

# UN assesses tsunami response

by Marion Couldrey and Tim Morris

*A report to the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) identifies lessons learned from the humanitarian response. Recommendations stress the need for national ownership and leadership of disaster response and recovery, improved coordination, transparent use of resources, civil society engagement and greater emphasis on risk reduction.*

In the 12 tsunami-affected countries approximately 240,000 people were killed, 50,000 are missing and feared dead and more than one million persons were displaced. Poor coastal communities were worst hit. In many affected areas, three times more women were killed than men. Children represented more than a third of the victims. In Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Somalia the disaster took place against the background of complex and protracted conflicts which had major implications for the organisation and delivery of humanitarian assistance.

In response to appeals for assistance from affected countries, UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams of personnel from 18 countries were rapidly deployed to five of the tsunami-affected countries. Sixteen UN agencies, 18 International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) response teams, more than 160 international NGOs and countless private companies and local civil society groups provided emergency food, water and medical services to the estimated five million people in need of assistance. Military forces from 35 countries assisted the relief effort. The UN Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC) established coordination centres in Indonesia and in Sri Lanka to provide logistical support and to assist in the coordination and use of military assets.

As a result of this timely response, no major outbreaks of disease or epidemics took place and around two million people received emergency medical assistance and food aid. Six months after the disaster, immediate needs have been met. Almost all those affected have access to sufficient and adequate water supplies, although in many camps sanitation facilities are below

internationally recognised minimum standards. In Sri Lanka some 30,000 provisional shelters have been built and in Indonesia 11,000 earthquake-resistant homes are under construction. However, it is clear that even as the recovery phase progresses, significant humanitarian needs – particularly among women, children, minorities, migrant workers and the internally displaced – will persist for many months. Over 9,000 Sri Lankan families, for example, are still living in tents.

With the exception of Somalia, the disaster affected countries with strong national governments, well-developed national institutions and functioning legal frameworks. This greatly contributed to the success of relief efforts. In many areas humanitarian operations benefited from committed involvement from central government ministries, armed forces and – where they were still intact – local government structures. Collaboration between international and national relief actors and governments facilitated relief distribution and simplified the hand-over of humanitarian and early recovery activities to government agencies.

## Coordination

In the wake of the tsunami the UN was confronted by one of the greatest challenges it has ever faced. The timing and scale of the event led to a proliferation of relief actions and actors and high levels of public, private and governmental assistance. The outpouring of support was a testament to the generosity of the international community but at the same time put humanitarian actors under the spotlight as it significantly raised expectations of how well they would perform and how they would account for funds they spent.

In general, coordination went well. Pre-tsunami standby arrangements with donors and the private sector to provide staff, equipment, transport and other assistance significantly helped the timely response. However, coordination did have hiccups. Some communities were flooded with relief items and with actors who did not necessarily have capacity to assist them. Aid did not always match needs. The humanitarian 'traffic jam' at times led to miscommunication, *ad hoc* planning, assistance delays and duplication of effort.

The willingness of governments to ease bureaucratic requirements permitted the speedy arrival of the first humanitarian workers and relief supplies. However, in many cases entry procedures subsequently became complicated. This delayed deployment of many items necessary for operations support (such as computers, telecommunication equipment and vehicles). Some governments imposed restrictions on the use of satellite systems. These administrative bottlenecks slowed relief efforts and delivery of much-needed assistance.

The response suffered from gaps in shelter, water and sanitation owing to the sheer magnitude of the problem but also the inability of the humanitarian community to quickly field and maintain enough skilled and experienced staff. The response also suffered from high UN staff turnover and the delayed deployment of staff specialised in information management, communications and civil-military liaison. Civil-military coordination officers from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Humanitarian Information Centres were sent to the field through formal channels which took time. The mobilisation of telecommunications systems was thus difficult and data collection, analysis and dissemination suffered from a lack of agreed standards. In preparation for future crises it is clear that more must be done to invest in standby humanitarian response capacity by increasing and strengthening professional staffing and administration and by supporting strategic partnerships that tap into NGO capacity and lo-



*A man carries donated relief supplies past a destroyed home with a tsunami-thrown fishing boat on its roof, Hambantota, Sri Lanka.*

cally available expertise. A standing global response mechanism under the auspices of the UN, with immediate authority to launch the initial response and build on available local and regional capacities, would lead to prompter dispatch of relief teams and supplies.

