From compassion to the **will to improve**: Elision of scripts? Philanthropy in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

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**A B S T R A C T**

The paper analyses how two private post-tsunami reconstruction initiatives in Sri Lanka mobilized well intended aid to support and assist tsunami affected families, drawing on narratives of compassion, which resulted in an inadvertent obtrusion of the moral imperatives of donors upon the lives of aid receivers. We trace the discursive terrain around goodness, kindness and compassion utilized to generate donations. This quickly slipped into the practical construction of village models that reflected individuals’ ideas and understandings of development, modernism, social consciousness and peaceful coexistence. This merging, we argue, quickly subverted intention for the ‘betterment of villagers lives’, and became a means through which donors made claims on villages and impressed their will upon recipients. Given that private donor involvement in post-tsunami Sri Lanka was a critical factor shaping conditions on the ground, we contend that it is important to unpack their (powerful) role in giving meaning to building back better.

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1. Introduction

“We realized that communities are poorly managed in Sri Lanka as people do not feel responsible for their village assets. For our Tsunami housing project, we wanted to change this and wanted to make the new villagers feel responsible to maintain the village.” Donor B

“Ten years before the tsunami when I went to the village, I had a dream. The dream was two fold. One was to try and get a kind of new rural community development plan right, especially with a focus and aim to give back...Right, so for me, you know I’m at the end of the day so pleased and gratified that we have been able to at least – you know – create something positively better for those in desperate circumstances.” Founder of philanthropic institution

Travelling down the Southern coast of Sri Lanka nearly 10 years after the tsunami, we no longer see the devastation and debris of tsunami waves. Instead, the coastline is dotted with pleasing and colourful sites of housing communities and sign-posts signalling various donor-funded model villages. Just as the destruction caused by the tsunami waves was hard to miss, it is difficult to ignore the spread of newly built post-tsunami villages along the southern coast-line of Sri Lanka. The signs not only denote which country, federal state, corporate firm or donor agency was instrumental in rebuilding the destroyed villages, they also indicate bold claims of model village construction. They signify a certain ethos of self-belief regarding model villages. The above quotes capture a widespread confidence that each recreated community was to stand for a better order of village life; a different social order. The architects of model villages seem to suggest that ‘improvement’ can be achieved through the physical construction of houses and solid village planning; to “try and get a new kind of rural community development plan right”. Compassionate rhetoric slips into technical and programmatic registers as the only viable means of making a ‘difference’, echoing Li’s (2007) observation that problems are constructed and framed such as to be amenable to technical interventions.

In this paper, our association with two philanthropically-supported village construction efforts in the post-tsunami context of Southern Sri Lanka is used to explore the extent to which ‘model’ villages were attempting to create a new social order. Based on fieldwork, which included conversations with various actors...

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1 Section two offers a more detailed description of the fieldwork site and methods adopted.
involved in rebuilding "model" villages, we uncover the ways in which the initial compassionate impetus shifted to a will to improve the life of villagers over time. Research has shown how compassion initially motivated by "pure intentions to help" morphs into other facets. For example, Korf (2006) argues how such intentions slide into a "consumption good" where donors use various technologies because of expectations placed upon them to produce success (2006:246). We, in contrast, focus on how it is not merely the accomplishment of the project that matters, but also the production of particular images of village life. Abiding to their own frames of reference, private donors were keen to instil an ethos of improvement into Sri Lankan village life by invoking their own understanding of improvement and development. Hence, we argue that they discipline and guide villagers into a better life inverting the status quo, making “the new villagers feel responsible for their village assets” said Donor B (see also Li, 2007).

The temporality and politics of recovery (Hyndman, 2011), the multiple dilemmas and ambiguities embedded in the housing rebuilding process (Brun and Lund, 2008, 2009; Ruwanpura, 2009), the politics of memorialisation and purification (Simpson and de Alwis, 2008), the commodifying of good intentions (Korf et al., 2010), and the gendered world of post-tsunami spatial politics (De Mel, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2008) are well documented and researched topics in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. This literature emphasizes ways in which the reconstruction process is embedded within a wider political, cultural, social and cultural terrain of war, ethno-nationalism and uneven development. They point out that despite the mantra of "building back better", existing fault lines have been overlooked, creating and perpetuating stress and anxiety in an already fragmented social context. Hyndman (2011) in particular notes how disasters always occur within specific political situations, and that those countries most affected by disasters tend to suffer from both man made and natural disasters. In this context, the task of humanitarian aid is to focus not just on the relief but also on political futures since receiving countries also have certain agendas. In contrast to Hyndman’s (2011) focus on the circuits of official aid exchange, our gaze shifts to philanthropists, themselves positioned outside official aid and its practices. We are interested in those whose purported aim is to help people in need. Our paper shows that since private aid givers are positioned within a political field, i.e. the aid business and the local political context, they too cannot avoid the existing fault lines.

