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Matching goods and people: aid and human security after the 2004 tsunami

Jin Sato

This article asks why, despite an abundance of aid materials and the good intentions of various relief agencies, tsunami-relief efforts in Thailand after the Great Sumatra Earthquake of 2004 resulted in complaints and skewed aid distribution. Beginning with an analysis of how relief goods are distributed in practice, the focus of the article shifts to forces that cause certain types of goods to be concentrated in certain communities. It concludes by identifying the limits of the goods-based relief approach, introducing intangible resources and identity as more foundational dimensions in the study of distribution.

Les bons produits aux bonnes personnes: aide et sécurité humaine après le tsunami de 2004

L'auteur de cet article pose la question de savoir pourquoi, malgré l'abondance de matériel d'aide et les bonnes intentions de diverses agences d'aide, les efforts humanitaires menés après le tsunami survenu en Thaïlande suite au grand séisme de Sumatra en 2004 ont donné lieu à des plaintes et à une distribution déformée de l'aide. Cet article commence par une analyse de la manière dont les produits d'aide sont distribués dans la pratique, puis il se concentre sur les forces qui font que certains types de produits sont concentrés dans certaines communautés. Il conclut en mettant en évidence les limites de l'approche d'aide centrée sur les produits et en introduisant les ressources intangibles et l'identité comme des dimensions plus fondationnelles dans l'étude de la distribution.

Combinando mercadorias e pessoas: ajuda e segurança humana após o Tsunami de 2004

Este artigo pergunta por que, apesar da abundância de materiais de ajuda e das boas intenções de várias agências de alívio humanitário, os esforços de alívio do tsunami na Tailândia após o Grande Terremoto de Sumatra de 2004 resultaram em reclamações e distribuição de ajuda desviada. Iniciando com uma análise de como os produtos de alívio humanitário são distribuídos na prática, o enfoque do artigo muda para as forças que fazem com que certos tipos de produtos fiquem concentrados em certas comunidades. Ele conclui identificando os limites da abordagem de alívio humanitário baseada em produtos, introduzindo recursos intangíveis e identidade como dimensões mais fundacionais no estudo de distribuição.

El equilibrio entre bienes y necesidades de la población: ayuda humanitaria y seguridad humana tras el tsunami de 2004

Este ensayo cuestiona por qué la ayuda humanitaria que recibió Tailandia tras el Gran Terremoto en Sumatra en 2004 se distribuyó mal y ocasionó quejas a pesar de la gran cantidad de bienes materiales entregados y las buenas intenciones de las agencias humanitarias. Tras

analizar la distribución de la ayuda humanitaria en la práctica, el ensayo examina por qué ciertos bienes se concentraron en sólo algunas comunidades. Concluye identificando los límites del método de ayuda basado en bienes, postulando a la vez que los recursos intangibles y la identidad son dimensiones más importantes a la hora de analizar la distribución.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Conflict and reconstruction; East Asia

Introduction

The Indian Ocean tsunami caused by the Great Sumatra Earthquake on 26 December 2004 was the most devastating natural disaster in recent history, resulting in a reported death toll of more than 227,000 people and the displacement of 1.7 million more (Scheper 2006: 33). This tragic incident triggered yet another giant wave, in the form of unprecedented aid from all over the world. According to the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC), international aid amounted to US\$ 13.5 billion, averaging US\$ 7100 per affected person (*Bangkok Post* 2006) – far beyond what the average Thai fisher earns in one year.¹ This article focuses on the ‘Second Tsunami’ of aid that this tragic event generated in Thailand. I ask why, despite an unparalleled abundance of material supplies, relief operations ended up causing much dissatisfaction at the receiving end; and I discuss key distributive policies that must be implemented to avoid such pitfalls in the future.

Numerous studies have analysed tsunami-related relief efforts, most of them from purely physical and engineering perspectives, exploring issues such as how to rebuild infrastructure, secure escape routes, develop effective early-warning systems, and train disaster professionals in order to reduce future risks. Little consideration, however, has been given to the social infrastructure required for these programmes to function, as well as to the political repercussions of aid projects on affected areas. From the perspective of disaster victims, the primary risk is not necessarily the next disaster, but rather the political and economic turmoil caused by relief efforts from the *present* one.

The social ramifications of relief efforts have gone largely unheeded for several reasons: (1) most disaster-management ‘experts’ have engineering backgrounds, and very few social scientists and area specialists are typically brought in; (2) effective analysis of the social dimensions of aid requires a substantial amount of time for research to capture visible effects; by the time changes can be observed, public attention to the issue has faded away, with a corresponding decrease in the quantity of research; and (3) many organisations involved in aid operations are poorly co-ordinated with one another, making it difficult to obtain general lessons that can be applied to future aid programmes. Instead of examining the long-term effects of aid directly, I begin by interrogating the social prerequisites of aid programmes, the effects of goods and services provided as ‘aid’, and the actual distributional mechanisms of relief efforts in the short term. Focusing on goods and mechanisms commonly observed in areas damaged by natural disasters minimises the difficulty of data collection and allows comparisons of data from different areas and types of disasters. It may also yield typologies of short-term effects, based on the nature of assistance, which will help to minimise unexpected disadvantages of future relief policies.

