Beneficiary perceptions of corruption in humanitarian assistance: a Sri Lanka case study

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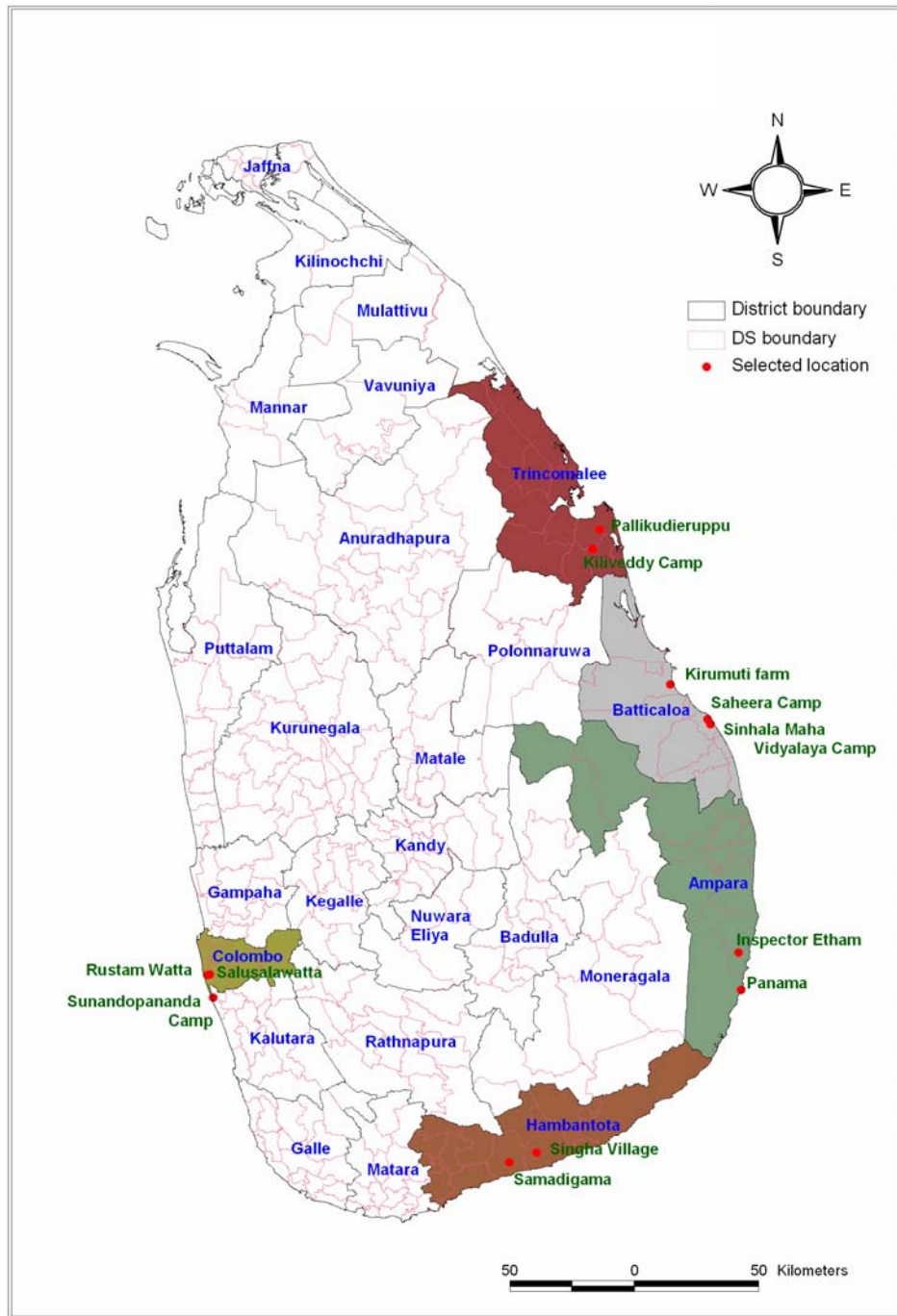Email: hpgadmin@odi.org.uk

This report was commissioned by Transparency International. The opinions expressed herein are the authors' own.

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Figure 1: Map of selected villages, resettlement sites and displacement camps

1. Introduction

Corruption in emergency relief is a huge challenge for humanitarian agencies. It can potentially undermine the effectiveness of their interventions and ultimately lead to the loss of lives. Corruption risks are often determined by the environment in which aid agencies operate, and are likely to increase in conflict-affected countries where governments are usually weak, the rule of law is not effectively enforced, the media and civil society are constrained and aid flows can become a lucrative resource (Ewins, Harvey, Savage and Jacobs, 2006).

Such an environment is present in Sri Lanka. The state is highly centralised and clientalistic, and political power is derived from patronage rather than performance. This is mirrored in the nature of civil society and the media is deeply partisan (Goodhand, Klem et al., 2005: 25). Sri Lanka is ranked 3.2 out of a possible score of 10 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.[1] Furthermore, non-state actors in the north and east of the country have formed predatory networks of taxation and extortion and are often the *de facto* authority in the areas they control. In this environment, humanitarian assistance is often manipulated for personal or political gain at the expense of affected populations. The sudden and substantial aid received in the aftermath of the tsunami in December 2004 further compounded these corruption risks.

