

# The opportunities and challenges of social work interventions in disaster situations

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## Abstract

Professional social workers' positive contributions to humanitarian aid are seldom publicly acknowledged. If unaware of cultural sensitivities, locally defined needs and power relations, they are decried as oppressive. I use a research project to examine opportunities and challenges social workers have in developing empowering practices with victim-survivors of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. Whether reducing risks, mitigating disaster, providing relief or long-term reconstruction, social workers have much to offer. I suggest that the United Nations should include social workers more centrally within its humanitarian remit because social workers are professionally responsible for enhancing human well-being holistically.

## Keywords

Disaster interventions, green social work, humanitarian aid, post-disaster, reconstruction, risk, social work practice, Sri Lanka, sustainable development

## Introduction

Social workers have a long history of supporting those affected by disasters (Desai, 2007), but their substantial contributions in disaster situations supporting people – their families, homes and communities – survive the ravages of disasters rarely receive public recognition. Social workers can be victim-survivors. Many ignore their own needs to help others. However, they can also oppress people in these circumstances when they fail to listen to their expressed wishes, respond to cultural sensitivities and local traditions and understand local-global power relations (Razack, 2002). Delivering aid is difficult, complex and contradictory. The possibilities for making mistakes and working in ways that undermine an ethic of care to vulnerable groups and communities are legion. Thus, it is important to identify the characteristics of empowering approaches for assisting disaster survivors.

Given this complexity, I explore the opportunities and challenges that social workers face in humanitarian aid endeavours that seek to empower local communities and provide locality specific and culturally relevant practice when developing people's resilience before, during and after disasters.

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For this article, I draw on research data arising from the Internationalising Institutional and Professional Practices (IIPP), a project I headed. Funded by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom, it ran from 2009 to 2012 to examine humanitarian aid provided to victim-survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that destroyed much of the built infrastructure in south-western Sri Lanka and killed 40,000 of its people. As the research occurred years after the tsunami, the victim-survivors had had time to reflect upon those experiences and see whether the aid then provided was valued and had subsequent impact. While their assessments of what happened are clear, these survivors may not have remembered the detail that they might have done if interviewed earlier.

Disasters expose insufficient local capacity and require external assistance to overcome their effects and can create relations of dependency. This dependency allows interactions between local and external actors that can reproduce oppressive power relations, notwithstanding claims to being empowering. It does so by side-lining local actors and ignoring their wishes (Hancock, 1994; Hoogvelt, 2007). The IIPP research explored whether villagers participated in decisions taken by donors, which ones and how.

Overall, the IIPP research found two key approaches operating among agencies within the aid community: top-down approaches with rigid external criteria for delivering aid to passive recipients who *received* aid from generous donors and bottom-up ones that actively engaged local residents and organisations in aid decisions. Most donors followed top-down approaches that excluded local voices, a concern that echoed Duffield's (2010) findings. The villagers in this study preferred bottom-up, egalitarian approaches over top-down ones, especially in the post-recovery phase of a disaster, because these enabled them to control their own destiny.

The IIPP research contrasted two specific models that claimed to engage in empowering interventions based on partnerships with local organisations and residents – the institutional model (IM) and the professional practice model (PPM) with humanitarian organisations in general. Around 600 aid agencies participated in relief work in Sri Lanka's devastated landscape. Most left within 6 months; a few remained for long-term reconstruction. Of those that did, the IIPP investigated the IM and the PPM in great depth because both purported to engage local organisations and residents as full partners in their activities. The IM was initiated by a British University, and the PPM commenced under an international civil society organisation (CSO) concerned about social work education, training and research. To staff their activities, both models relied heavily on academic staff and student volunteers – the IM drew on all disciplines and the PPM on social work students on placements. Both had links with local organisations and universities which provided continuity despite changing student cohorts.

