Contributing to Development? Transnational Activities among Tamils in Norway

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The theme of this article is the transnational activities of members of the Tamil diaspora in Norway and their significance to development in the Northeast region of Sri Lanka. Our analysis acknowledges the complexity of Tamil transnational activities, particularly in regard to issues which may be seen as political. A key observation among the majority of the Tamil diaspora concerns their pragmatic and seemingly apolitical approach to development. This is explained with reference to the positionality of the Tamil diaspora, as a key actor in regard to politics and development in Northeast Sri Lanka, but simultaneously trapped by the dynamics of war and peace. Thus, members of the Tamil diaspora employ transnational strategies, but in forms that cater to complex and sometimes contradictory needs for Tamil identity and belonging, political interests of national self-determination and security, and survival for families.

Introduction

The theme of this article is the transnational activities of members of the Tamil diaspora in Norway and their significance to development in Northeast Sri Lanka, the region where the Tamils are concentrated (Figure 1). The population of the Northeast region of Sri Lanka has suffered a protracted armed conflict between a militant movement fighting for the right to self-
This armed conflict has lasted for more than 25 years (1983-2009) and claimed more than 100,000 lives. Significantly, it has displaced more than a million Tamils internally in Sri Lanka, while there are now 800,000 Tamils living in exile (Orjuela, 2008). There is no reliable information about the size and composition of the population of Sri Lanka. The most recent national population census was conducted in 1981 and a large number of people have died or have left the country during the war from 1983 to 2009. Common estimates place the population size at about 20 million with the ethnic composition consisting of approximately 74 percent Sinhalese, 18 percent Tamils and seven percent Muslims. The period 2001-2006 was marked by the dynamics of Sri Lanka’s fifth peace process, involving the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Government of Sri Lanka and international facilitators, monitors and donors as key actors (Goodhand et al., 2005). A ceasefire agreement between the warring parties was signed in
February 2002. After a de facto return to armed hostilities from both parties since 2006, the ceasefire agreement was rendered insignificant for practical purposes, and the armed conflict continued till the victory of the Sri Lankan armed forces in 2009.

The research for this article was conducted between November 2003 and August 2005 - while the ceasefire agreement was being upheld by both parties. During this period of relative peace in Sri Lanka, development initiatives and post-war reconstruction were under way and many among the diaspora returned to Sri Lanka for visits. These return visits often strengthened and renewed their transnational ties and engagements with development initiatives in their regions of origin. The current context in Sri Lanka (July 2009) is a cause of great concern for many among the Tamil diaspora, due to the circumstances in which their family members may find themselves in while internally displaced in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the prospects for Tamils in Sri Lanka are now as uncertain as in previous decades.

Sri Lankan Tamils are settled in many countries, including Canada, Australia, Switzerland, the UK as well as in Tamil Nadu in India (Gamage, 1998). The Tamil diaspora is diverse, including sections of people who migrated prior to the civil war, as labor migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, and people who migrated or fled at different stages of the war. For all Tamils, the armed conflict in Sri Lanka was a decisive factor for their exile experience, regardless of whether or not they came as refugees themselves. The diversity of the Tamil diaspora is such that it cuts across class, gender and age, and also encompasses differences in caste and education, legal status and employment in the host country.

The role of the Tamil diaspora in relation to development in Northeast Sri Lanka may be of great significance, as their role has been in supplying funds for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Arguably, the Tamil diaspora can play the role of peace workers or war mongers in Sri Lanka (Orjuela, 2008). It is more than likely that most of the migrants will not return, but nevertheless will want to contribute to their ‘home’ country (Fuglerud, 1999; Van Hear, 2002). The question is how do they contribute and how significant are these contributions to the development of Sri Lanka?

Our attempt at answering this question is based on empirical research among Tamils living in Norway. The article starts with a theoretical discussion about transnational activities and their relevance to development at ‘home.’ This is followed by an account of the methodological design of the study. The subsequent sections present our findings relating to everyday transnational activities of members of the Tamil diaspora in Norway, focusing primarily on diaspora contributions to development in the North-
east region of Sri Lanka through remittances to family and contributions to Tamil development organizations. The analysis discusses concepts of development among Tamils, the political involvement of members of the Tamil diaspora, and particularly the role of the LTTE in Tamil diaspora politics. This leads to an acknowledgment of the complexity of Tamil transnational activities, particularly in terms of issues which may in some ways be seen as political. We point to the paradox of a pragmatic and seemingly apolitical stance among the majority of the Tamil diaspora to political issues in Northeast Sri Lanka, while at the same time, many of them are actively involved with development initiatives and most follow political news from Sri Lanka on a day-to-day basis.