This case study explores perceptions of corruption amongst beneficiary populations, with the aim of informing strategies that seek to reduce corruption in humanitarian assistance. It is based on a research trip in April 2008, in which individual and group interviews were carried out with key informants and beneficiaries affected by the tsunami and/or the conflict. Eleven sites were visited, in Colombo, Hambantota, Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, and 324 individuals participated in interviews and group discussions. The sites include villages affected by the tsunami and/or conflict, resettlement sites for tsunami victims and conflict-induced displacement camps.

The study uses Transparency International's definition of corruption, 'abuse of entrusted power for private gain' – which includes both financial and non-financial forms of corruption. This can encompass fraud, embezzlement, the manipulation or diversion of aid to benefit non-target groups, allocating relief in exchange for sexual favours and nepotism in recruiting staff or registering beneficiaries.

The study is divided into two main sections. The first gives a brief account of the context in which humanitarian assistance is delivered, outlining some of the corruption risks. It focuses on the response to renewed fighting and displacement in the north and east of the country since 2005 and the tsunami in late 2004. The second section explores perceptions of corruption voiced by beneficiaries during the research mission. These include irregularities in the registration process and in the distribution of relief, particularly of 'big-ticket' items such as housing and boats, but also in politically sensitive processes such as the return of internally displaced persons. It seems that the ability of beneficiaries to identify instances of corruption largely depended on whether they had sufficient knowledge of their entitlements. This varied substantially among the areas visited. The study concludes by outlining the implications of the findings for humanitarian agencies operating in the areas visited.

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[1] For Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index see
http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007.

2. Context

2.1 Violent conflict and displacement

For over 25 years, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been engaged in a bloody civil war with the government that has cost the lives of over 100,000 people, and has led to an estimated 520,000 internally displaced (IDMC, 2007a). In 2002, a peace process led to a ceasefire between the government and the LTTE. Conflict resumed in 2005, and the ceasefire officially broke down in January 2008.

In response to the humanitarian concerns arising from the return to war, a Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) has been developed, under which many I/NGOs and UN agencies are providing protection, shelter, food, health, education and water and sanitation to displaced populations. They are also supporting the government in its recovery efforts by promoting voluntary return and providing livelihood support (UN, 2008). In LTTE-controlled areas, the Tamil Relief Organisation (TRO), headquartered in Australia but with field offices in the north and east of the country, has played a significant role in providing assistance to Tamil IDPs. However, its links with the LTTE has led the US to freeze its assets under American counter-terrorism legislation. It is unclear how this has affected TRO's humanitarian activities.

Many of those displaced in the recent fighting have received government assistance to return home. However, there are concerns that many of these returns were premature and involuntary. Furthermore, there are reports that the government has exerted pressure on aid agencies to withdraw assistance to IDPs in order to induce their return (IDMC, 2007b). Despite these returns, an estimated 38,000 still remain in displacement camps, located mainly in Batticaloa and Trincomalee (ICG, 2008: 9). The government, for both military and economic reasons, has declared the Muttur East district of Trincomalee, an area of origin for many, a High Security and Special Economic Zone. The government has sought to resettle people from Muttur East in alternative sites, though many IDPs are reluctant to accept this and clearly state their desire to return to their areas of habitual residence (IDMC, 2006).

The renewed conflict has also led to the militarisation of the north and east. The military presence is strong and retired military personnel have been appointed as heads of district and provincial authorities. Military interests in the region have influenced the allocation and delivery of humanitarian assistance. Paramilitary groups in the region have also used assistance to control the population (SAHR, 2007: 9).

This environment has exacerbated corruption risks in a society where mechanisms of transparency and accountability do not exist (TISL, 2006: 1). Many areas of the north and east are under the control of the LTTE or other paramilitary groups, which engage in state-like activities, extracting taxation in exchange for protection and providing welfare. The ability of the government to enforce the rule of law in these areas is limited. Humanitarian assistance has been subject to taxation by these non-state actors, and international agencies, in exchange for access and security, are sometimes obliged to work with local organisations linked to these groups.[2] Meanwhile, the government has often used humanitarian assistance to further its strategic interests, rather than alleviate civilian insecurity. This is evident in the forced relocation of IDPs.

2.2 The tsunami

The humanitarian impact of the conflict was compounded by the tsunami that hit the island in December 2004. Over 30,000 people were killed, and more than 860,000 displaced. Economic losses were estimated at $1 billion, and the livelihoods of thousands were severely affected (TEC, 2006a: 31).

