Planning for institutional capacity building in war-torn areas: the case of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Basil van Horen*

Development Planning Program, School of Geography, Planning and Architecture, University of Queensland, Qld 4072, Australia

Received 9 March 2001; received in revised form 13 July 2001; accepted 31 August 2001

Abstract

This paper examines an attempt to build capacity and empower local institutions in war-torn Jaffna, on the northern tip of Sri Lanka. A participatory approach that is aimed at social empowerment is seen to be possible even under the most restrictive of political environments. However, whether or not the development intervention provides a foundation for longer-term improvement depends on the extent to which institutional capacity is built. Through an examination of the Jaffna Reconstruction Project, it is argued that if any of the ingredients of this institutional capacity are missing, not only will the ‘islands of participation and empowerment’ that are built by the development initiative be short-lived, but there may also be a negligible contribution to building a foundation for longer-term improvement in quality of life.

Keywords: Planning; Institutional capacity building; War-torn areas; Jaffna; Sri Lanka

1. Reconstruction and development in war-torn areas

1.1. Blurred boundaries between relief, reconstruction and development

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the standard approach to relief and development in war-torn areas was a linear one, with both being seen as distinct and sequential endeavours. The concept of a ‘continuum’ in which the response to an emergency moves from relief through reconstruction to development has been debated at length.¹ There is no consensus on whether these are indeed distinct stages, whether specialized agencies should take responsibility for each stage, whether

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +61-7-3365-6707; fax: +61-7-3365-6899.
E-mail address: b.vanhoren@mailbox.uq.edu.au (B. van Horen).
¹See Smillie (1998, xxii–xxvi) for a review of continuum thinking.
there is a linear progression from one stage to another, or whether a more circuitous and multidirectional understanding of the process of political, economic and social change is more useful. While the basic vocabulary remains the same, a number of alternatives to continuum thinking have gained currency. For example, ‘linking relief with development’ (LRD) is the framework used by USAID. This stresses the need to ‘build on local capacities, and to support rather than replace indigenous attempts to recover’. Another expression gaining currency is “relief-to-development-to-democracy”, which extends the connections. Along similar lines, GTZ applies a ‘development-oriented emergency aid’ (DEA) approach, which attempts to ensure that any interventions in an emergency situation (pre-, during or post-emergency) are undertaken in such a way as to enhance a population’s capacity for long-term development (GTZ, 1998).

The boundaries between relief, reconstruction and development are blurred, and often overlapping. Timing is crucial in terms of knowing if, when, and how to move from basic humanitarian relief to more developmental activities. Examples of problems with timing include action too late in Rwanda, departure too soon in Haiti, and transition too fast in Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Bosnia (Smillie, 1998, p. 25). A question that arises, then, is whether development related work can be timed to take place simultaneously with emergency relief and reconstruction work. This would mean development interventions such as training in primary health care, education, literacy, organizational development, and mediation and negotiation proceeding before conflict is over. Along these lines, the case described below illustrates that development is not the end stage of a linear strategy, but can be conceived of, and woven in, at various points of the relief–reconstruction–development process in war-torn areas.

1.2. Linking physical reconstruction with institutional capacity building

Delivery of emergency basic physical services is an obvious starting point in reconstruction. However, in any development context, deterioration and collapse of those service systems is inevitable if the institutional capacity to manage services on an ongoing basis is absent. Local capacity building is therefore crucial to ensure the longer-term continuity of any development process. But what are the ingredients of ‘institutional capacity’? Following Healey (1998), institutional capacity can be understood to comprise three dimensions—knowledge resources, relational resources, and capacity for mobilization—all interrelated and mutually supportive. A brief elaboration on these dimensions of institutional capacity will help provide a framework for an analysis of the ensuing case study.

Knowledge resources include ‘local knowledge’ which is a combination of knowledge built up through a combination of practical experience and the frames of reference that people use to filter and give meaning to that experience, as well as the knowledge provided by other stakeholders including professionals and the so-called ‘experts’. Knowledge has a social context—thus the importance of relational resources which refers to the development of networks that facilitate sufficient appreciation, trust and communicative skill for different stakeholders to find their

---

2 Emergency relief involves immediate, survival assistance to victims of crisis and violent conflict. Reconstruction operations overlap with relief and are principally aimed at reconstruction of infrastructure at national and local levels to save livelihoods. Development operations have longer-term objectives of rebuilding social, economic and political structures of war-torn societies.
‘voices’ and ‘listen’ to each other. The strength of such networks are not only the social capital of knowing who to contact and the general ‘trustability’ of relationships, but also where such networks exist, that knowledge can flow around stakeholders, increasing the ‘intellectual capital’ available, and contribute to mobilizing the political and economic resources that are necessary to achieve the objectives of stakeholders (Healey, 1998).

