

Key Messages
Tsunami Evaluation Coalition
Synthesis Report

Impact of the Disaster and Scale of the Response

The earthquake that triggered the Indian Ocean tsunamis on 24 December 2004 was the world's largest natural disaster in 40 years. It led to the most destructive series of tsunamis in recorded history with approximately 227,000 people killed or missing and assumed dead. Fourteen countries were affected with Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand the hardest hit in terms of loss of life.

The disaster threatened development. Economic, infrastructural and human development losses, both actual and projected, were originally estimated at US\$9.9 billion across the affected region. Indonesia has borne the brunt of these losses, accounting for almost half of the total. In Aceh, economic damage and losses were equivalent to almost the entire GDP of the province.

The response to the tsunami was unprecedented and represents the largest international response to a natural disaster on record. At least US\$13.5 billion has been pledged or donated for emergency relief and recovery: 44 per cent from donor governments and 41 per cent from private sources (the remainder came from the international financial institutions).¹ Private donations broke many records, with the general public providing the vast majority of the US\$5.5 billion in private giving.

The funding response was also the fastest ever recorded. In the UK the world record for online donations was broken with over £10 million (some US\$17.2 million) donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) website in 24 hours. While this speed of donation was partly attributed to increased use of the internet for collecting donations, phone-in donations also broke records. The speed of pledges and funds to the initial International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) appeal was also a record.²

This scale and speed of the funding response helped to ensure that most relief needs were met and that recovery interventions could start early. It also led to inevitable challenges, many of which are considered below.

Key Messages

The Synthesis Report focuses on up to the first 11 months of the tsunami response and the following messages identify the main findings from that period. They do not reflect changes in practice that may have occurred since then. It is also important to point out that the findings are based on a very particular and extraordinary event and some of the lessons learned cannot easily be applied to other types of emergencies. However, in a broad sense we are quite sure that the report is able to broadly reflect similar themes and trends have been evident in many other emergency situations and are thus indicative of both strengths and weaknesses in the current humanitarian response system.

Ownership and Accountability to Affected Populations

Findings

As is often case in the aftermath of a sudden and intense natural disaster, it was those directly affected by the calamity and those people in the immediate vicinity who were the first to respond. They rescued family members and neighbours, provided shelter and food, transported the injured and organised community responses. In addition, along with professional aid workers, volunteers poured into the devastated area from surrounding regions and from other parts of the affected countries. These ordinary people are the heroes of this emergency response. Yet the contribution of affected populations and local organisations are often overlooked by international aid agencies, private aid providers and the media.

¹ These figures are for countries covered by the TEC studies. The term 'private' refers to non-institutional donors and covers both the general public and private companies. The bulk of these donations came from private individuals in donor countries and was made to NGOs, the Red Cross and the UN.

² The initial appeal, created in the first five days of the emergency, was very quickly subscribed to. The subsequent appeal, revised and based on better information from needs assessments, was not well subscribed to.

The international aid effort geared up several days after the immediate life-saving work had taken place. One of the biggest weaknesses with the international operation was its lack of understanding of the local context and its reluctance and/or inability to consult with and work through and with local communities, groups and organisations. This laid the basis for some inappropriate and poor quality programming which in some cases even undermined the progress of local initiatives. This lack of consultation is a long-standing problem in humanitarian responses and there are measures in place to try and address it. Aid principles such as the Red Cross/Crescent Code of Conduct, Sphere standards and the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative underline the primary role of affected people and their authorities.

International aid was found to be more effective when provided in tandem with local and national initiatives. The key issue here is that of ownership. Aid works best when local communities and authorities have been consulted and are involved in the planning and management of programmes. Such collaboration creates an environment where responsibilities are owned by local people. Examples of good practice from the tsunami response demonstrate that local and national ownership of aid programmes can be supported through patient, discerning and context-sensitive approaches where the international community supported national responses. Success stories were more common when international agencies had existing relationships with local partner agencies.

On the whole, however, the urgency to spend money quickly and visibly led to many poorly executed aid projects and acted against the best interests of affected people. Opportunities to strengthen and build local capacity were therefore often missed, and agencies often did not adequately consult with, or even inform, the affected population about their projects. This tendency did not establish a firm footing for building appropriate local capacity and longer term recovery.

Recommendation

The international humanitarian response system needs to work much harder to understand local contexts and work with and through local structures. It is not just a question of supplying quantities of aid to far off places, it is also about making sure aid is appropriate and improves the capacities of local structures to do it their way. International support should aim to empower affected people to articulate their needs, demand accountability from international agencies, and to make their own choices.

International agencies must respect the role and responsibility of affected states as the primary duty bearers and authorities in responding to natural disasters.

Quality of the International Response

Findings

This was the first international emergency where the affected population were extensively surveyed on their views of the response. In general it was found that affected people were satisfied with the initial relief assistance, but became increasingly less satisfied with the assistance to help them recover, particularly with regard to re-establishing their livelihoods.

