

What happens into the future

“The emphasis seems to be on infrastructure and buildings, and not on people. That I think is quite sad because when you say rebuild the nation, you’re not talking about bricks and mortar, you’re talking about people at the end of the day,” says Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, the Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA).

The CPA, formed in 1996, is an independent, non-partisan organization primarily focused on issues of governance and conflict resolution and is thus committed to programs of research and advocacy through which public policy is critiqued, alternatives identified and disseminated.

In this interview with Business Today, Dr Saravanamuttu discusses a range of issues related to the post-tsunami relief and reconstruction exercise and brings up several thought-provoking notions. Subjects he touches upon include the government’s strategy in this respect, the appointed task forces, aid utilization and distribution, the role of the LTTE, the peace process, and the responsibility of the local media.

By Rashmini Mather



Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

The CPA submitted a memorandum to the Task Force on Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) making various recommendation. particularly emphasizing the need to accommodate the distinct concerns of the northeast. Can you highlight the crucial element of this memorandum, particularly those considerations you view as being possibly overlooked by the gentlemen?

The CPA memorandum to TAFRE stressed a number of points. The key overarching point was this: in the context of the peace process and of discussions about governance, peace and democracy in Sri Lanka, we have moved towards a situation in which there is a gradual and grudging acceptance of going down a federal route, the route of devolution and power sharing. Furthermore, from the perspective of governance, the realization in practice of the principle of subsidiarity, of decision-making and implementation at the lowest levels of government possible and of moving away from centralization, is to be encouraged and advanced. In other words, the lowest level, of government and governance must be empowered. they must be consulted, their capacity built up :har they can participate, effectively and meaningful whole rebuilding exercise. Now our concern is that the way that the response to the tsunami disaster has been designed, all of this could be rolled back. What we see is a tremendous centralization by the central government as well as within the central government. For example. whilst it is probably quite understandable that in an emergency situation of such great magnitude that there is a need for the central government to reassert itself and take control, our concern is nevertheless that given the highly centralized structures and culture of governance that exists, the concentration of powers and authority at the center will be reinforced and consolidated in the wake of the tsunami. In short, that there will be movement away rather than towards subsidiarity.

Look for a moment at the composition of the task forces. The point has been made by others and I echo this point. I find it quite ironic that out of all the task forces, you really don’t have anyone from within the public service, apart from Mr Lalith Weeratunga and of course members of TAFLOL, the task force dealing with law and order and logistics. Take TAFREN as the key organization since it has been charged with rebuilding the nation, preparing legislation with regard to a new authority, and with the task of coming up with the overall action plan. It is full of private sector company directors apart from Mr Weeratunga who is the Prime Minister’s Secretary. This indicates to me the perspective of those constituting task forces and the

opinion of the bureaucracy and administrative service of the Government of Sri Lanka. Likewise the committee dealing with immediate relief headed by Dr Tara de Mel: Dr de Mel is not from within the administrative service as such, and everyone else is from civil society or the private sector.

Whilst the members of TAFREN for example are all great entrepreneurs and managers of large private sector institutions, what is absent in the task forces is real grass roots credentials, members with expertise and experience in community development, sensitivity, orientation and imagination in this respect to contribute in a meaningful way to a plan for rebuilding the nation, no less. There is an overwhelming preponderance of the private sector – given the enormity and pivotal importance of the task at hand – it is almost like saying that you might as well privatize government.

The marginalization of the public sector in the composition of the task forces has implications for the future. What happens if and when the task forces disband or disappear? What happens to the Center For National Operations? \'hat comes in their place? Is there going to be an authority to rebuild the nation? Is that going to be some kind of super structure or super body? Or is it going to be the case that everything reverts back to the line ministries, to this bureaucracy that seems to be left out of the action planning? They suddenly end up with the baby but they have had nothing very much to do with the baby at the present moment. Within the Center for National Operations itself what real role haYe these line ministries got? Are they being treated as poor relations? Are they being given step-motherly treatment within that context?