The event was followed by a concerted humanitarian response by multiple actors, including provincial and national authorities, the military, the international humanitarian community and affected populations themselves. Some US$3bn in aid was channelled through the government for reconstruction purposes, and over US$1bn of assistance was channelled through NGOs (Goodhand, Klem et al., 2005: 87). The response initially sought to meet immediate needs, in terms of food, shelter, health, education and water and sanitation. However, the transition towards supporting the rehabilitation of affected populations occurred rapidly, and many agencies soon engaged in providing cash grants and assets for livelihoods promotion. They also supported the

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[2] Interviews with aid agencies, Sri Lanka, April 2008.

government in providing transitional shelter, resettling communities and building permanent housing (TEC, 2006a: 31–32).

The vast amount of humanitarian assistance that entered the country after the tsunami exacerbated corruption risks. The response became highly politicised and often reflected and accentuated existing conflict-related tensions. Discussions with key informants suggest that many politicians at the national, provincial and local levels and other non-state actors used the large influx of resources as an opportunity to increase their political capital amongst their constituencies and for personal enrichment. This was evident in the south, north and east, where politicians, the LTTE/TRO and other actors used humanitarian aid as a means of patronage and to bolster their legitimacy (Goodhand, Klem et al., 2005: 58).

Allegations of widespread corruption have been made by civil society organisations, with one watchdog claiming that $1bn in tsunami aid has not been accounted for.[3] However, allegations have also been made by the Auditor-General, which released a report highlighting numerous irregularities in reconstruction, rehabilitation and fund management. The report notes how, in one divisional secretariat, just under 600 families had been affected but over 15,000 received assistance.[4] Another high-profile case involves President Rajapakse, then prime minister. Rajapakse set up the 'Helping Hambantota Initiative', for which $830,000 was raised to support relief and reconstruction efforts in his home town. Although the funds ended up in three private bank accounts, the case was controversially ruled in his favour as the charge was seen as a politically motivated attempt to undermine Rajapakse's presidential bid.[5] Meanwhile, the LTTE ordered all agencies to channel funding through TRO (ICG, 2006: 9). Box 1 outlines some instances of corruption in the tsunami response as described by the local media.

There have been accusations of ethnic bias in the allocation and distribution of assistance. The

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[3] Interview with NGO, Colombo, Sri Lanka, April 2008.
[4] See Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) press release, 29 September 2005, http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2005 statements/354/
[5] See BBC News, 'Lanka President Wins Tsunami Case', 27 March 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/484944 2.stm.

Box 1: Examples from the local media of corruption in the relief and recovery process

According to statistics maintained by the district secretariat of Hambantota, the number of new houses built in the district for tsunami-displaced families stood at 6,028. However, according to other sources it was estimated that only 3,193 houses had been damaged in the disaster. Therefore many people received surplus houses, including the heads of local councils and their spouses, members of local councils and their relatives, politicians' supporters, public relations officers working for local politicians and people from wealthy backgrounds. Yet, despite the amount of surplus houses, a considerable number of tsunami victims were still living in temporary shelters or with host families. There were also claims that many non-victims who received houses had started to sell them. This was particularly evident in housing schemes such as Suchee, Maithreegama and Subodha. The new home-owners had to pay bribes of Rs15,000 to delete the name of the original owner on the housing beneficiary list and replace it with the name of the new occupant.

Source: 'Lakbima', 18 January 2008

Six IDP families received a cash grant of Rs250,000 each from UN Habitat to purchase suitable land to construct a house. The families purchased 69 perches of land in Kaluthara district. The land was divided by a government surveyor into six plots after allocating some of the land for a communal well. The local council gave approval for the survey plan. IOM then started to construct temporary shelters on the site until the beneficiaries obtained permanent housing from UN Habitat. However, under pressure from the neighbouring land owner, who was a strong supporter of a local politician, the chairman of the local council ordered IOM to stop construction. The landowner, fearing that the project would reduce the value of his land, used his political connections to stop the project.

Source: 'Ravaya' weekly newspaper, 17 February 2008

Tsunami victims in an IDP camp at Borupana Road, Ratmalana, in Colombo district, were living without electricity and other basic infrastructure. Selected members of the camp met the Assistant Secretary to the President and explained their situation and the poor conditions they faced in the camp. The Assistant Secretary wrote a letter to the Divisional Secretary (DS) of the area asking for a resolution. An eight-member team from the camp went to meet the DS with the letter. However, the DS was not supportive of their demands and engaged them in heated discussion. Finally, the DS informed the local police that eight people from the tsunami camp had entered his office and were impeding him in carrying out his duties. The police arrested the eight IDPs for questioning.

Source: 'Lakbima', 12 January 2008

government has been accused of concentrating assistance in the predominantly Sinhalese south, at the expense of the mainly Tamil north and east. In the south, there was similarly a perception that communities in the north and east were receiving a disproportionate amount of assistance, and many Muslims also felt left out despite being the worst-hit community (Goodhand, Klem et al., 2005: 59).

Many local NGOs did not have the experience or capacity to effectively manage substantial grants and therefore lacked the transparency and accountability mechanisms that could have helped to curtail corruption. The ability of aid agencies to establish control over their local partners was undermined by the pressure placed on them by donors and the media (given a large part of the donations came from the general public) to ensure that they were spending aid as quickly as possible, and were having an impact on the affected population.