In any development process, it is necessary to be able to mobilize resources—funding, equipment, people—in order to effect improvements in material quality of life. Simply put the application of knowledge resources and relational resources shapes the capacity to mobilize public sector decision-makers to provide material resources, but more importantly to build the healthy social and economic base that is necessary to ‘drive’ ongoing development.

1.3. Building capacity in war-torn areas

Given that there is often no effective government to work with in war-torn areas—either because it is predatory or because it has collapsed—alternative agents for the delivery and management of services often need to be identified. In this light, an argument could be made for a prominent role for civil society stakeholders. A strategy of attempting to build governance capacity from the bottom up is often pursued with a view to marginalizing existing predatory authorities in the hope that strengthening non-military interests will allow space for civil society to express its desire for peace and development. As Harvey (1998) points out, this is the thinking that underpins the work of the UNDP’s work with shuras (local councils) in Afghanistan, CARE’s work with local Somali NGOs, ActionAid’s work with local elders, and the emergence of neighbourhood committees to handle distribution of food aid in Liberia.

Although civil society and social capital are badly eroded in complex emergencies, rebuilding or strengthening local NGOs and community-based organizations through training programmes, initiated in advance of peace settlements, are often cited as a simple starting point (Lake, 1990). Supported by their study of northern Sri Lanka, Goodhand and Hulme (2000), however, argue that care needs to be taken to avoid simplistic treatment of the impact of war on social capital. The diverse impacts that war can have on social capital should be recognized—ranging from instances where some forms of social capital may be damaged (e.g. trust in the state and wider social institutions) while other forms are strengthened (e.g. bonding social capital where intra-group solidarity may be strengthened).

Whilst training may be a popular ingredient of programmes and projects designed to (re)build local capacity, it is important that they rebuild social capital so as to enhance absorptive capacity, both to manage aid during conflict, and so that effective organizations are in place when full-scale reconstruction begins. However, in order to move beyond running training courses, the challenge is to institutionalize participatory approaches that build upon local social networks that can serve as a foundation for ongoing development management.

Local government is a second level at which capacity building needs to take place. This, however, is only feasible in instances where local government is not predatory. The rebuilding of technocratic capacities would seem to be a logical starting point in rebuilding effective local government. This could involve the training of technical and management personnel so as to enhance its capacity to intervene in service provision (Lake, 1990) and in facilitating the strengthening of markets (Brown, 1992).
While conflict is still underway, the provision of public services such as health and education are generally dependent on central government transfers or foreign aid, which is unevenly spread. An extensive review of international experience regarding the economic aspects of post-war reconstruction by Carbonnier (1998), identifies prerequisites for the restoration of a healthy local economic base in reconstruction processes. Donor and public sector funding may often be necessary to reinvigorate the local economy given that the uncertainty and instability during conflict is anathema to private sector investment. Protracted periods of conflict often mean that even if the local government is functioning, there are very few people left who have experience in government and particularly in specialized areas of management and public finance. Where the informal economy has replaced currency or formal market transactions, rebuilding urban management capacity is also likely to involve basic exchange, trade and banking services being rebuilt completely.

Given the weakness of local economies, a serious problem in war-torn situations is the reliance on funding from external sources. For as long as such funding is available, it is possible to implement highly participatory and empowerment-oriented programmes and projects. A knowledge base may have been built, local relational resources may be present, developmentally supportive political relations may be present, but without the material resources necessary to apply that knowledge on an ongoing basis, what will sustain an ongoing development process? Will the gains made by the intervention be short-lived? Will the communities that have benefited from the project remain dependent on external economic support, or will they have the capacity to sustain an ongoing improvement process? What other ingredients are necessary in order to support the longer-term application of knowledge built up during the initial phase of capacity building?

2. The case of Jaffna

2.1. Some roots of the civil war and the destruction of Jaffna

It is impossible to understand the current civil war without some understanding of the origins of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Predictably, Tamil and Sinhalese scholars fiercely contest the historic roots of the conflict. These ancient roots will not be elaborated upon here other than to note that a legacy of conflict and struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamils has been documented as far back as the 10th century when successive invasions by waves of south Indian Tamils drove the Sinhalese south into the Kandyan hills and to the southern and western coasts.

