

Minutes of the Sri Lanka Roundtable

"Role of international actors in humanitarian and development aid: potentials and limits"

19 August, 9:30 – 12:30

KOFF / swisspeace, Bern

Participants: representatives of NGOs, academia, diaspora and government agencies

Facilitation: Christine Schenk (swisspeace, hereafter CS)

Minutes: Céline Morgan (swisspeace) and CS

1. Welcome & introduction

CS warmly welcomed the participants and the key note speaker and summarised some of the most recent political challenges: Since the end of the war the security situation and the economic situation has significantly improved but dealing with the past approaches and more space for political participation to enhance the integration of minorities remain contentious. Mahinda Rajapaksa has formed an internal commission to enquire into lessons learned and reconciliation focusing on the period 2002 to 2009. International observers and analysts consider this initiative as not strong enough to investigate about the war crimes committed by the government forces and LTTE during the last war. The UN has set up a panel of experts to advise the UN Secretary General on accountability issues, which has been opposed by the Sri Lankan (SL) government.

CS asked the participants to introduce themselves and to articulate their expectations towards the roundtable. Subsequently she outlined the mandate of the KOFF Sri Lanka Roundtable: it aims to offer an exchange platform for Swiss actors in Sri Lanka and thereby contributing to a coherent peacebuilding and networking among policy members, members of NGOs, interested academics and the selected members of the diaspora.

All participants agreed to apply the "Chatham House Rule"¹.

2. Input "Role of international actors in humanitarian and development aid: potentials and limits"

Geopolitical aspects

Sri Lanka sits at the crossroads of two significant contemporary geopolitical shifts. Firstly there is the rise and resurgence of China as a regional power; and secondly, many Western governments have lost their credibility in terms of morality, human rights advocacy and international law due to interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The SL government is masterful in its diplomacy and deals with a variety of governments which are sometimes at odds e. g.: Iran & Israel, India & Pakistan, USA & China. This puts SL in a unique geopolitical position.

¹ Given the application of the Chatham House Rule, the names and professional affiliations of participants and speakers will not be revealed. (available at: <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/about/chathamhouserule/>)

There is not one coherent policy among Western governments. One can observe a combination of military cooperation and humanitarian aid, which in some cases leads to the securitisation of relief. In addition, actors by themselves do not act with a coherent strategy. "There is not such thing as a unitary actor", e. g. within the US government, the Justice Dept. War Crimes Division supports accountability and the UN backed panel on human rights, while other agencies prefer to normalise relations as quickly as possible. In addition, the EU has cancelled the agreement on special preferences offered to SL under the EU's special incentive arrangement for trade (GSP+)².

Political context

Before the end of the war, many analysts considered the 13th amendment³ to be the minimum reform which could be implemented after the defeat of the LTTE. But it remains questionable whether it will be implemented. There are various signs that power will remain concentrated at the level of central government e. g. the control of police powers. Also questions related to land remain very contentious. It is still being more and more politicised, also through land purchase by the Minister of Development. The majority of ex-combatants of the LTTE are still in detention and access to them by the ICRC was suspended just over a year ago. Another issue that remains contested is the involvement of Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP) in government overtures to members of the Sri Lanka diaspora. The government uses diaspora activity as a threat under which to retain many emergency laws, but at the same time is reaching out to the diaspora for economic investment and assistance in building the new Sri Lanka. These developments coincide with a militarization of the public sector in the north and east and a strengthening of political networks linked to the Presidential family.

Economic situation

The physical security situation has significantly improved; the threat of bombs has vanished. This will have a significant impact on financial investments. Moreover, the mobility of the population and thereby domestic tourism has also increased.

The World Bank recently categorized SL as a middle-income country, which will have an impact on aid allocation for SL. SL has had an economic growth of 7% in the year 2009 and according to Mahinda Rajapaksa, SL might become the new hub of the Indian Ocean. Despite these assumed positive news there is heavy foreign debt. Some observers point to the dominance of funds assigned to the defence budget (rather than physical and social reconstruction). China provides loans at 2% interest to SL, much of which is used to purchase military equipment and infrastructure projects from China. In the July 2010 budget defence expenditure increased by Rs 24 billion while expenses on education and health decreased by 10% compared to the previous year. A wage freeze was announced for the public sector while bread and powdered milk prices went up and taxes on essentials were increased.