The government and the LTTE sought to overcome their differences and establish a joint mechanism for relief distribution. A Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was formed, in which the two parties could jointly receive and coordinate tsunami funds. However, it was strongly opposed by Sinhalese nationalists, who feared that it would further legitimise and empower the LTTE. The Supreme Court ruled P-TOMS unconstitutional in 2005 (ICG, 2006: 9).

3. Beneficiary perceptions of corruption

Interviewees for this study had been affected by the tsunami, the conflict or both. In the immediate aftermath, those affected by the tsunami had all received some kind of emergency assistance from the government, international aid agencies and local NGOs. This included water, food, hygiene kits, clothes and temporary shelter. As part of the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, many had received some form of cash support, material to rebuild their homes, alternative houses and fishing equipment such as nets and boats.

People in camps in Batticaloa and Trincomalee had been displaced by renewed fighting after the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement between the government and the LTTE. Most of those interviewed had been living in the camps since 2006. The camps were mainly managed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or IDP committees elected by camp residents. In the camps, they received food aid twice a month under a joint government and World Food Programme (WFP) initiative. Other local and international NGOs provided water and sanitation, safe spaces for children, materials for schools and other assistance such as hygiene kits and clothes. The assistance did not vary significantly from camp to camp. Some IDPs had participated in the government's return and relocation programme.

Corruption in these processes was of concern among some of the beneficiaries interviewed for this study. However, their ability to recognise instances of corruption largely depended on their access to information regarding their entitlements. This knowledge varied substantially throughout the areas visited. In some sites, local authorities and NGOs publicly displayed beneficiary lists and hung noticeboards listing entitlements, whilst in others, beneficiary lists were not publicly displayed and beneficiaries did not know what relief they were entitled to, but simply accepted any assistance they received when it came.

From the group discussions, most of the beneficiaries receiving tsunami-related assistance seemed to have a relatively good understanding of their entitlements. Yet in contrast, those residing in conflict-induced IDP camps had a limited knowledge of their entitlements, with the exception of food assistance received through joint WFP and government-run programmes, which listed entitlements per household. Despite these limitations, various instances of corruption were

nevertheless identified. These mostly related to politicians manipulating the registration process for financial or political gain, consequent distortions in the allocation and distribution of relief, interfering in the quality and quantity of assistance for personal enrichment and misleading IDPs during return processes.

The majority of humanitarian assistance, particularly during the tsunami response, was channelled through the government. In order to receive this assistance, the affected population has to register with the relevant local authorities. The Grama Naladhari (GN), the local village officer, is responsible for collecting information on households in the area both before and after a crisis. This includes data on assets, income, livelihoods, number of dependants and sub-families, demography, gender and age. This information is then used to compile needs assessments that help determine who is eligible for assistance. The final beneficiary lists have to be approved by higher levels of authority at the district and divisional level. The Divisional Secretary (DS) has overall responsibility for finalising beneficiary lists, allocating assistance and approving projects.

Local and international NGOs often use these assessments and lists to determine the beneficiaries of their programmes. This was particularly the case during the tsunami, where agencies were allowed to allocate relief more rapidly, government approval was facilitated and acquiring resources such as land for housing was easier. These lists and assessments were also used to avoid duplication amongst the myriad agencies working in the country. However, despite these potential benefits, some NGOs preferred to carry out their own assessments and distribute relief accordingly.

In areas of conflict-induced displacement, the GN is also responsible for registering IDPs and facilitates the distribution of relief among camp residents. The camps, however, are mainly managed by IOM or by an elected IDP committee. The committees receive training in camp management by IOM, and are used by the residents as a point of contact with government authorities and aid agencies, in which any problems or issues that arise in the relief process can be resolved. The committees also help to

distribute relief items in the camp and generally support their smooth running.

3.1 Political patronage in the registration process and in the distribution of relief

Many tsunami-affected beneficiaries identified instances of corruption throughout the registration process. They claimed that political authorities used humanitarian assistance as a means of political patronage and personal enrichment. Authorities were accused of manipulating the registration process to favour individuals and communities that supported them politically, or as a means to gain further support, as opposed to directing assistance to the areas and people most in need of it. The examples given suggest that this was most evident with lucrative tsunami-related assistance, such as houses and fishing boats.

This misuse of power for political purposes seems to have affected the allocation of relief within and between districts. For example, although Hambantota district was one of the worst-affected during the tsunami, it was widely understood among beneficiaries that it has received a disproportionate amount of assistance in relation to needs, with some individuals attributing this to the fact that it is the home district of the president. This has occurred at the expense of other districts, particularly in the east. It was claimed by beneficiaries that there are an estimated 3,000 excess houses in Hambantota, some of which have remained empty whilst others have been occupied by non-beneficiaries.