---

3 Sri Lanka’s population of 18.5 million is approximately divided as follows: Sinhalese 74%, Tamils 18.5% (Sri Lankan Tamils 12.5% and Indian Tamils 6%), Muslims 7% and other groups constitute less than 1%. Sri Lankan Tamils are descendants of migrants from south India. They are predominantly Saivite Hindus, and speak Tamil, which is also widely spoken in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu from where there is evidence that migration began as early as 3 BC. The Sinhalese trace their descent from north Indian migrants more than 2300 years ago. They speak the Sinhala language and are predominantly Theavada Buddhists. Indian Tamils were brought over from India during the British colonial period to work on tea and coffee plantations. They comprise about 6% of the country’s population. Muslims are descendents of Arab, Malabar and Malay traders who settled on the island centuries ago (EIU, 2000; Arasaratnam, 1994; Pfaffenberger, 1994; Singer, 1990).
During the post-colonial period, not only has the Tamils’ position on the island become relegated in political terms, but their once prosperous community has also become increasingly marginal in economic terms. Events contributing to this changed political and economic status include the disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils shortly after independence in 1948, the ‘Sinhala only’ policy of the Bandaranaike government, the adoption of a new constitution in 1972 that removed a clause safeguarding minorities rights, and the ‘standardization of university admission programme’ that meant that Tamils had to score significantly higher marks on admissions tests to gain admission to university.

The ineffectiveness of non-violent attempts to address these measures, such as the Tamil protests of 1950s and 1960s, as well as the inability of Tamil parties to make any gains in parliament even when they were the official opposition in the late 1970s, all contributed to the rise to dominance of radical, militant Tamil groups who were convinced that the only way to safeguard Tamil interests was regional autonomy for Tamils that was to be achieved by force (Pfaffenberger, 1994; Singer, 1996). In Jaffna town itself, security operations in the early 1980s as well as the 1981 burning of the Public Library of Jaffna (which was a repository of priceless documents) by the police along with sections of the army (Jeyaratnam Wilson, 1988, 163), further strengthened the position of the militants.

July 1983 is a key month in the escalation of the conflict. On 23rd July, 13 Sri Lankan Army (SLA) soldiers were ambushed and killed in Jaffna. Riots broke out in the rest of the country and the government did nothing to stop the fighting for five days—according to Singer (1996), either because it felt that it could not control the military (as many Sinhalese believe), or because it wanted to let Sinhalese vent their anger on Tamils (as many Tamils believe). At the end of the rioting, approximately 3000 Tamils had been killed (Hoole, Somasundaram, Srintranran, & Thirangagama, 1989, p. 71), and over 100,000 had fled to India (Singer, 1996). This was a turning point for many Tamils who were thereafter convinced that only a totally separate state—Tamil Eelam—could protect them.

A number of militant Tamil groups emerged during this period. The Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the most significant of the militant Tamil groups, having ruthlessly eliminated all other militant Tamil groups (Rajanayagam, 1994). In the mid 1980s, the Indian government of Rajiv Gandhi attempted to pressure the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan government to come to a peaceful settlement. This interest in a peaceful settlement was largely shaped by the 60 million Tamils living in Tamil Nadu state in India, who closely identify with many of the Tamil residents in Sri Lanka. When, in 1987, it appeared as though the SLA might indeed destroy the LTTE—and many Tamil civilians in the process—India sent ‘humanitarian aid’ to Sri Lanka. This was against the wishes of the Sri Lankan government, but in the absence of any international opposition to the intervention, Sri Lanka and India signed an Accord in July 1987.

One of the terms of the Accord was that India was to introduce a peacekeeping force—the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF)—of 10,000 troops in the north of Sri Lanka. The functions of this force included disarming the militants, maintaining a ceasefire, and ensuring fair elections (Singer, 1990). Although residents of Jaffna first greeted the IPKF positively, the LTTE refused to lay down its arms. When the SLA captured some high ranking LTTE officers, the IPKF did nothing to prevent the SLA from taking the prisoners to Colombo, as the LTTE had hoped they would do. The LTTE prisoners committed suicide, swallowing cyanide capsules, which was a final
spark leading to the LTTE turning on the Indian army. The IPKF was increased to 50,000 troops, and it took almost two months of house-to-house fighting before they took control of the Jaffna peninsula in August 1989. This was at the cost of 2000 civilian deaths, 50,000 buildings damaged, and 200,000 refugees searching for shelter (Hennayake, 1989, p. 12). By the time that the IPKF took control, however, the LTTE had escaped to the jungle from where they would continue their fight as a guerilla force (Singer, 1990, p. 422; Pfaffenberger, 1994).