The approach is very centralized and technocratic. This was the criticism made against the UNP in its Regaining Sri Lanka exercise. I would imagine that if a UNP Government came out with a task force to rebuild the nation made up of company directors from the private sector, the JVP at least would have raised a hue and cry about it. It is indeed ironic that the JVP seems to have very little or nothing to say about the present situation. They are not represented in the task forces. They seem to be left out completely in the cold. Or perhaps it is the case that whilst all of these things are happening, the JVP is doing what it has to do on the ground.
Other concerns which have been raised in our Memorandum to TAFREN relate to transparency and accountability and to parliamentary oversight. We have

underscored the importance of the freedom of information in all of this – without access to information, coordination is not possible and monitoring will be sketchy.

It appears that the people appointed to head the task forces are close confidantes of the President and doubt has been expressed regarding their selection and expertise in this respect.. What is your opinion on the task forces and their work?

It is not my place to question the competence of the individuals concerned. No doubt the President has chosen people who she believes are competent and who she can trust. This is not to be dismissed in the context of an emergency. But what concerns me more and I made the point earlier is the preponderance of the private sector. What happens to the bureaucracy, the institutional memory within the government of Sri Lanka, inclusivity and the consultative and participatory nature of the process? Leave aside the bureaucracy, the argument has also been advanced that the people who are affected, whose homes have been destroyed, whose livelihoods have to be rebuilt, are not being consulted and involved. The emphasis seems to be on infrastructure and buildings, and not on people. This I think is quite sad because when you say rebuild the nation, you're not talking about bricks and mortar, you're talking about people at the end of the day; you're not talking about a building or a house for someone, you're talking about a home. You can think in your air-conditioned room that Sri Lanka can now be built to a point way ahead of what it was on December 26, 2004. Good, as long as you talk to the people who are going to live in those houses and call them their homes, talk to the people who have to go to those schools and hospitals, think of the social and cultural aspects, think in terms of whether they can be maintained into the future, whether there is money to be able to do that. What is the rush to build. if insufficient thought and planning leads to more problems further down the line?

I think there needs to be much more of a consultative process. This is a chance to empower people and levels of governance below that of central government. One has to take them into account. You cannot allow for the indictment of the whole process that it is all about buildings and not about people. I think this is an argument which has a certain amount of credence to it at this time.

The President has been criticized for not employing an inclusive approach whereby the relevant professional political parties and institutions in the country have not been consulted. This is leading to much dissension among various factions and if not rectified could lead to disastrous consequences. What are your observations and suggestions?

I don't know about the full level of consultation that TAFRE has been through. One is led to believe from their spokespersons that they have engaged in this type of consultation. They also invited people to send in memoranda. We, the CPA, did but we did not receive any direct response from them. There were responses from the state media directed at me personally, which were entirely unparliamentary. I assume that there is probably some discussion with various professional bodies and that many have responded to the invitation of TAFREN to send in memoranda and submissions.

You asked about the level of consultation, participation and the capability of the task forces etc. One major success story of the tsunami is the simple fact that Sri Lanka hasn't had any epidemics. That is something that those who were responsible for the welfare camps need to be congratulated about because epidemics are a grave danger in situations of chi nature. Clearly something has been done correctly. Consultation, participation, empowerment at various levels of community. and bringing the expertise of the local community and of other people in the country are key. If this is about rebuilding the nation and presuming by this, we mean all of ri Lanka. then the issue arises that everyone should be made a stakeholder but there are concerns with regard to that.

Millions of dollars worth of aid has been pledged to Sri Lanka. However, the country has a track record of poor aid utilization. Will the situation be different in this case and is there are a chance that the pledges will be revoked if any mismanagement is detected?