Extensive global media coverage of the 2004 tsunami – owing in part to the large number of Western casualties in Thailand’s popular tourist destinations – attracted an historically unprecedented volume of goods and services to the affected regions. Furthermore, in Thailand heavy damage was concentrated in specific locations and left surrounding infrastructure mostly intact,

making aid operations relatively easy, compared with damaged areas in Aceh or in Sri Lanka. Paradoxically, however, tsunami victims complained about the lack of cash and material supplies that were supposed to come from the government and aid organisations. Why did the 2004 relief efforts, despite ample funds and favourable conditions, so completely fail to provide satisfactory aid to the tsunami victims?

A typical explanation of failed aid projects is based on the theory of 'elite capture', blaming certain corrupt elites (often government officials) for disproportionately capturing benefits originally intended for victims. This article attempts to provide an alternative theory by focusing on the nature of the goods delivered during relief efforts, and the distribution mechanisms employed. Using this approach, it becomes possible to develop distributive schemes free from time-consuming information-collecting processes and problematic reliance on the good intentions of relief agents.

Social *mechanisms* of distribution, particularly for disaster relief, often reveal aspects of communal life that seldom surface in the normal state.² The connections between goods and people in such situations have been of primary concern to social scientists, particularly economists. For example, in *Commodities and Capabilities*, Amartya Sen begins by saying: 'Much of economics is concerned with the relation between commodities and people. It investigates how people arrange to make commodities, how they establish command over commodities, what they do with commodities and what they get out of commodities' (Sen 1985:1).

Undeniably, commodities play a critical role in our daily lives, and while social scientists have paid much attention to how people gain command over certain types of goods and commodities, it is seldom asked how goods, in reverse, inform the domain of choices available to human users. A reversal of Sen's formulation poses the question of how commodities arrange and shape the people who use them. I found exploration of this question particularly worthwhile in analysing the 2004 tsunami response, when I encountered endless individual confusion and communal upset caused by a massive inflow of aid goods and the subsequent problem of how to distribute them. Of course, the logic of the effect of aid commodities on human communities is not exactly the reverse of Sen's formulation, since goods do not exercise intentional control over people; however, because the functionality of goods requires certain pre-existing conditions on the part of the user, some people will inevitably be placed in more advantageous positions than others. This dimension often escapes social and political analysis, since existing resource arrangements, as we shall see, seldom attract attention as criteria for aid distribution.

The social meaning of material objects was effectively elucidated by Langdon Winner in his controversial article 'Do artifacts have politics?' (Winner 1980). Winner took the case of New York City bridges with extremely low overpasses, arguing that the architect Robert Moses designed them intentionally low in order to achieve a particular social effect. Moses, according to evidence cited by Winner, was a racist, and in order to make sure that Jones Beach, his widely acclaimed public park, was inaccessible to blacks, he deliberately made the overpasses too low for buses carrying mostly poor, black passengers to pass under them (Winner 1980).³ Case-specific observation like this reminds us that it is worthwhile to examine the political effects of *things* beyond their immediate function. There seems to be an important yet unexplored dimension of material objects in which 'goods distribute themselves among people' (Waltzer 1983: 7).

In this article, I will refer specifically to Jon Elster's *Local Justice* (Elster 1992). Elster provides a useful basis for the analysis of interactions between the intentions of institutions allocating specific goods to certain people and the actual distributional outcome. Elster sought to come up with common principles characterising a wide variety of in-kind distribution. In *Local Justice*, he explores issues such as who gets a kidney for transplantation, who is chosen for military service, who is admitted to competitive colleges, and who is selected for lay-offs

(Elster 1992). Common to these questions is that they interrogate the distributive mechanism of scarce goods that are provided neither by the government nor by the market. Elster's framework provides an excellent entry point; however, it does have some limitations, particularly when applied to developing countries where social norms and cultural identities play a large role in distributive outcome. While the distribution of goods is important, this research finds that, at a foundational level, resources that generate and attract certain goods to certain people (while denying access to others) are more essential.

What follows is an attempt to extend and critique Elster's 'local justice' theory, using the tsunami-relief efforts in Thailand as a case study. I carried out fieldwork 14–19 January (four days), 23–1 March 2005 (eight days), 27 March–5 April 2006 (10 days), and 20–25 March 2007 (five days). Focusing mainly on the principles and secondary effects of goods distribution, I visited the worst-hit areas of Pang-nga (mainly Kao-lak), Tran, Krabi, and Phi-Phi Island.