Within the district of Hambantota, some beneficiaries also claimed that the authorities were using their position creating, finalising and approving beneficiary lists to favour political supporters and to add family members and friends. This often occurs at the expense of other legitimate groups, particularly those affiliated to opposition parties or who reside in districts with less political influence. In a village near the town of Ambalantota, a group of beneficiaries claimed that housing lists were inflated to include non-affected people. They said that these people then often sold the houses, rented them out or simply used them as second homes. This was also a complaint in the village of Samadigama, where over 300 houses were built, but only 87 were occupied by legitimate beneficiaries. Villagers believed that the other houses have been occupied by people who do not meet selection criteria but who have political connections or the financial means to bribe the local authorities.

Box 2: Political patronage in the allocation of housing

In December 2004, Swarna, a middle-aged woman from Hambantota district, was affected by the tsunami, losing her house and household assets. In order to receive assistance she presented the necessary documents to the GN, who included her on the housing beneficiary list, which received approval from the DS. Swarna resided in a temporary displacement camp until construction of her home was complete, but she claimed another household that had not been affected by the tsunami forcefully occupied the partially completed house, with the blessings of the political authority in the area. Although Swarna lodged a complaint about the incident to the DS, she was asked not to take the issue further as she would receive an alternative home in the area. After waiting six months, she returned to the DS to reiterate what had happened and ensure she was allocated a new home. At this point, she claimed that the DS asked her to produce a recommendation letter from her local member of parliament. She met the politician and produced all the relevant documents needed to obtain the recommendation letter, but she claimed that the politician did not issue a letter; instead, she was told that he would directly instruct the DS to allocate her a new house.

However, according to Swarna the DS refused to allocate a new house without a written recommendation letter from the politician. Therefore, she decided to meet the DS to explain the situation, who then immediately contacted the district secretary to ensure that he allocated the house without requiring unnecessary letters. However, despite the intervention of the district secretary, Swarna still claimed to be waiting for a house three years after the tsunami, in a district with an excess of houses. She believed she had been denied housing because she had worked for the opposition party.

These bribes often consist of giving fish or liquor to local authorities to induce them to put names on lists, or in order to get an approved damage assessment report from the police. Box 2 illustrates an example where a woman claimed to have been denied access to a house in favour of a non-affected family.

Some beneficiaries, however, defended the role of the GN, claiming that they are often pressured by higher-level authorities to include certain people and exclude others from beneficiary lists. They claimed that they are sometimes threatened with being transferred to a less desirable area of the country, often war-affected, if they fail to comply.

However, the beneficiaries interviewed did not know of any cases where these threats had actually been carried out.

Similar instances of corruption for political gain were cited in the neighbouring district of Ampara, with some families claiming to have been excluded from beneficiary lists, despite living in precarious conditions. They felt their living conditions should entitle them to relief. This was the case in the village of Pottuvil, where ten families were initially put on a beneficiary list after an NGO assessment. However, four families, including one with a disabled member, were replaced by households from a neighbouring village, whom they felt did not meet the targeting criteria. They believed they were taken off the list because they lacked political connections. Another community in Panama believed that they were being denied assistance because they did not vote for the party in power. These families received some livelihoods support from two international NGOs, but did not know what they were entitled to and simply accepted what these NGOs brought.

In contrast to the frustration shown by many of the beneficiaries in Pottuvil and Panama, most beneficiaries interviewed in Hambantota claimed that they were able to register and receive adequate assistance. Despite the manipulation of lists to include non-target groups, this did not necessarily mean that all legitimate groups were removed, especially given the excess number of houses that were built in the area. So, whilst many people bribed police officers to get damage reports or offered gifts to local authorities to get on lists, it was believed that most affected households eventually got some form of support.

However, it was not only the political authorities that were accused of manipulating the registration process. In the village of Samadhigama in Hambantota district, beneficiaries voiced anger towards the local Buddhist temple, which was managing a grant from the government of Taiwan to build houses for those affected by the tsunami. They claimed that the monk in charge of the grant had put friends and family on the beneficiary list and personally benefited by asking others to pay a fee if they wanted to get their name on the list.

In contrast to the tsunami-related cases, most residents in the displacement camps visited in Batticaloa and Trincomalee claimed not to have experienced any problems registering as IDPs.

However, there was an exception in Kirumuti farm, an IDP camp located in Batticaloa district. The camp houses 150 families displaced from Sampur (Trincomalee), as well as a group of 16 families displaced from Thoppigala (Batticaloa). These families were initially residing with friends and relatives in the vicinity, but then moved into the camp as some of the previous residents returned home. However, as they were initially living with host families they were not registered as IDPs. This has denied them access to most of the humanitarian assistance that arrives at the camp. The IDPs felt they were being discriminated against, but did not understand why. Conversations with key informants, however, suggest that local authorities are reluctant to give IDP status to those displaced in the same district as they are eager to show that IDP numbers are falling; by denying relief they can induce them to return home. This also provides political capital to the authorities as they claim that their policies in the region are improving civilian security.