It is well documented by the Central Bank and in other multilateral studies that Sri Lanka's aid utilization has been very low: anywhere between 14 and 20%, depending on how you calculate it. That is far too low for our country. Reasons

relate to a combination of factors including corruption, wastage, inefficiency and lack of political commitment. If I remember correctly, the previous government appointed Mr Ken Balendra, currently a member of TAFREN, to look into this. If we don't properly utilize the aid this time, it will be a tragedy because it will have repercussions for our ability to attract goodwill and support in the future. Furthermore, Sri Lanka has a responsibility to the individual citizens of the rest of the world who have been so generous. If we do not manage the funds properly and efficiently, we will never receive the same sort of help again, if unfortunately we need it. We also need to consider that if these monies are not used efficiently and for the purposes for which they were contributed, future humanitarian appeals with regard to disasters elsewhere will be affected as well. In this respect, I believe we have a responsibility towards the rest of the world.

As to whether those pledges of aid will be revoked because we don't get it right, I don'_t know. I am sure though that the international community will insist on transparency and accountability and the internationally recognized best practices associated with both. I know the international community is operating under the twin guiding principles of conflict sensitivity and subsidiarity.

Apart from the question of the aid being revoked or pledges lapsing, one must also be aware that there have been situations where the amounts pledged have been wonderful, displaying tremendous magnanimity, but the monies actually received are much, much less. The international community too does not always live up to the promises and pledges it makes. Afghanistan is a classic example where billions were pledged but nowhere near that amount was received by that country.

In addition to the official bilateral and multilateral aid, there has been an unprecedented amount of private money that has been raised. This money is there and the issue is that it be spent according to a plan so that there are no great imbalances. We need that kind of comprehensive plan and framework to ensure that there is an equitable distribution and that the distribution is according to need. Overlap and imbalance have to be avoided. The principle of equity has to be recognized and upheld as well. This means distribution according to need, in proportion to the devastation caused. We should ensure that the relief, recovery and rebuilding exercise in itself is not going to be the source of new division and cleavage. Instead that it resolves problems rather than creates new ones. The government has a great role and responsibility, there's no one else who can do this.

Do you agree with the statement ‘aid could be counterproductive unless good planning and governance is followed’?

Most definitely. Aid would be counterproductive if there is no good governance, no proper mechanisms and process insufficient monitoring evaluation, auditing, accountability. transparency. all of that. Aid is also counterproductive if we JU. r open our hands and say, please come, thereby creating dependencies on foreign resources. That would be absolutely tragic. We need to develop a certain amount of self-reliance. W’e need to capacity build at a local level. This is an opportunity to do that. We need to realize that yes, this is an opportunity to expand our resource base but this is not an opening to create a dependency into the future. Aid is necessary but aid carries with it risks.

As part of an independent organization involved in public policy debate, are you aware of the principles by which the foreign funds and donations are being allocated to different affected areas?

As far as I understand, two key concerns as I mentioned above are the principles of conflict sensitivity and subsidiarity. Conflict sensitivity is primarily a question with regard to the north and east but not exclusively so. Issues relating to relief, rehabilitation and recovery in the north and east in the context of the ethnic conflict predate the tsunami and conflict sensitivity in the aftermath of the tsunami must not harm the prospects for advancing the peace process. The hope is that trust, confidence and goodwill generated through the relief and recovery process will translate into better prospects on the peace front.

The second one is the notion of subsidiarity. This in my opinion is pivotally important as far as governance is concerned. At the same time it must be acknowledged that the capacities of the lower levels of governance and government have to be built up if subsidiarity is to realized on the ground. In certain areas, the culture of governance is one where the central government is hierarchical, in others the main political authority is authoritarian. The cumulative, combined effect of this is very centralizing. These issues have to be taken into account along with those of transparency and accountability. These concerns have to be addressed by the government, the LTTE, the NGO community, all

stakeholders.

There have been reports about inequitable aid distribution, corruption, bureaucracy and a failure to maintain law and order by the government in the aftermath of the tsunamis. With the CPA being somewhat of a watchdog, how serious is the ground situation and how can a disciplined and transparent approach to aid utilization be implemented?

Whilst there have been reports of law and order and other problems you identify, this has not been widespread. Certainly it is not systemic or some situation of lawlessness. The central government, the agencies of law and order and the forces have played a crucial role in maintaining law and order. The CPA's primary concerns have largely been with regard to the second phase as it were rather than the immediate relief work. How do we plan to move ahead once immediate challenges of relief are met? That's what the memo to TAFRE was all about. This is what the arguments with regard to decentralization, devolution, subsidiarity, and conflict sensitivity, are all about.

