

The Role of Buddhist Monks in Disaster Management: *A Case Study from Sri Lanka*

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Introduction:

Many countries in the World today experience increasing of hazardous natural and anthropogenic events which destroy the human, social and physical capital of the society. Even though it is not possible to link every extreme weather or climate event definitively to so called global warming, there is evidence of an increase in the frequency of natural disasters because of the global climate change. Hence, Climate change, which has been documented in numerous ways, will be reflected in future disasters. Various models predict that frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are being increased in all parts of the world due to the global climate change. This is particularly true as most of the countries have been experiencing extreme weather events related disasters (floods, droughts etc.) for last few decades. As an example the massive floods and landslides particularly in the region of Asia Pacific caused to displace a hundred thousands of people and destroy their properties unexpectedly since the beginning of 2011. Anthropogenic disasters such as armed conflicts, nuclear or chemical accidents etc. on the other hand are adversely impacted on the civil life all around the world. The global report of Internal Displacement says that over 27.1 people are internally displaced in 54 countries by conflict or other kind of violence as of December 2009 (IDMC 2010). South and South East Asia was the region with relative increase in number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in 2009. Even though natural and anthropogenic hazards are mostly occurring suddenly, their impacts are likely to be mitigated within few years. In this context disaster management aims to reduce, or avoid the potential losses from hazards, assure prompt and appropriate assistance to victims of disaster, and achieve rapid and effective recovery. The so called disaster management cycle illustrates the ongoing process by which governments and the civil society plan for and reduce the impact of disasters, react during and immediately following a disaster, and take steps to recover after a disaster has occurred.

Sri Lanka has been experiencing very different natural and anthropogenic disasters during its long history. In the event of facing such calamities, the Sri Lankan society with a strong Buddhist foundation has relied on, Buddhist monks as pioneers in voluntary services particularly for the provision of security and assistance to the victims. The two most talked about disasters in the country – the tsunami and the civil war– were potent examples of the involvement of Buddhist monks in emergency relief services and recovery activities with the assistance of Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations. Hence, this study examines the role of Buddhist monks in the disaster management cycle and evaluates their capacity to nurture and uplift the status of social development in the country. In order to achieve this objective, the present study used a qualitative approach for collecting empirical data from War and Tsunami affected areas in Eastern and Southern Sri Lanka respectively.

Buddhist Perspective on Disaster and Its Mitigation

'Disaster' can be defined from very different perspectives. In the present literature it is explained as a sudden, calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, and destruction and devastation to the human life and property. The damage caused by disasters is immeasurable and varies with the geographical location, climate and the type of the earth surface/degree of vulnerability. This influences the mental, socio-economic, political and cultural state of the affected area. Generally, a disaster completely disrupts the normal day to day life and it negatively influences the emergency systems. Disaster may also be termed as "a serious disruption of the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using its own resources. Thus, a disaster may have the main features such as unpredictability, unfamiliarity, speed, urgency, uncertainty and threat. In responding to the situations where people become victims of such calamities, religion has become a very important factor particularly for providing psychosocial assistance to the victims and restoring their normal lives.

Human populations are becoming more vulnerable to disasters, especially those of catastrophic scope, for many reasons. In past centuries, people believed disasters were caused by forces outside of human control. Floods, volcanoes, and other natural disasters were labeled "acts of God" and were interpreted as punishment or disfavor. This was very similar to the perspectives of monotheism and polytheism on 'disaster' and its 'prevention'. When humans break the God's order they are punished by the God or Gods. If humans accept the God's order the disaster (punishment) is prevented. Even today some theistic religions do not always have a positive impact on communities affected by disaster. Those religions encourage their followers to think of disasters not as events that can be avoided through mitigation and preparedness, but as a kind of divine retribution.