Provincial council elections were held in the north two months later, in October 1989. Singer (1990) notes that the Indians are widely believed to have rigged the elections in the north whereby they ensured that only candidates from a party opposed to the LTTE (the EPRLF) were nominated. This enabled them to declare the EPRLF the winner without having an election. Only a few months later, in March 1990, the IPKF was withdrawn from Sri Lanka, having been requested to do so a number of times by the anti-Indian government of President Premadasa.

The LTTE moved in quickly and reestablished control of the Jaffna peninsula, where they again became the de facto government from 1990 until 1995. Following a number of major military offensives and intense fighting that devastated the social and physical fabric of the Jaffna peninsula, the SLA retook control of Jaffna in May 1996. The LTTE, however, retained control of much of the Vanni area to the south of the peninsula, thereby cutting the Jaffna peninsula off from the rest of the country.

The population of the Jaffna peninsula was close to 900,000 before the SLA offensive in 1995 and dropped to approximately 450,000 within a year. Almost half a million people had left the area (RRAN, 1998). According to Singer (1996), reasons given for the exodus are conflicting. According to the LTTE, many left to escape the government bombing and shelling of populated areas. According to the government, many left under LTTE gunpoint as they withdrew from Jaffna, where civilians were used as a human shield and also with the intention of compounding a refugee crisis that would be a public relations embarrassment for the Sri Lankan government.

2.2. Jaffna in the year 2001—a city of layers

Since 1996, Jaffna has been a city that comprises two main layers. At the first layer is the Tamil population of Jaffna. Approximately 490,000 people are currently living in the Jaffna peninsula. The current population of Jaffna town is approximately 44,000, which is less than half of the pre-1990 population (Mahalingham, 2000). This layer is complex and includes civilians who have stayed in Jaffna throughout the war, returnees, refugees who have fled from fighting in other areas, and local government officials. Importantly, however, business people, professionals, and many educated people who had the means to support themselves elsewhere have been slow to return to the area, and consequently there is a high percentage of residents in the ‘poor’ and ‘vulnerable’ categories (Sivanathan, 2000; GTZ, 1999). For those who have remained, bonding social capital—or intra-group solidarity of Tamils—is very strong. This is, however, not to suggest complete unity amongst the resident Tamil population. Most notably, there are individuals and some small groups involved in gangs and theft—representing what Rubio (1997) calls ‘perverse social capital’.

At the second layer is the SLA, which is effectively functioning as an army of occupation. The SLA has complete control over the movement of people and goods in and out of Jaffna. The army has occupied the town’s two hotels, which it uses as its headquarters, as well as blocks of
residential neighbourhoods, which are used for accommodation of military personnel. There are security checkpoints at many intersections in Jaffna town where cyclists and bus passengers have to ‘get down and walk’, and local people are bag- and bodysearched. There is a curfew from 9 p.m. until 6 a.m., which applies to all civilians, including fishermen, and farmers who would usually work during hours around dawn and dusk (RRAN, 1998). Given that the military is comprised almost exclusively of Sinhalese soldiers, none of whom are locals of the Jaffna area and none of whom speak Tamil, they have little access to the inner workings or fabric of the local Tamil population.

The physical fabric of Jaffna town is devastated. Air bombing, artillery shelling as well as small arms fire caused severe damage during street battles as recently as 1996. Approximately, 30% of housing on the peninsula was completely destroyed, 40% badly damaged, and the remaining 30% slightly damaged (RRAN, 1998, p. 56). A strip of land around Jaffna town, a high-security zone controlled by the SLA, is uninhabited, and landmined. The core of the city that used to comprise the town’s cultural centre, churches, administrative and commercial buildings has been reduced to rubble. In this core, only the badly damaged library and facades of the post office and old Regent Theatre, are still standing. The electricity power station is not functioning and generators serve some pockets of the town for a limited number of hours each day.

The Jaffna peninsula can only be accessed by air or by ship. The land route linking the peninsula with the rest of the country has been closed since 1990, with the LTTE occupying much of the Vanni area, which is directly south of the peninsula. Regular civilian flights between Colombo and Jaffna were stopped in 1998 after a plane was shot down. Since then, a civilian service has operated intermittently. Military aircraft make numerous daily trips between Colombo and Jaffna, transporting SLA troops and supplies. An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ship makes one trip per week from Trincomalee to Kankesanthurai (on the north of the Jaffna peninsula). The primary purpose of the ship is to transport people needing urgent medical treatment in the south. Regarding contact with the outside world, telephone contact is sporadic given damage to the telephone exchange.

