

Conflict prevention through infrastructure reconstruction

Sri Lanka's ethnic war came to an end in mid 2009 when the LTTE was decisively defeated by the Sri Lankan security forces. The conflict destroyed much of the infrastructure in the region, as well as houses and many business enterprises.

| **Image:** Construction of a School on the east coast of Sri Lanka. Reconstruction of infrastructure has the potential to connect or divide communities.

Building or re-building infrastructure (broadly defined to include services that are essential ingredients to quality of life and economic activity) is regarded by the authorities and local people as critically important for creating a conducive environment for regional development, and improving the living conditions of war affected people. However, if developed insensitively, infrastructure also has the potential to divide communities by providing differential access to opportunities and deepening discrimination.

It is against this background and with funding from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the British High Commission in Colombo, that Dr Richard Haigh, Centre for Disaster Resilience (CDR), launched the project: Conflict Prevention through Infrastructure Reconstruction Richard explained: "The project is part of a longer term study into the relationship between physical infrastructure reconstruction programmes and social cohesion among conflict affected people in the North and East of Sri Lanka. As lead implementer, CDR is supported by: the Social Policy and Analysis Research Centre, University of Colombo; the Department of Sociology, Eastern University; the Department of Sociology, University of Jaffna; and, the Chamber of Construction Industry Sri Lanka. Consequently, the project is able to draw upon a team of academics and professionals who represent the built environment, sociology and archaeology disciplines. The partnership also benefits from having partners who are based in the conflict affected regions of Sri Lanka, where much of the field work is being undertaken".

This phase of the study aims to provide an insight into the critical components of adequate infrastructure and to establish how local people are currently engaged in the reconstruction process. Continuing Richard said: "The North East conflict involved the three main ethnic communities in the country, it is not reasonable to expect such tensions to subside following the end of the war as many of the conditions that led to such inter community tensions are likely to persist even after the war. By studying the on-going construction work we can determine the nature and extent of impact of reconstruction projects on the



local population in terms of social inclusion and exclusion, old tension, new conflicts and infrastructure development". In December 2011, a Salford team of academics – Dr Richard Haigh, Professor Dilanthi Amaratunga and Vice-Chancellor Professor Martin Hall – visited Sri Lanka to meet with the local partners, contribute to field work and visit communities in the North and East. The Vice-Chancellor was also the keynote speaker at two events, one in Colombo and the other at the University of Peradeniya. The Colombo event was co-sponsored by Chamber of Construction Sri Lanka and received national television coverage. The presentation used some examples from South Africa's pathway to reconciliation and reconstruction to outline ways in which organisational change may contribute to reconciliation and reconstruction in other countries, now and in the future.

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The focus of data collection has been on construction projects in the North and East, including housing programmes, roads and water supply. All these projects are important components of the resettlement and reconstruction process currently underway in the region, and yet a number of concerns have already been revealed by



the project team. In most cases, contractors come from outside the communities where the infrastructure is being constructed. They often have their own supply chains and workers brought from outside the region. Many local people feel that they do not have opportunities to engage in construction work and gain experience and economic benefits.

Also, the beneficiaries belong to diverse communities with a post-history of inter-community conflict and tension and if a project is not planned with this in mind it can increase rather than reduce such tensions. In one housing programme studied by the team, a majority of houses were assigned to one group and the remainder to another. The two sets of houses are separated by a buffer zone with little in the way of shared infrastructure.

Elsewhere, the team studied a water project that aims to improve water supply for a major town by tapping water from a remote irrigation reservoir. They have found that a community adjacent to the reservoir is strongly opposed to the development as it is not a beneficiary of the project, but is instead likely to face water shortage for agriculture, particularly

in the dry season. Before this new project commenced, people used reservoir water for their cultivation and fishing activities. On a more positive note, the field work has revealed examples of where infrastructure has helped to connect communities, such as the reconstruction of a road linking three major towns in the region; Local traders from different communities and ethnic groups benefitting from improved road conditions, reduced time taken to travel, and an increasing number of trips per day. In addition, easier travel between the towns had led to increased interaction between communities".

Future activities include the preparation of a policy briefing for government, donors, the construction industry and other agencies involved in the reconstruction process

The Salford team has also visited a prosthetics clinic which was set up shortly after the war concluded. Some amputees helped by the clinic are former soldiers in the Sri Lankan army; others were combatants with the defeated LTTE, while many others were civilians. As well as



fitting prosthetic devices, the clinic also helps amputees to rebuild their livelihoods through employment or setting up small enterprises. In summary of the project so far Richard said: "In the coming months the project team will be collating these and other examples to help inform future developments.

Planned activities include the preparation of a policy briefing for government, donors, the construction industry and other agencies that are engaged in the reconstruction process. This will be supplemented by a number of dissemination events with key stakeholders, each aimed at raising awareness of the

Far left and cover:
Sri Lankan man

Left and below:
Damaged property in Mullaitivu, a small town on the north-eastern coast of Sri Lanka and the theatre of many battles fought since 1983 in the Sri Lankan Civil War against the Tamil tigers.

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