Our discussion explores more closely the ways in which human interventions in the physical world – rebuilding villages – are also about the will to rebuild a Sri Lankan sociality (Li, 2007; Woost, 1994; Brow, 1990). Our case studies point to how discourses of compassion and moral cultural rhetoric elide into righteousness about improving village communities. Moreover, by scrutinizing the deployment of cultural and moral tropes by non-state actors, we highlight how these scripts also encompass individualist undertones. We show how emblematic models “don’t attempt to accommodate messy realities of pre-existing social and economic relations” (Li, 1996:519), but are moreover subtle archetypes reifying a neo-liberal political economy. More specifically, post-tsunami Sri Lanka witnessed private individuals taking an active role in mobilizing the flow of foreign funds, which was unusual in the development landscape as non-accountable philanthropists were taking an active role in post-tsunami reconstruction. Rather than the state or NGOs, it was individuals who initially raised and disbursed funds. Logics of compassion hence were crucial in the nascent stages – striking a chord both with the aid givers, but also with the local communities. This script of compassion differs from Li’s scholarship (2007). Similar to Li’s (2007) research, however, these rhetorical devices eventually lapsed into a discourse on the will to improve communities, which also intersected with previous efforts of the Sri Lankan state to rebuild a nation of villages that harked back to a hegemonic vision of a mythical and glorious pre-colonial past (Woost, 1993; Brow, 1996). These registers invariably evoked Sinhala-Buddhist registers – which nearly three decades later were effortlessly resurfacing.

Wilful village construction and revitalizing the village community can be traced to colonial and immediate post-independence Sri Lanka, thus revealing a genealogical association with Sinhala-nationalism (Woost, 1994; Brow, 1988). Uplifting rural communities was a tool of various political regimes (Woost, 1994; Brow, 1988). Villagers were used to the idea of revitalizing a “Sri Lankan” way of living in order to overcome a history of colonialism and oppression. Brow (1999) using the early works of Tambiah (1992) notes how post-colonial development efforts focused on creating a self-conscious society, which “were believed to have flourished under the ancient kings” (1999:68). The explicit task for the post-colonial state was to recreate imagined self-confident and harmonious villages, reinforcing hegemonic visions of nationhood. Pioneered through village-level housing constructions, which commonly came to be known as the gam udawa (village awakening) scheme in the 1980s, it became a politically expedient development strategy. Gam Udawa evoked Sri Lanka’s glorious (Sinhala-Buddhist) nationalist past while registering its commitment to a path of development (Woost, 1993, 1994; Brow, 1988, 1996). A similar impetus lay behind the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme in the 1980s; tanks and temples were important metonyms for “material prosperity and spiritual well-being, respectively” and were placed alongside rebuilt housing communities for forcibly displaced villagers (Tennekoon, 1988:297).

The tsunami, by contrast, offered a catastrophic “natural” event necessitating the reconstruction and rebuilding of various coastal villages. In the post-tsunami period it is crucial to consider the ways in which a plethora of private donors, numerous non-governmental organizations, and international actors have taken on this mantle of national housing to boost villages. Brun and Lund (2009) offer an overview of Sri Lanka’s “One National Housing Policy” (ONHP) and the ways in which land distribution politics and ethnic formations coloured these initiatives historically and in contemporary times. We analyze how compassionate discourses deployed by private individuals eventually coalesced with enduring nationalist visions of village life. From our fieldwork, we unravel the discursive strategies used by donor communities and other stakeholders’ rehabilitating model village community schemes; a neglected topic in post-tsunami scholarship. The potent currency of nationalist development politics noted previously, honed in on state processes in the hegemonic formation of a nation of villages (Woost, 1994, 1993, Brow, 1988, 1990a, 1996). The important distinction is that this mantle now is taken on by individuals in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, where its will to compassion clouds a hegemonic vision.

2. Fieldwork in a nation of model villages

The village settings for our study are in southern Sri Lanka; one in the deep south 120 km from Colombo and 18 km inland; the second approximately 80 km south of Colombo and on the coastline. Research in both these locations began in 2005 (Hollenbach and Ruwanpura, 2011). Ruwanpura’s fieldwork started as part of a larger project funded by UNIFEM (Ruwanpura, 2008, 2009) and entailed conducting in-depth and semi-structured interviews lasting 40 min to an hour with twenty villagers. Numerous fieldtrips during 2005–2008 continued with follow-up visits in 2009/2010 and early 2011 to sustain the relationships built with interviewees.
These frequent visits helped establish close familiarity with some villagers, with conversations in and out of their homes on various facets of village life and the activities of the institution. She also conducted 17 interviews with non-governmental organizations, local government officials, religious clergy and local activists to obtain a sense of the ways in which they operated in the area. On average these interviews approximated 45 min, with some of lasting as long as 2 h. Repeat interviews took place as well. These were supplemented during 2009/2011 by interviews with senior level project managers at ten multi-lateral agencies that eventually came to develop partnerships with the institution initiated by the philanthropist. Prior social connections with the founder aided several lengthy formal interviews (lasting over an hour) and casual conversations on the plans and activities for rebuilding the village. They also offered easy access to project documents and interviews with five staff working for the institution. The frequency of visits and privileged access through social connections to the founder afforded the researcher personalised encounters and dialogues with the activities of the place in both formal and informal contexts. As a bi-lingual researcher, all interviews by the first author were conducted in either English or Sinhalese and recorded. The transcribing was done by a bilingual Research Assistant who was present at almost all interviews.

Similarly, Hollenbach shares an intimate association with the inland field site. She worked for two and a half years (2005–2007) as project manager for the privately initiated housing project discussed in this paper. Afterwards, as an academic researcher she conducted fieldwork for a further 2 years (2008–2010) at the same site. During the research phase, semi-structured interviews were held with the three foreign project initiators, 15 senior personnel of the NGO managing the reconstruction site, 25 local politicians and bureaucrats. This research also included document analysis of donor meeting minutes and internal discussion papers. Because of the rapport built with housing recipients, it also became possible for her to understand the complex motivations of affected families who moved to the housing scheme and participated in village community workshops. Two Sri Lankan researchers helped her to interview 62 villagers and to conduct focus groups. These were translated and transcribed by Research Assistants, as all were done in Sinhalese – of which Hollenbach has a working knowledge. As a bi-lingual speaker, all other interviews were the sole responsibility of the second author – which were recorded and transcribed.