Students, a key staffing component in both the IM and the PPM models, are 'in-training' and require staff support including teaching about disaster interventions, cultural sensitivities and community engagement. Staffing to cover all these tasks can be difficult to arrange when models rely heavily on volunteer input. They also provide labour and respond to new opportunities. While the IM and the PPM remained over the long-haul, long-term retention of students was limited by their being available primarily for short placements. Some students stayed for longer periods and a few remained in Sri Lanka (Vickers and Dominelli, 2014). Student discontinuity worried interviewees.

Two organisational changes of note were the PPM losing several supporting universities during the first year, leaving Slovenian social work educators and students to sustain it. The IM changed location and management structure in 2013 by becoming a charitable organisation to ensure long-term sustainability. Both models became heavily involved in long-term capacity building, central to sustainable reconstruction and development post-disasters. Residents perceived the IM and the PPM as following bottom-up approaches. I consider their claims below. Social workers can adapt lessons from this research for their own practice.

## Contradictions in delivering humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid is delivered in times of disasters – ‘natural’ (e.g. earthquakes, volcanoes) and ‘(hu)man-made’ (e.g. chemical accidents, armed conflict, climate change). What constitutes empowering humanitarian aid relationships is also contentious. Some authors, for example, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2014), praise its life-saving initiatives during disasters and ability to strengthen resilience against future catastrophes. Other writers, for example, Klein (2008), decry the capacity of some to exploit disaster victim–survivors because multinational corporations have made humanitarian aid a profitable business that exploits local communities. Hoogvelt (2007) and Piliger (2005) contend that humanitarian agencies have become embroiled in global geo-politics, especially when their very safety is dependent on military support. Hancock (1994) shows that inappropriate aid is delivered to people whose voices are ignored.

The definition of a disaster as a shock emanating from a natural hazard is contested, with the literature increasingly arguing that the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘(hu)man-made’ disasters is becoming immaterial because all disasters, whatever their cause, have a human component (Dominelli, 2012b) and some hazards, for example, climate change, have slow onset or occur slowly. Other scientists maintain that climate change will result in more earthquakes and volcanic eruptions (McGuire, 2012). Regardless of type, disasters differ from ordinary calamities in that a community is unable to cope with the aftermath from within its own resources and requires external support (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), 2009). Whether (hu)man-made or natural, disasters are conceptualised as having three phases: immediate relief, recovery and reconstruction. Recently, preparedness, mitigation and prevention have been added, but largely as components of reconstruction. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments delivering aid generally determine their own priorities.

The impact of disasters on people and communities is exacerbated by social inequalities that have cultural, economic and political roots. Consequently, children, older people, women and poor people are the segments of the population most adversely affected by disasters (Dominelli, 2012a; 2013; Pyles, 2007), and social workers are often charged with reducing their vulnerabilities.

## Methodology

The IIPP research followed an interpretive ethnographic methodology which facilitated an exploration of the contested nature of international interventions and socially constructed realities. Data were collected to get ‘inside’ the social worlds of research subjects, thereby accessing the richness, complexity and specificities of their experiences (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) of humanitarian aid and the extent to which they felt that aid had been delivered within empowering partnerships. This approach does not produce a singular ‘truth’, but reflects the many voices that exist among participants while making explicit both the contexts in which the research occurs and the epistemological assumptions that underpin researchers’ own values (Klein and Myers, 1999). Because this study is primarily qualitative and based on one area, albeit investigated in-depth, the findings have to be interpreted with caution. While the findings report what was said to researchers, they do not claim representativeness or wider generalisability.

The author’s university granted ethical approval in the absence of such procedures in the Sri Lankan research sites. The data collected yielded transcripts of 368 interviews, 10 focus groups and 35 sets of field notes. Interviews and focus groups were usually digitally recorded and transcribed. If this was not possible, local researchers took notes endeavouring to replicate the exact words spoken as closely as possible and checking their accuracy with interviewees. Data were

coded through NVivo software using a grounded analysis method to enable themes, patterns and categories to emerge from the data (Mathbor, 2008: 37).