Given the military restrictions on goods that are allowed in and out of the area, as well as the inability of Jaffna-based producers to get their produce to outside markets, Jaffna effectively exists as a closed economy. Attempts to export perishable agricultural produce from the area seldom reach outside markets in saleable condition—usually due to the non-availability of transport or bureaucratic delays—resulting in goods rotting and farmers losing the entire stock. The inability to transport agricultural produce between Jaffna and markets in the rest of the county has resulted in serious price distortions with gluts of some locally produced items, and serious shortages of items produced in other parts of Sri Lanka. Although goods such as tobacco are less vulnerable than perishable goods, some farmers have two years of stock that they cannot get to outside markets (Sivarajah & Karulval, 2000; Paramsothy, Vijayaratnam & Alvappillai, 2000). In addition, a military restriction on the importation of items such as fertilizer from outside of the Jaffna peninsula imposes further constraints on farming productivity.

Farmers perceive all of these restrictions as deliberate means of making their farming operations unviable (Council of NGOs, 1998). Combining the low purchasing power of the local population with restrictions on farming hours and distributing produce to markets outside of Jaffna peninsula, farmers and enterprises have little incentive to produce anything in excess of what is needed for local survival needs.
Local government officials in Jaffna are all Tamils, most of whom were in Jaffna’s administration during the period of LTTE control between 1990 and 1995. They are in a difficult position in that they are dependent on funds from Colombo to pay their salaries, but also need to take care not to antagonize the LTTE. Although they are civil servants ostensibly providing a service for the local Tamil population, they have to work with dilapidated infrastructure and limited resources. Also, many of the more highly qualified personnel have left the area.

The weakness of Jaffna’s local economic base places it in a position of extreme vulnerability. Economically, Jaffna is completely dependent on central government transfers and foreign donor assistance for its survival. There is no local taxing capacity. Other than government officials who have formal employment, most people survive on informal economic activities in what is effectively a closed economy primarily oriented around subsistence and survival.

3. Reconstruction and development in Jaffna

3.1. Linking physical reconstruction with social mobilization

 Shortly after the major fighting in Jaffna died down in 1996, refugees began returning to the area. Anxious to demonstrate to the international community that steps were being taken to improve conditions in Jaffna, the Sri Lankan President requested foreign government support. The Federal Republic of Germany responded with a commitment of over 15 million DM for emergency aid and reconstruction of Jaffna. Following bilateral negotiations between the German and Sri Lankan governments, the Jaffna Rehabilitation Project was established.

The lead implementation agency of the Jaffna Reconstruction Project (JRP) is the German agency, Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), which is partnered with the Jaffna Municipal Council, National Water and Education ministries, the Government Agent in Jaffna and the School Development Societies. The JRP falls under the jurisdiction of the Resettlement and Rehabilitation Authority of the North (RRAN)—a government body that is exclusively responsible for the coordination of all reconstruction interventions in Jaffna, and facilitating partnerships between foreign donors, aid organizations, and local government and community organizations.

The project was established as part of the GTZ development-oriented emergency aid approach noted earlier. The JRP has two levels of focus: physical rebuilding and the mobilization of people, skills and resources as part of a capacity building process (GTZ, 1999). The focus on four priority areas that were identified by locals as being of greatest need has been an effective ‘entry point’ for the social mobilization process. The JRP focuses on water supply, housing reconstruction, school rebuilding and microenterprise development, with social mobilization being a central thread around which the project activities are organized.  

4 1 German Mark = 0.4521 US$ (7 August 2001).

5 Unless otherwise indicated, descriptive facts about the JRP have been obtained from GTZ (1999), GTZ field staff, communication with residents of Jaffna, and visits to project sites in Jaffna between 1997 and 2001.
3.2. Water supply

In 1996, the district’s water supply was not properly functioning due to damaged or dismantled pump stations, and damaged transmission and distribution systems. People obtained water from wells, which often had very high levels of salinity. As an emergency intervention, 30 fibreglass water tanks, each with a 2000 l capacity, were installed in the most populous areas of town. Tanks were filled with water from a safe well source each day by a water bowser and delivery vehicles. Rehabilitation of the piped water supply system serving the town involved the rehabilitation of a system linked to the Thirunelveli and Kondavil well fields that now serves approximately 60,000 people with safe drinking water, with over 700 stand posts. Jaffna municipal officials and GTZ staff regularly meet with water users as part of an awareness raising programme to highlight the importance of keeping areas around water points clean and the need to conserve water. Complementing the urban water supply scheme is a programme to rehabilitate 17 rural water supply schemes. Completed in December 1998, the rehabilitated systems serve approximately 100,000 people through about 500 public stand posts.

Before the war, rural water supply had no history of public participation in Jaffna. At the outset of the project, persuading the local population that their involvement was not just desirable but also necessary to complete the work was a difficult task. The local population did not see why their time and labour was needed to repair public utilities for they had never had any responsibility before the conflict.