Transnationalism and Concepts of ‘Home’

Most scholars who study transnational migration argue that it is qualitatively different from international migration of the past, in the sense that it is increasingly possible to have multiple identities and multiple localities due to new technologies of travel and information, the globalization of kinship ties, the growth of remittances and as a result, the disintegration of the firm boundaries between host and ‘home’ societies (Cheran, 2006; Portes, 2001; Vertovec, 2009). This creates new possibilities for the relationship between migrants and their place of origin. While transnational activities can fulfil both migrants’ social and cultural needs in exile, they may also have the power to transform not only migrants’ lives, but also the lives of those at ‘home,’ as they are played out within transnational social spaces (Pries, 1999).

While discussing transnationalism and the potential significance of transnational activities, it is important to be aware of the limitations to transnationalism as well as the challenges which migrants and non-migrants operating within a transnational space are faced with (Akuei, 2005). Attempts at delimiting transnationalism have been made, for instance, in terms of wide or narrow, deep or wide, or in terms of transnationalism from below or above. Transnational activities are also discussed in terms of whether or not they span a transnational social field (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Kivisto, 2003; Vertovec, 2009). Furthermore, transnational activities are often categorized in terms of individual and community activities, by geographical focus, as well as differentiating between economic, social, cultural and political activities (Al-Ali et al., 1999). For our analysis it is important to differentiate between different types of transnational activities, simultaneously focusing on the significance of their interconnectedness. The notion of transnational social field is applied, so transnational activities are understood as those which span the Norway-Sri Lanka transnational social field.
Transformations of ‘Home’

There are differing views on how identity and ideas about ‘home’ are shaped and re-shaped and about the significance of place in these processes. These may be described as either essentialist, seeing ‘home’ as “a peaceful haven which is unchanging and homogenous,” or pluralist, seeing ‘home’ as “not only dynamic, but that it is defined differently depending on who does the defining and where they are” (Mohan, 2002: 101). However, many researchers would agree that the concept of home can easily entail both meanings (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002). While noting the significance of spiritual and cultural belonging of the ‘home’ one has left behind, there may be a “practical home” (Black and Koser, 1999). Malkki (1995) argues that it is the lived experience of ‘home’ which is likely to be most significant for transnational communities. It is through everyday activities and lived experience that meanings of ‘home’ may be constituted, that traditions are reproduced and that efforts towards creating change in the once left physical ‘home’ are made. Meanings of ‘home’ are marked by complexities and ambiguities, and are related to different aspects of identity, not only ethnicity or nation.

How do we conceptualize the role of transnational activities in transforming ‘home’? Mohan observes that “the processes that relate to development have, generally, been linked to specific, quite fixed, notions regarding territories, boundaries, spaces and places” (Mohan, 2002:78). Transnationalism provides an opportunity for different investigations into development which go beyond the spatial framework of bounded states and communities. The opportunities for development, in connection with migration and transnationalism, are many and celebrated, but it is necessary to differentiate between different contexts and outcomes (Portes, 2009; Mercer et al., 2009).

Whereas development and conflict resolution are often seen as depoliticized, i.e., as technocratic questions of crafting social and institutional changes, there is widespread scholarly recognition of the inherently political nature of these processes (Harriss et al., 2004). Similarly, it is acknowledged that external assistance for peace and development rarely comes without strings attached and always has differentiated effects on those who receive it. Actors who are supporting transformative processes have interests as well as resources and strategies of power. This also applies to members of the diaspora and their transnational activities. As regards the contributions of transnational activities to development, it would be relevant to ask what kind of developmental and political transformation they engender.
Many diaspora communities arose as an outcome of war. It is therefore noteworthy that the understanding of the relationship between war and development has undergone significant changes in recent years. Previously, war and development were seen as separate issues; now the relationship between the two is increasingly acknowledged. Contemporary development interventions seem to be ‘working on conflict.’ This implies an instrumental use of development assistance to transform violent conflicts and build lasting peace (Burke and Mulakala, 2005). This allows external development actors to play a role in peace building, through the use of peace conditionalities, and also use the transition to peace to institutionalize a certain kind of development. The implication of this mode of reasoning is that transnational migrant networks, like other external actors, may pursue interests in peace and development based on a diversity of resources and practices of power.