Tsunami in Thailand

Magnitude of the disaster

At approximately 10:00 am on 26 December 2004, a huge wave caused by the Great Sumatra Earthquake hit the southern shores of Thailand, wreaking damage of a magnitude unprecedented in recorded history. The devastation resulted in 5395 dead (of whom 2436 were foreign nationals) and 2817 missing (896 of them foreign). An additional 8257 persons, including 2392 foreigners, were seriously injured. See Table 1.

One social characteristic of the event was the diversity of casualties, particularly the foreign tourists, as well as migrant workers from Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia. An estimated 60,000 Burmese migrant workers were affected by the tsunami (Scheper 2006), and identification of these migrant workers was difficult, because most had entered the country illegally and thus lacked proper registration. Many even refused to be housed in refugee camps and fled from emergency assistance to find refuge in nearby forests. The diversity of casualties, from wealthy tourists to illegal migrants with a multitude of ethnicities, religions, legal and economic standings, and occupations, made relief efforts in Thailand particularly challenging.

Following the visit of then-Prime Minister Taksin on the day of the disaster, aid started pouring into the area, sharply increasing day after day. Despite the Thai government's announcement that it would decline international financial assistance, the disaster attracted huge amounts of money and aid goods from all over the world. The loss of more than 3000 foreign lives in Thailand amplified international attention to relief efforts, with increased commitments for recovery assistance from many different agencies. In addition to the diversity of casualties, this diversity of aid agencies assisting under severe time constraints made the relief task even more demanding.

Public interest and willingness to contribute were unprecedented. More than 10,000 people queued in front of the Red Cross Headquarters in Bangkok to volunteer or donate blood. The rapid surge in volunteers and donated goods from all across the country left little time for Red Cross staff to engage in more direct assistance to the victims. Donations collected at the Prime Minister's Office amounted to 1.6 billion baht (US\$ 4 billion) as of May 2005, but only one billion (US\$ 2.5 billion) was actually disbursed.

Despite the vast sums of money collected at the centre, voices of the victims rang out largely in disappointment. On 2 February 2005, *The Nation*, a major English-language newspaper published in Thailand, printed a special issue entitled 'We Have Received Nothing: Voices of the Tsunami Victims', highlighting the bureaucratic delays and maldistribution of aid.

Table 1: Impacts of the tsunami on humans, housing, environment, and livelihoods in Thailand

Dimension of impact	Sub-dimension	Degree of damage/impact
Human	Dead	5395
	Injured	8457
	Missing	2817
	Children without one or both parents	1449
Housing units	Destroyed	3302
	Damaged	1504
Natural resources	Coral	Minimal damage 32,013 rais; Substantial damage 3812 rais
	Beach	1485 rais
	Beach forest	90,093 rais
	Waste/disposal waste	2 sites
	Saline soil area	about 3957.5 rais
Water sources	Surface-water ponds	102
	Shallow wells	2324
	Ground-water ponds or wells	737
Livelihoods	Fisheries	US\$ 44,044,117
	Livestock	US\$ 429,158
	Agriculture	US\$ 161,314
	Business enterprises	US\$ 308,205,908
	Tourism	Around US\$ 15 million loss

Note: 1 rai = 6.25 hectare.

Source: Segschneider and Worakul (2007), pp. 6–7

Criticisms were targeted mainly at gaps in criteria and duplicated procedures among aid agencies, slow processing time, arbitrary allocation of goods, and rumours of corruption.⁴ Frequent news reports emerged on suspected embezzlement of funds collected for the victims and their families (*The Nation* 2007).

‘Elite capture’ thesis

When there are enough goods to go around and few are actually being disbursed, the popular explanation relies on some variant of the ‘elite capture’ theory (Platteau 2004), in which ‘elite’ implies government officials and village leaders who have disproportionate access to social, political, and economic power.⁵ The term ‘elite capture’ refers to the process by which these privileged individuals dominate and corrupt community-level planning and governance (Dasgupta and Beard 2007). Examples range from outright embezzlement of aid money by government officials to more skilful manipulation of aid flow by local leaders and other influential people. I wish to expand the definition of the term in the aid context to include captures of externally provided goods and resources initially intended for the needy that are subsequently exploited by those in more advantageous positions (including local aid staff), resulting in a skewed distribution of aid (Platteau 2004). The tendency of aid to be unevenly distributed can grow stronger in disaster-relief situations, since extreme time limitation inevitably increases outsiders’ reliance on local leaders for ‘representative’ judgment.

The fact that large sums of windfall money tend to invite both intended and unintended elite capture has often been cited in the development literature as a primary obstacle to poverty alleviation.⁶ This in turn leads to either a deplorable lack of political will and advocacy for community-driven development or strategic discussion of targeting the poor by devising ways to minimise elite influences (van de Wall 1998).