Improved civil-military liaison is required to ensure a better match between needs and the use of available aircraft, vessels, vehicles, personnel and other military assets. Rapid and generous military responses provided access to many hard-to-reach populations but in some cases the activities of civilian and military actors overlapped. Relief goods were not always distributed in the right form and quantity where they were most needed and parallel relief pipelines developed. These problems were exacerbated by inadequate understanding of military command structures and poor information sharing between the humanitarian community and the military. The tsunami has set a precedent and it is now very likely that military forces will be significantly involved in future humanitarian operations. It is therefore important to establish better communication channels and coordination procedures between

military and humanitarian partners. In many cases, the UN's resident/humanitarian coordinator (RC/HC) lacked the staff resources to provide needed leadership. It is critical that the RC/HC be immediately supported with staff and capacity to provide critical coordination functions as well as the capacity to begin recovery activities from the outset.

The international community needs to clarify who is to coordinate disaster recovery. While disaster response is now shaped by clear and universally accepted coordination standards and tools, disaster recovery – which involves a wider range of actors – does not have any formal coordination structures. This is particularly true for international coordination at the country level and is made worse by the fact that resident coordinators do not have adequate support.

### **Displacement and protection challenges**

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, an estimated one million people were displaced. After the first few weeks, however, the large numbers of temporary displaced began to diminish as the situation stabilised and people started returning to

their home areas. The fluidity with which displaced populations moved (particularly in Aceh), the growing strain on host families and the destruction of livelihoods challenged the ability of national authorities and the international community to tailor responses to the different needs of various categories of tsunami-affected populations. Initiatives to temporarily relocate populations were further complicated by the political situation in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and by previous relocation initiatives in the Maldives.

It is vital that the particular needs of IDPs should be rapidly addressed. The humanitarian principle that efforts must be made to meet the life-saving needs of as many people as possible demands that attention be paid to the specific protection and assistance needs of IDPs. They need to be involved in relief planning from the outset to help ensure that aid is fairly distributed and does not reinforce pre-existing inequalities. Special measures for the assistance and protection of IDPs and host families should therefore be prioritised. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement<sup>1</sup> should be extended to natural disasters.

## Donor generosity spawned funding challenges

The disaster generated an unprecedented outpouring of public and private compassion and resources. The UN estimates that a total of US\$6.8 billion has been pledged to the tsunami: US\$5.8 billion from government sources and US\$1 billion from corporate and private donations. Within 15 days of the disaster 60% of the US\$977 million in humanitarian and recovery assistance requested in the UN Flash Appeal had been committed or made available. OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS) estimates that by June 2005 US\$880 million had been contributed to the appeal and a further US\$162 million had been committed. Much of the tsunami funding has been contributed through non-UN channels, including international organisations such as the IFRC (which has reported receiving \$US2.2 billion) and large NGOs.

While the ready availability of massive resources allowed the humanitarian community to operate without focusing on fundraising, the high-stakes financial environment created by such generosity put pressure on humanitarian organisations to spend funds quickly. Driven by huge reserves of funds and donor pressure for quick results, many organisations launched simultaneous projects and executed them with large numbers of staff. In the rush for rapid action, many international actors were also perceived as neglecting their national and local counterparts.

In some cases organisations have received far more money than they are able to spend in the response phase. Many have had to rapidly reconsider their own planning procedures and quickly develop strategies for reporting and communicating the use of donated funds. In order to maintain public trust, humanitarian organisations – irrespective of how they choose to handle monies left over – must ensure they clearly communicate their intentions to their donors.

Clearer reporting and demonstrable accountability are needed to ensure that the new funders who have contributed to the tsunami response will continue to do so in future emergencies. The humanitarian community has well-established accountability mechanisms but the sheer volume of funds pledged or contributed for the tsunami, particularly from the private sector, has increased scrutiny over how they are spent. The international accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers has provided free assistance to help the UN with its immediate accounting and tracking of contributions raised under the tsunami flash appeal and also to assist expansion of existing UN financial tracking systems for emergency appeals.