**Methodology**

Before turning to the transnational activities of the Tamil diaspora in Norway, a few notes on research methods seem necessary. The data collection for this study consisted of a triangulation of methods involving individual qualitative interviews, a close monitoring of several Tamil English language web-sites, and conversations with key informants as well as other members of the Tamil diaspora.

The study is based on 14 in-depth interviews with members of the Tamil communities in Oslo and Bergen, the two largest cities in Norway. Interviews were conducted with 11 men and three women in the period, November 2003 - August 2005. Interviewees were aged 25-65, with most of them being in their 40s, married and with children. Most interviewees had been living in Norway for more than 15 years, some since before the armed conflict started in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s. Many originated from the Jaffna peninsula, while the remainder originated from several locations mainly in the North of Sri Lanka. While this small sample may not be seen as representative of the Tamil population in Norway, interviewees included mainly people with higher education and middle-class position, thus resembling the average standing of Tamils in Norwegian society (Blom and Henriksen, 2008). Interviews were conducted in Norwegian or English, depending on what the interviewees preferred. The interviews were not recorded due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed. Ethical concerns were duly considered, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, and making sure participating in interviews did not unduly expose them to risk (e.g., conducting interviews in an inconspicuous way in public places and anonymizing all participants).
Access to Tamil communities in Oslo and Bergen was gained through pre-existing relations and use of several community gate-keepers, resulting in a ‘snow-balling’ method to contact new interviewees. The role of a community gate-keeper in recommending particular people to a researcher is powerful and may create a bias in the study. However, efforts have been made to reduce the bias of any one of the gate-keepers by using several gate-keepers and ensuring that interviewees from different communities were represented.

Transnational Activities among the Tamil Diaspora in Norway

There are about 12,000 Tamils in Norway, including people who have lived in the country since the 1960s and people who have arrived in the course of Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war since 1983. The Tamil diaspora in Norway is resourceful and Tamils are generally perceived as hard working. Statistics on immigrants in Norway support this view – for instance, the employment rate of Tamils (71 percent) compares well with that of the total population (75 percent) and the immigrant population (57 percent) (Blom and Henriksen, 2008). The Tamil diaspora seems united and well-organized, although a closer examination reveals internal diversity in terms of caste and religious identity, education and profession and political positions and practices among them (Fuglerud, 1999). Following other studies, our study also confirms that most Tamils in Norway have family members spread around the world and that most participate in diaspora activities.

Transnational Activities Leading to Multiple Meanings of Home

“The notion of ‘home’ encompasses a range of meanings, revolving around the ‘double consciousness’ of being in a ‘new place’ but connected to an ‘old place’” (Mohan 2002:88). The meaning of home includes both imagined and mythical dimensions in the ways members of the diaspora remember or imagine home. It also includes the actual home, i.e., the Tamil homeland in Northeast Sri Lanka, where buildings have been devastated by two decades of war. Home may also include the recreating of Tamil homes in the diaspora, the physical places of dwelling, as well as the focus on culture in the diaspora, as tools for supporting Tamil identity.

Data from our interviews, as summarized in Table 1, show that the key activities among Tamils in Norway center around three main concerns, namely, addressing the social and cultural needs of Tamils in Norway, promoting the education and Tamil identity of Tamil children and youth growing up in Norway, and supporting the Northeast region of Sri Lanka by way of financial contributions to development efforts and the Tamil
struggle and more direct involvement with development initiatives in the Northeast. These include activities within the transnational social field and activities which may be seen as supporting and motivating transnationalism, but which, in themselves, are not transnational. Among diaspora activities there is also some variation in the strength of transnational ties. These diaspora activities are often intertwined, and it is therefore not meaningful to separate out only those activities which may strictly be seen as transnational. For instance, Tamil cultural events are organized by adults with a cultural interest. Tamil children are taught Tamil dances, as a part of strengthening their Tamil identity and creating a feeling of community with other young Tamils in Norway. These dances are performed at cultural events where the main aim may also be to raise funds for a development project in the Northeast Sri Lanka, or to collect money for the LTTE.

First, the social and cultural needs of Tamils in Norway are met through Tamil radio, women’s groups and the various semi-organized groups playing football and cricket, all the groups in connection with Catholic parishes in Norway and the celebration of various Hindu festivals. These non-formal networks are also significant as a basis for more organized transnational activities. It is through everyday practices and routines related to religion, food, music and culture that people create their meanings of home and transnational practices.