Because elite-capture theory often succeeds in providing convincing explanations, particularly to the general public, other factors that may explain skewed distribution often go unnoticed. Narrow identification of so-called ‘antagonists’ tends to deflect our attention from other, perhaps more remediable, causes of distributional bias.⁷ Also, reliance on explanations based solely on actors’ intentions under-estimates the effects of structural factors that may have relevant yet unintended effects on aid distribution.

Having visited sites of aid operation two weeks after the 2004 tsunami, I believe that most aid agents did their best to serve the needs of the victims – surrounded by such unprecedented devastation, anyone would feel an immense sense of obligation to do something. Attending various co-ordination meetings and conducting interviews with aid workers at the front line left one in no doubt that they were committed and serious about their cause. Perhaps, then, the limitation lies in the fact that they made their best effort from *their own* perspective. After interviewing more than 20 individuals from international and national front-line aid organisations, I noticed that the primary concerns of the assisting agencies were, first, how much aid was going to what location; and second, what (and how much) other agencies were sending. The first question focused on distribution between communities while neglecting distribution *within* communities, and the second, which came much later in the rehabilitation process, failed to ask what aid people had actually *received* and how they received it. Failure to address these issues is part of the reason for the victims’ overwhelming complaints.

From the perspective of aid officials, there are justifiable reasons for these lapses and priorities: when time is limited, relief efforts must rely on local leaders to take care of community-level allocation of goods. Also, aid agencies often fiercely compete with one another for visible results and the resulting increase in international reputation gained by effectively administering aid. Reputation and record are essential, particularly for NGOs relying on donations.

In examining how aid goods are matched to recipients, it is necessary to examine the principle of distribution that each aid agency implicitly or explicitly adopts in allocating goods.

Elster’s ‘Local Justice’ framework

Are there certain categories of goods (and burdens) that are always allocated under specific principles? Or, alternatively, to what extent is the allocation of goods specific to particular countries or cultures? These are questions posed by Jon Elster in his book *Local Justice* (Elster 1992). Elster focuses on kidney transplantation, college admissions, military service, and immigration – for none of which has either economics or political science attempted to develop a conceptual framework explaining how institutions should allocate goods and burdens.

‘Local’ refers to the fact that different institutional sectors use different substantive principles (such as need, merit, seniority) of allocation (Elster 1992: 3). Furthermore, in local justice, success in one arena does not depend on bad luck in another: there will usually be no special privilege for entering a competitive college, for example, just because an applicant has been denied a kidney transplant. Also, ‘justice’ is used not in the normative sense, but as an explanatory concept to mean allocation of scarce goods for the purpose of maximising some aggregate features of the recipients, or more generally, of all citizens (Elster 1992: 6).

Further contrast with ‘global’ justice may clarify Elster’s argument. Globally redistributive policies, according to Elster, are characterised by three features: (1) they are designed centrally

at the level of national government; (2) they are intended to compensate people suffering from various sorts of bad luck resulting from the possession of ‘morally arbitrary properties’; and (3) they typically take the form of cash transfers (Elster 1992: 4). The contrast between the two notions of justice is summarised in Table 2.

The power of Elster’s approach lies not only in his description of non-market and non-government allocation schemes that have immediate distributive impacts of their own, but also in his account of secondary effects. Secondary effects occur when members of group X are disproportionate to members of group Y, and thus certain goods and burdens immediately allocated to Y end up concentrating in X. Providing fishing gear to communities, for example, may end up benefiting men more than women (particularly widows), although that is not the intention of those who provide aid. Similarly, donations of houses to Thai nationals – ignoring minorities and migrant labourers who have lost their homes but are not legal residents – wrongly assume that the benefits can be evenly distributed.

Elster’s focus on the principles of distribution depending on the nature of goods offers important insight into making aid more effective. Goods delivered as aid often have influence reaching beyond their immediate objective. Providing water in the form of communal tanks, for example, may have a different effect from distributing bottled water, as the former requires some form of collective management, and the latter may cause garbage problems. Likewise, provision of fishing tools may have little value for those who do not fish, and creation of a village revolving fund may present difficulties in a community with limited experience of successful collective actions. The value of goods, therefore, depends not only on the physical characteristics of the goods themselves, but also on the human and social elements of the communities who derive benefits from them.

Nature of goods

A clear understanding of the nature of goods to be allocated is necessary before any goods can be fairly distributed. The usefulness of examining the nature of goods is derived not from the physical attributes of the goods themselves, but rather from the incentives and social order that the goods render in human communities. In this respect, discretion becomes an important factor; allocations based on gender or age are more straightforward than allocations based on need, which is hard to verify and thus invites manipulation of entitlements. These conditions often play a critical role in triggering moral hazard and secondary effects that work against the poorer sections of target communities. The distribution of goods based on need, for example, is often exposed to potential recipients’ incentive to exaggerate their needs (i.e. moral hazard), while allocation based on gender or physical disability reduces such occurrences. Specification of the exact effects of a particular choice of criteria and methods may lead us to develop concrete ideas for effective assistance (or less disruptive assistance) in situations where collection of detailed information is costly.

