

The Feinstein International Famine Center

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Disaster globalization: Evaluating the impact of tsunami aid

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Introduction

The tsunami and earthquakes that hit the Indian Ocean 26th December 2004 caused a disaster so extreme and so unusual that it pushed all our models of response to the limit.



Krakatau 27th August 1883. The day the world exploded

The last disaster even close to this magnitude was caused by the eruption of Krakatau in 1883. 36,417 people were killed as a 40 meter high wave descended on Java. The 2004 wave was of similar proportion but the devastation monumentally more. More people, more infrastructure, more connectivity.



Today's tsunami hits a more populated, more developed and more complex society. (Photo courtesy USAID)

Why evaluate?

We normally choose to examine the world in three possible ways: to examine the normal, to test out models and projections against reality, or to examine the extreme - those events which push our theories and models to breaking point. It is for this last reason we should be looking at

the tsunami response. We have a unique opportunity to examine what happens when response systems are stressed to the limit. This examination will tell us about how robust they are; will show where improvement can be made and where they are fundamentally failing.

Extreme events

By almost every measure, the tsunami, the resulting disaster and the response, were unique, extreme events.



These two before and after photos from satellite imagery powerfully illustrate the apocalyptic nature of the destruction. One minute the town is there, 3 minutes later it is gone.



The extreme nature of the disaster took many forms: extreme violence and destruction, extreme public response and one, if opinion polls done in January are to be trusted, that may not be repeated. Most people who did so as a one-off contribution. They were not suddenly converted to the cause of humanitarianism. Their generosity seems to have been driven by a combination of causes.

1. The tsunami was a great media event. A real life disaster movie, making Armageddon, Dante's Peak and The Day After Tomorrow look tame.
2. It was Christmas, or event better, the day after Christmas when people in the West were at home, feeling a little guilty about all the presents and over indulgence of the day before, and not plugged into the rush of a normal working day.
3. The disaster had personal connections. For Sweden, this was their biggest ever natural disaster. So many Swedes on vacation in Thailand died. In the USA, France, the UK and elsewhere, returning tourists told graphic horror or miraculous escape stories.
4. No one's to blame. This was no complex political crisis where the lines between victim and perpetrator, good and bad are hopelessly blurred. In most peoples' minds this was as close to an "act of God" as you could get.
5. It's not Iraq. At least in the USA, and probably in most European countries, the simplicity of the scenario and the

potential to do something worthwhile in reaction, stood in stark contrast to the morass of Iraq, seen every day on TV.

6. The internet is here. Donation has never been easier. Disaster response from the comfort of your own home is now possible. Most agencies reported a quantum leap in giving via the internet, through portals such as Yahoo and Amazon, or directly via the agency's own website.

The geography of the disaster was also extreme. It was essentially a thin strip of destruction, maybe 5 miles wide at most, running for thousands of miles round the coasts of seven or more Indian Ocean states. Within the strip, devastation. Just outside of it, normalcy. Enormous coordination issues but also a huge interface along which spontaneous and local assistance could take place, or an



The wave spread out from off-shore Aceh and smashed into the coastlines. A thin strip of devastation around the Indian Ocean.



Geo power and Mac power, together building a new world

interface along which exploitation and opportunism could take place.

It happened at a time of extreme politics. The shape of our geopolitical world is being redrawn. The economic and military pre-eminence of the USA (which, by its own figures, spend more on its military than the rest of the world combined spends on theirs), the drawing up of the battle lines of democracy versus terrorism, free trade versus central control, mean that no event - and certainly no event as big as this - can be played out without reference to the bigger picture.

And finally the response was extreme. Extreme in scale, one of the biggest ever in



Complex response: Assistance, protection, rebuilding livelihoods side by side with rehabilitation. (Photo courtesy USAID)

the world. Extreme in diversity - a massive rise in the number of previously unknown local and Asian agencies assisting - and extreme in the range of responses. This was not just a war zone, or a high impact natural disaster, or a prelude

to reconstruction, or a chance for nation building. It was all of the above at the same time and often in the same place.

The shape of an evaluation

To get a handle on what a meaningful evaluation of the tsunami response should look at, we can think in terms of a spreading wave of concern, akin to the tsunami itself.