Second, among activities related to Tamil identity in Norway, the Tamil schools are the most significant. The Tamil schools are supplementary Saturday schools which parents may choose for their children to attend as an extra-curricular activity. Despite the fact that Tamil parents do not

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Based on data from interviews in Oslo and Bergen, 2003-2005.
believe that they and their children will return to Sri Lanka, the identity of second generation Tamils in Norway is very much in focus among the parents. Vast resources, time money and voluntary efforts are invested in the Tamil schools, focusing on Tamil language, history and cultural activities. There are Tamil schools in Bergen and Oslo and in most places in Norway where Tamils live.

Third, there is a range of development activities, which are clearly transnational in their reach. These focus around support for Northeast Sri Lanka, in terms of financial support for development efforts and for the Tamil nationalist movement, as well as more direct involvement with development initiatives in the Northeast region. The main diaspora involvement in development is through money transfers, including both private remittances and organized collections. These practices support Lacroix’s (2008: 18) observation that “development initiatives remain one of the most widespread expressions of (...) transnational connections.”

Though it seems that direct ‘political’ activities are limited and that Tamil schools focus mostly on the Tamil language and cultural activities, it may be argued that the Tamil schools have a vital function in promoting Tamil identity construction in the diaspora, which also has very clear political aspects (Fuglerud, 1999; McDowell, 1996). Since the LTTE is the dominant Tamil organization in Norway and is largely responsible for running the Tamil schools there, most of these schools reflect the LTTE’s view of and role in the conflict. Through these schools and the related social and cultural activities, the LTTE has constructed a Tamil identity among the diaspora population, by re-creating particular traditions and creating a common memory of a particular reading of Tamil history as well as the conflict in Sri Lanka.

Arguably, there is a strong link between participation in activities of an educational character, a sense of ‘home’ and willingness to contribute to development in the Northeast of Sri Lanka. The interest in Tamil cultural activities is strongly linked to a Tamil identity that is created and recreated through participation in such cultural activities. This, in turn, relates to the interest in the Tamil homeland, whether a political interest motivating an active support or opposition to the LTTE, or active support for development in the Northeast of Sri Lanka. As such, participation in Tamil activities in Norway may be seen as motivating and reinforcing transnationalism, even when activities themselves do not span the transnational social field.

**Tamil Identity and the LTTE in the Diaspora**

Analysis of our interview material shows that there are differences among Tamils in Norway in how Tamil identity is constituted, how this is related
to the LTTE, and how this translates into political positions and practices. According to Fulgerud (1999), Tamils in Norway can be divided into three groups in terms of their political activism: (1) a very small group of LTTE representatives/members and a slightly larger circle of active supporters, (2) a very small group of members of other Tamil organizations (competing with the LTTE) or non-members but actively critical of and opposing the LTTE, and (3) the majority who do not take an active political stand, but who feel affinity with the LTTE’s struggle for the ‘Tamil homeland’ (and have supported the LTTE financially, either directly or through the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO)\(^1\) or other organizations affiliated to it).

The LTTE had a strong bearing on diaspora activities, not the least through the Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC),\(^2\) though there are differences in opinion as to the extent of this influence (McDowell, 1996). There is a range of transnational activities across diaspora communities in different host countries, which have been coordinated by LTTE-affiliated organizations and networks such as the TCC, the TRO, but also non-LTTE organizations, such as the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum (SLDF).\(^3\) Such political constellations play a central role in shaping the meaning of home in exile as well as transnational activities.

**Contributing to Development in Northeast Sri Lanka?**

**Remittances: Family Support Systems**

Members of the Tamil diaspora worldwide and in Norway show a great concern for Northeast Sri Lanka, which materializes in helping both their families and Tamil society in general. The foremost transnational activity which a majority of Tamils are engaged in is sending remittances to family members in Northeast Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka received remittances of nearly US$1600 million in 2004, rising to US$2700 million in 2007 (Ratha and Zu, 2008). It should be noted that these remittances are not only from Tamils abroad to the Northeast of the country, but include all remittances to Sri

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\(^1\) The TRO was formed in 1985 as a self-help organization for Tamil refugees in South India. Throughout the war TRO mobilized economic resources in the Tamil diaspora and carried out a broad range of humanitarian programs in Northeast Sri Lanka.

\(^2\) The TCC is a worldwide network associated with the LTTE. It has played a central role in organizing political activities and resource mobilization within the Tamil diaspora.

