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Editorial

Beyond the Debris: Why Cyclone Ditwah Demands a Post-Disaster Anthropology for Sri Lanka

Tharaka Ananda[1*] and T. M. S. P. K. Thennakoon[2]

[1]Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka, [2]Department of Geography and International Center for Multidisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

[*]*tharakaananda@sjp.ac.lk*

Introduction

The impact of Cyclone *Ditwah* extends significantly beyond the immediate destruction of physical infrastructure; it explains the systemic social fractures and inequalities that define Sri Lanka's vulnerability to extreme weather events. As of December 12, 2025, the disaster has pervaded all 25 districts, adversely affecting a population of 1,637,960 individuals (DMC, 2025). With confirmed fatalities reaching 640 and an additional 211 individuals reported missing, the crisis demonstrates the theoretical framework established by Oliver-Smith (1996), which hypothesizes that disasters are not solely natural occurrences but are fundamentally social processes shaped by historical context, power relations, and inequality.

Furthermore, the extensive material damage, revealing in the total destruction of 5,713 residences and partial damage to 104,805 others provides empirical evidence that vulnerability is structurally generated before the emergence of environmental hazards. The displacement crisis emphasizes this reality: currently, 82,813 individuals (comprising 26,103 families) remain displaced, suffering in 847 government run safety centers across the island. To understand the current crisis, one must look beyond the immediate meteorological event to how history, economics, and politics have controlled whose lives, where, and in what conditions. In Sri Lanka, the "disaster" is not merely the wind or rain; it is the unsafe landscape that specific populations were forced into long before the storm arrived.

Theoretical Background

This editorial uses an anthropological approach to question the idea that the disaster was purely natural and to critically examine technology-driven (technocratic) rehabilitation responses.

The Social Production of Risk: Vulnerability and Structural Violence

The destruction caused by Cyclone *Ditwah* must be analyzed through the Social Production of Disaster theory. Oliver-Smith (1996) argues that vulnerability is "programmed" into society through historical decisions. In Sri Lanka, this is evident in the central highlands, where the colonial legacy of tea production created a landscape of inequality. The "line rooms" of the plantation sector, constructed on steep, marginal slopes to maximize lands for tea cultivation,

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represent a historical stratification of risk. The landslides in these areas are not random; they are the collapse of a colonial landscape.

This reflects Farmer's (2004) idea of structural violence, the invisible social system that limits people's choices and life chances (agency). In the Western Province, poor urban residents are pushed into informal settlements along riverbanks and reclaimed wetlands because affordable and secure housing is not available to them. Flooding in these areas reflects structural violence, as state infrastructure tends to protect commercial property while allowing floodwaters to affect marginalized communities. Using the PAR (Pressure and Release) model (Blaikie et al., 1994), this situation can be understood as the result of long-term factors such as colonial history and poverty, combined with rapid urban growth, forcing people to live in unsafe places that later became highly vulnerable during Cyclone *Ditwah*.

The Phenomenology of Displacement: Liminality and Communitas

Approximately 82,813 individuals currently residing in 847 safety centers live in a state of *Liminality*. Drawing on Turner (1967), these survivors are "betwixt and between," having lost their usual social roles as **farmers, estate workers, tea pluckers, daily wage laborers, parents**, and **homeowners**, and have been left waiting within slow and uncertain administrative processes. Although this situation can create a short period of shared solidarity among survivors, anthropological theory shows that this unity does not last. As rehabilitation begins, pre-disaster social hierarchies (caste, class, and gender) invariably re-emerge, often determining who accesses aid first.

The Political Economy of Recovery: Disaster Capitalism and the "Second Disaster"

Rehabilitation creates its own risks, often termed the "Second Disaster." This occurs when aid is culturally inappropriate or when expert driven solutions ignore Local Ecological Knowledge. For example, engineering solutions that relocate communities without consulting indigenous knowledge of flood cycles often lead to failed settlements.

Reconstruction after disasters can be used for profit and power, a process known as Disaster Capitalism (Klein, 2007; Schuller, 2012). After the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka, "buffer zones" forced fisherfolk to leave their land to make way for tourism. Cyclone *Ditwah* could be used in a similar way, in the guise of "safety", claiming to protect people from floods while pushing the urban poor out of valuable land in Colombo. Aid can also create an imbalance of power, turning active citizens into passive "beneficiaries" and limiting their ability to make decisions for themselves.