Table 2: Local and global justice

	Global justice	Local justice
Decision making	Highly centralised	Decentralised
Subject of distribution	Cash	In-kind goods and services
Objective of distribution	Compensation	Not compensation

Source: Author, based on Elster (1992)

Table 3 describes typical examples of goods and services provided to regions hit by the 2004 tsunami and temporary refugee camps. Life-support goods – food, water and housing – come first. The second stage is often related to the betterment of the lives of those in refugee camps, where most people end up staying much longer than they originally expected. Finally, from the third stage on, a gradual return to original habitats begins, with parallel efforts to build permanent houses. Legal problems arise in areas where people have no land titles.

In classifying types of goods, several important criteria must be taken into consideration (Elster 1992). The first is whether or not the goods are divisible: goods are indivisible if more than one person cannot simultaneously receive them. Division of indivisible goods (such as labour) destroys their value. Communal electricity generators and water tanks are examples of indivisible goods that must be used collectively. This is an important consideration, since if goods cannot be equally divided, some arrangement must be worked out so that the balance between the benefits of the goods and the burden of maintaining them is perceived as ‘fair’ in a given community.⁸

The second criterion is homogeneity, meaning that all individual units of any one commodity are indistinguishable with respect to features that make the commodity desirable. An early-warning system, for example, may be equally beneficial for all of those who live within hearing distance from the equipment. Temporary houses derived from the same building material, on the other hand, may have various advantages and disadvantages, depending on a multitude of other factors (such as access to toilets and water).

The third criterion is scarcity: goods are scarce when there is not enough to satisfy all individuals at a particular time. In tsunami-struck Thailand, donated goods such as canned food, medicine, and used clothes were often in over-supply. Scarcity becomes relevant for determining qualitative differences between goods and the timeline of their supply. Temporary housing, for example, may be considered non-scarce when there are more houses than individuals who need shelter; however, even if the total number of houses is enough, the timing of house-building services often creates a sense of scarcity, since houses cannot be built all at once. The question of who should have priority in moving into these houses then becomes an issue.

Notice that variation in the quality of aid goods creates incentives and necessitates certain social arrangements for those who wish to obtain benefits (or avoid burdens) derived from the goods. Communal water tanks, for example, require a system of collective maintenance

Table 3: Sequence of goods provided to tsunami victims

First stage (two weeks after tsunami)	Second stage (one month after tsunami)	Third stage (two months after tsunami and on)
Food and water	Temporary housing	Permanent housing
Medicine	Employment opportunities	Early-warning system
Tents	Day-care centers	Constructing evacuation routes
Clothes and blankets	Water tanks	Legal support
Cooking utensils	General volunteer activities	
Temporary toilets	Establishing boat factories	
Electricity generators	Providing fishing gear	
Health clinics		
Clean-up volunteers		

Source: Author's survey

in order to produce benefits for the community. Using differences in operational requirements, then, provides a practical way to determine the type and distribution pattern of aid goods (with similar function) in order to effectively reach the most needy.

Mechanisms of distribution

Before they can reach the hands of the consumer, goods must be distributed through some sort of mechanism; the particular choice of allocation method, however, often entails secondary distributional impacts that are hard to detect. Table 4 presents a description of typical goods and services provided, along with their respective distribution methods, together with the guiding norm at the foundation of each distribution mechanism. Lottery appears to be the most common distribution method (allocating everything from small daily goods to more expensive items such as temporary houses). Such extensive use of the lottery system illustrates how notions of fairness based on simple equality are preferred in the distribution of many types of goods. A particularly important aspect of the distribution of goods is the secondary effect (or after-shock) that the allocation inflicts on human communities. Dependency on external aid, village-level conflict over unfair distribution policies, shortage of aid allocated to minorities (such as sea gypsies), mistrust of donor agencies, and corruption of local leaders are among the problems that have surfaced during and after relief efforts.

The major reason for victims' dissatisfaction with aid was not necessarily a shortage of goods, but rather the unfair ways in which those goods were distributed. Dissatisfaction stemming from flawed aid distribution is hard to mend, because of its structural nature; most donors see aid as 'one shot' medicine to heal devastated communities, while the receiving end sees each relief project as one in a series of many, coming from various sectors of society. In other words, receivers accumulate experience after experience during each successive round of aid, influencing the way in which they practise distribution in the next round. To illustrate, in one Islamic community that I visited, village members literally counted the aid goods they received to see if there was enough to go around the village; if there was not enough, they rejected the donations altogether. This principle was born out of past conflict triggered by the problematic division of scarce goods.