At all times the respondents were made aware that these conversations will be used for research and fieldwork analysis, guaranteeing their anonymity, hence we have concealed the names of the villages. Our fieldwork did not involve long periods of habitation in the villages – as both Woost (1994, 1990) and Brow (1988, 1990) have done with their situated ethnographic research, which captures the fine grain of village life. However, because we were both very close to the founders of the project, we are able to illuminate findings based on more than mere formal interviews. In other words, the insights gained through interviews and personal conversations offered the chance to interrogate the slippage between rhetoric and ideas that was not otherwise easily available to researchers. So while we do not make claims of knowing everyday village life as Woost (1994, 1990) and Brow (1988, 1990) do, we find ourselves in a position to capture the fine grain of village life across different scales of thinking, particularly where the founder and donors claimed to ‘know better’ about good community life in Sri Lanka.

3. Model village(s): Ownership and construction

At first glance the case studies used are ‘model’ villages insofar as they are impressively built spaces conveying the capabilities of human intervention in the advent of unforeseen destruction. The houses built are seemingly high calibre and aesthetically pleasing. There is an order to the village plans; the houses are neatly interspaced in equal measure, decoratively painted, with eye-catching brickwork and tiled porches and pretty front gardens. The villages are not simply visual. The establishment of community halls, libraries, medical facilities, playgrounds, and village squares was also a crucial dimension to the physical erection of these model villages, even though these were not facilities previously available. Such efforts reflect what Woost (1994) notes as a “floor plan for the ideal village” (1994:79; see also Li, 1996:518–519). The programmatic aspects to the reconstruction then shows how donors draw on what they believe is ‘good’ for those receiving ‘their’ help and “they occupy the position of trustees, a position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need” (Li, 2007:4).

Though there are differences between our field sites – one is a foreign donor-driven initiative and the other a local private philanthropic scheme operationalized through urban and foreign networks, there are important overlaps between them which the following analysis will focus upon. This analysis is concerned to outline the modus operandi of the villages to show the ways in which reconstruction efforts came into being. We start, however, by showing through tabulated evidence the key features of the two village rebuilding projects.

Information on villages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Initiators</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Construction and funding period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local village (L-village)</td>
<td>Southern Province, on the Galle Road</td>
<td>600 houses</td>
<td>2006–2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign village (F-village)</td>
<td>Foreign person with local connections to the village and previous charity work in the area</td>
<td>90 houses</td>
<td>2006–2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The foreign donor driven project came into existence through the initiative of four foreign individuals with long-standing relations to Sri Lanka. After the tsunami, they instigated a high-profile fund raising project from an assemblage of institutional actors in their home country. A national-level ministry, local branches of international service clubs, volunteer organizations, and large scale foundations with the mission of promoting peace, development and democracy were all involved. Leading figures were directly

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3 The issues raised in this paper are not necessarily about the particularities of the organizations per se as much as much as the particularities of the Sri Lankan social hierarchy and political economy fabric which enables the existence of social practices which gets evaluated in this article. We call the village which came through direct foreign intervention the ‘Foreign Village’ (F-Village) and the other the ‘Local Village’ (L-Village). This binary categorization is used for ease rather than to connote a parochial reading of difference between the foreign and the local.
involved and were motivated to implement a “good” project to improve the situation and lives of tsunami-affected people permanently and sustainably. “We felt the need to help, as we lived and worked in this beautiful country for such a long time; and our friends were helpless. We had an obligation and felt responsible to help and give” said one donor, while another noted “It was a good opportunity to re-establish our working relationship to Sri Lanka and continue the partnership with the country. After a couple of years we were able to implement a project, we could legitimize and get funding from the local government”. In contrast to previous times where development was framed as restoring an ancient, mythical and glorious past not influenced by western concepts of living (Woost, 1993:505; see also Brow, 1996), the idioms deployed attempted to reflect the befallen calamity.

After several visits and conversations with local partners, donors assessed the demand for houses as a priority. This led to the conception of creating a new village for tsunami-affected communities from the Galle area, where they hoped to instil “a new way of living”. Eco-friendly housing and living was an underpinning premise reflecting the interest of the Ministry involved: “we need to focus on eco-friendly aspects as we had to legitimize the funds within the portfolio of the Ministry”. Core to the eco-friendly vision were: eco-friendly construction materials, minimizing electricity consumption per unit, instituting better sewage tanks to recycle waste water, re-forestation of the village area, and waste water management. To be holistic in their ‘model’ it was important in donors’ understanding to implement a new community self-administration system where villagers were to take more responsibility and ownership to secure developmental sustainability (see also Li, 2007). The way philanthropists defined better community life shows that they were influenced by their knowledge of eco-friendly construction, community organization, and by pre-conditions given by the Ministry. Suggestions on self-governing were based on community self-governing systems of the federal state of their native country. This clearly reflects how “[t]he identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution...experts are trained to frame problems in technical terms...their claim to expertise depends on their capacity to diagnose problems in ways that match the kinds of solutions that fall within their repertoire” (Li, 2007: 7). Self-administration echoed with past state-led initiatives, with routines motivated in “the dominant quest to redefine village society” where “covert efforts to restructure the habitus” are constantly invoked (Woost, 1993:82; see also Bourdieu, 1977). To identify potential beneficiaries, surveys were undertaken in order to pick the ‘right eligible’ person. As Li (2007) notes, “planned development is premised upon the improbability of the ‘target group’”, where “deficient subjects can be identified and improved only from the outside” (2007: 15). According to a principal coordinator the surveys helped to get a “proper mix of Sri Lankan society together” and prevent the risk of, in their words, a “squatter village or slum”. The eco-friendly village emphasis was congruent with the latest environmental discourses and an apparent social justice concern for “promoting the moral and material welfare of the poor” (Brow, 1988:318). This drive, however, is undergirded by interpellations of the “deserving poor”, which attempts to thwart undesirable manifestations of an idealized village community.