- 1 At the center, most critical are the local communities (what is left of them) and their views on the response.
- 2 A little out fro that we have some key regional issues around coordination and proportionality.
- 3 Further out are issues to do with how well the global humanitarian system performed,
- 4 Finally we have issue of how this extreme event provides the impetus and opportunity for global economics and politics – and global solidarity - to shape humanitarianism.

1: The victim's tale

Dr. Martha Thompson, a social scientist, and a visiting lecturer with the Famine Center, reports that *in Aceh* the overwhelming issue in the first two months of response was the naiveté of most



agencies. They just did not understand the nature of the conflict there, the nature of counter-insurgency and the way agencies were being manipulated to support the Indonesian authorities' bigger plans for Aceh and its people.

This interface of natural disaster, high tension politics and conflict is not unique. It happened many times in Central America in the 80s and there are many lessons agencies could learn from that period as to how best to program



Aceh, the hidden face of conflict. Lack of context analysis and naiveté over the nature of population control & camps in counter insurgency environments got external agencies off to a bad start.

relief and rehabilitation in a counter-insurgency environment.

In Sri Lanka, many of the same issues surfaced, but also a sense that there were huge divides between populations in terms of what they received as assistance. The Tamils in the north in the areas controlled by the Tigers fared well, those down the east coast suffered from poor infrastructure and thus slowness of response, and the Islamic communities found themselves being left behind, in part



The battle zone: First the destruction of the tsunami then the imposition of a 200 meter exclusion zone, undermining the livelihoods and community of the most vulnerable. Well meaning precautions against future tsunami have immediate effects of recovery.

because they had never chosen to build bridges with the international aid community.

But the really critical issue is the 200m wide coastal exclusion zone. Issues of land ownership and land appropriation. The forcing of whole communities to construct new livelihood nets, the unabashed disregard for peoples' civil, economic and human rights, cry out to be seriously examined.

In Thailand the same issue of the appropriation of land can be seen. As one local community leader put it, "a second tsunami of corporate globalization and militarization." Also in



Reconstructing vacation world in Thailand: who benefits and who loses?

¹ These reflections on how local communities perceived the relief effort were gathered by a social scientist, Dr Martha Thompson, who is a visiting lecturer with the Famine Center.



Thailand, the tsunami revealed just how many of the refugees who have fled the repressive regime in Burma have ended up as cheap labor in the tourist resorts of the coast. It is estimated that some 60,000 illegal Burmese workers are now without income. They cannot appeal for help, for if they do so they will be deported back to Burma.

Critical issues

There are four critical issues that any evaluation must look at.

- How well did agencies do their context analysis and adapt to the reality of each country?
- Was there any sense that rehabilitation was being led by the affected community, was it a benevolently imposed aid action or a cynically imposed state option?
- Who's gaining and who's losing in the rehabilitation? The Indonesian armed forces have to raise about 70% of their costs from non-state sources. They are heavily involved in illegal logging for instance. How are they benefiting from the rehabilitation?
- Finally, has any real livelihoods analysis been done which would allow for rehabilitation to support rebuilding household economies and the policy and institutional changes needed to bolster such rebuilding?

2: Regional dynamics

Moving out from the communities, at the regional level across the Indian Ocean the most critical issue is adaptation. How did the

aid system seek to adapt to function in each unique situation? Did the response, albeit initially "off the shelf", quickly morph into one appropriate for each environment, each culture and each unique set of political issues?

3: The global aid community



Each country, each island, each community needs a sympathetic, tailored response. Is that what happened?
(Photo courtesy USAID)

What does this extreme event reveal about the nature of the global aid community today?

The first thing to look at is the way funds were pledged, committed and disbursed. In this response, the general public probably committed more funding than the governments of the world. Do we have any way of measuring that? In previous natural disasters, like the Gujarat earthquake, there is ample evidence that extra remittances from diaspora accounted for as much aid as the international system, yet they go unmentioned. Islamic agencies, particularly in Indonesia and parts of Sri Lanka, made a big difference. Where do their figures appear in the picture?

Just as critical is the seeming gap between what states promise and what they delivered. One aspect of this is the suspicion that many pledges did not really represent new funds, but rather already committed development funds reallocated and dressed up in new clothing. Finally one really has to question whether aid



was pledged and committed against assessed needs or simply as a shot in the dark.

Alertnet (www.alertnet.org) has been tracking pledges. Some, like Japan, have committed more than they pledged, others, like the EC, are way behind.