\(^3\) The SLDF is a global network of democracy and human rights and activists seeking to promote peaceful co-existence and democratization in Sri Lanka.
Lanka, not the least from migrant workers in the Persian Gulf states. Nevertheless, the large number of Tamils living around the world and their observable remittance practices suggests the importance of remittances for the Northeast region (Sriskandarajah, 2002). With the protracted war and the devastation of livelihoods in mind, it seems clear that many people in the Northeast would not survive without remittances (Van Hear et al., 2004).

We find that many Tamils assume that most others send money to Sri Lanka on a regular basis, as this comment suggests: “I think Tamil women contribute to development, mainly by sending money to family and friends” (a Tamil woman in her mid-50s, in Norway since the 1970s). This is also supported by statistics in Norway, where it is found that 79 percent of Tamil immigrants remit money to family in Sri Lanka, compared to an average of 57 percent across immigrant groups (Blom and Henriksen, 2008:35). Remittances may be seen as family support systems.

Research and debates on the effects of remittances on development in the 1970s and 1980s suggest that the direct effect is small, claiming that remittances tend to be spent on consumption and therefore create a need for future consumption and dependency on remittances, rather than promote development. While observations in Northeast Sri Lanka, especially in Jaffna, and interviews among members of the Tamil diaspora support this argument, it is important to recognize that such remittances may also be seen as investments in human capital, and not just simple consumption (Goldring, 2004). Furthermore, there may be significant effects on the local economy, when remittances are spent on goods and services (Carling, 2004; Van Hear et al., 2004). Such local development linkages have been strikingly visible in Jaffna in the period after the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement, particularly with regard to investment in land and some local entrepreneurship (Vorbohle, 2003).

Money Donations to Tamil Development Organizations

Money donations to Tamil development organizations, mainly the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), is another common way through which the diaspora contributes to development in the Northeast. As one interviewee (Tamil man, early 50s, in Norway since the 1980s) pointed out, this is motivated by the desire to help: “There is a great will and wish to contribute to development, both at the individual and family level, and for the entire society.” Diaspora contributions have been of great significance to the TRO, as this has constituted its principal source of funding (Stokke, 2006). This is a fact the diaspora members are well aware of, as the following quote demonstrates: “Development in Sri Lanka is dependent on the diaspora” (Tamil woman, mid-40s, in Norway since the 1980s). The TRO’s develop-
ment efforts in the Northeast have been huge, and are seen as very impor-
tant by members of the Tamil diaspora. It is also clear that even those who
are critical of the TRO, in terms of its relationship with the LTTE, have great
respect for the humanitarian and development work which the TRO has
done in the Northeast. The following quote shows the paradox members of
the diaspora face:

Many people give financial support to the TRO and the LTTE, but
this doesn’t mean they accept everything, agree with everything.
There are very many different opinions among Tamils in exile. But
supporting the Tamils in Sri Lanka is something nearly everyone
does, it’s something one owes to those who are still there, it is
solidarity. Everyone knows that the money goes to the LTTE
through the TRO system, but we also believe that the money
reaches those who are in need.

Tamil man, mid-50s, in Norway since the 1970s

The Tamil organizations based in Norway are linked to larger develop-
ment organizations in Sri Lanka, such as the TRO, and smaller development
initiatives, including the Northeast Development Fund and the Norwegian
Tamil Health Organization, which are part of a wider network of diaspora
organizations and other groups centered around specific issues (e.g., dis-
abled children) or a geographical area (e.g., village school associations).

Social Remittances and Diaspora Circulation

Levitt (1998) has developed the concept of “social remittances” to refer to
the flow of ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital from the diaspora
to the country of origin. Our interviewees’ responses show that social
remittances are important. For many Tamils, the transfer of ideas is related
to visits to Sri Lanka and particularly in relation to the possibility of
temporary return visits for volunteer work. In the period 2001-2006, 82
percent of Tamils in Norway travelled to Sri Lanka (Blom and Henriksen,
2008:36). This confirms the impression from our interviewees of visits to Sri
Lanka being very common among Tamils in the period from 2002. All of our
interviewees had been to Sri Lanka at least once; most had visited several
times since 2002. Mostly these have been holiday visits with personal
motivations. Some people also participate in volunteer work, though it
seems that relatively few Tamils from Norway do. Four of our interviewees,
including a doctor and an engineer, went to Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004.