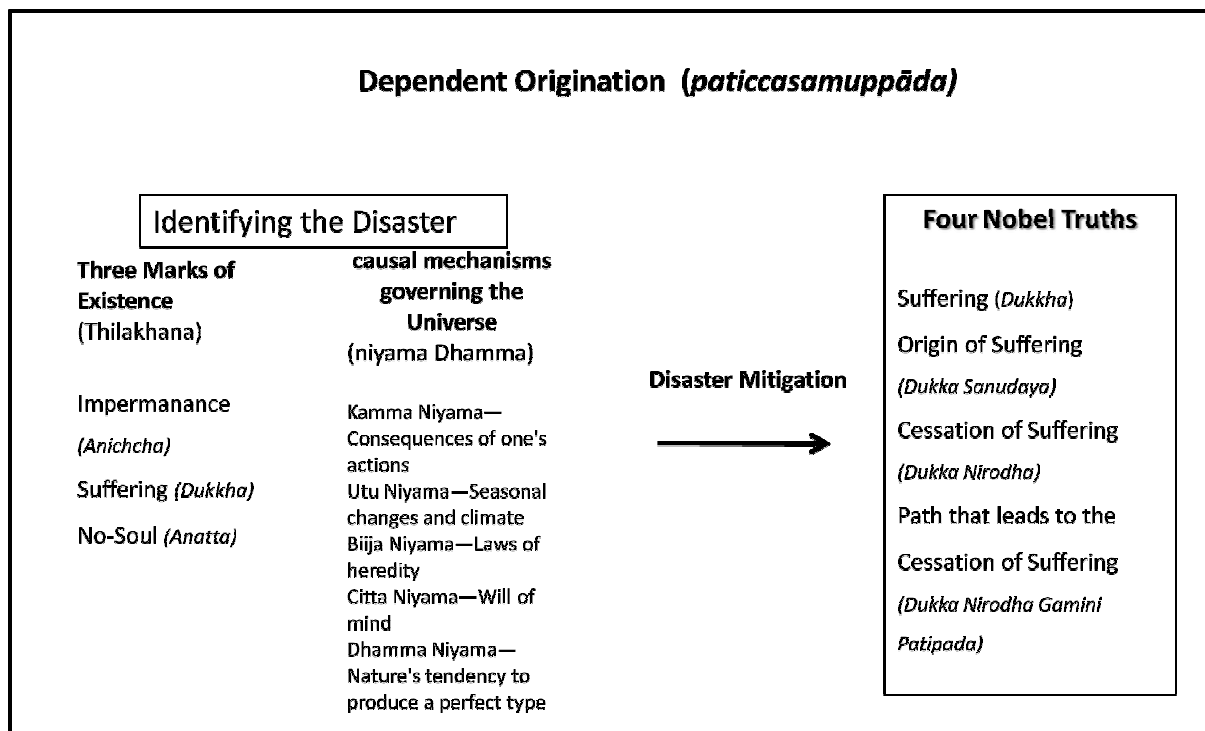
In the aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, some Islamic people interpreted the disaster as punishment from God. Similarly, both Catholics and Evangelicals in Morolica, Honduras, seemed to regard a devastating flood as a result of Hurricane Mitch as part of God's design or punishment. The response of Javanese communities in facing eruptions of Mt Merapi is shaped both by syncretic religious beliefs and by a rational evaluation of the risks to livelihoods in the event of an evacuation (Lavigne et al., 2008). However it is evident that, the religious interpretation on disaster and its mitigation has a spatial variation within a same religion or belief too. As an example, the Christian conception of disasters described by Bankoff (2004) in the Philippines significantly differs from that documented by Chester (Chester et al., 2008) in the Italian context. In some places, different religious beliefs combine into unique constructions of natural hazards and disasters, as observed among communities under the threat of Mt Merapi, in Indonesia, where both Hindu and Islamic spiritualities interact (Schlehe, 1996, 2008). From another aspect, religion may serve as a coping strategy in the face of recurring hazards or disasters among Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities. Thus Gaillard Texier (2010) says:

Referring to Gods is far from being a reflection of fatalism, but rather a convenient and rational way of pointing to someone or something that is out of people's reach in a context of daily hardship. At the level of authorities, however, this may result in the search for a convenient scapegoat to evade responsibility in the construction of people's vulnerability. The role of prayers in times of suffering has also been considered to be both mentally and socially effective in coping with disastrous situations and is believed to ward off further events by appeasing deities (83).