More than six months were spent while social mobilization staff met with local residents to discuss and plan their involvement in the water supply component of the project. The dialogue paid off and the locals became very involved in the process. They organized work groups, collected cash donations and asserted their rights over the systems by requesting changes in the position and number of stand posts to better suit new population distribution patterns. A total of more than 100 extra stand posts were newly erected as a result of community requests.

3.3. Housing reconstruction

Estimates of the number of houses damaged or destroyed in Jaffna during the hostilities vary, with 81,000 considered to be a conservative figure. Returnees typically take shelter in the shells of their old homes, or construct temporary shelter using wood and Palmyrah leaves. The JRP has targeted 1000 poor and vulnerable households to rebuild their homes. Priority is given to the poorest households (income of less than Rs. 1500 per month (US$20)), family groups, and women-headed households. By the end of 1999, 300 homes had been rebuilt, 80% of which had to be completely rebuilt from scratch. A second phase involving the rebuilding of another 700 homes commenced in 2000. A grant is provided whereby each household is provided with the necessary building materials. Households then undertake or organize most of the unskilled work themselves, and receive a grant to pay for skilled labour. Local-level government staff have been involved in the programme, with an engineer and architect providing technical support.

The housing programme has been used as an entry point for a wide range of social mobilization activities. Clusters of households were identified in areas of high resettlement, and community organization has been built through the establishment of cluster organizers in these areas. These are local men and women trained in participatory mobilisation approaches. These coordinators
play a role that links households involved in housing reconstruction with local government officials. They also act as catalysts within their communities, helping people to mobilize around identified needs. For instance, local residents in each cluster have been organized to start community savings schemes and revolving loan funds. These schemes are aimed not only at rebuilding community cohesion, but also in assisting poor families build up their assets. In order to stimulate community mutual help, the project provided additional building material, so that each cluster could construct a facility (such as a community centre, pre-school) that would benefit the wider community.

3.4. School rebuilding

Jaffna has a long tradition that places great value on education (Gunasingham, 1999; Arasaratnam, 1994; Sinnathamby & Sinnathamby, 2001). Throughout the fighting, many parents tried to keep their children in school. In some cases, communities even evacuated with the 'school' to ensure that their children continued to receive education. In the initial phase of the project between 1996 and 1999, eight of the worst damaged schools were rebuilt, reaching a student population of 6500. In addition, sanitation facilities at over 350 schools were rehabilitated. A second phase involving rehabilitation of a further 16 damaged schools commenced in 2000.

Before any physical rebuilding work took place, the GTZ Social Mobilisation Unit conducted a total of 51 workshops in eight schools. Workshops covered issues such as public participation, leadership skills development, physical and mental health (dealing with the trauma of the war), child rights, conflict resolution and landmine awareness. The workshops were vital to mobilize demoralized teachers, pupils and parents. Many School Development Societies (SDCs) that had been inactive for a number of years were invigorated, regrouped, and became active again. These SDCs undertook all of the unskilled labour, and were also responsible for local procurement of materials. Although physical rebuilding has been completed, social mobilization staff continues to work with SDCs and teachers to encourage school activities such as the establishment of forums for children to deal with the emotional trauma arising from the conflict.

3.5. Microenterprise development

Although not an emergency aid activity, and also not targeted at poorest and most vulnerable residents, Competency-based economies through formation of enterprise (CEFE) is a training concept developed by GTZ, aimed at existing and potential entrepreneurs and aims to contribute to the revitalization of the Jaffna local economy (Tharmaseelan, 2000). The training programme develops real-life business competencies by ensuring that all trainees undertake 'real world' business activities. These include market research on their product or idea and the development of a business plan, which is subsequently assessed by a bank. The main partner is the University of Jaffna. The programme trains trainers (nine have been trained since 1997), who then run training courses (in which there had been 70 participants by early 2000). By early 2000, 45% of potential entrepreneurs who had passed through the training courses had started new businesses, while 80% of existing businesses had expanded—in total creating an estimated 147 new jobs.
4. Institutional capacity building?

The conceptual framework elaborating the various elements of institutional capacity (Fig. 1) that was outlined earlier in this paper provides a framework for dissecting and examining development interventions such as the JRP. The framework allows a structured examination of component parts of institutional capacity—knowledge resources, relational resources and capacity for mobilization—that are crucial if there is to be ongoing improvement in the lives of the people of Jaffna.