Past experience – after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the December 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran – shows that funds that are easily forthcoming when the disaster hits the headlines soon dry up as attention wanes. Recognising that the

window of opportunity for disaster fundraising is narrow and short lived, the scope of the tsunami flash appeal was extended into the recovery phase. This flexibility has made it possible to raise resources for shelter, livelihoods development, micro-infrastructure and the environment and to allow speedy commencement of recovery plans and programmes. Such extension of flash appeals to cover recovery needs should become standard procedure after all disasters. The development of a common financial tracking database – which would include official aid, NGO funding and private sector contributions – in one comprehensive system would facilitate recovery planning and implementation.

## Closing the gap between relief and development

Early national ownership of and participation in the design and implementation of recovery programmes are essential. Participation from local disaster management experts and technicians is vital to ensure that recovery programming considers the needs and capacities of affected populations.

The early attention to recovery in the relief phase of the emergency helped local populations get back on their feet. In Indonesia, rubble removal was implemented by means of cash-for-work schemes which injected cash into the local economy while providing a psychological boost to the 11,000 people who took part.

However, in many areas, early recovery was not possible as damage to roads posed a problem for the early transportation and delivery of reconstruction materials. Improved arrangements with private contractors and standby partners with advanced logistical capabilities and air transport services would assist in overcoming these recovery difficulties.

Street in the centre of Banda Aceh (some 4km from the coast).





Temporary shelters,  
Sri Lanka.

The UN lacks system-wide mechanisms for incorporating risk reduction measures into post-disaster recovery efforts. There is a need to identify suitable assessment methodologies for identifying early recovery needs, to improve procedures for sending technical experts to support recovery programming and to ensure that funding for recovery and vulnerability reduction interventions is made available.

### Civil society and local engagement

Civil society has made an immense contribution to relief and recovery efforts. Local Thai agencies were essential to organising recovery operations in cooperation with local governments and national authorities and they drew attention to those who might otherwise have been overlooked, such as Burmese migrant workers and the Moken, an ethnic minority who are among the last sea tribes to lead a traditional existence. In Indonesia the Aceh Recovery Forum provided support and advice to the government, the UN and the international financial institutions in the development of the government's Reconstruction Master Plan. Wide-ranging consultations with civil society in Aceh further enhanced the credibility of the planning process.

While it is widely understood that recovery programming must be based on the sound and participatory assessments of needs and capacities of the affected population, this has not always happened in practice. In several countries, concerns were raised

by the affected populations about their lack of involvement in recovery planning.

From the outset of the response international actors engaged with local government officials. Affected governments did not try to centralise authority during the relief effort but instead welcomed engagement and coordination at sub-national levels to facilitate response. However, the tsunami demonstrated that local government structures do not always have sufficient resources to perform coordination tasks. External agencies and local institutions need to work together to prepare pre-disaster plans and build the response capacity of local organisations.

The tsunami has highlighted the need to empower communities at risk to protect themselves and their property from the impact of disasters. Developing community-based disaster preparedness plans – from stockpiling food and medicine to building embankments in flood-prone areas, to including preparedness as part of teacher training and school curricula – would reduce disaster damage substantially. Local early warning systems, building of earthquake-resistant structures, identification of escape routes and agreed information and communication strategies are essential to ensure that appropriate action is taken when warnings are issued. Long-term support for sustainable economic development, resulting in strong civil societies as well as sound infrastructure, will help ensure that nations are prepared

to weather the shocks from natural hazards. The international community should invest in people-centred early warning systems. They should include risk assessments, awareness raising and preparedness measures so that communities know what to do and can act upon warnings.

Response and recovery programming must be based upon a reliable, participatory assessment of the needs and capacities of affected populations, so that local initiative, resources and capacities are fully understood and utilised. Consultation mechanisms and priority-setting activities contribute to building consensus around recovery priorities, roles, responsibilities and resources. Before the next disaster strikes the response community must not let miss the opportunity to document and disseminate the lessons learned from the tsunami.

***This article has been prepared by the FMR editors and selectively draws on issues discussed in the ECOSOC report: 'Strengthening emergency relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, recovery and prevention in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster: Report of the UN Secretary-General', July 2005 (available at [www.un.org/docs/ecosoc](http://www.un.org/docs/ecosoc)). Interpretation and emphasis given to aspects of the report are those of the FMR editors and not those of the United Nations.***

1. [www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/gp\\_page.htm](http://www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/gp_page.htm)