

INTERVENTION

THE ASIAN TSUNAMI, ACADEMICS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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In their editorial in the March 2005 issue of this journal, James Sidaway and Peggy Teo (2005:2) invited papers “that go beyond the (dramatic and disturbing) immediate media coverage of the tsunamis to unpick myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath”. In another editorial, in *Environment & Planning D*, Jim Glassman (2005:168) highlights two “missing story lines”, namely “institutional and social culpability in failing to reduce the risks to less privileged Acehnese and Thais” and “the opportunistic use of Asian suffering by US leaders” (p. 169-70). Indeed, the disaster is being, and will be “read” – or used – by geographers to make a wide range of points – political, ethical, developmental and methodological. We suspect that they will share one thing: a desire to get away from, or beyond, the notion of the tsunami as “just” a natural disaster, albeit one of vast scale. In this intervention we discuss our own research agendas in the wake of the tsunami, and return to a set of comparatively well-worn themes at the interface of utility, positionality and ethics (see Proctor, 1998; Hamnett, 2003; and the special issue, *SJTG*, 2003, for related debates). As will become clear, while they may be well-

worn this is for a good reason: they demand consideration every time a researcher steps into the field, and particularly one as potentially sensitive and difficult as this.

A team of us, led by Ben Horton of the University of Pennsylvania, have been awarded a Small Grant for Exploratory Research (SGER) by the United States (US) National Science Foundation (NSF) to undertake a survey of the natural and social impacts of the tsunami of 26 December 2004 in selected sites in Malaysia and Thailand. The fieldwork will not be completed until August 2005, but the planning of the project has been illuminating and has forced us to think more carefully than usual about our responsibilities. This intervention considers the role that scholars can (and cannot) play in contexts where the struggle to recover lives and livelihoods is the overriding concern. At the same time, however, the failure to ask the difficult questions when memories fade and where concerns are directed at the here and now can mean that important lessons are lost or left unlearned. Where, in other words, in this thorny tangle of ethical issues, practical challenges and local

and national sensitivities does the role of the (foreign) academic lie? How might traversing these issues contribute to conceptual debates in geography?

What has very quickly become evident in our preparations is that researchers from institutions at the “global core” – in our case from the US, United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore – must tread very carefully and not just for the more obvious reason that it is offensive to do otherwise. Scholars in Thailand were collecting data and views within days of the tsunami. Institutions in Thailand like Chulalongkorn University, Prince of Songkhla University and the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) were preparing reports and briefing papers and giving presentations before the end of January. AIT, for example, had a research initiative up and running by 14 January 2005, and arranged a seminar in Bangkok on 21 January (see <http://www.tsunami.ait.ac.th/>). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government and multilateral agencies were, of course, even quicker. The WorldFish Center in Penang, Malaysia, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in Bogor, Indonesia, and Oxfam, UK have already produced valuable reports and studies which draw on a first-hand engagement with people and places from, effectively, day one.¹

This is not to say that the role of local universities has been unproblematic, and we certainly do not wish to over-romanticise the “local” and, by extension, see the role of outsiders as redundant, even destructive. It seems that, for Thailand at least, research has focused on the more easily accessible sites and little has been done to reach the outlying islands in the Andaman Sea because, like their counterparts elsewhere, Thai academics have pressures of all sorts to juggle and the straightforward option is often the more attractive one (it is notable that none of the six tsunami-related SGER/NSF grants awarded intends to focus on Aceh/Indonesia, suggesting that the logistical, security and

ethical dilemmas and barriers there are, as yet, simply too great to negotiate). There have also been some murmurings that outputs from academics are not being made available to the afflicted communities, in part because of pressing commitments to various authorities and agencies coordinating recovery activities. It took several months for information on the science of the tsunami to be produced in Thai and, in that way, made available to affected communities. To begin with this was simply a translation from the Hawaii-based International Tsunami Information Center’s brochure *Tsunami The Great Waves* (*The Nation*, 26 February 2005) by the Chaipattana Foundation. There have now been more publications produced and the Ministry of Natural Resources has held information sessions and workshops for communities to develop evacuation plans along the Andaman Sea coastline. Furthermore, and despite the fact that communities have made numerous requests for simple factual information, there is nothing in Thai that relates specifically to the 26 December event. Worse still, one of us attended a meeting in February where comments by health experts about researchers visiting Bang Muang camp in Phang Nga, the worst affected Thai province, on the Andaman coast, noted that local residents complained that they had been asked to repeat and relive their experiences so many times by researchers and journalists that they had become yet further traumatised.

With these complex issues of accessibility, relevance and psychological trauma in mind, where and how might foreign academic researchers contribute to understanding the tsunami and its aftermath in practical and helpful ways while at the same time not reproducing a context of over-research? How can we share conversations with local researchers and “add” something to what is already happening on the ground? In other words, how do we define an ethics of engagement? There are, it seems to us, some areas where we can offer something different and valuable, complementing the wealth of

TABLE 1. PATTERN OF TSUNAMI FATALITIES BY GENDER IN SELECTED DISTRICTS IN INDONESIA AND INDIA

LOCATION	FATALITIES	FEMALE		MALE	
		No.	%	No.	%
<i>North Aceh district, Indonesia</i>					
Sawang	93	70	75	23	25
Kuala Keureutou	85	68	80	17	20
Kuala Cangkoy	146	117	80	29	20
Matang Boroh	42	29	69	13	31
Subtotal	366	284	78	82	22
<i>Tamil Nadu, India</i>					
Nagapattinam district	4,289	2,406	56	1,883	44
Cuddalore district	537	391	73	146	27
Subtotal	4,826	2,797	58	2,029	42

Source: Extracted from Oxfam (2005).

work that is already being undertaken. In any case, we believe there is a role to play for concerned scholars who wish to practically engage with, rather than merely comment upon, the tsunami and its aftermath. This is not to present a false dualism of practice and commentary, but to situate our own emphasis on the utility of research within the immediate context of the tsunami. Different research summons different approaches and methodologies, and in this case we feel it is important to connect to practical discussions about response and recovery. At the same time, and through this process of engagement, we hope to participate in ongoing conceptual debates in geography, embracing the thorny issues that our research will inevitably raise as an opportunity to speak to academic debates about a variety of issues.