3.2 Interfering with the quality and quantity of assistance for personal gain

Another instance of corruption is related to the quality of some of the houses provided as part of the rehabilitation process after the tsunami. Many beneficiaries, particularly in Hambantota and Colombo districts, felt that the quality of some of the houses they received was extremely poor, and that corrupt contractors were used to carry out the work. Many houses had significant signs of damage, such as cracks in the walls; many flooded when it rained and some were simply left unfinished and unfurnished. Furniture was a significant complaint; beneficiaries claimed that some households received their houses fully furnished, including microwaves and television sets, whilst others did not receive any furnishings. In a site close to Colombo, beneficiaries claimed that furniture allocated for houses was being used in the DS' office.

The design of houses often varied from the original plan shown to the beneficiaries. This was an issue that beneficiaries felt strongly about as it often produced culturally insensitive products. For example, a Hindu family complained that the toilet was located inside the house, which goes against their traditional beliefs. Some beneficiaries were not sure why designs had changed or why the quality of the construction was poor, but others attributed the lack of quality to corrupt contractors and discrepancies in the allocation of furniture to

the existence of 'beneficiaries' with political or financial influence. Contractors were accused of changing designs and using poor-quality materials in order to increase their profits. Some also stated that work was sometimes sub-contracted multiple times, and therefore the final contractor often had fewer resources with which to work. The quality of houses is often so poor that the donor agency has initiated a programme to rectify shortfalls (TISL, 2007: 5). In Ampara district, some beneficiaries showed gratitude for the houses, stating that they did not receive any assistance when their houses were damaged by fighting in the 1990s, and were therefore simply grateful that, after the tsunami, they were getting assistance.

Other actors were also blamed, not just contractors. In the example cited above, with regard to corruption by the local Buddhist temple, beneficiaries also complained about the quality of housing provided under the scheme, and felt that the temple was profiting from the assistance process. Their suspicions were aroused during the opening ceremony, when a monk from the temple claimed that the houses were worth 600,000 rupees (around US$5,500), but it was clear from the quality of the houses that such an amount had not been spent.

Most beneficiaries were unaware of the process used by aid agencies and government authorities to hire contractors. In one village in Ampara district, beneficiaries mentioned that all they knew was that the contractors were always outsiders, and they never hired anyone locally to carry out the work. Beneficiaries in Hambantota claimed that the quality of the houses improved when NGOs monitored progress throughout the construction.

Housing was not the only issue. In villages near Hambantota, some beneficiaries also complained about the poor quality of fishing equipment, such as boats and nets. They felt discriminated against as they saw other fishermen get better equipment, which they believed the others received because they had political connections or the money to bribe authorities. However, it was not clear whether this was the result simply of different agencies procuring items of different quality, rather than corrupt practices.

In the displacement camps visited in Batticaloa and Trincomalee, IDPs complained about the quality and quantity of food assistance provided

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Box 3: Local NGOs, contractors and the quality of housing

Bonn Sri Lanka, a diaspora NGO formed in Germany, sponsored the construction of 30 houses in Hambantota after the tsunami. They hired a local NGO to carry out the work and allocated 900,000 rupees (around US$8,500) for each house. When they came to Sri Lanka to see the final results of the project they were shocked to find that the quality of the houses was extremely poor; many were without electricity and some had no toilets or kitchens. An evaluator estimated that they were worth only 250,000 rupees (around US$2,000). It was later revealed that the construction work had been sub-contracted four times. Bonn Sri Lanka subsequently inquired about the possibility of filing a criminal report against the local NGO involved, but an officer from the Criminal Investigation Department informed them that the organisation no longer existed and that it was originally set up during the tsunami response by a minister with strong political connections. He advised that it was best to drop the case.
Source: Interview with New Environmental Resources Forum, Hambantota, Sri Lanka, April 2008.

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through the joint WFP- and government-run food programmes. In order to receive food aid under this scheme, IDPs are given ration cards that state their entitlements depending on the size of their household and number of dependants. These were sometimes displayed on large noticeboards in the camps, and as a result most IDPs tended to know exactly what their entitlements were. WFP imports most of the food aid, with the exception of rice, which is the government's responsibility. Once the food is cleared at the port the government stores it until it is distributed. The distribution is carried out by local cooperatives hired by the government.

Most IDPs complained that the quantity of the food received from the cooperatives was often below their stated entitlement, and that the food quality was often poor. This was of critical importance to the IDPs, as they often sell part of their ration in order to buy other necessities, and they claimed that a small reduction in quality and quantity made a significant difference to their purchasing power. Some attributed this lack of quality and quantity to corrupt practices by the cooperatives used to distribute the food, claiming that they were probably profiting from giving less. The fact that the weights tended to be correct when government officials or WFP staff were present reinforced their suspicions. Others, however, did not know why they were receiving

poor-quality items and less quantity, and most were unfamiliar with where the food was sourced.