One can talk about any number of best practices but one needs to it down and look at the existing structures of governance in terms of their capacities. We have a huge public service in this country with almost a million people; we have around 85 ministers and another huge number of ministries as well. You're slicing things up in so many different ways in order to be able to satisfy political imperatives rather than any kind of administrative rationality or development framework at the end of the day. There are serious structural problems that need to be addressed with regard to governance in Sri Lanka. You can't do an ad-hoc job or as someone said, there's no point putting plaster on a wooden leg.

Representatives of the task forces have stated that the country has sufficient funds but lacks the human skill and materials for reconstruction. Do you agree?

I certainly recall that in discussions with regard to the Regaining Sri Lanka document and reconstruction in the north and east, there were skills shortages there. There may well be some in the south as well. But I think one has to take a

holistic look. There are ways in which to deal with the immediate emergency situation; there's an entire country out there, not all of it was affected directly by the tsunami. With proper planning, one could take human resources from one region to temporarily fill in gaps in others. Then we must think of outside assistance. There is expertise within this region with regard to disaster relief in India and Bangladesh. We should consider taking them on board and further plugging that gap.

Why is it that it has taken a tsunami for us to look at rehousing those living in refugee camps for so many years?

It is interesting that you pose the question in that way because it may turn out to be the case that we end up with two types of Internally Displaced Persons (!DP) – IDPs as a result of the ethnic conflict and IDPs as a consequence of the tsunami. It may work out to be the case that the IDPs as a consequence of the tsunami were the last into the welfare camps and the first ones out. The problem with regard to IDPs in the north and east is tied up to the peace process. For example, there are some people who cannot go back because their places of original habitation have been declared High Security Zones. And there are several political challenges which have to be addressed in that context as well. That is not to suggest for a moment that the !DPs' relocation in the south is going to be easy because there are all sorts of associated issues with regard to availability of land to begin with and the buffer zone criteria. Frankly I haven't fully understood the rationale with regard to the coastline buffer zone argument, and I feel that rationale should be made more public so that there is a full-fledged debate. There is a danger that the IDPs as a consequence of the tsunami may well receive relief earlier than those who have lived in welfare camps a a consequence of the ethnic conflict for decade because of those issues being tied to the political problem associated with the peace process.

Won't such a situation cause further resentment?

Yes, it could well cause further resentment and that is why one cannot fully disassociate the whole question of tsunami disaster relief and recovery from the question of relief, recovery and rehabilitation as a consequence of the ethnic conflict. Those people in the north and east have had to face this twice over in a sense and one needs to take that into account. Therefore in terms of developing mechanisms or structures of governance, one has to recognize that one cannot

divorce the two at the end of the day. That is why the whole recovery process has to be conflict sensitive, particularly where the north and east is concerned, but not only with regard to those areas.

The CPA memorandum states -an institutionalization of the LTIE's role in the reconstruction of the northeast". What does this mean exactly and in what realistic capacity do you see the LTIE involved. particularly since the JVP has openJr objected to the government working with the LITE?

To answer the second part of the question first, tsunami or no tsunami, the government is a coalition government. It has to be able to speak with a coherent voice with regard to a resolution of the ethnic conflict. Therefore the coalition partners have to come to a common understanding. They may well agree to disagree in terms of emphasis but one should not undermine the other in terms of a negotiating position and there should be a willingness and unity with regard to the question of a return to negotiations. There are problems with regard to the coherence and the unity of the GOSL position on dealing with the LTTE, which have to be resolved.