On the one hand are the more familiar issues of ethical engagement and enacting relations and practices that acknowledge relations of power, authority and the politics of representation in the research process (e.g. Sidaway 1992; Rose, 1997; Slater, 1997). On the other hand are issues such as the role and uses of scientific knowledges in disasters, the political ecologies of human-environment relations, and the nature/culture dualisms that help constitute the tsunami's moral geographies (to name a few that have already arisen in the con-

ceptualisation of our project). Indeed, we anticipate that the explicit combining of both "physical" and "human" knowledges of the tsunami will provide unanticipated conceptual insights as the research unfolds, while at the same time shaping our understanding of ethics (see Whatmore, 1997).

These ideas will undoubtedly be enlivened through fieldwork, which we have yet to undertake. Let us therefore turn to four broad areas that we see as guiding our research, and which can potentially offer pragmatic outcomes. These areas include: linking and comparing; dynamics and transitions; politics and society; and theory and practice.

First, linking and comparing. Much of the work undertaken so far has been locally grounded and highly empirical, as it should be. There are comparatively few studies which link households, villages, sites, regions and countries in ways that are able to say more than "in Sri Lanka we found this", "in Thailand we found that" and "in Indonesia we found the other". One exception to this, and an example of how comparative research can provide different awareness, is Oxfam's (2005) early report on the gendered effects of the tsunami (see Table 1) in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Oxfam's collection of aggregated data at these sites suggests that women were

disproportionately affected by the disaster, and for a variety of reasons (their responsibilities for children and elderly relatives, their role in fishing communities and how this placed them in vulnerable sites when the tsunami struck, women's ability to swim/climb trees, and so on). Oxfam's report also raises many interesting questions with regard to post-tsunami social life: Will men take on new domestic roles? Will widows have access to land? Will marriages between younger women and older men become more common? Research of this nature can provide windows of insight to the relevance, production and performance of social structures across cultures. In general, however, research protocols have not been designed in such a way that close comparisons can be undertaken. The demands of the moment have, understandably, driven the agenda. It is also true that the way that reports are framed and comparisons made rarely delve far beneath the surface. What can become shrouded from view and lost in global events of this magnitude are the eddies of difference that may say something at least as important as the dominating headline event.

The second area where we think there exists an opportunity for academic research is in terms of understanding the dynamic of response, rehabilitation and recovery. What, in other words, is the timeline both at the micro level (individual, household and community) and at the regional and national scales? More particularly, how can we understand and explain the dynamics and inconsistencies evident at different levels? Which leaders and agencies responded fastest and most effectively? How was relief targeted? What kinds of knowledge/power regimes helped to shape these spatial and timeline dynamics? These issues dovetail with the third area where we feel there is work to be done: namely in terms of the political and social structures and networks that, in large part we suspect, answer many of the "why" questions that underpin the timelines and the dynamics. It seems that some communities have responded much more

vigorously and effectively post-tsunami than others, and surprisingly so. The lesson that seems to be coming through, often piecemeal, is that issues of trust, leadership and embedded social capital – problematic and difficult to pin down though all these may be – are important. But how, exactly? We feel that academic researchers can play an important role in helping to devise frameworks for understanding these issues, and that it is important to do so before memories fade.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, there is the linking of theory and practice. NGOs, government agencies and multilateral organisations have been primarily concerned with dealing with the human and environmental fall-out of the tsunami and have focused on rebuilding shattered communities, supporting divided households, and revitalising local economies and livelihoods. To some extent, academics might see their role as contributing to this project of recovery and rehabilitation, and to sharing knowledges about (and perspectives on) the tsunami. There is also, though, a set of questions which require a reflection on the tsunami and its aftermath in terms of the wider conceptual literature. Without this the tsunami and its effects become packaged as a catastrophe rooted in a particular time and in certain places. The "Wave" quickly becomes historicised and the "lessons" for the future lost. Engaged fieldwork is one important way to contribute to such debate, and we have already suggested a few themes that might inform the conceptual aspects of our work.

There is one important caveat to add to our identification of these four "gaps": our experience so far has been that just as we think we have found a niche to explore we unearth a study that is close to what we are planning. There is the distinct possibility, even the likelihood, that when we begin the fieldwork we will find researchers asking just the questions and toying with just the issues that we are. This need not be paralysing. Our strategy has been to ask local researchers and

organisations where and how we might contribute; they, better than anyone, can identify what research might be most valuable.

Nonetheless, if one agrees that there is, in the nexus of issues that the tsunami has raised, a role for academics pursuing questions that are more scholarly in orientation this still requires that the investigation of those questions does not remain merely “academic”. We are conscious of the need to not only include local researchers in our project but also return the results of our work – in an accessible form – to the communities, organisations and government agencies in the areas and countries where we are working. We also hope, possibly in a future issue of the *SJTG*, to be able to write a paper that does, as James Sidaway and Peggy Teo have asked, “unpick [the] myriad geographies of the event, context and aftermath”. That, though, is for another time.

ENDNOTE

¹ See for example, http://www.worldfishcenter.org/tsunami_main.htm; http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/docs/_ref/highlights/tsunami/index.htm; and http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/conflict_disasters/bn_tsunami_women.htm.

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