Considering the extent to which Jaffna has been ravaged by war, the JRP has skillfully managed to weave a path through the complexity of a devastating war, and has successfully delivered basic resources to the very poor and vulnerable in Jaffna. Social mobilization and empowerment are central aspects of the project that have been aimed at putting in place the foundation for positive long-term social improvement. It has been argued that institutional capacity is a necessary prerequisite to ensure the continuity of this process of improvement and change. To what extent, then, have the ingredients of institutional capacity been built by the JRP?

Notwithstanding the serious constraint of depleted base of high quality intellectual capital and leadership amongst the people still living in Jaffna, the project has been successful in building knowledge resources at the local level. Before any service delivery took place, each of the four project components involved a 6–9 month period focused on social development, under the guidance of five full-time workers in the Social Mobilisation Unit. In contrast to agencies such as UNDP and UNHCR who mostly rely on foreign personnel to run their social development programmes, the JRP employed local people who were very effective in building upon the local knowledge system and the creativity of the poor in the area. Building knowledge resources focused not only on social development, but also on technical knowledge—this has enabled the successful delivery of water, housing and school rebuilding activities, as well as community involvement in the ongoing management of services. This is particularly important given the weakness of local government.

The building of relational resources is more complex, in respect of which at least three levels bear consideration. First, building relational resources within the local Jaffna population has been a primary focus of the social mobilization process and may be argued to be similar to the ‘synergy’ view of social capital, as outlined by Woolcock and Narayan (2000). Grounded in a thorough

![Fig. 1. Elements of institutional capacity (source: Healey, 1998).](image)
understanding of the local community’s internal social relationships and formal institutions, institutional strategies were developed that built upon bonding and bridging social capital. Also, the JRP has built upon the positive manifestations of social capital—cooperation, trust, institutional efficiency—and has had the effect of at least partially offsetting some of the negative, or predatory, forms of social capital that were noted earlier.

Translating this into project activities, it was evident that since most community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations had disintegrated during the fighting, attempts to build organization on the project started from an extremely weak base. However, water and school rebuilding provided useful entry points for social mobilisation, given that the community had to work together for mutual benefit. In the case of housing, the clusters were built from scratch, whereas with school reconstruction, School Development Societies were resurrected and rebuilt. These processes of building social capital involved the emergence of new leadership and altered social hierarchies. This process of building ‘clusters’ in the housing programme, for example, has also enabled the development of links with other initiatives, including a UNICEF health volunteer training programme, a UNICEF toilet reconstruction programme, and an Action Contre la Faim gardening training programme.

Local government in Jaffna is not predatory as in many other civil war contexts, and as a consequence, it has been possible to attempt to build relationships between civil society and local government. However, there is no effective local government system outside the towns, and so the institutionalization of participatory approaches is extremely difficult to achieve in these areas.

Training of trainers is a crucially important, and forward-looking, aspect of the project. Not only does it serve to increase the local knowledge base, but it also serves to multiply the number of effective social mobilizers throughout the peninsula. For those who are committed social activists, their social mobilization activities are likely to continue for as long as there are resources around which to mobilize. Although some of this activity is likely to become dormant if external support is withdrawn and there is a consequent drop in motivation levels, at least a strong set of knowledge and relational networks will be in place at the level of the local Jaffna community, which could then be resuscitated as a catalyst for development when funding is injected into the area again.

At a second level, relations between the JRP and the Sri Lankan central government in Colombo are also positive. This is underpinned by the German government having been the only foreign government that came forward with substantial funding for emergency aid and reconstruction in Jaffna in response to the Presidential appeal in 1996. Important in terms of ongoing relations, the terms of project management which were agreed upon in bilateral negotiations between the respective governments has meant that there has been a strong foundation of goodwill and trust at the highest levels of government from the beginning of the project, which has smoothed the process of approvals necessary during project implementation. Even though the project has to get Ministry of Defence approvals for the movement of all materials and people in and out of the Jaffna peninsula, the initial high-level intergovernmental agreement has been important in ensuring that GTZ is able to implement the project according to the mutually agreed project principles. That the project is able to have control over the disbursement of funds and procurements has meant being able to avoid many usual bureaucratic delays that could be expected to originate in Colombo.
Given the level of political and ethnic hostility in the war, it would seem that a project that places ‘social mobilisation’ at centre stage could easily be interpreted by some politicians and senior officials as a potentially radical means by which the local population could be mobilized against the status quo. Interestingly, this is not the case. There are a number of reasons why there is, indeed, support for the process from Colombo. One reason is that the initial project planning and design was participatory—not only at the local community level, but also with central government officials in Colombo, giving them a sense of ownership and inclusion in decision-making. Once project implementation commenced and the benefits of participation have become evident with the poor of Jaffna playing an integral role in planning, design and implementation, Colombo officials—particularly those in RRAN—have continued to support the participatory planning process. Another reason is that the JRP is targeted at poor households to whom materials were directly provided, giving the SLA and Sri Lankan government a degree of confidence that these materials were being used for project purposes and not ending up in the hands, for example, of the LTTE. In addition, visible outputs of the social mobilization process—houses, schools, water and many services managed by poor communities themselves—are evident. This has been in contrast to a government housing grant system that delivered no houses: grants were paid out, and used for purposes other than housing. So on the one hand, the participation at senior levels has been good in ensuring that JRP is not faced with political obstructionism and bureaucratic hurdles that could impede effective implementation. On the other hand, the sense of ‘ownership’ at senior levels has also led to the Sri Lankan government attempting to take some of the credit for the successful implementation of the JRP.