Several interviewees pointed out that the diaspora could play a significant role in influencing societal development related to the caste system, gender equality and intergenerational relations. In practice, among diaspora contributions, the transfer of skills, organizational models for capacity building and institution building in the Northeast, including in LTTE-controlled areas, seem to be the most tangible. Such contributions were acknowledged and facilitated by LTTE institutions and affiliated organizations such as the TRO (Stokke, 2006).

Cheran (2003) identifies “diaspora circulation,” referring to the visits of members of the diaspora for shorter or longer periods on a continuing basis, as also a significant way in which the diaspora contributes to development in the Northeast.

Tamils from the diaspora go to Sri Lanka to contribute their skills and their knowledge (...) One Tamil from Norway has moved to Sri Lanka to start a driving school based on the Norwegian model.

Tamil man, late 20s, in Norway since the 1990s

Tamils in the diaspora in Norway contribute to development through the transfer of knowledge as well as capacity building. There was less evidence of contributions towards peace building and strengthening of civil society in the Northeast. There have actually been some efforts with regard to peace building and supporting civil society. Sometimes these goals are achieved by way of development projects, at other times, efforts are specifically intended to promote peace building and civil society participation. For instance, an interviewee describing how village projects help ordinary people improve their lives added: “this may stop the children from going off fighting, as the parents will have money for school fees.”

Diaspora circulation can be enabled by migration and settlement in new countries, but it can also be limited by the new obligations of diaspora members in the country of settlement:

For people who are working, even a stay of 3-6 months[in Sri Lanka] is very difficult, because of mortgages and work, but some people try. (...) Others would like to go, but it is difficult for financial reasons.

Tamil man, mid-50s, in Norway since the 1970s
Economic obligations may hinder Tamils in Norway from circulating and investing substantial amounts of time and effort in Sri Lanka. Some also question the lack of initiatives from the Norwegian government to channel state development assistance through diaspora circulation schemes and development initiatives (Carling, 2004).

The Politics of Development in the Tamil Context

Our findings from Norway show that Tamils in the diaspora participate in multiple development initiatives, directly through development organizations and volunteer work and indirectly through various forms of economic and social remittances. These development efforts are characterized by a particular approach to development. This concept of development is shaped by two decades of warfare and the 2004 tsunami disaster. Therefore, development primarily means humanitarian relief and reconstruction. There is less emphasis on broader developmental transformation of society, for instance in terms of empowerment of women and the poor. Interviewees in the Tamil diaspora acknowledge the need for a transition from delivery of humanitarian relief to participatory development, but the common understanding is that this is contingent on conflict resolution and hence an issue that must be dealt with in a future post-conflict situation.

This sequential understanding of immediate humanitarian response and future development has also been prevalent among LTTE-affiliated development institutions in the Northeast. While the LTTE has not had a coherent and public development policy, it has operated in the short-term according to a technocratic and humanitarian needs-based approach (Stokke, 2006). Likewise, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), which has been the main channel for diaspora involvement in humanitarian and development efforts in Northeast Sri Lanka, has given prime attention to the immediate needs of the displaced and war-affected population. In the context of the war-torn and tsunami-affected Northeast, the approach to development adopted by many Tamils in the diaspora and by the LTTE is entirely understandable, as it is seen as a practical approach born out of necessities which must be addressed with immediacy. It may be argued that a more comprehensive and participatory understanding of development would be likely to emerge if there were a political resolution of the conflict. Nevertheless, the concept and institutionalization of development among the Tamil diaspora and within the LTTE as a matter of technocratic delivery of humanitarian assistance, amounts to a depoliticization of social change, which conceals the political nature of disaster relief and development initiatives.
How may one explain why members of the Tamil diaspora seem to see development in such technical and non-political terms? Firstly, this understanding of development has practical reasons in the need for relief in the Northeast (Shanmugaratnam, 2007). Ideas about participatory development seem less relevant in a situation where many people do not have their most basic needs met. Secondly, there is a real possibility that the apparent lack of interest in development as a broader political project may be explained in terms of the political context in Northeast Sri Lanka. Involvement in the politics of development, with a radical emphasis on human rights, might not have been seen as possible, advisable or useful, in a situation where the LTTE ran a de facto ‘state’ in parts of the Northeast and exerted considerable influence and control within the global Tamil diaspora (Stokke, 2006).