In every previous major disaster, pledging conferences have come up with impressive figures, much headlined, but when researchers have gone back, months or even years later, there are huge disparities between what states pledged and actually delivered. At present pledges are not tracked, only commitments. Surely this is wrong. Promises should not be empty.

Pledges should be made against some sort of assessed need. For government donations, the main vehicle for assessment and coordination should be the United Nations Consolidated Appeal Process, yet \$5 out of every \$6 pledged to the tsunami were for needs outside the UN appeal.

Of funds pledged for the health sector in the UN appeal, only a little over half have actually been delivered as cash to allow agencies to get working.

4: To each according to their need?

It is impossible to assess the response to the tsunami without also looking at the response to other crises in the world. After all, the hallmark of humani-tarian action

is its impartiality – to each according to need. The UN appeal for Darfur, Sudan and the ongoing genocide there was about the same size as the tsunami appeal, but far less funded, and the critical but miniscule appeal for war victims in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has received hardly anything. The disparities in the appeal figures are worrying enough, but add in the actual cash flows and any sense that the global humanitarian system is impartial goes out the window. This is a collective failing and one aid agencies and government donors simply cannot ignore.

Funds flow both ways. The US committed a little under \$ 0.9 billion to the tsunami-affected counties, but every year it takes back from the three worst hit (Indonesia, Thailand and Sri-Lanka) \$1.8 billion in tariffs on their clothing exports, tariffs which the producing countries feel are in violation of WTO rules.



As the tsunami struck, famine and genocide were ravaging the Darfur region of Sudan. War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo continued to claim lives, yet the international aid system has pledged orders of magnitude more per disaster victim to the tsunami response. Is this impartial? (Photo courtesy Michael Wadliegh, gritty.org)

¹ These reflections on how local communities perceived the relief effort were gathered by a social scientist, Dr Martha Thompson, who is a visiting lecturer with the Famine Center.



Other western nations have similar balance cards they need to examine. The point is that with a disaster rudely thrust into the dynamics of economic growth, one cannot look at emergency aid flows in isolation. Rehabilitation is the business of everybody, not just the aid agencies.

Finally we need to be aware of the internet. Internet donations are purported to account for almost half of all the funds coming in for tsunami relief. In previous operations internet donations were marginal. The tsunami disaster may mark a shift in the way the public gives and thus in the responsibility and accountability relationships between agencies and their supporters.

Any evaluation worth its salt has to tackle these five global issues:

1. What does a pledge mean? Have donors kept their promises?
2. Can we track all donations? How does the aid system acknowledge the role of remittances, local donations, and the efforts of local communities?
3. The relationship between assessment and funding? Aid agencies are urged to do rigorous assessments and base appeals on evidence, but do donors actually fund according to demonstrated need?
4. If the internet significantly changed the way the general public makes donations and what are the long term consequences for agencies?

5. Does the international aid community walk its talk and respect the principle of impartiality? How does it manage the huge imbalances of aid flows created by the response to the tsunami?

Driven to distraction?

Finally we need to reflect on the changing nature of what drives humanitarian response. We delude ourselves if we think the aid endeavor is solely needs driven. It is driven by the wishes and emotions of the general public that provide financial support and political space through their support for agency's work. It is driven by the media which shapes the disaster in the mind of the public, and the agencies. It is driven by the local political and military agendas, and of course by the global political and economic agendas. And finally it is driven by the needs and aspirations of the disaster survivors.

All of these are competing realities. How explicitly do agencies seek to understand the currents that may be pulling them off course and how consciously do they put systems in place to get back on course?

Disaster response and the business of funding it, planning it and delivering it are now global endeavors, hooked in, for better or worse, to other globalized processes – the media, global trade, the pursuit of democracy, the pursuit of a fair deal for the most vulnerable. Aid agencies need to examine these disparate drivers, how much they skewed response, and how this can be guarded against in the future.



Once in a life time

All of these issues and concerns happen in, and shape, every disaster, but in the tsunami they happened in the extreme, and thus are more revealed, stand out from the noise and are easier to research. This tsunami was a tragedy of global proportions but it is also a tremendous opportunity to make more than just incremental changes in the way the aid system works. Evidence-driven research out of the tsunami response, feeding into policy change and practice improvement could be a rising from the ashes. None of us are likely to see a tsunami like this again in our life times, so let's not squander this unique opportunity.

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