3.3 Corruption for political gain in IDP return

The government is keen for IDPs to return to their homes or to alternative sites in order to demonstrate improvements in security created by its military successes in the east of the country. As a result, many IDPs have been offered assistance to return to their areas of habitual residence or to relocate to alternative sites. This was the case for IDPs residing in Kiliveddy camp in Trincomalee. These IDPs used to reside in a camp in the centre of Batticaloa town; however, in 2006 the government informed them that they would be helped to return to their home town in Sampur, Trincomalee. They were placed on buses that had large signs indicating that they were returning to their home towns, but they were later surprised when they arrived at Kiliveddy camp, a transit site about 50km from their areas of origin. They were told that they had to stay in the camp until further notice, and they have been there ever since. Some IDPs explained that the reason why they were sent to the transit site was because their home town lies in the government-declared High Security and Special Economic Zone. They claimed that the fact that they were forced to move against their will and that they were misled was a form of corruption, particularly as the government was benefiting both militarily and economically by controlling their home areas.

A similar issue was raised in the town of Pallikkudyirippu in Trincomalee, where 194 IDP families returned in March 2008 from IDP camps in Batticaloa. The government had informed them that it was safe to return to their homes and that the government had repaired their houses, installed wells and fixed up the local school and health centre. They were therefore encouraged to return, and transport was provided for them to do so. However, once the IDPs returned they found that their homes were still uninhabitable, wells had not been installed and the government had misled them with regards to security, as the area was still subject to fighting and the surrounding area was littered with land mines. They currently inhabit the local school in extremely difficult conditions, with severe water and sanitation concerns. Furthermore, they have lost their status as IDPs and are therefore no longer entitled to receive government assistance. They are currently dependent on limited assistance, mainly food aid, brought in by some international NGOs. The beneficiaries did not use the word corruption to describe the process, although they felt that the government was attempting to return people home as quickly as possible in order to gain political capital from the process.

3.4 Complaints mechanisms

Most of the beneficiaries interviewed who identified corrupt practices in the relief process sought to take their grievances to the relevant authorities, or directly to aid agencies and NGOs. Others, however, decided not to complain directly as they feared that this could potentially lead to them losing out on other entitlements.

The official mechanism to complain about the relief process is to present a written statement to the GN. However, most beneficiaries did not present letters but rather spoke informally to the GN. In Hambantota, some beneficiaries claimed that, after talking to the GN, their grievances were resolved. Their names were added to beneficiary lists if left out or an inquiry was opened looking into why some households were not allocated houses. In other instances, however, the GN did not resolve their grievances and often claimed that the problem lay with higher authorities over which they did not have any influence. Most beneficiaries believed that this was true, although they also claimed that some GNs were involved in malpractice and often erected bureaucratic obstacles in order to discourage further complaints. In Ampara, most villagers interviewed said that, after complaining to the GN about being left off beneficiary lists, they were simply told that they would receive assistance next time; this was often not the case. The threat of political transfers was mentioned at one site, and was seen as a disincentive for GNs to question higher authorities on corruption issues.

Many beneficiaries also fear that complaining may lead to them losing their entitlements. This was raised by a group of fishermen, who were reluctant to give any written complaints to the authorities. Rather, they would protest and organise demonstrations. They claimed that this tactic was sometimes successful, and in one instance the government increased their monthly cash payment from three to four months, although they were demanding six months, as they had heard others had received this amount in neighbouring Hambantota district.

Others went directly to NGOs, particularly if they had a complaint with regards to relief provided by that specific agency. In Hambantota, a group of beneficiaries had been told by an international NGO that they were to receive a Rs30,000 (around US$280) grant per household to support their livelihoods. After six months they had not received any support, and therefore went to the NGO to inquire when they would receive the money. They were told that there was a slight change, and that the grant had been reduced to 9,000 rupees (around US$85). They reported that, when they asked why this was the case, they were rudely told that the reason did not concern them. They suspected that it was due to corruption in the NGO.

In the IDP camps, many residents, through their elected IDP committees, complained to both the GN and WFP about the quality and quantity of food received from the cooperatives. According to the beneficiaries, the cooperatives denied the accusations and made sure that quantities were correct when government or WFP staff were present during distributions. In one instance, the IDP committee at Kiliveddy camp, with the support of WFP, negotiated with the cooperative to be present at the distribution to ensure beneficiaries received their proper entitlements. They were satisfied with the outcome.

4. Conclusions

Various instances of corruption were identified by beneficiaries interviewed during the study. These include government authorities and a religious entity manipulating the registration process and taking bribes in order to include family, friends and political supporters on beneficiary lists. These instances were most prominent with regards to lucrative items such as housing and fishing boats built or distributed during the rehabilitation phase of the tsunami response. According to beneficiaries, this manipulation of the registration process has affected the distribution of relief between and within districts, with Hambantota largely believed to have benefited the most from excess assistance.

Other instances of corruption affected the quality and quantity of assistance received. Many of those that received houses in the aftermath of the tsunami complained about the quality, claiming that cracks had already started to form in the walls, many were subject to flooding during rains and the original designs shown to beneficiaries were sometimes radically changed upon construction. This was often blamed on corrupt constructors compromising quality to minimise costs or subcontracting the work with fewer resources. Quality and quantity were also concerns for IDPs receiving food aid, with some accusing the local cooperative used by the government and WFP to distribute food of gaining financially by providing them with less than the amounts stated on their ration cards and giving poor-quality food.