Triangulation between the accounts of staff, volunteers and villagers was facilitated through the use of one coding framework for all data sources. A set of open themes was utilised to code the data and subsequently produce a set of rough summaries of selected themes. These summaries were then employed to generate more specific sub-themes which were then regrouped into key areas of findings. The process of 'coding down' from the initial general themes to the specific sub-themes allowed similar or identical sub-themes to emerge within more than one broad theme, thus enabling internal verification. The ensuing 357 themes were grouped into 12 areas of findings, which were produced by an iterative coding process. One of these areas was villagers' experiences of aid. This article presents findings from this theme. The quotations selected illustrate wider trends in the data unless otherwise specified.

## Findings

### *Opportunities and challenges in top-down humanitarian approaches*

External agencies play significant roles in the recovery of devastated communities and individuals. These can be beneficial or exploitative and have far-reaching consequences for recipients. The IIPP project found support for both positions, although interviewees considered top-down approaches most likely to become exploitative.

Interviewees considered major players in the humanitarian arena like Oxfam, the Red Cross and Save the Children as particularly helpful during the immediate relief and recovery stages. The majority of villagers welcomed such aid especially during the immediate relief and recovery phases. Equally valued were early consultations about reconstruction initiatives capable of continuing in the long term. Only the IM and the PPM did this from the relief stage.

A few interviewees were relieved that some aid donors took charge to ensure that goods and services were delivered during the immediate aftermath of the disaster in difficult and chaotic conditions. Humanitarian aid workers were not the first to arrive on the scene, a point anticipated by the American Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Several villagers commented that 'We had no help for 24 hours when we were waiting on the hill'. Family members and those from inland villages were the first who came to help. 'The Red Cross arrived later'. FEMA asks those living in disaster-prone areas prepare for being without help for 72 hours. Social workers can utilise such knowledge to strengthen local resilience and mitigate risks before disasters, and during their preparation, prevention and mitigation phases.

Interviewees distinguished between aid received through a top-down approach during the relief phase when their major concerns were to get food, water, clothing and shelter and continuing this approach beyond it. They insisted that once safety and basic needs had been met in culturally appropriate ways because they were Buddhists, they wanted to decide what the future of their local communities would look like. This included who lived there and under what conditions. Villagers suggested that donors should think of having flexible approaches that responded closely to situations on the ground, the risks that local people perceived and the help they actually wanted. They suggested donors thought about what approach suited particular conditions during a specific disaster phase for a local community so as to support it more effectively and successfully. One interviewee wants flexibility as the norm:

You may have a plan when you go to a community but when you see the community you may have to change the plan. You have to be ready and flexible to change. (Villager)

Despite being valued for physically delivering aid, top-down approaches were heavily criticised. Respondents claimed that these ignored them in decisions made about their communities and spawned corrupt practices whereby those not entitled to aid received it. They identified local power holders – politicians, village leaders, the military and the police as favouring those they knew or had links with and deemed this a down-side of social networking during disasters. Some interviewees claimed that top-down approaches focused on physical support and delivering goods while neglecting psychosocial support, especially during the post-relief period when the reality of what survivors had lost and needed to rebuild had penetrated their consciousness. Social workers can help them regain emotional health by recognising this as grief over loss of family, friends and community. Kubler-Ross (1969) argued for psychosocial support across the following stages: of grief and loss, denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, to promote individual and collective resilience. This might have been useful because villagers were grieving the loss of family and friends alongside possessions, housing and livelihoods.