This dominance of the LTTE in the Northeast was furthered and institutionalized through the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement and the subsequent inflow of humanitarian and development assistance. The peace process was characterized by the use of development assistance as a precursor to conflict resolution, institutionalizing a certain kind of apolitical approach to development and positioning the LTTE in a key role in regard to development in the Northeast (Goodhand et al., 2005; Shanmugaratnam and Stokke, 2007). Understanding development as a technical issue is thus related to the then political context of a dominant LTTE in the Northeast. But it is also in agreement with the focus in international development assistance to Sri Lanka since 2002 on the delivery of humanitarian relief with relatively weak strategic connection to political transformations. The diaspora approach to development allowed Tamils in exile to provide support to Northeast Sri Lanka that might have been motivated out of fear or support for the LTTE, and may or may not be an expression of support for Tamil nationalism in general and for the LTTE in particular. It is a politically flexible, risk-reducing and pragmatic approach, where many seem to have taken a ‘wait and see’ stance in regard to the conflict; in the meantime, they seek means to help out in whatever way possible.

These explanations fit with the responses which were given by our interviewees in relation to political issues, indicating that a majority of the members of the Tamil diaspora seem to be politically passive, but simultaneously providing funds for LTTE-affiliated development initiatives, yet also criticizing the LTTE privately.

At the moment it is not accepted to not agree with the LTTE, to raise serious questions about how things are handled. (...) The result now is that many people choose to keep their opinions to themselves.

Tamil woman, mid-40s, in Norway since the 1980s
Smaller groups of respondents either actively supported the LTTE, or actively opposed the LTTE, and had more radical ideas about the politics of development and the need for political transformations at ‘home,’ but most of our interviewees stated that they were “not into politics.” Meanwhile, they were interested in political issues, but chose not to focus on the political sphere, despite the fact that they were well aware that their actions might have political implications (e.g., sending money to TRO development projects).

Our data from Norway also give some evidence of what may be termed “forced transnationalism.”

All Tamils in the diaspora have supported the Northeast of Sri Lanka after the tsunami. I think in Norway people support through the TRO because of pressure also, maybe even coercion; they don’t see other possibilities to help the people in the Northeast. The TRO are very well organized. They do home-visits where you are more or less obliged to choose between paying either 200kr, 500kr or 1000kr, you receive a bill to be paid through the bank. Many people are afraid of not paying, because they worry this may affect their family in Sri Lanka. (...) The LTTE has a system where you get a number if you pay to support them, here in Norway. When you get to Sri Lanka they ask for your number. If you don’t have a number, they ask you to pay there.

Tamil man, early 60s, in Norway since the 1970s

La (2004:382) describes the Canadian Tamil context where “coercion by the LTTE has become a widespread problem” and Tamils have felt forced to remit money to the LTTE. However, in the Norwegian context it seems that this has been less frequent. Many Tamils in Norway have supported the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka, either directly or indirectly, and many have felt obliged to do so, including through the collections organized by LTTE supporters. While the general impression is not of coercion, there are some examples of this and therefore fear of the LTTE has to be one of the lenses through which interviewees’ responses should be understood.

With the military defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan armed forces in 2009, it remains to be seen how the situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka will develop, and what kinds of responses this may trigger among the Tamil diaspora in the future.

The Significance of Diaspora Contributions to Development

What is the significance of such transnational diaspora activities to development in Northeast Sri Lanka? This is a complex and multidimensional
question. An in-depth examination of developmental changes would require a thorough analysis of economic dynamics in Northeast Sri Lanka. It is beyond the scope of this article to undertake such comprehensive analyses. Thus, we will limit ourselves to posing a few questions and making some tentative observations.

Remittances and money donations to Tamil development organizations are of some significance to development in Northeast Sri Lanka. The amount of money that is being transferred is substantial and provides important support for survival and livelihood strategies of families, directly or through development organizations. Interviewees within the diaspora view their contributions as significant. This is generally supported by observations and conversations with people in Northeast Sri Lanka as well as LTTE-affiliated organizations (Stokke, 2006). But if remittances are significant, then for whom and where do remittances go to? Data from the study indicate that the families of migrants are the receivers of most remittances. As such, this further suggests the possibility of a growing gap between those who receive remittances and those who do not (Shanmugaratnam, 2007).

In terms of money donations to Tamil development organizations, who benefits from their work, who does not and why? Out-migration from Northeast Sri Lanka is not evenly distributed, i.e., some areas have more migrants than others. Given migrants’ tendency to donate resources to their communities of origin, some places in the region are left out of the development efforts supported by migrants.” According to Cheran (2003), there is evidence that diaspora contributions are centered on the districts of Vanni and Jaffna. This relates to both private transfers or remittances sent to families and to village development initiatives. This suggests that place matters, in terms of whether diaspora contributions are significant or not. In the case of donations to LTTE-affiliated development organizations like the TRO comes the added question of possible politicization of development assistance, with distribution being possibly influenced by political relations to the LTTE.