The role of the government in aid distribution warrants particular attention. In Elster's classification, the government is a central distributing agency that plays a key role in compensation. Indeed, the Thai government did function as a compensatory institution after the 2004 tsunami; however, the involvement of many different government subdivisions in aid activities complicated relief efforts. The Ministry of Interior, for example, had criteria for compensating loss of subsistence that differed from the criteria employed by the Fishery Department. With more than 10 agencies involved, all with subsidiary local administrative bodies (i.e. provincial and district), each agency acted within its own arena of local justice, rather than from a bird's-eye view of global justice.

Although the model observing characteristics of goods and their distribution mechanisms may explain some important aspects of distributional biases in aid allocation, it is far from complete: it does not, for instance, provide hints to explain why some communities attract more goods than others, despite similar levels of damage.⁹ Well-publicised refugee camps such as Baan Nam Khem garnered high-profile media coverage and attracted abundant assistance from all sectors, particularly NGOs, while areas far from tourist spots attracted less plentiful, slower assistance. The spatial gap in aid allocation suggests that, in order to maintain the fairness of material welfare provided by relief efforts, aid agencies must take into account factors outside the domain of goods.

Table 4: Norms, distribution methods, and secondary effects of aid

Norm	Common distribution methods	Examples of goods and services	Problematic secondary effects and causes
Equity	Lottery	Permanent housing Temporary housing Emergency basket	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to participate in the lottery (e.g. information and eligibility) is sometimes manipulated
	Queue	Food and water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aid dependency, maldistribution • Waiting may eliminate possibility of other opportunities
	Equal division	Cash Donated goods (when enough for all members)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of goods that cannot be equally shared • Division of goods based on household unit without considering the number of household members
	Waiting list	Donated goods in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible manipulation of the list (who decides who should be included, and at what position?)
Needs satisfaction	Needs assessment by outsiders	Living space and habitat Electricity generators Medical appliances Volunteer labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imposition of national standards for 'safety' reasons • Spill-over of benefits to non-victims • Disregard of maintenance ability • Aid dependency
	Needs assessment by insiders	Fishing boat, fishing gear Temporary housing Communal water tanks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependence on pre-existing power/ reliance on local leaders' judgement • Lack of support to those who do not fish
	Voluntary reception	Employment opportunities Occupational training Day-care centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impartial dissemination of aid information • Excludes unregistered individuals
Entitlements	Allocation to household (eligibility assessment)	Residential areas Donations from religious organisations Cash compensation from government Fishing boats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spill-over to those who were registered in affected area without actually being resident • Incentives to change eligibility requirements (e.g. some villagers adopted Christianity in order to receive goods) • Duplication and confusion in the confirmation of eligibility
None	Direct and random handouts	Cash General goods Tents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double counting • Intra-community feelings of unfairness • Reduced incentive to work

Source: Author's survey

To gain and to defend: extending Elster's framework to aid policy

The case of the 2004 tsunami highlights the limitation of Elster's approach, as well as possibilities for further enrichment of goods-allocation theory. Apart from the obvious exclusion of non-Western cases from his discussion of local justice, Elster's examples have three primary limitations when applied to the 2004 tsunami situation:

1. In the aftermath of the tsunami, *multiple* types of goods, as well as cash, were provided to victims at the same time, often generating interactions between various types of goods received.
2. Distributions were made both from the perspective of compensation for loss as well as in accordance with a simple local-justice principle.
3. Time limitation was so severe that little allowance was made for the collection of detailed recipient information.

Elster developed his argument by framing individuals as the primary actors in receiving goods and burdens, where giver and taker are paired one-to-one. After the 2004 tsunami, however, the primary recipients of emergency goods were communities or groups of people, especially after one or two weeks of immediate assistance. The distribution of aid goods, then, was the task of communities, not individuals. Selection of the community as the basic unit of allocation stems primarily from the practical need to depend on local leaders for intra-community distribution. Problems in matching goods to needy communities tend to arise in the gap between inter-community allocation of goods and services and subsequent distribution among community members.

In Thailand, I observed that outsiders provided more goods to communities possessing certain resources than to other communities with similar levels of damage. Communities close to main roads with outspoken leaders, good connections with NGOs, and histories of collective action often attracted more external assistance. In other words, resource endowments rather than needs seem to have a distinct effect on the level of aid granted to any given community. Here, 'resource endowment' refers to bundles of potential services that are composed not only of material resources but also of human resources such as knowledge, power, and social capital. Resource is a relational rather than a substantive concept (Bathelt and Glüchler 2006).