Children suffered most, having lost parents, relatives, friends and neighbours. Paedophiles preyed on some. Reuniting children with their families, sometimes extended family overseas, became a social work priority, especially to protect children (Dyb et al., 2011). In highlighting multiple vulnerabilities among children, one IIPP interviewee reported,

Children suffered a lot, they not only lost belongings but some of them lost one or both parents ... Children were caught by the waters and injured ... Some of them could not sleep at night ... They were scared to leave their mothers. (Villager)

Interviewees emphasised getting children into normal school routines to re-embed them within familiar surroundings because these were beneficial and provided safe places. School buildings and libraries had been major casualties of the tsunami, so residents asked donors for school books. Children helped each other by sharing notebooks and notes that had survived the disaster. Books became surfeit to needs by continuing to arrive when schools had secured sufficient numbers and requested other forms of aid.

While villagers welcomed the initial delivery, receiving 10 copies of the same book was deemed wasteful of resources. When asked what they did in the face of irrelevant assistance, they replied, 'We sold the books we didn't need'. Such practices highlight the need for better coordination within the aid community so that one NGO is aware of what another is doing. This research revealed that no single organisation knew the specifics of what individuals and agencies were doing on the ground and highlighted a gap in coordinating functions that needs filling as a matter of urgency. Social work professionals and community development workers acquire these skills through their training, but neither the IM nor the PPM had held discussions with the United Nations (UN) OCHA about their interventions. Interviewees also believed that OCHA itself was too busy dealing with the logistics of aid delivery to keep track of all those in the field and lacked labour power for doing so.

Interviewees exposed top-down approaches that had poor coordination, information, communication systems and relationships with local communities. Consequently, local people often felt 'being done to', despite donors' aspirations to the contrary, and argued for whole-hearted engagement at individual and community level.

Another challenge interviewees identified was that international NGOs lacked structures or resources to sustain activities after their departure. Many relied on state funding and grants which seldom lived up to expectations (Coynes, 2013). Without funding, initiatives floundered once the NGOs left. IIPP respondents felt frustrated and deserted when this occurred.

Other interviewees raised the wage disparities between local and overseas workers produced by overseas NGOs who pay higher wages for the same job than local NGOs could do. This resulted in local people doing similar work receiving substantially different rates of pay. Also, this created tensions over activities supported with overseas money and raised income expectations that could not be met through local resources once these donors departed. Another consequence was that some who had worked for overseas NGOs contemplated leaving the country, thereby undermining capacity building endeavours that relied on skills and expertise remaining in Sri Lanka. These tensions echo Branczik's (2004) findings and must be resolved.

Local interviewees also critiqued top-down approaches for having inadequate capacity building and training initiatives, and leaving them poorly prepared for future disasters. While the 2004 tsunami might be a rare event, floods and droughts are a regular occurrence in Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe, 2008). However, the relevance of lessons learnt from this disaster were not considered for regularly occurring hazards. Social workers can assist in transferring such knowledge and skills down to the community level.

Others criticised international donors engaging in top-down approaches for being independent actors answerable to no-one and highlighted the importance of their accountability to local people. Otherwise, charges of reinforcing neo-colonial relations gain credibility to the detriment of both local people and international helping processes. Individual volunteers can reproduce top-down relations through everyday practices and contradict stated organisational policies. One interviewee describes a *wanted* intervention that was undermined by another that contravened Buddhist cultural sensitivities:

It was done by [volunteers]. It's a nice work. But unfortunately one [volunteer] who painted the [organisation's name] logo, painted a cross on the logo. A [Buddhist] monk observed this and asked her to erase it immediately. It became another problem. [person] did not tell anything. I think that the cross is still there on the [organisation's] logo. So that issue created a big suspicion among the villagers. Why draw a cross on the [organisational] logo? [Organisation's name] logo did not have a cross on it. (Villager)

This highlighted how culturally insensitive practice ignored NGO policy.

Interviewees viewed top-down approaches to humanitarian aid as part of an internationalising process for educational institutions and various professions whereby those perpetuating such practices gain in the global competition for students, status, reputations and fee income. Without local involvement, this process could deny local people of direct input into their long-term growth and community development, a danger Chan and Dimmock (2008) highlight. A message for social workers, given the insights in this section, is to use top-down approaches with caution.