The Buddhist perspective on disaster is an atheistic which is based on the theory of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*). The Buddha taught that all conditioned thing, or volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*) are impermanent, arising and passing away, subject to change, and therefore all are cause for sufferings (or disasters)¹. Philosophically, the disaster and its prevention is explained by the Buddhism under the essence of its teaching. According to the four Nobel truths there is suffering (disaster) and origin of suffering is attachment, the cessation of suffering is attainable and there is a path to the cessation of suffering (Figure 1). Under this explanation though Buddhism does not consider material welfare as an end in itself, it does not ignore the social and economic welfare of people. Ven. Rahula says;

The Buddha was interested in the happiness of men. To home happiness was not possible without leading a pure life based on moral and spiritual principles. But he knew that leading such a life was hard in unfavorable material and social conditions. [...] So Buddhism recognizes the need of certain minimum material conditions favorable to spiritual success-even that of a monk engaged in meditation in some solitary place (Rahula 1989:81).

Figure 01: The Buddhist Perspective on Disaster and its Mitigation



Hence, it can be argued that the role of its followers in providing protection and assistance both materially and spiritually to the people who are in vulnerable situation is very much encouraged by the Buddhism. The Buddhist monks in different societies have come to join in social services under this acceptable universal truth.

¹The last word of Buddha: 'Disciples, this I declare to you: All conditioned things are subject to disintegration - strive on untiringly for your liberation.' (*'handa'dāni bhikkhave āmantayāmi vo, vayadhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādetā'*. *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*)

The role of Buddhist monks in Social Service

The role of Buddhist monks in relief and rehabilitation services particularly in the hazardous situations has been very much appreciated by many people in the world. Although the members of the *Mahasangha* have renounced the worldly life, they still have an important contribution to make to the welfare of the society. For instance, they help to solve the problems of the lay people through counseling. Not being attached to the worldly conditions such as happiness and pain, gain and loss, they are more objective and farsighted in their outlook. They are therefore able to advise the lay people on the best course of conduct. They also help lay people to face the trials and sufferings of life, especially in times of distress such as when a serious illness or death occurs due to a disaster. The Buddhist temples have an important role to play in the education of the young and even today. In addition, Buddhist monks and nuns help in the running of free clinics, orphanages, homes for the aged and the sick, and other welfare organizations.

In Thailand, Buddhist monks and temples have a significant social role in local communities and villages in engendering practical compassion and support in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. For example a Buddhist University campus in Northern Thailand initiated a social mobilization and community advocacy project and a network developed through temples and temple communities throughout North and Northeast Thailand, extending to Myanmar, Lao PDR and Southern China. Practical strategies used include training of monks, inclusion into Dhamma camps, summer retreats and ordination of novices, and in monks' activities in the temple and village community and schools. The project results revealed that Buddhist monks can be supported to lead village communities ahead in showing and giving compassion and support to people with HIV/AIDS, and in community/village-based prevention and care (Maund L, Bennoun RM, Chaimalee PW 1998). *Mahabodhi Society*, the apex body of Buddhists in India with the aid of a couple of like-minded voluntary organizations has set up a tailoring centre and also a free medical clinic for the poor people at Saidpur, a Maoist infested village in Gaya district. A leading Buddhist monk for this project has said that plans are afoot to set up similar centers at several other villages in Bihar. The residents are a happy lot as they are able to avail medical treatment, usually out of their reach and at no cost. (Thai-Indian News Tuesday, December 15, 2009)².

In coping with painful situations, Buddhist practices have become an appropriate strategy in different countries. This perspective has well documented by Lindberg-Falk and explained the manner in which the role of Buddhist monks and nuns in coping with the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Thailand. She focuses on Buddhist communities of Southern Thailand, demonstrating that religious beliefs and practices (for example, imitation funerals, Buddhist ordinations, communication across boundaries) are ways to cope with suffering in the aftermath of an enormous disaster (Lindberg-Falk 2010). This case is a powerful demonstration that resorting to religious practices in a time of hardship should be seen as a potential resource, rather than as a sign of guilt, sinfulness or helplessness.

A religious and social service provider organizations affected by and composed of Burmese Buddhist monks from the so called 2007 Saffron Revolution, are currently supporting

² http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/samaritan-buddhist-monks-render-social-service-in-gaya_100289440.html. accessed on 23rd January 2011.

and providing assistance to refugee monks inside and outside of Burma. This organization was formed by a group of senior monks as a response to the severe economic and social problems existing in Burma in 2007. This organization has established an assistance network for the internal and external refugees, both monks and civilian democracy activists. This is one of best examples to show how Buddhist monks are active in disaster related problems in very different way.