Because identification of the function of particular resources takes time, resource endowment is a critical dimension of distribution. Outsiders are often concerned about goods – which are typically tangible, movable objects – and how to distribute them. In contrast, resources are often difficult or sometimes impossible to move (if a resource is completely immovable, there is no distributional problem – just an unsolvable situation in which some people have less access to a resource than others). One shortcoming of aid-distribution perspectives that are preoccupied with commodities is that people's well-being relies not only on movable goods that they seek and gain, but also on continued access to resources that consumers already possess. Unlike commodity goods whose quantity decreases with consumption, resources that people possess often increase through their utilisation: the value of land, for example, increases not when it is left unused but when new ideas and technologies are introduced to develop and make use of it. To secure a livelihood, particularly when externally threatened, people seek to defend and *retain* resources, rather than simply trying to obtain new goods and benefits from outside.

As noted earlier, resources lie at the foundation of goods distribution. At an even more foundational level lies the dimension of 'identity security', referring to a generic sense of belonging to a particular culture based on language, subsistence, religion, and shared history. In fact, the

first challenge of tsunami recovery was to identify the bodies of the dead and assign them to their respective communities. Identity conflicts are clear in the case of the Moken (sea gypsies), who have a long history of residence in Thailand yet have rarely had official citizenship status. Figure 1 depicts the relationships between identity and the other dimensions of human security (resources and goods).

The case of Baan Nahm Khem illustrates how goods and resources (social capital in this case) interact with one another ((1) in Figure 1). In this community, from the very early stage of recovery assistance, various types of self-help group were formed, and a village revolving fund, with assistance from outsiders, supported village activities in an effort to return to normal life. According to my interview with village leaders, distribution norms based on fairness were established when the community intensively discussed, during the early stages of recovery, who should move into the temporary houses first. Unlike many villages which decided housing allocation by lottery, people in Nahm Khem developed their own priority criteria, based on age, severity of injury, and presence of small children in families eligible for housing. It is admirable that Nahm Khem community members devised their own criteria for allocation, but even more impressive that they made all information about aid goods public knowledge, posting and regularly updating a list of donated items on a communal board where everyone could see it.

What conditions, then, enabled Nahm Khem to undertake this kind of initiative? Most of those in the village at the time of the disaster were originally from the same village, Nahm Khem, which may have strengthened their social capital. The involvement of various NGOs, in material terms as well as in terms of strategy to rebuild the community, must have also contributed to the village's success. Interestingly, Nahm Khem's village headman had a bad reputation for privately benefiting from tsunami assistance. In a sense, then, the typical elite-capture situation was already common knowledge among the villagers. The leader who took the initiative in publicising donation information and developing connections with outside NGOs was an active committee member of the Tambon sub-district council. Substantial structural pressure for this second leader to gain recognition among the villagers and perform well probably stemmed from the village leader's bad reputation; this multiple-leader condition, although it grew originally out of coincidence, later acted as a check to prevent one-sided dominance. A sense of fairness influenced people's incentive to co-operate with their fellow

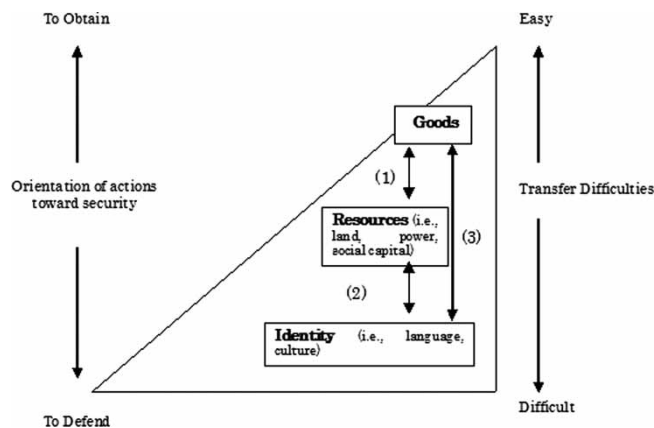


Figure 1: Anatomy of human security

villagers – a factor that, in the long run, proved to be more critical than the amount of aid received by the village.

The case of Patong Beach, meanwhile, illustrates the connection between resources and identity ((2) in Figure 1). Close to Patong Beach, on Puket Island, was a small Moken village. Despite living on state-owned land with no legal title whatsoever, the Moken people had engaged in fishing to support the tourism industry on Patong Beach. As a result, there had been tension for some time between state agencies and businesses wishing to expand resort facilities and Moken villagers illegally residing in desirable resort areas. When the tsunami hit and Moken villagers on Puket Island lost their homes, the city government refused to give permission to rebuild destroyed communities in the same location. Displaced villagers were, however, ultimately allowed to stay on Puket Island, with new houses donated by a private company after an outpouring of enthusiastic media support and sympathetic public opinion. In this case, mass media and the attitudes of the public at large played critical roles in connecting resources (in this case, land) with people's ethnic identity to strike a balance in relief efforts.