### ***Bottom-up humanitarian approaches: The IM and the PPM***

Sri Lankan victim-survivors of the 2004 tsunami valued bottom-up approaches, especially for long-term sustainable development and reconstruction. Interviewees indicated that the IM and the PPM models that began in 2005 to provide immediate relief including clearing debris so that land could be reclaimed were highly regarded from the beginning because local residents and organisations were engaged as full partners straightaway. The features that contributed to villagers' positive overall verdict were as follows:

- Directly involving local people in decision-making;
- Linking with local groups/organisations;
- Being led by and accountable to local communities;
- Supporting long-term development in education;

- Individual/collective empowerment;
- Networking;
- Capacity building;
- Enhancing social capital;
- Mutual learning;
- Cross-cultural awareness;
- Mutual exchanges.

Social workers have the skills to reproduce these in locality specific, culturally relevant practice.

Interviewees appreciated the IM's and the PPM's interdisciplinarity across academic disciplines including social sciences, agriculture and engineering to meet community needs holistically and cover housing, sanitation, roads, communications systems and food production. They valued their willingness to address long-standing structural problems like poverty which predated the tsunami, as occurred when the IM built the pre-schools they wanted. As one interviewee commented,

This [building a pre-school] is a good project. It provides an opportunity for poor families to send their children to a preschool. There were lot of children in this village who did not go to a preschool because they did not want to send the children far away and also did not have the money to pay high fees to send their children outside [the area] to preschools. The other reason was that they were scared of the tsunami and still there is a little fear to send their children far away. Starting this preschool was very helpful to them. (Villager)

Two-way exchanges between people and organisations in Sri Lanka and Slovenia, and Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom, were facilitated through memoranda of agreement that enabled academic staff and students to cross oceans to learn in each other's country and treat local people with dignity and reciprocity. As one interviewee explained,

Yes, they [villagers] are very happy. This is the first time that a group of young people from another country visited our village and helped the young people and the children. We are also lucky to have a group from the university visiting and living in our village and helping our children and youth ... The first batch that came to the village conducted English classes for the youth in the village ... The[y] ... met in the temple in the evening and played games ... visited the homes of some of the youth and had meals with them. They spoke to the adults. They also learned from the adults about the places of interest in the village. (Villager)

Different cohorts of students built on what others had done before them. Some painted and renovated the temple while others focused on building pre-schools. This was done in partnership with local villagers, organisations and temples – some of which donated the land on which buildings were constructed. The IM had built pre-schools in 12 villages by the time the research was completed. Some villagers claimed that the IM students were 'like family'. They 'cried when they left' and could hardly wait for another cohort to arrive. Some villagers and students continued to exchange letters and cards, while young people used email to maintain contact once the exchange had ended. That they worked with a well-trusted and highly respected local organisation was crucial to those active in the IM being accepted by local people, as this interviewee clarifies:

Mothers were happy to send the children as there was security as the preschool was run by [name] which is a respected organisation in the area. (Villager)

Nonetheless, there were tensions between local villagers and this local organisation, especially when it delayed paying bills local people incurred on its behalf to facilitate infrastructural building.

Both the construction of pre-schools and repair of local amenities like the temple which lay at the heart of village life were appreciated by villagers as these constituted critical village resources. The temple was especially significant in ensuring children's spiritual development. Another interviewee commented on the respect shown by both IM and PPM students:

The humble way they [students] visited our houses and the way they learned our temple customs. Their kindness towards the adults in the village. Some of them even learned to cook our food. They respected our customs. (Villager)

The villagers also made it clear that mutual exchanges were preferred. They also wanted to give. In this case, they provided food for overseas visitors, talked to them about their culture and traditions, got them to participate in their festivals and taught them their dances, thus enabling mutual cross-cultural learning. Moreover, pre-schools enabled villagers to network and create social capital among them as claimed below:

Most of the parents started sending their children to the preschool. We made friends with other parents. Otherwise we stayed at home doing nothing. (Villager)

Some interviewees commented on the benefits children and young people gained from their encounters with IM and PPM students. This included learning about health issues, substance misuse, teamwork, English, Western songs, sticking to time and playing sports, especially by the sea-side which had become a fearful place following the tsunami:

They [children and young people] forgot their shyness and started talking a few words of English. They learned to work as a team. They learned to respect people of different cultures. This is a new experience for us. (Villager)

Other interviewees wanted English taught at different levels for wider learning among the villagers and felt that given the large numbers of students who went each year, it would be possible for them to extend language provision. Learning English was seen as promoting their children's future aspirations, as articulated by this interviewee:

We cannot send the children for tuition in English. This was a good beginning for our children to start thinking how important English is. (Villager)

Some overseas students learnt Sinhala. However, exchange opportunities were limited by the paucity of resources supporting these endeavours, despite mutual and reciprocated learning taking place.

Students require additional support and supervision but offer significant opportunities. These include enthusiasm and optimism in engaging with other people, stimulating new ideas and learning from cross-cultural exchanges (Vita, 2007). The IM and the PPM student exchanges provided Sri Lankan students with opportunities that would not have otherwise been theirs, for example, studying in the United Kingdom and Slovenia and learning about other ways of fulfilling their dreams in their localities. In turn, going to Sri Lanka enabled overseas students to reconsider their place in the world including their privileged status, the role of their countries in oppressing others and acquire skills and knowledge that could increase their chances of employment in a global



market-place (Vickers and Dominelli, 2014). Rethinking these aspects of life is crucial for social work students aiming to practise with cultural appropriateness.

Capacity building became a two-way process whereby the partners learnt from one another. One villager poignantly illustrated the difficulty under-resourced initiatives have in meeting their aspirations and highlighted how local people could also exploit the opportunities overseas aid provided to undermine local provisions:

Now we do not have a [name] society. No deposits in our [name] bank. People do not repay their loans. We did not have a place to conduct our meetings for [the] last three years. And the Pre-School is now getting less and fewer students, now only having 15–20 [students] while other one is having 25–30 students. The [teacher] charges a lot from students ... [and] is stubborn, not listening to others, so problems, problems, problems! (Villager)

Villagers were concerned that this individual could take over the pre-school and demanded that control of the building be assumed by a strong local organisation that could monitor the quality of the teaching, pay the teacher a stipulated salary and ensure that the fees charged were low enough to allow poor parents to send their children. This instances the importance of the IM ensuring that local organisations manage facilities to hold local professionals accountable. Otherwise, overseas-funded resources can become exploitative sites used to thwart parental educational ambitions for their children. Some villagers felt that donated buildings were underused and thought that these could be opened for ‘other purposes. One young person suggested meetings, English classes, programmes for our mothers’.

Despite the rosy glow with which research participants spoke of the IM and the PPM models, they also criticised them and identified the following weaknesses in both:

- Insufficient resources, especially for staffing schools and long-term educational developments because this could endanger their future functioning;
- Insufficient psychosocial care for post-disaster support;
- Poor continuity among volunteers because most students went for only short 1- to 3-month periods;
- Inadequate student preparation and debriefing for embedding these two models institutionally and passing on enthusiasm and lessons learnt from one cohort of students to another.

Additionally, one interviewee expressed concern that overseas staff of White European origins visiting Sri Lanka received preferential treatment over those from Black and minority ethnic groups (BMEs). Similarly, international visitors from the West were likely to be treated better than BME staff from Sri Lanka who visited European countries (Dominelli, 2008, 2014).

Moreover, neither the IM nor the PPM had a good track record of addressing sexual harassment experienced by volunteers in Sri Lanka, as discussed below.