Since the lack of research interest in the study of religion and disaster management, the role of Buddhist monks in reducing the risk of disasters are further neglected by national and local plans. This particular group is usually well integrated within local communities particularly in Asian Buddhist countries, and thus often able to respond to disaster in a very short time span. Moreover, the organizations headed by Buddhist monks often benefit from a high level of trust among local communities. For these reasons, as social workers, Buddhist monks have long been at the cutting edge of disaster risk reduction. Their involvement in relief and rehabilitation activities has also been crucial in fostering post-disaster recovery in many regions of the world.

Experience from Sri Lanka:

Even though there are no completely accurate statistics on the number of ordained Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, estimates indicate that the total is in the country of 30000³. Buddhist monks (*Sangha*) in Sri Lanka, and these are primarily of the *Theravada* school. According to traditional Sri Lankan chronicles, Buddhism was introduced into Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BC by Venerable *Mahinda*, the son of the Emperor *Ashoka* during the reign of Sri Lanka's King *Devanampiya Tissa*. Sri Lanka has the longest continuous history of Buddhism of any Buddhist nation, with the *Sangha* having existed in a largely unbroken lineage since its introduction in the 2nd century. During periods of decline, the Sri Lankan monastic lineage was revived through contact with Myanmar and Thailand. Throughout history the monks have been both spiritual guides and advisers to the society. At the heart of present popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka stands the village monk (*grā mavāsee Bhikku*), whose primary role is to provide the services to the society through teaching, preaching (*bana*), officiating at ceremonies, festival and funerals, etc. There are some critics against this role of Buddhist monks who are not to strive for their own spiritual development, and to use their knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, the *Dhamma*, to guide laypeople (Seneviratne 1999, Tambiah 1992). But the importance of the *Sangha* in Buddhist Sri Lanka cannot be underestimated. The monks who engage in education, social service, community-development and social integration as well as disaster mitigation exercise great influence at the community level. Recent disasters in Sri Lanka particularly Tsunami in 2006 placed Sri Lankan Buddhist monks in the focus of the international community. Not for the first time in history, the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka took a leading role in times of emergency, and were able to mobilize rapidly their forces in order to help the victims. Hence this study has attempted to investigate the role of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks in the disaster management cycle and evaluates their capacity to nurture and uplift the status of social development in the country. In order to achieve this objective, the study used a qualitative approach for collecting empirical data from 100 monks who had directly involved either War or Tsunami affected people in Eastern and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka respectively. Table 01 presents the manner in which interviewed monks represented different categories. It was interesting to see that majority of interviewed monks (71%) worked at individually for Tsunami

³ Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment – Sri Lanka

and war affected people in both provinces. Monks in war affected eastern province were more organized than the Southern in disaster management activities.

Southern Province						Eastern Province				Total
Galle District		Matara District		Hambantota District		Ampara District		Trincomalee District		
21		16		13		32		18		100
Individual level	Organized level	Individual level	Organized level	Individual level	Organized level	Individual level	Organized level	Individual level	Organized level	
16	05	11	04	11	02	23	09	10	08	100

Table 01: Selected Buddhist monks for the study mainly characterized by their involvement level in helping the victims of Tsunami and civil war. Level of involvement refers the manner in which help the victims and participation to the different activities in disaster management. Monks who worked as an organized group or under an established organization/institution included the category of organized level.

The eight types of services are rendered by the monks within a disaster management cycle as shown in Table 02. There are very few monks recorded worked in rescue activities particularly of war victims in Eastern province. In the case of Tsunami, significant number of monks had helped the Tsunami victims individually at the point of victimizing (Table 02). One Buddhist monk from *Hikkaduwa* in Southern coastal area where the powerful waves swept inland on 26 December 2004, knocking the crowded train off of its tracks recalled the incident;

At that time More than a thousand of people were on the train. Dead bodies were floating everywhere. I was really shocked by seeing how people were trying to survive. Just I made few ladders and put them against the train. People were happy for a movement. They climbed down carefully and ran away towards my Temple. There were very old wounded persons too. Since it was a very risky time nobody found to bring them into a Hospital. All hospitals along the coastal belt were also damaged. So they needed to be brought a Hospital far away. Even though as Buddhist monks we are not allowed to drive, at that time I took the risk. I could bring them into a hospital by a lorry within very short time. All of them were recovered. Later on we could recover more than 200 bodies, but hundreds of people were still missing (Monk _Hikkaduwa_38 age).