On the question of the institutionalization of the LTTE's role, the point we are making in that memorandum is this: there are large areas of the north and east which are under the physical control of the LTTE and there are areas which are not. At the same time, there is a strong political influence and presence of the LTTE in areas which they may not physically control. Any attempt to rebuild and provide relief and reconstruction in the north and east has to take the LTTE on board as a key player. But simultaneously, it is not a question of saying it is only the LTTE, and allowing one's desire to be able to do something in those areas with regard to relief and construction to in any way consolidate an LTTE position as the sole representative of the Tamil people or as the kingpins of the north and east to the exclusion of everyone else. The plurality and diversity of opinion within the Tamil community and other communities has to be taken into account.

The LTTE has also shown that it has a network and a capacity with regard to emergency relief and reconstruction. The TRO has worked on the ground, there has been cooperation between the agencies of the GOSL, the LTTE and the TRO at a district level. One thing that the tsunami did was to highlight the interdependence between the north and east of this country and the rest of this country: between the LTTE. paradoxically enough, the single strongest political actor in the north and

east, and the GOSL. The LTTE cannot successfully carry out relief and recovery in the north and east without the assistance of the GOSL because the international community will not give its funds directly. Likewise, the GOSL cannot carry out relief and recovery throughout the entirety of the northeast on its own because its writ does not run through the entirety of the north and east. Thus the two are locked into some sort of partnership. What we're saying is to take this on board, to recognize this and come up with arrangements which will then allow relief and re-construction efforts in the north and east to commence at the same time and continue at the same pace as the rest of the country.

We're told that rebuilding of the nation has commenced in Hambantota. Why? What kind of message does that send with regard to national integration and unity The other clay someone raised an interesting question – the answer to which I don't really know. They raised the question as to why we were asked to observe a minute of silence at 9.36am on January 26, a month after the tsunami struck Sri Lanka. What was the significance of 9.36? Was it auspicious? But do you look at auspicious times in order to commemorate a disaster? Someone suggested perhaps that was the time that the tsunami hit the south and Hambantota. We certainly do know that it hit the eastern coast of Sri Lanka well before 9.36 am. It is such things, which give you an indication of the way people think, the way they approach a problem, and it gives you the dimensions of the problem at the end of the clay. It is the extent to which these attitudes are deeply entrenched.

You have to try and ensure that the whole relief and recovery effort is conflict sensitive, also in terms of generating trust and confidence with regard to advancing the peace process and the resolution of the conflict. At the very least it should do no harm 10 the prospects of peace.

What do you see as the next step to recommence the peace process?

The peace process got stuck at the point at which there was talk about interim arrangements with regard to normalization, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. So it's almost as if we've come full circle. At the same time, the immediacy of the problem as a consequence of the tsunami, highlighting of the interdependence between the two communities and indeed between the two political actors is such that if you try to now deal with interim institutional arrangements that were proposed in the context of the peace process, which would have probably involved

constitutional change, you're really going to delay relief and rehabilitation. I feel one has come to the point at which there needs to be a consensus between those elements within the GOSL committed to the peace process and a negotiated solution, and those in the LTTE who feel likewise. One should insulate talk about any arrangements to deal with tsunami related relief, rehabilitation and rebuilding from peace process related issues. The LTTE, I would imagine, would not want to engage in any exercise that they think is prejudicial to the TSGA or interim administration. At the same time, they have to engage in negotiation with the government about interim arrangements to deal with tsunami related relief and recovery. It is a sort of situation in which the two are essentially and implicitly linked but if you start talking about an explicit linkage, you run into political problems. You need to be mature and responsible enough to recognize the constraints on either side; recognize that there are implicit linkages but not try to make explicit linkages between the two.

> **"You have to try and ensure that the whole relief and recovery effort is conflict sensitive, also in terms of generating trust and confidence with regard to advancing the peace process and the resolution of the conflict."**

Free media is another concern of the CPA. Do you feel that both the state and private media in Sri Lanka are taking a responsible role with regard to coverage of the natural disaster and its aftermath?