Corruption for economic and political gain was also cited by some IDPs who had been misled during return processes. They claimed that government objectives to return IDPs home as quickly as possible and to appropriate strategic and fertile land have led to forced relocations and returns despite security concerns and a lack of livelihood opportunities in their areas of origin. Others have been denied IDP status, a prerequisite for obtaining government assistance.

From the instances of corruption identified by beneficiaries, it seems clear that the environment in which humanitarian assistance is delivered strongly influences the risks of corruption. For example, the general lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms and the predominance of patronage politics have heavily influenced which locations and households receive assistance and the quantity and quality of that assistance. Furthermore, the renewal of conflict in the north and east has meant that military, economic and political objectives have influenced recovery strategies.

However, the risks of corruption and the ability of beneficiaries to identify instances of corruption are also linked to policies and practices of the actors involved in relief and recovery. The fact that many beneficiaries were unable to access information on their entitlements limited their ability to identify instances of corruption. The government, NGOs and other aid agencies rarely informed them of their entitlements and beneficiary lists were not always publicly displayed. In fact, many beneficiaries told us that, if lists were displayed, they would be able to complain if they identified any discrepancies. During the research trip, only a few noticeboards, mainly located in IDP camps, were publicly displayed listing entitlements. However, by indicating what each household was entitled to in terms of food aid it enabled them to identify discrepancies in the distribution of food by the cooperatives.

Furthermore, a considerable amount of aid after the tsunami was channelled through the government, and many NGOs used government lists in order to speed up the delivery process. However, despite these advantages, relying on government lists also increased the risks of corruption as they were often manipulated for personal or political gain.

Aid agencies therefore need to understand the environment in which they operate in order to identify corruption risks and implement policies that can curtail them. Table one summarises some of the possible ways agencies can minimise the risks identified by this study. These include understanding the nature of politics and patronage in the country and identifying the lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms that should make aid agencies more cautious when channelling aid through the government or using the government's beneficiary lists. This understanding can also lead to protective mechanisms such as carrying out independent needs assessments and verifying government lists more rigorously. It could also lead to advocacy to publicly display lists so that the public can scrutinise them.

Table 1: Programming area, corruption risks and possible ways to minimise risk

Programming area	Corruption risks	Possible ways to minimise risk
Targeting: reliance on government lists	Manipulation of the registration process by politicians to include friends, family and political supporters on lists Acceptance of bribes to included non-beneficiaries on lists	Carry out independent assessments to ensure that assistance is reaching beneficiaries. These assessments and consultations with beneficiaries can also be used to verify government lists Publicly display beneficiary lists and advocate for reciprocity with government lists
Project implementation: use of local partners and contractors	Poor-quality outputs (especially houses) in order to siphon off funds Profiting by sub-contracting the work to third parties	Establish procedures to verify authenticity and legitimacy of partners and contractors Monitor progress in project implementation and making payment dependent on outputs Enforce rigorous accountability procedures and reporting and ensure partners and contractors have the capacity to comply Inform beneficiaries of the value of projects and provide forums for them to report irregularities
Food distribution: relying on local cooperatives to distribute food aid	Local cooperatives distributing poor-quality food and reducing the weight of rations	Monitor the distribution process Arrange for IDP committees to attend distributions Ensure suppliers are providing adequate-quality food
Supporting government efforts in recovery, return and reintegration	Forced relocations, misleading the displaced population Encouraging IDPs to return but not providing promised assistance	Increase monitoring of government return processes Advocate against forced and unsafe returns Ensure programmes are not supporting these processes when contravening international standards and principles
Registration and targeting of IDPs for relief	Government denying IDP status to legitimate IDPs	Identify internally displaced people who have been denied IDP status and ensure their needs are being met

An awareness of corrupt practices by contractors, local NGOs and cooperatives could lead to policies that monitor progress throughout the construction phase or the distribution of food, and to measures that can disincentivise malpractice, such as making payment dependent on outputs or implementing rigorous accountability procedures that ensure that all the resources allocated for projects are accounted for. These accountability procedures can be top-down, ensuring that organisational staff are monitoring project implementation, but also bottom-up, supporting communities to monitor work carried out by contractors and local NGOs, and report any irregularities. However, the ability of beneficiaries to scrutinise local partners and contractors also hinges on power dynamics in the region, as many will be reluctant to bring up irregularities committed by armed actors or their allies. Bottom-up approaches must therefore be accompanied by top-down efforts.

Politically motivated corruption in return and recovery process for IDPs is clearly harder for agencies to control. However, they can ensure that they do not support these processes in any way and voice concerns when involuntary, unsafe and undignified returns are taking place, and the government is appropriating land for military and economic purposes. Furthermore, identifying displaced persons that have been denied IDP status can help ensure they receive assistance.

In sum, the risks of corruption in humanitarian assistance largely depend on the environment in which aid agencies operate. Agencies therefore need to understand this environment and to adapt their policies and practices in order to ensure that such measures indeed help to reduce these risks.

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