An example of goods having a direct impact on identity ((3) in Figure 1) can be found in other Moken villages – Thungwa and Thabtawan, for instance, where Christian organisations were active in aid activities. Having lived in the area for centuries as sea nomads, constantly moving from one place to another, the Moken people lack the ability to own land, and lack also a distinct sense of nationality. Some adhere to Buddhist teachings, while other communities follow Islamic traditions. In the year following the 2004 tsunami, however, churches began to appear in Moken villages. In Taptawan village, which I visited in March 2005, a villager commented that the number of Christians in the village had increased five times since the tsunami, making it clear that the aid activities of Christian organisations have significantly contributed to affected people's shifting sense of belonging (Sithiprasertkula 2007).¹⁰

The argument here is not that resources and dimensions of identity should always be taken into consideration during aid operations. Rather, the point is that the inputs of goods as aid often have foundational impacts on the resources and identity of people in disaster-affected areas, and these consequences must be taken into account in order to accurately evaluate the success or failure of relief efforts. In fact, expanding the focus of aid evaluation raises the difficult issue of an affected area's political history of property arrangement. Land-ownership disputes are one of the central issues unexpectedly made salient by the 2004 tsunami (Scheper 2006). Yet, once relief efforts reach the stage of rebuilding lives through building permanent housing and securing employment, aid agencies must address the entrenched inequalities in resource distribution that had existed before the tsunami, in addition to the question of how relief efforts will affect the existing power structure.

What implications, then, does this study have for disaster-aid policy? First, it is clear that selection of goods and distribution mechanisms is instrumentally important in satisfying the needs of some people, while neglecting those of the others, primarily due to secondary effects occurring within communities. In other words, if we take these effects into consideration in advance, we may be able to speed up the relief process, with the explicit intention of reaching the poorest. Second, aid efforts should focus not only on supplying goods and services but also on strengthening institutional resources that allow recipient communities to more effectively attract and digest those goods and services based on local criteria of fairness. Third, after the emergency stage, outside relief agencies should co-ordinate with one another to develop ways to reduce pre-existing inequalities or dominance, instead of simply increasing the amount of allocated aid. In situations complicated by entrenched inequalities in basic resources, engines of public opinion such as mass media often have the power to galvanise positive change, a power that local poor and disaster victims alone seldom possess.

Conclusion

This article began by invoking Elster's 'local justice' framework to derive ideas applicable to the context of emergency assistance and human security. The particular challenge of disaster aid in southern Thailand, it seems, was the inescapable dilemma of reconciling present needs with the problems of legitimacy inherited from the past: new houses have to be built on land with its own complicated history of ownership politics; compensation can be given only to people with proper registration. In other words, relief efforts were shaped by the history of the area as much as by actual relief infrastructure.

I argue for the need to look beyond the role of emergency goods and into the background of resources and identities that guide aid efforts in certain directions; victims are not merely subjects of aid, but active agents with the power to solve their own problems. The domain of resources attracting goods to certain communities, while rejecting others, should be of particular interest to aid communities. Because the secondary effects of relief efforts on resources and human identities endure for generations, we must pay careful attention to the voices of victims in order to understand what people affected by disasters wish to defend, rather than blindly providing what *we* think they wish to obtain.

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Notes

1. The same article refers to the striking contrast of the 2004 Flooding Catastrophe in Bangladesh, which drew just US\$ 3 per affected person.
2. 'Mechanism' refers to an 'identifiable causal pattern that comes into play under certain, generally unknown conditions' (Elster 1992:16).
3. Winner concludes his argument by saying: 'Many technical devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity. Consciously or not, deliberately or inadvertently, societies choose structures for technologies that influence how people are going to work, communicate, travel, consume and so forth over a very long time' (Winner 1980: 127).
4. Suspicion came not only from the villagers but also from the international donors. The US government also tried to push the Thai police to investigate the suspected misuse of 88 million baht (about US\$ 3.5 million) in donations intended to help the Thai Tsunami Disaster Victim Identification (*The Nation* 2007).
5. Other possible explanations include pure ignorance and lack of knowledge about the target population. These explanations seldom play major roles in the official discourse of aid, since to admit this possibility will discredit donor activities, and media will have more incentive to report more 'interesting' news involving sabotage and corruption.
6. Unintended elite capture refers to structural and systematic biases that put elites in more advantageous positions in terms of access to aid and development opportunities.
7. Policy recommendations based on the assumption of elite misbehaviour highlight either changing the attitudes of elites through education or reforming incentive structure, or empowering the poor to enhance their voices. Either path requires long-term commitment.

8. Tendler (1982) claims that divisible and scarce goods are hard to distribute to the poor, since they tend to invite elite capture.
9. Jeff Sachs eloquently delivered this point in his *Time Magazine* article 'Class system of catastrophe' (Sachs 2005).
10. It should be noted here that not all Christian organisations encouraged religious commitment in exchange for aid goods.

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