I have always complained and tried to do something about my complaints that the media in this country in general is insufficiently responsible. I have a particular complaint with regard to state media because I don't agree that there should be a state media. There is something called the government gazette. Whatever information the government wishes to put out, they can put out through the government gazette. Every newspaper and every media organ can carry it. If a political parry, be it in government or opposition. wants to use a media instrument to propagandize, then they should collect the money and set up a media institution – a radio station, television station and or newspaper. Let the people decide whether they want to pay, watch or read it. For me, there is absolutely no justification for state-controlled or state-owned media. However, I do believe that there is a place for public service media as far as electronic media is concerned where you have a

radio channel or television which is committed to public service in terms of providing a range of programming that reflects the diversity and plurality of the society which is not run by state apparatchiks but rather it is run by independent people. Although not 100% perfect. the model of the BBC is an interesting one in that respect.

In general terms, as far as the tsunami is concerned, why is there insufficient coverage of the Ampara district. which was the worst affected when looked at in any number of criteria. Are there no media institutions that are interested in the Ampara district? The Ampara district as a district in terms of parliamentary representation probably has a higher proportion of ministers than any other district but at the same time, it is having serious problems with regard to relief and recovery. We have been talking about the importance of conflict sensitivity, but immediately after the tsunami the most interesting aspect for certain media seemed to be as to whether the Sea Tigers had been destroyed or not or whether a VVIP coffin was being sent up to the Vanni because Prabhakaran was supposed to have been killed. What are they doing by are they doing it and what do they hope to get our of it'.

The media needs to look at capacity building within itself, look at social responsibility; are you part of the problem or are you part of the solution is a question they really need to address themselves. I believe there should be greater attempts at professionalism and ethical journalism; there should be a pride amongst journalists in their profession. Even the private media institutions have to ask themselves, how much are they investing in their staff in terms of capacity building, do they treat their staff as professionals, do they pay their staff in the way that professionals should be paid, is it not the case where you have journalists who are in the pay of politicians?

The media after all is a tremendously important institution. rm not saying that the media industry is a complete disaster. There are certain things that the media has done in Sri Lanka at times when democracy has been threatened. There have been media organizations and journalists who have stood up and taken a lot of flak, we know of journalists who have been killed and threatened. The time comes for the media as a key institution in a functional democracy to ask itself questions with regard to its social responsibility and to balance and reconcile that with the demands as far as freedom is concerned.

Do you have any response to the recent attacks the media has made against you?

Firstly, I am indeed flattered, and in one way, humbled that I've been paid so much attention by the state controlled media. As far as the personal attacks are concerned, I don't intend answering them, they're absolutely beneath contempt. What they're suggesting to me is that this is a government that can take no criticism, that doesn't accept that civil society has a role to play and a contribution to make in public policy making. Or is it the case that attack is the best form of defense? Is it the case that further clown the road. there are things being planned that have to be preempted by attacks on people now. In fact it's quite boring at one level if it wasn't potentially dangerous. It docs reflect adversely on the government's willingness and ability to recognize that civil society actors have a role to play in the public policy debate and that criticism made in a constructive spirit can be discussed and taken on board. If anyone thinks that they'rc going to stop me from doing what I'm doing by attacking me, they're certainly wrong. It only convinces me that I must be doing something right and I should continue to do it.

Do you have any final message to our readership?

The message is this: we have to seize the opportunity to get things right in terms of planning. It is a development problem. a political problem: it is a problem with regards to democracy because it deals with empowering people. Things should not be clone in haste because of political gain or imperatives. There are people's lives and livelihoods involved here. This is an opportunity for me, given the work we do here at the CPA, to contribute towards strengthening governance. I think the government hopefully will engage with civil society in a much more serious discussion about how levels of governance can be improved with regard to enhancing subsidiarity and conflict sensitivity. We're very fond in Sri Lanka of saying we missed an opportunity. We must ensure that we do something this time and doing something here is not just a question of building buildings. It's about people's lives, about their hopes and aspirations for the future. and it is about about a functioning democratic society where all the people in this society can live peace-fully with each other. We have an opportunity now to get this right and we have to keep pushing. rm not saying that I have a panacea for getting it 100% right but what we have to take on board is to include as many people in this conversation. The message at the end of the day is that all those platitudes and good sentiments are fine but we need to put them to work.