Responsibility and ownership by the villagers was crucial to the success of the ‘model’ village. Yet, the donor group identified that the planning and implementing capacity of the Sri Lankan partners would be insufficient to “properly” transfer all the ideas into this new village. Therefore, a knowledgeable implementing partner had to be found. An international NGO was given the mandate of identifying appropriate land in Southern Sri Lanka and consultating with a close Southern political figure. An old rubber and tea estate in the interior of Galle was ear-marked because of its proximity to the Southern Expressway, which they told villagers opened new socio-economic vistas.

In contrast the momentum for the other field site came “locally”. The philanthropic institution was initially involved in charitable activity in a small village enveloped between Ambalangoda and Hikkaduwa for approximately 10 years prior to the tsunami. It started off as a one-person led initiative seeking to contribute to a parental village from which the founder came (from a family of privilege unlike other villagers). With an educated legal professional as a father, the founder was from the English-speaking village elite. Though mostly Colombo-educated, his parental family resided in the village. After inheriting the parental home, he tore it down and rebuilt a tropical home making ample use of the spacious land, coconut palm trees, the nearby beach breeze and local vegetation. The newly built residence was used as a holiday home, hosting a swimming pool, tennis courts, and basket ball courts. The new abode was a symbol of luxury, wealth, and privilege in a village-community which is dotted with small cadjan houses. Yet, the founder claimed a social conscious, noting “...I’m going to my roots where my father and mother came from. And I have gone and [I] basically work,...for the good of the people in the region.” Here too the trusteeship, of which Li (2007) reminds us is invoked, with a twist of claims to ‘authenticity’ given that the village is the founders natal village. This was no ‘external’ intrusion. Instead the initiative emerges from apparently well-grounded internal and local interest, if only one was to ignore class dynamics which create propitious conditions for one group of people to “do good” towards others (see also Korf, 2006). The tsunami offered him the opportunity to transform these moral aspirations into new ambitions.

The holiday home with its spaces of leisure was destroyed by the tsunami. The founder survived because he was at the local Buddhist temple, which was on a higher elevation made of large granite rocks. After the tsunami waves had receded and a few days later, when the founder returned to the village and his holiday home the destruction was monumental. His network of Colombo-based friends and family mobilized to start cleaning up operations. He also used his skills and capabilities to tap into the deluge of donations, which had started pouring into post-tsunami Sri Lanka. He accepted that the first step to rebuilding the village was to clean/clear-up the debris and dead bodies from the physical destruction. After this clean-up, the next step involved starting to rebuild the houses. This required not just available voluntary help, but also financial help, architectural input, and planning. These all came from urban-based English-speaking middle classes. Individual assistance and social connections mattered here too in the immediate aftermath. Financial goodwill found in the immediate post-tsunami period came not just from the donors, but also from the Sri Lankan diasporic community. Quite astutely, the founder used his networks existing at multiple scales to channel resources into rebuilding houses and homes for those whose homes had been destroyed by the tsunami. The ‘indigenous’ knowledge was his vital asset. Initially he drew upon resources from a network of friends, later he tapped on bi-lateral aid donors in his will to improve village life. His ability to make claims on behalf of his natal village, despite his distinctly different socio-economic standing, offered him an “insider’s” legitimacy that he did not need to create from scratch (see also Li, 2007: 176).

