

# PREVENTING CORRUPTION IN POST-TSUNAMI RELIEF & RECONSTRUCTION OPERATIONS: LESSONS & IMPLICATIONS FOR SRI LANKA

## *A BRIEFING NOTE FROM TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL SRI LANKA*

An expert meeting on Corruption Prevention in Tsunami Relief, held during April 7-8, concluded with participants recommending a set of principles to prevent corruption in delivering relief and reconstruction assistance to tsunami afflicted areas. The meeting, organized jointly by the Asian Development Bank, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Anti-Corruption Initiative for Asia-Pacific, and Transparency International, was hosted by the Government of Indonesia on 7 and 8 April in Jakarta.

Representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka, several Sri Lankan Civil Society Organizations and members of Transparency International Sri Lanka participated at this meeting.

Key recommendations identified include:

- **All stakeholders** involved in the tsunami assistance must ensure transparency and accountability in their operations, in particular in the management of the financial flows. For this, up-to-date information must be actively made available to any interested party. Further, they should coordinate their respective operations and provide for independent oversight of project implementation.
- As the **affected people's** ownership of the relief and reconstruction process is essential, operations should build on their leadership, participation, and commitment to ensuring the best use of assistance. Relief operations must therefore contribute to the strengthening of local institutions, transfer of technical skills, and should promote policies aimed at preventing corruption.
- **Donors** should coordinate with governments and among themselves to avoid duplication of assistance schemes. They should also establish uniform procurement rules, maintain and publish clear books and records, and provide assurance of full internal and external controls. They must further make a careful assessment of the local conditions so that allocated resources match needs.
- **Governments** must involve affected people and civil society in decision making, ensure information dissemination, and provide easily accessible corruption reporting channels combined with effective mechanisms to encourage and protect whistle blowers.
- **Non-governmental organizations** play an important role in monitoring the relief and reconstruction process and in reporting any suspicion of corruption to authorities. They need to closely coordinate their activities with governments, donors and among themselves, while ensuring the

maximum involvement of all groups of affected people in priority setting and decision making.

How do these ideas resonate and apply in the Sri Lankan context? TISL strongly believes that certain enabling factors need to be promoted to make sustained impacts on ground.

- If there is one shining example of a positive beacon in the cross cutting experiences of effective aid relief from different parts of the world, it is “Political Will”. Clear, committed and cohesive policy statements and operational directions from the highest levels of the polity send a powerful message of uncompromising political commitment to walk the talk. TISL strongly feels that a visible political will to fight corruption in post-tsunami reconstruction, is conspicuous by its absence in Sri Lanka. The need of the hour is a strong and committed leadership to address the phenomenon of corruption that lurks ominously in the shadow of the various aid pledges that have been made in the wake of the Tsunami disaster. A good contrast is Indonesia, where the entire polity, cutting across all sectarian divides, has come out in one strong voice to address the emergent concerns.
- Strengthening of local institutions and networks is a must to ensure community ownership and participation in the relief and reconstruction activities. A point to emphasise is the need to identify and promote local expertise; there is a clear danger of applying universal templates to culture specific contexts and creating solutions which are impractical and worse, exaggerate existing problems.
- Empowering citizens and affected communities through enacting new legal measures like Right to Information, Disclosure Laws and Whistleblower Protection Acts will go a long way in ensuring effective public participation and collaboration in rolling back corrupt practices. TISL strongly calls for the urgent enactment of disclosure norms for all relief and reconstruction activities.
- There is a growing danger that all capacity building measures on accountability and transparency will be limited to the relief and reconstruction projects (mostly, due to donor compulsions) and will leave the larger domain of public institutions untouched. There is a strong need to strengthen critical institutions like the office of the Auditor General, independent commissions like CIABOC (Bribery Commission) and Parliamentary Oversight Committees. If these wider measures are not taken, there is a strong chance that particular projects will exist as “islands of integrity” in “oceans of corruption”.

The under-currents of conflict embedded into the social and political fabrics need to be kept in perspective while designing participatory structures for the implementation and monitoring of relief and reconstruction works. The idea of broad-based consortiums should be promoted to make public participation more inclusive and representative.