



CRISE:

Centre for Research on Inequality,
Human Security and Ethnicity

IN BRIEF

Four imperatives for sustainable post-war reconstruction in Sri Lanka

Introduction

After 26 years of civil war and the loss of some 100,000 lives, Sri Lanka is grappling with the unfamiliar realities of peace. With the defeat of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the end of the war in May 2009, the small island nation has been propelled into uncharted territory fraught with opportunities and dangers for peace and development.

The most serious issue that the Sri Lankan government needs to tackle after the elections is the transition from war to peace, and a parallel transformation of the role and competencies of the state. The government displayed great determination and competence in its military strategy to win the war. It now needs to demonstrate an equal amount of determination in developing very different kinds of strengths if it is to win the peace.

Given the nature in which the war came to an end, and the consequences that this generated—in terms of the vast humanitarian crisis, the heightened international media exposure, and the demoralised and marginalised condition of Sri Lanka's Tamil community—this policy brief advances four key points that are of critical relevance at this juncture for sustainable post-war reconstruction and a successful war-to-peace transition in Sri Lanka:

1. The new government must offer a political solution to the conflict.

2. There must be a significant improvement in donor–government relations.
3. Post-war reconstruction must be open, participatory and transparent, and calibrated towards peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation.
4. The government and donors must focus on rapidly improving living standards, infrastructure and levels of economic development in the northeast to bring them into line with the rest of the country.

Context

Ethnic conflict: Sri Lanka's brewing ethnic conflict between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority exploded into open civil war in 1983. Tamil insurgent groups argued that since independence from Great Britain in 1948, the majority Sinhalese community, which comprises 74 per cent of the population, had steadily marginalised the Tamils in political, economic and cultural terms. They demanded the separation of historically Tamil-speaking northern and eastern provinces of the island, into a separate state of Tamil Eelam.

The war has followed a number of different stages since 1983, and has even involved several different protagonists, including at one stage, Indian peacekeeping troops. Between 1990 and 2009, the war was fought primarily between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE.

Ceasefire and tsunami: there was a long gap in the war between December 2001 and July 2006 when a Norwegian-mediated ceasefire was in force. During this time, Sri Lanka also suffered the devastating consequences of the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which in the course of one morning claimed the lives of almost as many people as had 20 years of civil war.

Eelam War IV: after the resumption of the last phase of the war in August 2006, the government steadily gained control of the areas previously dominated by the LTTE, first on the eastern coast, and then in the north of the country. Unlike previous Sri Lankan governments that aimed largely to contain the LTTE, or to pressure it into negotiations, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse fought an explicitly exterminationist campaign to uproot and destroy the rebels outright. Following a dogged 14-month campaign in the north, the war reached its end-game between January and May 2009, when a few hundred remaining LTTE cadres were surrounded in a small coastal strip, together with as many as 150,000 displaced Tamil civilians. It is assumed that several thousand civilians were killed in these last months of the war, which finally ended in May 2009, with the deaths of virtually the entire military leadership of the LTTE, including its supreme leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Economic geography of conflict: in describing the agenda for reconstruction in Sri Lanka, it is important first to recognise that the war affected a relatively small part of the

island, namely the northern and eastern provinces. Throughout the 26 years of war, the 2.5 million residents of the affected areas of the northern and eastern provinces suffered extended periods of acute physical and economic insecurity, reflected in the rising incidence of malnutrition, disease and psychological trauma.

Most people in the northeast have been forced to flee their homes at some point or another during the war—

often repeatedly and in many cases permanently. At one point in the 1990s, almost one million people, or more than one-third of the total population of the northeast, were officially registered as internally displaced while as much as one-fifth of the total Sri Lankan Tamil population left the country altogether, today forming a large international diaspora. Following the end of the war in May 2009, some 260,000 people, comprising most of the civilian



Trincomalee Fort, 2002.

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population of the former rebel-held territories in the north, were detained in camps pending security clearance and landmine sweeping in their villages.

Many towns and villages in Sri Lanka's north are damaged beyond recognition because of repeated artillery and aerial bombardment over two decades, and remain abandoned and depopulated. At the end of the war, the population of the northern district of Jaffna was 30 per cent lower than it was in 1981. Most major roads, railways and other infrastructure, such as electricity networks, are badly damaged or have remained in complete disrepair for two decades. Large areas of productive farmland were left uncultivated for years due to the danger of landmines, or because they straddled zones of frequent military contention.

Although the rest of the country was quite seriously affected by the war in a variety of ways, including suicide bombings and the militarisation of daily life, it bears little comparison to the scale, intensity and duration of human suffering and economic dislocation in the northeast. Indeed, the rest of Sri Lanka enjoyed steady rates of economic growth and global integration during the war years, and the country is, as a result, now classified as a middle-income country, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of USD 2,000 per capita (data that excludes the northeast).

Due to the legacy of colonial-era development, the north-east of Sri Lanka had, even before the onset of conflict, been a remote, arid and impoverished region. The contrast that ensued between economic growth in the prosperous south and destruction in the economically marginal north-east meant that this area became not just more impoverished in absolute and relative terms, but also ever more disconnected from and irrelevant to the island's economic development as a whole.