The initial phase was modest: to rebuild the partially destroyed homes of families who had lost a breadwinner. Afterwards, the goodwill of private individuals (mostly from the diaspora) enabled funds to rebuild houses on a larger scale. The motivation to envision a rebuilding scheme was only dreamt of in his earlier philanthropic activities: “But for me, if I look back ten years ago – just planting the seed with purity of intention to help people compassionately has taken me to an extreme level of establishing what I dream of in the most unfortunate of circumstances, of course, by way of a tragic
tsumani. But I have made that huge setback into a blessing.” In Sri Lanka’s long history of restoring villages, individual participation in the development project in the search for utopian communities is, however, not novel (Brow, 1999, Woost, 1993). It offers the chance to construct and recreate “an image of society that modifies and represent ideological elements of both past and present” (Woost, 1993:506). By evoking tropes of compassion and kindness, the founder was citing Buddhist culture as the moral compass precipitating action in reconstructing a village after a catastrophe. The mobilization of dominant themes opportune for the time augmented the probability of effected communities and people recognizing “themselves in the forms of address contained in those discourses” (Woost, 1993:506; see also Brow, 1988:322; Li, 1996). Unlike in the past, where it was state-led official rhetoric that pandered “over cracks and cleavages” and bound people through articulations of Buddhist idioms in Sri Lanka (Brow, 1990:9), in the post-tsunami landscape this mantle was increasingly taken on by philanthropists and non-governmental organizations.4 While the Sri Lankan state is not quite in retreat (Hyndman, 2011; Jazeel and Ruwanpura, 2009), the space for individual actors – unelected and unaccountable – was on the rise. Moreover, the lip service paid to Sinhala-Buddhist rhetoric in a country besieged by a three decade ethno-nationalist conflict was ignored by the donor community in its eagerness to embrace development activity via the philanthropic and non-governmental sector. Holding non-state actors and philanthropists culpable for the dangers of deploying Buddhist idioms via development projects was less of a concern for the corporate and donor community than celebrating the ‘successes’ of doing productive development work with the non-state. The neo-liberal development ideology of rewarding performance with the non-state sector was more fundamental than being concerned with the pernicious effects of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology (see also Li, 2007:239–243). When the first author interviewed USAID and World Bank officials on the potential problems of being involved with non-state actors peddling Buddhist idioms through their development work in a context of an on-going and prolonged ethno-conflict, they deftly avoided responding to the query. Slippages between ideological frames of reference and its potential dangers were rarely registers of concern; as Li (2007) notes: “Trustees cannot address-ideological frames of reference and its potential dangers were rarely registered in the village context” (2007: 21), despite other existing political realities in a war-ravaged and staunchly ethno-nationalist Sri Lanka. An inflow of a steady stream of funds meant re-imagining a rebuilt village emblematic of an idyllic community. Two room houses were built with small, beautified garden patches for each recipient family. Within the village, each house was separated with low-level brick, hedge or picket fences that cordoned off individuals properties. Whilst initially the houses built were single storied, over the years two-storied houses were built as well. Shortage of land did not pose an insurmountable problem because donor-funding was not lacking. Hence building two-tiered houses was a logical step in the reconstruction process; it also signalled to donors’ bold thinking by the institution. Moreover, so long as it paid attention to systems, donors were attracted to working together with such NGOs. As the founder put it: “There are donors, don’t get me wrong, who like to be associated with projects...where there are systems and discipline.... You plan your work and work your plan; that is a simple thing...that should be the agenda.” The vectors of success had merged into plans, systems and disciplining with barely a reflection on the impetus of compassion that led to aid waves in the first place.

Eventual support from corporate entities and state-level donors led to each institutional benefactor becoming responsible for smaller communities within the village. Today there are many smaller compounds with names designating the corporate or donor-named sub-villages within the local village. This donor imprint on ‘model’ villages exists in both situations. For the foreign donor driven scheme, the new village name starts with the name of the donor country, while for the locally initiated ‘model’ community, the donor and corporate imprints are on recently created sub-villages. Despite the rhetoric of ownership by local communities, the interest of the villagers, and language of sustainability, the imprint of “my/our” model is an integral component of reconstruction efforts. Stewardship and the self-assurance of knowing which comes with it underscored the activities of both the local and foreign donors. It reflected what Li (2007) notes as trustees intervening in social relations “in order to adjust them” while pulling them together from “an existing repertoire, a matter of habit, accretion and bricolage” (2007:6). However, we show how this aim, in the post-tsunami landscape, is taken up by non-state mediators, and how emerging ideological frames are not subject to scrutiny as the state is.

4 Hyndman (2011) reminds how geopolitical shifts and stresses on aid effectiveness also meant donors becoming more entrusting of “neutral” NGOs and civil society and sometimes working only with this sector (2011:877).

5 This was because attracting funding from foreign governments was feasible only with NGO-status.
project staff, health sector workers and/or participate at the weekly classes inside the centre; in the words of the founder, the emphasis was on “leading by example with strict rules and regulations.” Orderly conduct is a key attribute instilled through participation and any sense of accessing it in a leisurely way, as most villagers would familiar with, is not encouraged. In the case of Sulawesi border-park villagers, Li (2007) notes how “villagers were to be true to themselves, while also conforming to new requirements” (2007:132). A similar expectation was instilled through the changes instituted with getting appointments and orderly entrance to the Centre. Importantly, the language of the founder changed regarding the activities offered by the Centre. In the immediate post-tsunami period, the founder spoke of the skills training offered to the villagers by the centres – initially one but by now three dotted around the village or boundary villages. In more recent times, the founder speaks of ‘empowerment’ of villagers via skills training. Shifting the jargon to suit the development rhetoric of the donor community is clearly vital to his ability to expand to be able to continue to be treated as a serious trustee with commitment to not just local needs, but also global development discourses.

The building of the main centre itself concretizes a spatial and social division: areas designed for village community activities and hosting the philanthropic organization’s project office are accessible to villagers by appointment. Meanwhile, the lavish rear of the building, a holiday and residential quarter complete with swimming pool, is reserved for visiting dignitaries, friends, family and similarly socially connected people. This is a space creatively carved out as a distinct area which separates the rural people, permitted entrance only as domestic workers, from the mostly Colombo-based and foreign visitors to the reconstructed village.

Was this a new kind—of rural planning implemented in practice? In F-village when the foreign donor driven project selected its site, there was no prior consultation with recipients, local authorities or other associated bodies aware of local housing matters. Even when the details among different partners were clarified regarding implementing an ‘eco-friendly housing model’ and a MOU signed in October 2005, the government instituted Tsunami authorities were not involved. Partially the donor group sidelined official authorities because they ranked their linkages with local political officials and partners highly. Formal bodies were a trivial detail. When the decision to implement the project via an international NGO was made, links with official relief structures were mobilized. At this point, the NGO registered the project with TAFREN (Task Force to Rebuilding the Nation)/RADA (Reconstruction and Development Agency), so that it became an official tsunami housing scheme. In reality, however, the political influence of local political figures and authorities was more crucial in creating a ‘model’ project as it helped bypass established state policy for sake of punctuality. For instance, the slowness of a local government official to make decisions resulted in a donor calling a political friend to impel quick action in the decision-making process: “You know, if things are not moving you should let us know; we will use our contacts to pressure the local authorities to work faster. We can not have more delays in the implementation process, we need to show success. We made promises… we need to fulfill these promises.” By this time, the matter of showing success and delivering on promises was the driving force – and the political expediency of ‘will to improve’, rather than compassion, had taken the upper-hand. Post-tsunami housing schemes and their practices were much messier on the ground, embedded as they were in the politics of access and privilege over and above those discrepancies already examined (Brun and Lund, 2009).