India and Sri Lanka have signed their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Interestingly, this agreement contains a clause on no inward flow of labour, possibly reflecting increased internal discontent with the numbers of Chinese workers brought in to work, for example on the new port in Hambantota. India works to investment and private sector models, through an \$800 million rail project in the north and \$250 million for 50,000 homes.

² See also <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=515> (accessed 23 August 2010)

³ Under the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of July 1987—and the resulting 13th amendment to the constitution—the Government of Sri Lanka agreed to devolve some authority to the provinces. But up to now, this 13th amendment did not come into force.

Social context

The social context in SL remains difficult: democratic space and freedom of expression remain tight and many social needs are not covered. There is concern among the humanitarian community that the small cash grants offered to returnees (who frequently have no home to resettle in but stay in interim shelter or with other families) will be stopped and earmarked funds channelled to reconstruction and infrastructure. The reconstruction efforts of the SL government mainly focus on infrastructure, but leaving aside the so called “soft intervention” like health, gender, psycho-social education. Most IDP camps have been dissolved, but support to returnees is still insufficient. All resettlement is overseen by the Presidential Task Force (PTF) and the Ministry of Defence.

The subsequent discussion focussed on two aspects, firstly, the positive impacts of the end of the war induced insecurity and the constant threat or reality of violence; and secondly, the possible improvement for the public sphere. It remains unclear, what (more Sri Lankan) approaches for democratic participation might be feasible. The model of a second parliamentary chamber, which might be one option to balance ethnicity and representation as an decisive factor within the political system, is currently being discussed. Meanwhile Sri Lankan Think Tanks and journalists continue to encourage debate and civil liberties as a strength and lifeblood for any democracy.

3. Mapping of involvement in reconstruction, rehabilitation and development and issues to be addressed

The table contains the main areas, where participating organisations are currently engaged. A more detailed description of the activities including the affiliation of involved organisations is included in the actors’ list.

Physical reconstruction	Economic reconstruction	Social reconstruction	Other
Housing projects in Kilinochchi (2 organisations), Vavunya, Trincomalee, central province	Cash project and livelihood generation in Jaffna	Distribution of wheelchairs, support to orphans and disabled persons	Demining in the North
Water rehabilitation project in Jaffna and Kilinochchi	Bakery in Jaffna	Tracing of missing persons and establishing links to families	Film project on Tamils living abroad
	Vocational training center for women in the North, East, Highland and Vavuniya	Support to children for schooling	
		Training for trauma counsellors	
		Support to victims of human rights violations	
		Support of sports activities in the Highland	
	Relief and protection through multilateral organisations		
	Reintegration and assistance to IDPs		
	Support to migrants (immigrants and returnees)		
Infrastructure rehabilitation and community development (until end 2010)			

In the future one agency might be engaged in a housing project in the North. Another organisation considers a project to strengthen women based on familiar project design.

Some potential and limits for engagement

Coordination with the government: While post-war recovery warrants support and good will for all in the population, some critics have called the current approach 'an economic solution to a political problem'. At the same time coordination with the government is a prerequisite not only to align aid, but also to establish trust, since the relationship between aid agencies and the government has suffered. Where, then, are the possibilities for forging a sustainable future? Some participants reported that local partner organisations, e. g. church organisations offer a better entry point for reconstruction efforts.

Resettlement and reintegration: The coordination between the government and aid agencies leaves room for improvement. One of the most important issues is land. Questions related to land titles, land entitlement, land grabbing remain contentious and bear potential for future conflicts. A roundtable on this topic, focussing on questions related to land in the North is envisaged.

Accountability and reconciliation: There is a precedent in the Dublin-based Permanent People's Tribunal which has held hearings and documented experiences during the war. The participants agreed that mutual grievances might be tackled through particular initiatives, since the atmosphere for a comprehensive approach to deal with the past currently remains less conducive. Finally, there is a recognised need for grieving and acknowledging the past according to local traditions and religious practice, be it Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity or other. After decades of suffering there is a great deal to come to terms with in order to move forward into the future.