For war related rescue activities, there were very few opportunities for Buddhist monks in conflict affected areas. Main reason was they were not allowed to go to the risk areas by security personals. But two monks interviewed had took the risk and gone with Army personals to a village where mass execution taken place. Their role as Buddhist monks was highly appreciated by the security personals because they had treated civilians attacked by the terrorists physically and mentally in order to cope up the emotional situation. Generally monks had played a very important on site role when disasters occurred in terms of providing emergency needs, help victims for coping up, controlling unpleasant situations, direct the displaced people into safer areas, coordinate people who engage in rescue activities etc.

Nature of the Service	Tsunami	War	Level of Service		Total
			Individual	Organized	
Onsite operations	36	03	39	00	39
Emergency relief	72	57	96	33	129
Establishing welfare centers	42	39	60	21	81
Mental health support	23	09	32	00	32
Sheltering	29	12	11	30	41
Schooling	17	32	20	29	49
Livelihood assistance	17	04	06	15	21
Moral upliftment	00	12	12	00	12
Representation of policy making	03	16	12	07	19

Table 02: The role of Buddhist monks within disaster management cycle is categorized according to the experience they had during and after the disaster. Level of service referred how monks involved in the disaster management activities.

It is clear that as one of the most important stage of the disaster management cycle, providing emergency relief was the key role of Buddhist monks subjected to the study. Most of the monks had involved in relief services such as providing cooked food, water, cloths, medicine, sanitation as well as establishing welfare centers in their temples for the victims. It was interesting to see that a significant number of monks interviewed particularly in the Eastern Province had engaged in relief services for both Tsunami and war affected displaced people. The monks who were involved in emergency relief services for Muslims, Hindu Tamils and Christians those who had become victims of Tsunami and war, irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliations, were immensely appreciated. When the researcher was at the field in the Eastern Province, he could touch a remarkable experience on the way in which Buddhist monks were appreciated by other ethnic groups those who had received enormous supports during the war and Tsunami disasters. There was a Buddhist monk in Ampara District who had involved full time in relief and rehabilitation activities for war affected people in the Eastern Sri Lanka. When Tsunami hit the *kalmunai* area where the Tamil displaced were living, the monk had visited and brought them into his temple. There was a camp already established for Sinhala IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in the temple. They had been there for about nine months and went backed to their previous places in September 2005. When the so called Eelam war IV began from the East, most of those families found refuge from the same temple in December 2007 and they were there for about six months. The monk recalled his memories during the risky period;

It was very hard to live here in Ampara for all ethnicities at that time. Our devotees were not in a position to even find enough food. When Tsunami hit the coastal area we had more pressure. There were Tamils and Muslims who were very helpless due to the Tsunami. Even though we did not have enough space for them here in the temple, I brought them and put here up in a temporary hut built by war-induced Sinhala displaced people. At the initial stage I organized all monks in this area for gathering food, clothes, medicine for them and we used our

traditional way of arm-food collection (pindapatha) ⁴ for that purpose. I am very happy to say that after their return most of those families visit our temple where they resided as displaced in every New Year festival and I visit them at their important occasions (Monk_Ampara_58 old).

Most of the Buddhist monks in so called border villages played a vital role in protecting and assisting of the war victims as well as developing reintegration among different ethnicities in Sri Lanka. Some leading characters in sangha were assassinated by the Terrorist time to time because monks did not allow them to use the civilians as human shield during the war.