Once the NGO signed up with TAFREN/RADA, they strictly followed all rules introduced by local authorities. The size of the house, the minimum space between structures, the size of roads, and all other standards regarding post-tsunami housing policy were taken into consideration. The projected task was to build 90 new houses with an emphasis on individual gardens designed by an architect native to the donor country. The donors demanded building a kindergarten, a library, a medical facility, a playground, shops, a bakery, a village square and a community hall alongside the houses. The structuring was similar to villages of the donor country where the community hall is located at the centre of the village. This was the space where people meet, come together, communicate and create a “peaceful” living environment. Representing village communities through an emphasis on “harmony, equality and tradition” was a critical device in giving meaning to these schemes (Li, 1996:502). Planning for the perfect community, however, was undergirded by constraints of timing and success: “…we have to start the project now as we have to show progress to the financial backers in the host country. The identification of beneficiaries is important, I know, but we cannot discuss more details about the project. We have to start construction!” The ideal village where people were supposed to take responsibility for its sustenance was planned and constructed without considering who this group was. There was thus no issue about sideling their interests and wishes.

The scales at which both post-tsunami village building schemes have taken place is significant and impressive. Yet the quest to build ideal villages is a story about the ability of a group to instill and promote particular values, revealing the degree to which improving the human condition is always pervaded by modern impulses. More critically, however, there is another shift taking place. No longer are these initiatives solely the purview of the state (Woost, 1993, 1994; Brow, 1988, 1990). The current juncture has also led to private people and groups seeing it as their unquestioning responsibility to implement and instil changes perceived as bettering deserving people. This drive is starkly apparent in the ways in which the village layout resonated with each donor’s notion of rural community ordering (Li, 1996). Detailed neighbourhood practices show how planned efforts did not always go as intended. It thus shows that even as the sliding from compassion to the will to improve lead to powerful efforts at village reordering (Li, 1996:504), lived realities of village community life also need documentation.

5. From idyllic villages to everyday living

The restructured L-village with its sub-communes was aflode with road names and sub-village names recently given to signify the renovated and newly built homes’ connection to the numerous corporate and donor associations. Within the main village there is a plethora of other sub-villages with distinctive flavours connoting ownership to the donor community, for example Victoria Gardens, AVIVA village and Perth village. Beyond signposts, the layouts resonate with donor images of idyllic communes. Walking through Perth village one comes across small and pretty garden path with street lamps fashioned after old gas lamps, lighting the way into a small and seemingly cozy community of 6–7 houses. Victoria Gardens is designed with a tarred road, which has a children’s playground in the midst of 84 two-storied houses, a novelty and rarity in any Sri Lankan village.

The local unit is actively involved in attempting to maintain an idealized vision of a village community. Hence 9 years after the tsunami there is still great effort and commitment to maintain this.

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6 Gated entrances to the homes of village elite have been in place decades in the village; this was merely a reinforcement of class and place in the location (Hollenbach and Ruwanpura, 2011).

7 The bakery is reflective of the critical role bread plays in the donor country, where a local bakery is a present in most village settings.
However, both the donor and several villagers conceded that efforts to beautify and keep individual home gardens and paths through a scheme of awarding a monthly prize with dry food rations had been abandoned because of costs involved with giving prizes and monitoring and judging best gardens. The lack of interest on the part of the villagers was also a contributory factor. A villager said “Mahathaya (the gentleman) thinks that we have the time to be looking after home gardens. He does not realize that we are [too] busy trying to eke a living to have the time to be gardening and beautifying our premises.” A woman said “It is not as if we Sri Lankan’s are known to be unclean people; we sweep the garden and keep our premises clean. We just don’t have the time to take the extra effort to be keeping flower beds and planting new plants.” Their reactions were grounded in the everyday of their lives with economic pressures and material discomforts being prominent concerns. The inevitability of the “gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished” is not merely because “the will is stubborn” (Li, 2007:1).

It is also because the persistence of material deprivation and class inequality thwarts these efforts, thus making villagers have different sets of priorities from those who are will a distinct improvement.

Villagers also had a different understanding of space. Where architects built bathrooms and toilets into the houses they designed, villagers turned those bathrooms into storerooms or a spare room, prioritizing funds toward building a new toilet outside, separate from their new homes – constraining even further their rather small rear compounds. The villagers expressed their strongest displeasure with this new feature. One villager simply put it thus: “Toilets shouldn’t be in the house. Everything that goes on in there can be heard – how civilized is that?” Additionally, laundry lines in front gardens – initially forbidden – and vegetable patches and small cash crop cultivations greeted us on subsequent field visits in place of flower beds. Village life lived is chaotic, grounded, and with rough edges.

