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Mainstreaming Social Transformation in Recovery and Development Projects: Case of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

There have been several key programmes for recovery and development in Sri Lanka which provided integrated support to returnees, host communities and other vulnerable groups with different needs, capacities and aspirations in the conflict affected areas. These projects and programmes have significant social transformational potential, but how to design and implement recovery and development interventions in order to bring about sustainable social transformation is a question that has not been fully answered yet. In this context, this research paper analyses series of projects which were designed to promote social transformation through its recovery and development interventions and suggests an analytical framework to mainstream the social transformation interventions into recovery and development. The methods involved the evaluation of ten selected recovery and development projects in northern and eastern region in Sri Lanka using qualitative data collection techniques including focus group discussions, key informant interviews and direct observation. Finally, the analysis presents a path to follow when mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects through the exploration of strategies, approaches, practices, experiences and lessons learned.

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1. Introduction

Sri Lankan civil war which was ended in 2009, brought significant hardships to the whole country affecting society, natural and built environment and the economy of the country. Though the whole country was affected by the war, northern and eastern region was the main theatre of the devastating armed conflict between the Sri Lanka security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam that lasted for over three decades. This war had a devastating

impact on hundreds of communities in the war affected region, destroying lives, property, social networks and infrastructure. Community life was severely disrupted during and even after the period of conflict. In this context, revival and revamping of community life has been a major task in the recovery and rebuilding process. Accordingly, there have been several key programmes for recovery and development in Sri Lanka that provided integrated support to returnees, host communities and other vulnerable groups with different needs, capacities and aspirations in the conflict affected districts. These post war recovery and development interventions have a significant social transformational potential but whether this potential is realised or not depends on the way these projects are designed and implemented. The most critical question is how to design and implement recovery and development interventions in a post war situation in order to bring about sustainable social transformation – be they direct or indirect interventions. Within this context, this paper reports the key findings from a major exercise to collect, collate and present the experiences, results and lessons of “mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects” in a systematic way, based on post-conflict reconstruction projects in Sri Lanka.

Further, this paper explores the concepts, strategies, tools, processes and outcomes of various social transformation (ST) interventions which have been aimed at bringing about a major transformation in the communities. Finally, it suggests a path of change to be followed in mainstreaming social transformation into recovery and development projects. It is intended to make the strategies, approaches, practices, experiences and lessons accessible to a wider audience of practitioners, government institutions, donors, civil society organisations and the public who are embarking on similar interventions, replicate positive impacts and avoid duplication as much as possible.

2. What is social transformation?

ST is defined as a fundamental shift in the way a society is organised. Theoretical literature on ST is diverse and wide ranging and emanates from a range of social sciences and other disciplines [1]. Social transformation implies a fundamental change in society, which can be contrasted with social change viewed as gradual or incremental changes over a period of time [2]. However, the most widely used term is *social change* which often refers to a spontaneous process of change brought about by societal level transitions. Much of this literature [3] & [4] deals with structural change and does not pay great attention to the role of social actors. Further, there has been an increasing recognition overtime of the role of collective and individual actors in bringing about change in the way societies and communities are organised. The focus here has been on the role of social movements, historical figures and social planning. While the former refers to organised social groups agitating for change, the latter refers to the activities of governments, planning agencies and civil society organisations that are aimed at bringing about changes at societal, community and even household levels. Accordingly, the concept of social change broadly refers to change at a macro societal level over time, or how diverse relations among individuals and groups (economic, social, cultural and political) change and adjust under the influence of forces of change and resistance. More recently, some development oriented civil society organisations have been inspired by the notion of theory of change [5]. The key assumption underlining this notion is that it is possible, based on knowledge and experience to configure the conditions needed to achieve the desired change in a given context [6]. [7] identified the need for on-going reflection and adaptation in order to ensure that civil society programmes are conflict sensitive.

The concept of ST as used in recent development literature seems to be akin to the notion of theory of change, rather than to the concept of social change as it appears in the classical social science literature. In this context, ST refers to a shift in the way communities are organized, either formally or informally, on one hand, to attain various social needs and goals and on the other to deal with external forces including other communities. More specifically, in this research paper, ST is understood as a process whereby intra-community (i.e. within a community) and inter-community (i.e. between communities) relations, including cooperation, conflicts, tensions, prejudices and discrimination – based on ethnicity, caste, religion, generation and socio-political affiliation – are transformed positively. In the North and East of Sri Lanka as well as selected areas both bordering the war affected regions and elsewhere, where the ST interventions have been carried out, various economic, social and political factors have contributed to conflict. As a consequence, ST is not simply a matter of restoring the pre-conflict status quo, but even changing some of the pre-conflict conditions in the communities. While the ethnic conflict followed the broad ethnic

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