## **Major challenges: A place for social work advocacy?**

Major challenges faced by victim-survivors focus on the receipt of aid – who gets it and who does not, housing and livelihoods. Resolving these involve long-term planning and resource allocation during the immediate, medium and long terms. Social workers can undertake needs assessments and monitor aid delivery to ensure that those eligible receive aid that is culturally relevant.

Local informants were extremely upset about the lack of monitoring and controls that resulted in aid reaching ‘undeserving’ recipients because they had already obtained their share or knew those delivering aid. Villagers identified local police and military personnel who imposed top-down

decision-making as perpetrating such practices despite being significant players in evacuating and assisting victim-survivors before control was ceded to NGOs. Interviewees wanted government to tackle those ineligible for aid who 'received boats and houses when those needing them did not'.

As in Thailand (Tang, 2014), Sri Lankan interviewees complained that multinational firms took advantage of chaotic situations and skewed rebuilding processes towards tourism – important economically but competing with local housing needs. While local people were prohibited from building on the coastline, overseas multinational hotel chains established themselves on this land and deprived residents of ancestral home sites. Even today, some Sri Lankans have been unable to return from the hinterland where they had relocated for safety because family and/or friends provided temporary accommodation, but now lack resources to rebuild in the coastal areas where they used to live. And, villagers who relocated to the hinterland to be with family 'received nothing'.

Rebuilding livelihoods was another major difficulty. These devastated areas engaged primarily in fishing. Many fishermen had lost boats in the tsunami, but not all had been repaired or replaced. Unequal outcomes created tensions. And 8 years later, many villagers had not received aid. Yet, non-fishermen had received boats during the aid distribution process, thereby supporting Hancock's (1994) and Hoogvelt's (2007) assertions of inappropriate aid delivery. This interviewee explains,

A few youth who had political support got boats even if they were not fishermen, so what they did was they sold it and spent the money on drinks, it was a waste. This happened because the people who were involved in the distribution did not select the right people. They took money and gave it to those people and their friends. (Villager)

Drinking became a problem for unemployed men and created problems for communities, particularly around domestic violence and fights.

Women were barred from assuming the position of fisherwomen because women were culturally deemed to pollute the boats and would bring disaster in their wake. Cultural taboos of this sort are very powerful (Strang, 2012).

Villagers revealed remarkable coping skills that enabled them to survive the tsunami and identify long-term preventative measures. Interviewees recommended the formation of 'teams in the village prepared to come forward and help in a time of disaster'. Building community resilience could become a crucial preparatory activity to reduce damage during future disasters and keep decision-making among local players. This required capacity building that 'trained young people for the fishing industry' and provided 'an insurance scheme for fishing equipment' which villagers proposed as challenging, but significant, moves forward. One interviewee advised,

Always work with the community and not for the community. The community should have ownership of what is being done in their communities. Understand the capacity of the people in the community. (Village official)

Social workers can advocate for such changes.

## Opportunities for future consideration

Villagers highlighted some opportunities arising through aid. Income generation schemes, often supported by social workers, aimed at women specifically to meet family needs. Self-employment through forms of micro-finance enabled women to assume control over their lives as this interviewee claimed:

the mothers and some of the women in the village have got the chance of joining the [organization name] and get into the habit of saving and also obtain loans to start self-employment. (Villager)

Furthermore, involvement in such activities enabled women to develop their own talents, skills and confidence. Some embarked on change processes that would have been unthinkable before the tsunami. However, these activities did not challenge traditional gender relations, as this comment indicated:

she was running this after school club and she was really good and things, but it's all gone now because she has got married and moved to a[nother] village. (Villager)