In F-village the central meeting office is the dominant building in the square and it houses the grama niladari’s office, kindergarten, library, etc. According to a donor “This should be the place where people meet, where life happens… the villagers have to organize a weekly-market and all the people can meet here and exchange”. The space was planned with a large market place and several benches placed around the public space. One donor said “I imagine in couple of years if all the trees are big and there is enough shadow, then people will sit here talk and meet”. Benches were also placed along the hilly area where several stairs connect the lower with the upper part of the village. Walking down the stairs in 2011, the benches exist but the anticipated view of the surrounding area is obscured by the woods because of neglect. Asking the villagers about this set-up, one woman recently (February 2011) noted, “You know we are not using these things… now the benches are more a meeting place for the young boys drinking and smoking without us seeing them… You can go there and you always find bottles and cigarettes… we actually do not like to go there with our small children, it is not nice”. Moreover, the publicly situated benches are unused because the trees planted alongside haven’t grown fully, hence anyone using it is exposed to the hot sun.

Another characteristic eco-friendly concept was to put up public dustbins to keep public spaces clean and waste free. During several community meetings the concept was explained, and villagers were asked to set up a volunteer group to encourage recycling disposed waste. Today, the dustbins are rare. When villagers were queried, they stressed “You know the people did throw their waste anywhere and did not put these into the bins. Then young boys started to break them… some are in the Presidents’ office, you can see them if you like… some people took them to their house and use them for private waste. Also the waste collection never really started, we still burn all our waste”. While the villagers are aware of expectations placed on them and how they were supposed to be disciplined into, in this instance, a version of environmentally-conscious citizens, they continue to use the village in ways consonant with everyday life as they know it (Scott, 1990). This failure of “reorganization ‘educated’ by development discourse and practice” suggests how “contradictory sedimentation of knowledge… and contextualized judgements about practical experience in everyday life” occur (Woost, 1993:516).

At first glance the village is idyllic with lush surroundings that offer a feeling of being apart from city-life. The wild foliage, rubber trees and tea estates dominate the backdrop. Since the public spaces are no longer well maintained, nature creeps into spaces originally planned as playgrounds, meetings areas or community gardens. Village life becomes disorganized not simply because of the everyday lives of villagers, but also because the environment defines it to reflect practices found on the ground.

In both villages, the libraries and community halls were sporadically used. In order to protect books, the persons assigned to keep the libraries secure tended to be stingy and were reluctant to loan or had strict hours of operation. This reflected both the ways that those with some influence acted, entrenching their social position within the village and leading to disquist amongst others (see also Brow, 1996); or as levers managing accessibility to public facilities, values that varied from village norms were instilled. While the medical facilities are used, in F-village a medical practitioner has a private clinic in operation, in L-village volunteer medical practitioners work only over the weekends. The gradual privatization of healthcare facilities has become slowly instituted through these initiatives. These shifts are worthwhile noting because of the disjunction between what was attempted and what has transpired; sometimes in keeping with the script and at other times incurring unexpected shifts. The effects of interventions, as Li (2007) reminds us, are always “contingent and diverse” (2007:272).

These built communes signal foreign and corporate donor interventions and hence their claim on these villages, rather than necessarily how locals structure their village compounds to reflect their lived social community. Woost (1994) reminds us that often Sri Lankan villages are “loose conglomerates of homesteads dispersed”; in his case throughout the jungle, in our case diffused on the coastline and in the immediate interior. Indeed it did not seem that the local villagers had any say, save for the colours used to paint their houses, in designing or redesigning the villages. The founder, elite and English-speaking, was the “local” mediator deploying donor-friendly language who negotiated funding and reconstruction plans on behalf of the village. The donor village similarly was striking the correct chords in using the lingua franca of environmentalism that reverberated in the two countries. In both instances, at one scale it was his/their village at incipient stages of the process; later, the villagers redefined their space – shaped by their everyday situations and material realities.

6. The slippery slope between compassion and the will to improve

Both initiatives presented here departed from village development terrains where tragic circumstances wrought by the tsunami necessitated compassion and kindness towards the other, whether distant or otherwise. The discourses of compassion, goodness, and kindness were paramount for accentuating the gravity of post-tsunami Sri Lanka, with catastrophic tsunami images not needing too much effort on the part of fund raisers to capture the attention of the munificent (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). Korf (2006) points out that when the attention shifted to “our” generosity, creating narratives around the compassion to help acted as important catalysts creating empathy in the Western world. Using these tropes,
however, comes with a price. Aid practices get tailored according to the will of the donor, where their primary interest is in flourishing donations rather than necessarily listening to what the local recipients may most need (2006:246). Yet, enveloping this discourse was also donor recognition that an opportunity was created with a seeming clean slate, and a mandate to ‘build back better’, as official tsunami housing policy states. This momentum underlined efforts to exemplify innovative rural development, a reoccurring theme in Sri Lanka’s development landscape (Woost, 1994; Brow, 1988, 1996), but one which continuouslyneglectsclass dynamics and social hierarchies or rural communities (Caron and Da Costa, 2007). The distinction this time was that philanthropists and non-state actors were in full force, while the structural sources of inequality continued to be hidden from view (Li, 2007:275; see also Korf et al., 2010).

Tropes of compassion and kindness were important to mobilize donor and philanthropic funding. Their import also lies in the ways such discourses engage villagers in a culturally familiar language. Thus, as beneficiaries moving into reconstituted villages, villagers found a semblance of coherence and recognition in the moral tropes used given its resonance with the proverbial. By documenting how the deployments of cultural idioms (compassion) cloak moral imperatives, we have shown how individual donors and non-governmental organizations take upon themselves the quest for uplifting villagers. We show the need to trace the discursive strategies of authoritative sources as they hit the ground. Li (1996) notes how competing visions of community offers space for imagining alternatives, whilst reminding us that “the attempts to catalogue tradition and locate an authoritative source able to represent ‘the community’...leads to simplifications inevitably ridden with power, as articulate spokesmen... overlook ambiguities in ... indigenous terms and practices” (1996:508). The tsunami offered a space to rejuvenate these authoritative voices – whether they are the voices of local elites committed to socially-motivated betttermor, or those of foreign donors with ties to Sri Lanka who envisioned harmonious village life.

