 2005 to 2008 to examine the short and long-term impacts of interventions on settlements. Shortly after the tsunami relocations, it has created tension among the people who received new houses and their hosts [1]. Belgian Red Cross [5] explained this tension as, the host community's resentfulness towards the settlers for the disruptions they cause and the stress they put on the common resources. Cox and Hamlen [6] state that housing, transportation, water, power distribution, transportation, and food security are resources related factors that determine the disaster resilience of a community. Alterations in the level of these factors and inadequate provision of the social infrastructure would change the resilience of the community towards potential future disasters.

However, many donor organisations that sponsored new settlements for tsunami victims have included various social infrastructure facilities in the settlement plans. Such infrastructure has often included sports facilities, multi-purpose community buildings, medical centres and children's parks. However, in most settlements, such facilities have not been maintained and fallen into disuse over time [7]. As a consequence, the competition for social infrastructure could weaken social networks and reduce cooperation between communities and lead to resettlement failures [8]. Therefore, identifying the adequacy of the social infrastructure for the communities is necessary to take measures to sustain resettlements in the long term.

The perusal of studies reveals that an analysis of the adequacy of social infrastructure facilities provided at the initial stage of resettlement and the identification of issues that have emerged in these settlements due to the inadequacy of

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