Thus, villages could lose resources because traditional gender relations were re-affirmed. In another example, a local NGO brought groups of women together around traditional handicrafts, for example, embroidery and sewing to produce goods for sale, or drying fish their husbands caught. This enabled women to earn an income that they controlled. In one case, as women gained confidence, they undertook other activities and challenged gender stereotypes a little. This occurred when having generated income, one group decided to spend some money on themselves by arranging to visit the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. This would have been impossible before the tsunami (Herath, 2012). Although such activities remained within traditional gender tramlines, encounters with overseas staff and students altered women's lives to some degree. Some interviewees commented on how none of this 'helped the men to change'. Transformative change in these situations would have required the politicisation of participatory development, an issue which was not on the humanitarian agenda (Williams, 2004). Responding to men's needs, particularly those who have lost their livelihoods if they are to refrain from drinking, domestic violence and fighting with each other, was an under-developed issue in aid interventions following the tsunami (Dominelli, 2014). This highlights the importance of humanitarian providers to address issues of masculinity, a neglected area in disaster situations. A young man who benefited from computer teaching and opened a computer service with humanitarian aid wanted such opportunities expanded.

Tackling sexual harassment provides another opportunity to prioritise issues of masculinity. White women volunteers were sexually harassed, as exemplified in this scenario:

all of a sudden there were no more [Sri Lanka] women and we were just surrounded by this group of men who were kind of closing in on us and one of them said ... will you come to the beach with us. And [white woman] said 'No', and then she said 'Run' to all of us. So we ... elbowed our way out of that group of men who ... had their hands in places they shouldn't have. Then they followed us and we spent the rest of the evening standing by the police cars and the men on the other side [the police did nothing] ... We were covered up [clothing-wise] and ... it wasn't that. It was just because we were white girls. That's the only reason it was happening. (White woman interviewee)

These issues were not raised with those managing donor organisations. White women responded with their own precautions, going into public places only with White men they knew for protection. Ironically, this reproduced gender stereotypes of women needing men's protection. Tackling these issues requires sensitive work that can involve social workers in consciousness-raising endeavours to highlight the need for respect across all ethnicities and genders.

## Conclusion

Aid delivery is a complex, non-linear process holding both challenges and opportunities. People do not necessarily experience all the phases of a disaster. Cultural taboos including gender stereotypes can be re-affirmed or challenged slightly. University involvement in humanitarian aid is part of an internationalising process that carries the dangers of promoting 'professional imperialism' (Midgley, 1981) alongside offering opportunities for growth not otherwise available to home and

exchange students (Collins and Rhoads, 2010; Sewpaul, 2006). The IM and the PPM collaborated fully to support local communities build capacity and were valued by villagers.

To empower local residents and assist long-term development, interviewees in the IIPP research suggested the following:

- Forming local partnerships with local people, communities and organisations and working with them as equal and active members of one team;
- Interdisciplinary team-working to enable villagers' views to be heard, have needs met holistically and reduce emotional stress;
- Receiving financial support that local residents controlled for long-term development was preferred to global corporations implementing their own agendas;
- Having needs assessments that were linked to the actual distribution of aid to avoid those who were unaffected by the tsunami receiving it
- Controlling external actors and their own politicians from coming into affected areas only to exploit the opportunity and advance their own interests.

Social workers can improve disaster interventions by promoting this advice.

I conclude with the words of one interviewee who aptly states why external humanitarian aid that tackles structural problems, addresses differentiated experiences of disasters among disadvantaged groups, and focuses on sustainable development are important to victim-survivors in poor areas:

... existing resources are not enough to develop this area. Therefore we kindly request from you to help us develop this village and we will be able to develop our village and our students will be able to take the advantages and succeed in their education ... we hope to develop our areas as well as to have better living conditions for all peoples. Considering their activities we can understand that they [students] support us to have better living conditions and success in our village. (Villager)

And for social workers delivering humanitarian aid, a Sri Lankan interviewee advised,

You are trying to help the people to develop their abilities and get away from being dependent. And standing up on their own feet to find solutions to solve their own problems using their talents and skills. If you really want to help people, help them to find answers to their questions themselves. Help them to develop self-confidence and be independent people. (Villager)

Social work staff and students are a valuable humanitarian aid resource. OCHA should call upon their services more.

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