Good intentions are not value-free. A veiled script reveals how values of individual responsibility are inculcated and how outsiders attempt to rectify what they perceived tsunami-affected villagers to be lacking. As Crikshank writes, “citizens are not born; they are made...[that explains] the political significance of the ways social scientific knowledge is operationalized in techniques, programs, and strategies for governing, shaping, and guiding those who are held to exhibit some specific lack” (1999:3). Bettering post-tsunami village life carries with it the connotation that the deficits of village life needed correcting. The assumption was that intervening outsiders would decide how to improve it for them without considering the need for redistributive social justice. Li (2007) reminds us that “the objective of trusteeship is not to dominate others—it is to enhance their capacity for action, and to direct it. . . . Their intentions are benevolent, even utopian. They desire to make the world better than it is. Their methods are subtle...They structure a field of possible actions. They entice and induce” (2007:5). Similarly, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka the rejuvenation was not merely limited to re/building new homes. It also consists of self-contained and prototype village layouts, with access to various skill training programmes. This phase of restitution had a natural event as a catalyst and hence was distinct from preceding periods of village awakening schemes in which the state forced action (Woost, 1994, 1993; Brow, 1990, 1988). Consequently, it “blend[s] seamlessly into common sense” (Li, 2007:5) with a historical trajectory already in existence in Sri Lanka, made more urgent by a “natural” disaster. Yet it is a backdrop no less worthy of scrutiny. The development state is dissected for its entanglements, retreat, interference, visibility, or violence (Hyndman, 2011; Jeffrey, 2007; Brow, 1996). Yet the growing presence of local and foreign philanthropists in new realms have escaped critical gaze in post-tsunami scholarship. Our intervention modestly attempts to fill this gap. As new agents of development, philanthropists and non-state donors are engaged in a politics of representation that does not simply defy quotidian conditions on the ground, but also refines a particular version of political economy (see also Hyndman, 2011; Brow, 1996). The villagers themselves did go about their lives as they found fit. Our foci, however, calls for reengaging moral tropes that are utilized by non-state agents to sustain a script pervaded by individualistic undertones.

7. Conclusion

Logics of compassion were critical for generating aid in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. Tracking the moralities of the compassionate discourses of independent donors has highlighted that village planning continues to be governed by principles of modernization (Li, 2007). Crucially, we have traced how privileged philanthropists perpetuated hegemonic and nationalist visions of model villages, whereby individual responsibility was also encouraged. Non-state agencies are increasingly the preferred development partners, where they deftly deploy culturally sensitive tropes in a neo-liberal landscape (Hyndman, 2011). Yet our paper calls for examining the manner in which their actions are also about subtly shifting social relations favourable to neo-liberal incursions into village life, which we also contend bears upon nationalist politics. While we see the state (Jeffrey, 2007), we also need to see the non-state and its increasing role in development interventions to more fully appreciate its entitlements, intercession, gentle violence and culpability in social life. More specifically, we have shown how individual donors used their personal connections with politicians and high-profile bureaucrats to outwit state/non-state procedures so as to achieve their vision. Excavating the everyday violence perpetrated suggests how we need to pay careful attention to the emerging role of philanthropists and their increasing role in development interventions.

Improving village communities and rural development schemes of all sorts was the purview of colonial administrators, the state and multi-lateral organizations – whether in Sri Lanka or other regions in the Global South (Li, 2007; Woost, 1994; Brow, 1990, 1988). What we have illustrated is how this trusteeship is changing hands to philanthropists and non-state actors in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, albeit without the same level of analysis it deserves. The emergence of this new assembly of trustees equally needs unpacking since intervention schemes are “fragments of reality...[which] signal new ways in which social forces can be bounded and dissected” (Li, 2007:277; see also Hyndman, 2011). The absence of the state in these instances may not necessarily lead to “anarchy, poverty and despair” (ibid 280), but rather results in non-state agencies stepping up its role without much scrutiny. Our concern then is that social hierarchies are reinforced despite the mobilization of localism, culture, responsibility and sustainability with a seeming concern for social justice. Such rhetoric deflects attention from grounded political-economic relations, where producing responsible villagers depoliticizes their existing subjectivities and neglects prevailing social relations at the village scale.

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8 With limited rural employment opportunities, the value of these training schemes beggars belief.

9 In this regard, the ways in which new governance regimes attempts and failures at disciplining local communities into a better world in post-tsunami Sri Lanka needs further research.

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For post-tsunami Sri Lanka we have revealed how political economic relations are simultaneously implicated and yet elided in the shift from the discursive tropes of compassion in the advent of disaster to the will to improve. Villagers are not necessarily trapped in their new settings or unafraid to draw attention to the materially frenzied nature of their lives. Yet it is also the case that constellations of power at certain junctures need not necessarily lead to imaginative alternatives. The interpellation of religious and moral mores during disasters to assist affected others are compassionate gesticulations, but when taken to the scale of willing communities to improve, such schemes expose an underbelly where the political economy matters. The moral of the story remains thus: Compassion ultimately does not rid social relations of material inequality and class discrepancies. These can only be addressed through redistributive social justice.

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