As shown in Table 02 most of the Buddhist monks engage in disaster management activities individually. Even at the organized situation, they had worked within very limited space. Representation of National level organization in disaster management activities are very few for monks subjected to the study. In post disaster stage, the role of Buddhist monks are more organized than the early stages of the disaster, particularly in helping the victims for sheltering, schooling and livelihoods. One of main findings of the study is that the role of Buddhist monk in improving mental health of the victims and policy making is very limited. Even at the individual level their contribution for policy making is 32 percent only. Few monks had engaged in moral upliftment programs in disaster management with war affected communities while none of them were reported in Tsunami affected communities. But here it should be understood that several strategies were adopted by the Buddhist monks for psychosocial care of both Tsunami and war affected communities all over the country. It should be noted that all of those activities in healing the wounded minds of the victims were not more psychiatric-oriented but very ceremonial. On March 25, 2005 the *Associated Press* reported;

At a 300-year-old Buddhist temple near where the Asian tsunami swept up to 2,000 people aboard a train to their deaths, dozens of monks chanted blessings Friday at an all-night ceremony to help the wandering spirits of those killed three months ago. As night fell on this southern coastal area devastated by the Dec. 26 tsunami, women wearing white saris sat on mats and prayed with folded hands, some holding the holy Lotus flower and burning incense sticks. Monks chanted hymns continuously throughout the night for the spirits of the dead to be reborn. Special prayers were planned this weekend for residents of Peraliya, a village close to the Janagangarama temple, which was annihilated when waves described by survivors as big as elephants smashed into Sri Lanka's coastline.⁵

Worldwide, there is increasing scientific evidence to support the importance of psychosocial interventions on the mental health of disaster victims (Murthy and Karki 2002). Even though monks engage with counseling through various activities such as preaching, meditating etc., it cannot be seen their full capacity or strength in upholding the mental health of affected people. Particularly the meditation could be used for healing the wounded minds of the victims very successfully. Therefore the role of Buddhist monks should be mainly focused on psychological assistance particularly in post disaster stage. As explained the above in very crucial stages monks have played a vital role to overcome the victims suffering through different activities. But most of them were not well organized or systematic. The people's religious and cultural interest could be used for healing their mental trauma and turn them into positive

⁴ Pindapata is a tradition in which Buddhist monks wander through a village to collect their daily meals. The tradition started when Lord Buddha said monks and nuns should not cook or store their own food in order to simplify the lives of monastics and to enrich the spiritual lives of lay people.

⁵ " <http://pluralism.org/news/view/10250>

thinking. Some studies have revealed that some war affected people have used the compensations they received for their dead relations for overcoming their sympathy (Ven. Sangasumana 2010).

However, according to the respondents, there was some strength in playing a key role in disaster management as Buddhist monks such as transparency of their activities, recognition of the society, having more personal and organizational links, enabling state support etc. Sometimes they had to face practical problems as monks in assisting the victims at the point of disaster occurred. In addition several weaknesses were faced by them such as attitudes of the lay people, political influence, bureaucracy, subjected to cheating etc.

Conclusion:

The research results reveal that spiritual and material supports of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks in post-disaster phases (relief, recovery and rebuilding) are instantly recognizable. Their contribution has been phenomenal in terms of establishing temporary welfare centers in temples for the displaced, providing physical, mental and spiritual support for victims, coordinating different actors engaged in disaster mitigation and resettlement programs etc. Such voluntary activities recognized and honored by the society at large, not just Buddhists, as transparent and dispassionate service rendered by the *Mahasangha* of the country. However, one of the main weak points of this mechanism is that most of the relief programs are very individual and unorganized. In addition Sri Lankan Buddhist monks are very much interested in material support in disaster management mechanism rather than improving of mental health of the victims. The high capability of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks in disaster management is not much utilized by both monks themselves as well as the policy makers. It can be argued that that psychosocial care has been limitedly included as part of the disaster management programs in Sri Lanka. But in fact Buddhist monks owing to a holistic perspective based on sound principles have a great potential for providing psychosocial care to the survivors of disasters. The nature and value of their role in respect of capacity building, rendering services and monitoring is also elaborated on. Further, Buddhist monks need to be educated in national and local disaster management mechanism, rules and regulations. They should be the one participants of decision making. They have very important experiences in disaster management in terms of the way in which people react the situations, and their physical and psychological needs, Issues in assistance and protection etc. If such constrains can be resolved, the social service of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks could become even more valuable for implementing an efficient and effective national disaster management plan.

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