The Ontology of the Missing: Ambiguous Loss

Finally, the crisis of the 211 missing persons requires a forensic anthropological lens. Families face *Ambiguous Loss* (Boss, 2006), a state of frozen grief where closure is impossible without a body. Anthropologists distinguish between biological death (cessation of life) and social death (the community's acceptance of the departure). Without forensic intervention to identify remains, the missing people are refused social death, and their families remain trapped in trauma.

The core problem addressed in this editorial is the dangerous "technocratic gap" between the social reality of the disaster and the bureaucratic response to it. While empirical data proves that Cyclone *Ditwah* was a socially constructed catastrophe, driven by structural violence, poverty, and historical land inequality (such as the violation of the 1873 "5,000-foot rule"), current state and NGO recovery efforts focus mostly on technical solutions like construction and logistics that ignore these human dimensions.

This mismatch creates a "Second Disaster" where housing that does not fit how families live, aid distribution that reaches only those with legal land documents excludes the landless poor, and the lack of forensic intervention leaves the families of the 211 missing persons without closure. As a result, the same conditions that made the disaster so harmful continue after the cyclone.

The main objective of this editorial is to propose a Post-Disaster Anthropological Framework for Sri Lanka's recovery. It argues that recovery cannot rely on engineering solutions alone. Instead, the framework emphasizes understanding the historical and structural causes of damage so that rebuilding does not recreate the same risks (deconstruct vulnerability). It also stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity by including local ecological knowledge in relief and recovery efforts, helping to prevent a "second disaster" caused by aid that does not fit local ways of life (Cultural integration). Finally, the editorial calls for 'forensic justice' to address the crisis of the missing and the pain of ambiguous loss, while protecting affected communities from being displaced or exploited during reconstruction (safeguarding rights).

Deconstructing Vulnerability: Structural Violence and the Geography of Risk

To meet the first objective, we must acknowledge that the destruction was not random and did not affect everyone equally. The pattern of damage closely follows Sri Lanka's economic geography. To understand "structural violence," we do not need abstract theory; we simply need to analyze the official figures released so far. The deaths caused by Cyclone Ditwah reveal deep and unacceptable inequalities.

Colombo District recorded the highest number of affected people, with more than 330,000 residents impacted by flooding, yet the reported death toll stands at only nine. In contrast, *Kandy* District experienced far fewer affected individuals, approximately 171,000, yet recorded 234 deaths.

Why is the same storm twenty-six times more deadly in the hills than it is in the capital? This is not a natural mystery; it is the social production of disaster. In *Colombo*, the wealthier residents are protected by insurance and infrastructure, while poorer residents often live in concrete housing that do not easily collapse in flood. In contrast, in *Kandy*, *Badulla* (90 deaths), and *Nuwara Eliya* (89 deaths), deaths expose the enduring violence of the plantation economy. The people who died were largely those confined to line rooms or forced onto unstable marginal slopes land considered too unstable for tea bushes but "good enough" for housing laborers.

These deaths are not accidents of geography, and this vulnerability is not accidental; it is the outcome of long-standing social and economic decisions about lives that are valued and treated as replaceable. At the same time, this represents a clear policy conflict. For example, Sri Lanka's National Land Use Policy (Ministry of Lands and Land Development, 2007) clearly classifies 76,400 hectares of land above 5,000 feet (1,600 m) as a conservation zone, acknowledging its ecological fragility. Yet available data reveal a dangerous gap between policy and practice: these apparently "protected" highland areas are inhabited by some of the poorest workers in the country. The British colonial administration exposed these slopes of their deep-rooted cloud forests to plant shallow-rooted tea bushes, destabilizing the soil for profit. Consequently, landslides did not affect random hills; they struck areas the state already recognized as unsafe, demonstrating that economic extraction has repeatedly taken priority over ecological safety.

The housing data confirms this stratification. With 1,568 houses fully destroyed in *Kandy* alone, versus only *77* in Colombo, the physical evidence proves that poverty is the primary

risk factor (DMC. 2025). Cyclone *Ditwah* simply illustrated a pre-existing geography of inequality, proving that natural hazards become disasters only when they overlap with human vulnerability (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 2002).