Further questions may be raised about the diaspora’s responsibility in terms of pushing for political transformations towards democracy and human rights. We find that most of our interviewees express a strong interest in Sri Lankan political affairs, but choose to take a passive stance to politics in Northeast Sri Lanka. The role of the diaspora in the political sphere has been significant mainly in terms of funding the LTTE. The relative silence among the Tamil diaspora about the lack of internal democracy or human rights violations by the LTTE is noticeable. Most issues related to development and peace building in the Northeast, are directly related to the politics of the conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government (Centre for Just Peace and Democracy, 2006). In this context, most members of the Tamil diaspora pursue an apolitical approach to
development with weak strategic connections to political transformations in Tamil areas. While humanitarian assistance remains crucial to create a degree of normalcy in war- and tsunami-affected areas, politically they seem to have provided support in the struggle for power-sharing between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka rather than the promotion of democracy and human rights. It can be argued that contributions from the Tamil diaspora are and have been crucial for meeting humanitarian needs and upholding the capacity of the LTTE, but are less vital when it comes to questions of substantial developmental and political transformations. Incidentally, this could also be said for the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities of many international humanitarian organizations that have operated in Northeast Sri Lanka since the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (Balasingham, 2004; Goodhand et al., 2005; Shanmugaratnam and Stokke, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Tamils in Norway display a strong identification with processes in Sri Lanka. Their capabilities and desires to participate in transnational activities of significance to relief, reconstruction and development in Northeast Sri Lanka are strong. Through social and cultural activities, members of the diaspora shape and re-shape their identities, sense of belonging and longing for ‘home.’ They are also involved in economic and political activities of direct relevance to ‘home,’ mainly in terms of financial remittances and money donations to development organizations and the LTTE. While permanent return to Sri Lanka does not seem realistic for most, the sense of living both ‘here and there’ seems prevalent, and is manifested in the widespread practices of making sizeable contributions towards development in the Northeast of Sri Lanka.

While it is clear that diverse forms of transnational activities are interrelated and may seem inseparable in everyday life, there are also ambiguities and contentious relations, especially between political and economic transnational activities. This seems to affect the way in which development is perceived by members of the Tamil diaspora, who seem to hold a depoliticized and technical view of development, despite the fact that most issues related to the Northeast are understood in the context of the political conflict there. It can thus be observed that most members of the Tamil diaspora are interested in political issues, but choose to take a passive and non-articulated stand on politics in the Northeast. Questions have been raised about the diaspora’s responsibility in terms of pushing for democracy and human rights in the Northeast, and the fact that it may be too late to address these issues later. However, most members of the Tamil diaspora seemed to be
patient, and had a great degree of understanding of the LTTE’s position in terms of the negotiations with the Sri Lankan government, and the need for certain control of the situation among Tamils. This positionality, as both a key actor in regard to politics and development in Northeast Sri Lanka, but simultaneously trapped by the dynamics of war and peace, frames the transnational activities of the Tamil diaspora in Norway. Thus, members of the Tamil diaspora employ transnational strategies for engagement but in forms that cater to complex and sometimes contradictory needs for Tamil identity and belonging, political interests of national self-determination and security, as well as survival and security for individuals, families and friends.

It remains to be seen what forms post-war transnationalism among the Tamil diaspora will take. Nevertheless it is possible to envisage at least three possible scenarios for transnationalism among Tamils in the diaspora. First, perhaps the diaspora will continue supporting the LTTE, despite its military defeat. The diaspora has been an important supporter of the LTTE previously, and may now raise its support significantly, especially if there are credible efforts to transform Tamil nationalism from militant to democratic means. Second, a post-LTTE scenario could develop, where transnational activities grow in a number of ways, through a range of different organizational structures, as well as privately. With the military defeat of the LTTE, it would not be surprising if its structures for receiving transnational support have also been damaged, potentially creating new spaces for transnational activities. Third, it is possible that Tamils in the diaspora become less transnationally active, and perhaps shift their attention more to their societies of settlement. The climate in Sri Lanka for meeting and reaching out to Tamil transnationalism is likely to be significant in influencing to what extent this may be the case.

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