

A People's Process for Post-Tsunami Rebuilding

The Colombo Statement

26 April 2005

The tsunami that struck our coastal and island communities in Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Somalia, Thailand and other countries on the shores of the Indian Ocean on 26th December 2004 was completely devastating. Hundreds of thousands were killed, are missing or injured, and millions displaced, with their livelihoods devastated. In Somalia, apart from the impact of the tsunami, the churning up of radioactive and toxic waste earlier dumped in their seas, has had severe impacts on health and environment.

People from all across the world responded to the disaster with tremendous compassion and generosity. Billions of dollars were donated to rebuild the lives and livelihoods of the survivors. Our governments and the international agencies operating in our countries that have jointly taken on the task of making this happen have almost all declared very positive guiding principles acknowledging the need to consult and empower the affected communities.

However, four months later, hundreds of thousands of the affected people are still living in desperate circumstances amidst complete uncertainty about their future. In many cases they have been reduced to the state of passive, subservient receivers, as immediate relief is dumped hurriedly without consideration of their needs and desires or of the problems of poverty and in some cases conflict in which they were living even before the disaster. Even more disturbing, aid has not reached certain invisible sections of affected populations, particularly those not seen to have been directly affected by the tsunami.

While we greatly appreciate the sense of urgency among all people who donated to relief and reconstruction efforts, the compulsion to disburse such funds within short-term time targets leads to the undermining of local structures and organizations and reinforces current inequitable structures and processes. It restricts possibilities of being guided by long-term social development perspectives. This calls for greater dialogue between people of contributing and receiving countries, in order to increase appreciation of grassroots realities.

In most of our countries, the tsunami rehabilitation is being used to push through neo-liberal agendas that are being resisted strongly by people's movements. In Sri Lanka in particular, where control of the rebuilding process has been handed over to private interests, decisions are being taken on the basis of vested corporate interests. The pressures that exist in some countries to push poor communities away off the coasts must be seen in this light. The traditional rights to coastal lands is being denied, as is their right to make informed and independent decisions on relocation.

It is in this context that fishworker, farmers and people's organisations, regional networks, national and international NGOs and development agencies, working in tsunami-affected areas in India, Indonesia, Maldives, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, met in Colombo on 25th and 26th April 2005.

While there are many differences between our countries in terms of post-tsunami rehabilitation, there are also commonalities, such as lack of coordination in aid delivery, inappropriateness and inequity in aid disbursement, top-down and inappropriate policies for relief and rehabilitation, lack of financial and policy transparency, and lack of community participation.



We are united in the belief that the serious problems that remain to be solved in all our countries must and can only be addressed through a people's process that recognises that all resources pledged in the name of affected people genuinely belong to them and must be used in the way that they see fit. This can be achieved by setting up reserve funds, to be managed and administered with representation from affected populations. These funds must be available for long-term use and should be transparent and accountable to local people's organizations.

It is essential that systems for representation of affected people's organizations in planning and decision-making bodies set up by national governments with multi- and bilateral institutions, and for continuous monitoring must be set up. This has been reiterated at previous meetings of this kind, held in Bangkok and in Medan. The rights of affected populations to information, in language and forms accessible to them, must be ensured.

We emphasize the importance of developing collaborative strategies that bring together the donors, the actors and the people who are affected. We commit ourselves to building such networks at all levels for monitoring the processes from the perspective of the people.

We reaffirm the fundamental principle for post-tsunami rebuilding: the need for people, particularly the affected people, to be the owners and therefore the designers and decision makers of the process of rebuilding.

Endorsed by the participants