Understanding *Cultural Dimensions of Risk Vulnerability* is deeply stratified by class, ethnicity, and occupation. A uniform, "one-size-fits-all" recovery plan risks what Mark Schuller (2012) describes as the "trickle-down imperialism" of aid, where decisions made by distant donors overlook local realities. Anthropologists are trained to identify these social fault lines. They can determine which households have lost not only their homes but also their social support networks, such as systems of borrowing and lending (mutual help) that are essential for survival among the poor. Anthropologists can also draw on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). By examining how earlier generations managed floods and used indigenous land-use systems, such as Kandyan home gardens, it is possible to recover forms of resilience that have been weakened or erased by modern monoculture.

Addressing Displacement and the Liminality of Survival

By 12th December 2025, 82,813 people (26,103 families) are languishing in 847 government run safety centers. As they wait, they enter what Turner (1967) described as a liminal stage, space between loss and recovery, where uncertainty becomes a condition of life.

However, the data reveal a clear "tale of two displacements." In the highly urbanized Western Province, displacement is largely invisible. In Colombo, although more than 330,000 people were affected, only 141 remain in safety centers, as many have the social resources to stay in hotels or with relatives. In contrast, displacement in the Central Highlands is clearly visible, with large numbers of people crowded into safety centers. According to available data, *Kandy* District records 27,227 people residing in safety centers, followed by *Nuwara Eliya* District with 20,825 people and *Badulla* District with 17,444 people.

More than 65,000 people in the hill country cannot simply "go home" when the rain stops, because their land has been destroyed and buried under mud. In crowded safety centers, stripped of privacy and of their roles as providers (capable adults), they experience a second trauma: the loss of dignity.

Without immediate and culturally appropriate intervention, these temporary shelters risk turning into permanent shantytowns.

Mediating Aid and Documenting Memory

In times of crisis, aid distribution can easily become politicized. Anthropologists can serve as cultural brokers, helping ensure that marginalized groups such as informal settlers, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities receive fair access to assistance.

They also play an important role as witnesses. By documenting oral histories and personal accounts of loss, anthropologists support psychosocial healing, validate survivors' experiences, and help preserve the collective memory of the disaster.

Methodology: A Field Guide for Rapid Anthropological Assessment (RAA)

To move from theory to action and address the problem of "technocratic disconnection," relief agencies must adopt a Rapid Anthropological Assessment (RAA).

Unlike standard bureaucratic surveys, this qualitative approach focuses on social relationships, cultural practices, and local ways of understanding risk and recovery (cultural logic.)

Phase I: Mapping Social Vulnerability (Days 1–5)

- **Objective:** Identify invisible risks beyond physical damage.
- **The Problem:** Standard surveys count heads, not relationships.
- **The Action:** In districts like Puttalam, where a striking 20,813 houses are partially damaged, we need to map kinship networks. Are the elderly being left behind in unsafe homes because the younger generation has migrated for work? In Badulla, we must analyze the "Line Room" housing on plantations. Here destruction of housing may also break labor arrangements, leaving estate workers without both shelter and employment.

Phase II: Excavating Local Resilience (Days 6–14)

- **Objective:** Integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into recovery.
- **The Problem:** Top-down planning ignores local wisdom.
- **The Action:** In *Ratnapura* and *Kalutara*, aid workers should interview elders about traditional "safe zones." Historically, villages were built around temples located on higher ground areas that are frequently absent from modern zoning maps. Identifying these indigenous safe locations can guide safer rebuilding. In addition, livelihood calendars must be considered; for example, distributing rice seeds is ineffective if the planting season has already passed.

Phase III: The "Build Back Better" Audit (Months 1–3)

- **Objective:** Ensure reconstruction is culturally appropriate.
- **The Problem:** Culturally deaf architecture: Rebuilt houses often ignore local living practices and needs
- **The Action:** With 5,713 houses fully destroyed nationwide, the reconstruction effort will be massive. Anthropologists must run participatory design workshops. For example. if we build concrete houses as boxes without outdoor kitchens for the rural families in Monaragala or Kegalle, those kitchens will be rebuilt indoors, causing long term respiratory health risk later. Reconstruction must respond to local culture and daily life, not just for the camera.

Forensic Anthropology and the Crisis of the Missing

Perhaps the most distressing statistic in the report is this: 211 people are still missing. The majority of these 82 in *Kandy*, 39 in *Kegalle*, 37 in *Nuwara Eliya* are likely buried under deep landslides.