Four imperatives for reconstruction

1. Peacebuilding: the onus is on the Sri Lankan government to offer a significant and generous settlement to the Tamils, both substantive and symbolic, to ensure reconciliation and peaceful reintegration. The end of the war cannot be taken to imply an end to the underlying conflict. There are still serious problems of national integration, as well as with ensuring equal economic, political and cultural rights for all communities. Sri Lanka's Tamils are, for the most part, demoralised, exhausted and alienated. While they are relieved that the war is over, they are also deeply concerned about their future in the country. The government of President Rajapakse gained massive popular support among the majority community after the war, and has had an unprecedented opportunity to use this popularity in a far-sighted, statesmanlike and magnanimous fashion. While previous governments were always prevented from offering such concessions for fear of provoking Sinhala nationalist opposition, the end of the war has

created has created possibilities for progress in ways that did not exist before. There is, however, only a relatively narrow window of opportunity to pursue such measures. The history of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is littered with missed opportunities and failed statesmanship. The post-war moment and the unique historical circumstances that it gave rise to are transitory, and is already starting to fade in the ebb and flow of competitive party politics.

2. Rebuilding international relations: during the last phase of the war, the relationship between the Sri Lankan government and the international community, particularly Western aid donors, reached its lowest point ever. Now that the war is over, it is critical that all parties rise above the hostility and rancour of the war era to focus on the critical tasks at hand. Since early 2006, international donors have taken an increasingly critical stance towards the Sri Lankan government, especially on human rights and humanitarian-related issues. The government in turn, has been sharply critical of Western donors, United Nations (UN) relief agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and has made it more difficult for them to operate. The hostility between the two sides became acute in early 2009, when there was intense outside pressure on the issue of civilian protection, which the government interpreted as a Western-led campaign to rescue the LTTE from sure defeat.

Many donors are in the process of withdrawing from Sri Lanka and remain only to provide essential humanitarian support. Most international observers are pessimistic about the possibilities for positive change in Sri Lanka, and donors are either disengaging completely or are moving from an approach based on 'carrots' to one based on 'sticks'. The European Union (EU) is seeking to suspend Sri Lanka's preferential trading privileges and the US Department of State produced a report in October 2009 on possible war crimes.

The poor state of government-donor relations is a major obstacle to post-war reconstruction. It is important that both the government and international donors carry out a significant reappraisal of their attitude to one another and find ways to address each others' concerns in order to meet the urgent need for reconstruction. There are important reasons for donors to remain engaged and to offer vital peacebuilding support, for the political situation remains volatile, particularly with presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2010.

3. Participatory and transparent development: post-war reconstruction is not just an end in itself, it is also a means to an end—that is, achieving a permanent, just and sustainable transition from violence to peace. Given that development has historically contributed

to ethnic polarisation, it is essential that reconstruction is seen as inclusive and fair to all communities, and in particular that it does not further alienate the impoverished northeastern Tamils. Reconstruction is not just a technical exercise; rather, it must be imbued in form and in substance, with the concerns of rehabilitation and reconciliation, for otherwise it can become (in perception if not in reality) a mechanism for retribution and repression.

Very little is known at present about the government's post-war development plans, and this lack of information and communication with the affected communities is compounded by the absence of outside agencies and due to the overall uncertainty in the run-up to the 2010 elections. Current indications are that post-war development is likely to be heavily militarised, with economic projects situated in special high security zones carved out of depopulated civilian areas. In the absence of any communication, many Tamils are concerned that development will in effect become counter-insurgency by other means. There are, for example, widespread perceptions among Tamils that there is a hidden agenda of demographic transformation under way through the settlement of large numbers of Sinhalese in historically Tamil areas.

There is very little factual information with which to confirm or refute these perceptions, but it would clearly be in the long-term interests of peacebuilding and reconciliation that there is transparency and clear communication of the goals and process of reconstruction. A stable transition from violence to peace requires a broad-based, participatory approach that takes account of the needs and specificity of the areas involved. The danger is that otherwise, development may contribute not to sustainable peace but to renewed forms of violence and conflict.

4. **Equalising living standards, reconnecting economically:**

given the vast differences in living standards, economy and infrastructure between the northeast and the rest of Sri Lanka, post-war reconstruction must focus on equalising living standards and economic reintegration. Unlike many war-torn regions, northeast Sri Lanka is favourably situated between regions of relatively high growth and increasing prosperity to the

north and south. By upgrading the northeast's transport, communication and economic infrastructure to national standards, and by investing in employment creation and positive forms of private sector involvement, the northeast could gain and grow from national, regional and international sources of economic investment and positive spillover effects:

- **National:** Sri Lanka is a relatively small island, and the livelihoods of farming and fishery households could be improved significantly just by granting them better access to national markets—currently impeded by travel restrictions and the poor road network.
- **Regional:** Sri Lanka's war-torn northeast lies between the high-growth economies of southern India and southern Sri Lanka, and it could benefit significantly from better access to those nodes of global connection and prosperity.
- **International:** the million-strong global Tamil diaspora could be an important source of economic investment, return-migration and knowledge transfer, but this requires a more substantive return to normality, as well as greater confidence among the diaspora about personal and economic security.

Conclusion

These four imperatives can help link reconstruction to peacebuilding and convert the present post-war situation into a sustainable post-conflict scenario. The main constraints lie within the government, and to a lesser extent the donor community and the Tamil diaspora.

The present uncertainties over the peace process, donor relations and the development agenda are to some extent transitory, a result of the uncertainty and flux in the run-up to fresh elections in 2010. What this implies is that the domestic ground realities in Sri Lanka can potentially change significantly by mid-2010. In the interests of sustainable peacebuilding, it is crucial that donors remain engaged with Sri Lanka and do not lock themselves either into disengagement or into punitive and hostile forms of engagement.

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