The evaluation found many of the same problems that have been seen in other emergencies. For example, the proliferation of agencies led to an oversaturated humanitarian environment which militated against sensible coordination and led to unhelpful competition between agencies to find something to do. Overall, the quality of programming was uneven. These kinds of problems have been seen before in other emergencies and demonstrate the need for agencies to improve the quality of what they do on the ground.

Recommendation

One way of approaching the issue is to tighten up quality control. This may involve regulation – for example, establishing an international accreditation and certification system to distinguish between operational agencies that work to a professional standard in a particular sector, from those agencies that do not.

There are a number of options for regulation, and all such systems have costs and disadvantages as well as benefits. The Synthesis Report provides a range of options that could be considered. (See Annex 1 below for more information.)

International Response Capacity

Findings

Despite the huge funding response the scale of the disaster challenged the capacity of the international community to manage the huge surge in money and resources (and to deal with problems of coordination associated with agency proliferation). As has been seen in other emergencies, funding – in the past largely provided by donor governments – has fluctuated enormously so that agencies have not been able to establish an adequate ‘standing capacity’. This has resulted in a shortage of trained staff on stand by, a lack of necessary financial tracking systems in place, an absence of working relationships on the ground and an inadequate understanding of local contexts. In the tsunami response, although the funding was available in abundance, the ‘standing capacity’ was not in place to deliver aid to greatest effect.

Recommendations

The international aid community and disaster-prone states should strive to increase their disaster response capacity at community, national and international level.

International actors need to increase the linkages and coherence between themselves and the other components of the disaster response system. For example, governments in disaster-prone countries would benefit from legislation and structures to strengthen their interaction with the international community. INGOs should develop the skills and tools needed for mapping local capacity, and INGOs and the military should train together to plan in advance for humanitarian responses.

Funding Response: According to Need?

Findings

The enormous influx of funds highlights discrepancies in how aid money is raised and spent. From 2000 to 2004, an average of US\$6.4 billion per annum was spent on humanitarian aid globally³ (vs US\$13.5 billion for the tsunami). In the tsunami, total funding was over US\$7,100⁴ for every affected person which contrasts starkly, for example, to funding of only US\$3 per head actually spent on someone affected by floods in Bangladesh in 2004.

In addition, the TEC Synthesis Report finds that funding allocated by international agencies was rarely based on need. Formal assessments completed by international agencies of the needs of the affected people were often not used, often not undertaken jointly, and not always shared. In particular, donor funding was often a consequence of political and public reactions to anecdotal stories in the mass media. Globally, gross inequities in funding for different emergencies are also evident (leading to, for example, half-rations in Sudan in the face of increasing malnutrition, while very generous funding is provided for Iraq and Afghanistan). Donor governments and international agencies also failed to ensure adequate tracking of funds within the system.

Recommendations

The TEC is calling for a fairer system so that all those affected by emergencies can be provided an equal opportunity to escape suffering and early/premature death and rebuild their lives. Governments in particular are urged to make the current funding system fair and more efficient, flexible, transparent and in line with the principles of good donorship.

-ends-

³ DAC Online Database.

⁴ This is calculated on the basis of US\$13.5 billion divided by 1.9 million people considered to have been directly affected. The Synthesis Report has more details.

ANNEX 1: Regulation and Accreditation: Some considerations

- Regulation by a UN body might seem the natural course, but NGOs and the Red Cross would probably not accept this for a variety of reasons. These include questions about the UN's capacity to keep its own house in order, and issues of independence from a multilateral body made up of member states.
- Regulation could be (and in many cases already is) based on national legislation, but this creates a very uneven playing field, with agencies from different countries operating within very different regulatory frameworks.
- Another option is to have a variant of the ISO9000 standards specifically for humanitarian aid agencies. An international standard gets around the issue of variations in the national legislation of different countries.
- A fourth option is for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to develop a set of criteria against which agencies have their performance evaluated. Such criteria would include many of the standards that have been adopted by agencies in recent years. Under this system, agency operations would be reviewed by an independent external mechanism against these criteria.

Governments can support regulation by making tax-exempt status dependant on meeting accountability requirements, such as those required in the US, as well as demanding regular published audits and independent evaluations. Affected-country governments can demand similar transparency requirements of agencies responding to natural disasters in their countries. The European Commission could introduce a directive to ensure that NGOs in the European Union are obliged to be as transparent about their finances and expenditures as are NGOs in the US via Form 990.

Complementary to the regulation of aid agencies is 'professionalising' the role of aid workers, both national and international. International aid agencies should consider, along with academic institutions and training providers, setting up a professional body with transparent criteria for admission and for the achievement of 'certified professional' or 'chartered' status. As an initial step, the IASC or a major donor could host discussions on what the requirements for such professional status would be.