A third, and critical, level regarding relational resources concerns the position of the Tamil population of Jaffna vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan government in Colombo. This relationship transcends the level of the project and any capacity building impacts that the project might have. The war between the Colombo government and the LTTE means that Jaffna (and, by implication, its population) is a pawn in a struggle—a consequence of which is that at least one critical ingredient that is necessary in order for the local population to be able to mobilize resources, is missing. More specifically, the economic controls imposed upon the Jaffna peninsula means that some of the most basic requirements for a healthy economy—such as the ability of producers to distribute their produce to markets, as well as to have access to capital inputs that are required for production processes—do not currently exist in Jaffna. The inability of producers to get their goods to outside markets has already been noted. Another small example is that although the CEFE micro enterprise component of the project addresses the key issue of local economic development, many entrepreneurs remain dependent upon the support of external agencies to import the necessary technology and machinery. For instance, three enterprises manufacturing roof tiles required machinery that was not available in Jaffna, and it was only through the assistance of GTZ that the machines could be imported from outside the area (Tharmaseelan, 2000).

The project has built considerable knowledge resources. It has also built strong relational resources at the local level. However, the inability to build a healthy local economic base means that the capacity to mobilize financial and other material resources to support the application of knowledge and local relational resources built up during the JRP is severely limited.
5. Concluding comments

Given the constraints under which it has been implemented, the extent to which the JRP has succeeded in balancing community-based development with physical service delivery in the context of an ongoing war, is remarkable. It also represents an advance over many other projects reported in the literature on planning in war-torn contexts (for example, Smillie, 1998; OECD, 1997). This project has succeeded in building capacity in a number of areas. Strengthening the knowledge base of locals has been a successful aspect of the way in which social mobilisation has been linked with service delivery. At a local level, relational resources have been strengthened. Although the war disrupted and left community-based organizations in disarray, the project has been able to build upon the strong basic fabric of trust, cooperative social relationships, and kinship networks in a process of rebuilding organizations, centred around physical, educational, and local economic development. Political relationships and mobilisation potential at the local level is also strong—relationships between local government officials, politicians, and ordinary residents are cooperative and positive.

The knowledge resources, relational resources, and mobilization potential at the local level may be present and, indeed, have been strengthened by the project. However, without the material resources necessary to apply that capacity on an ongoing basis, the benefits of having built this capacity are undermined. The catch 22 is that the economic stranglehold on Jaffna means that without external aid (whether in the form of foreign donor aid or central government transfers), local institutions are paralysed; with aid, they are dependent on that external assistance, but are vulnerable to collapse if it is withdrawn. Initiatives like the JRP can only go so far in the absence of a vibrant local economic base that has the potential to sustain longer-term development processes and change. Unfortunately, addressing this problem is far beyond the scope of such a project. Even so, the social development focus of the project is hopefully putting in place the synergetic social capital that will serve as a catalyst for development when the war is over.

Although Jaffna is a war-torn area, a key lesson learned from this project is equally applicable in any other development context. Development interventions can only lay the foundation for longer-term improvement in the quality of ordinary peoples’ lives if all the ingredients of institutional capacity are present. Although strong and vibrant social organization oriented towards development may indeed be built, without the ability to mobilize the resources necessary to sustain the process of improvement, they risk becoming ‘islands of participation and empowerment’ that will sink and disappear if external support dries up.

Acknowledgements

Particular thanks to Steffen Wirth from GTZ, colleagues at the University of Jaffna, and residents of Jaffna who have been so helpful and willing to share their knowledge with me over the past four years. Thanks to Steffen Wirth, Sisira Pinnawala, Michael Leaf, and anonymous reviewer’s comments on an earlier draft. Opinions and errors in this paper are my own.
References