For the families waiting at the edge of the cordon tapes, this is what Boss (2006) describes as ambiguous loss grief without closure; where the missing is neither confirmed dead nor able to return, leaving families suspended in uncertainty. We must understand the critical distinction between *biological death* and *social death*. While the landslide caused the biological death of these victims instantly, their *social death,* the ritual separation of the deceased from the living cannot happen without a body. Because they cannot hold a funeral or sign a death certificate, the missing remain "socially present," leaving families suspended in uncertainty. This is where anthropology becomes a forensic necessity. We cannot just use bulldozers to clear the debris. We need teams trained in Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) to distinguish human remains from animal remains and to identify victims through personal effects and biology. In a culture where proper funeral rites are essential for the peace of the soul, identifying these 211 missing people is a spiritual obligation as much as a legal one. Also, the only way to transform a chaotic disappearance into a dignified departure.

Implementation Challenges and Policy Framework

Despite the clear need for anthropological insight, integrating this work into disaster response faces significant obstacles:

1. Institutional Neglect: Disaster management often prioritizes engineering and logistics, while social sciences are considered "soft" or optional.

2. Urgency vs. Depth: The immediacy of rescue operations leaves little political will for in-depth, participatory approaches.

3. Power Dynamics: Even participatory processes can privilege local elites if facilitation is not carefully managed.

Toward a Policy-Oriented Framework: To overcome these challenges and "build back better," we propose the following steps:

1. Institutionalize Social Science: The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) must formally incorporate anthropologists into assessment teams to work alongside engineers and logisticians.

2. Mandate Participatory Recovery: Reconstruction plans must be co-designed with survivors using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods, ensuring infrastructure aligns with their actual needs.

3. Prioritize Equity: Explicitly target "structurally violent" gaps. For example, aid distributed based on land deeds excludes the landless. Anthropological insight ensures that the invisible and marginalized are not overlooked and remain visible.

4. Cultural Archiving: Launch a national project to record survivor testimonies, serving as both a historical record and a tool for communal trauma processing.

The Geopolitics of Recovery: The "Donor Trap"

As the "Rebuild Sri Lanka" campaign attracts massive international funding, we face a critical choice between **Donor-Driven** and **Owner-Driven** reconstruction. Anthropological history reminds us that foreign aid is rarely neutral; it often comes with "technocratic conditions" - demands for rapid, highly visible results (like ribbon-cutting ceremonies for prefabricated villages) that prioritize foreign contractors over local labor and expertise.

Using international funds to import prefabricated houses risks damaging the local economy. Instead, the billions of rupees in aid should be directed to survivors through "owner-driven reconstruction." This approach allows families to hire local masons and purchase materials from nearby suppliers, turning the reconstruction budget into a motivation for the village economy. Foreign funding can and should be accepted but the foreign blueprint must be rejected.

Conclusion

The data from December 12 is not merely a situation report; it is a moral allegation of our development history. It reveals a catastrophe that was selective in its cruelty. While the storm clouds covered the entire island, the tragedy targeted the vulnerable.

640 dead. 1.6 million affected. 211 missing.

These numbers are not accidents of nature; they are the results of choices. They are the cost of ignoring the 5,000-foot conservation rule in Nuwara Eliya and the cost of tolerating shanties on the floodplains of Colombo (Not just these factors but many more).

If we attempt to rebuild Sri Lanka using only cement and steel, we are not solving the problem; we are merely setting the stage for the next disaster.

We will rebuild the line rooms on the same unstable slopes in Nuwara Eliya. We will rebuild the shanties on the same floodplains in Colombo. We will have restored the infrastructure, but we will have re-embedded the risk.

Anthropology offers a different architecture for recovery. It reminds us that disasters are not just meteorological events; they are cultural stress tests. They reveal how we relate to our land and to each other. A true recovery demands that we move beyond the "technocratic gap." It demands that we listen to the displaced in Badulla, that we use forensics to restore dignity to the missing in Kegalle, and that we demolish the structural violence that turned a hazard into a tragedy.

Cyclone *Ditwah* has broken the island's physical infrastructure. It is now our collective duty to ensure that the technocratic indifference of recovery does not break its spirit. Post-disaster anthropology is not an academic luxury for this moment; it is a survival tool.

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