

# Logistical challenges

by Steve Matthews

*The impact of the Asian tsunami was unprecedented and the logistical challenges of meeting the needs of those affected were enormous. Had the tsunami happened even five years ago, World Vision would not have been able to respond nearly as effectively as it did.*

In the late 1990s, with growing numbers of humanitarian emergencies and rapidly evolving complexity of relief aid, World Vision changed the way it responded to major disasters. Instead of borrowing development staff at the onset of an emergency, and losing days of response time in the process, World Vision created a full-time division – its Global Rapid Response Team – dedicated to predicting, preparing for and responding to large-scale emergencies.

The tsunami was to test its capacity to the limit. “We mounted thirty-two airlifts to Aceh and Sri Lanka in the first thirty days,” said George Fenton, World Vision’s Director of Global Pre-positioning. “We’ve never done anything that big before.” And it wasn’t easy. The red tape of bureaucracy proved a major obstacle in some cases. Although most items could rapidly be off-loaded and distributed, certain non-food items such as vehicles and radios, which are more likely to be considered a potential security risk in conflict-affected countries, became immediately entangled in red tape and required considerable staff time before they could be moved on.

World Vision India and Thailand – with bigger staff capacity – were able to play their part in the response with little outside assistance, leaving the bulk of the international effort to focus on Sri Lanka and Indonesia. World Vision’s response in Sri Lanka was launched just hours after the giant waves hit the country, thanks to the creativity and passion of the local staff who immediately started distributing food, water, clothing, sleeping mats and hygiene products. Their rapid response led the way in what became the biggest shipment of aid in the shortest period of time in World Vision’s fifty-five-year history.

World Vision has pre-stocked warehouses in Denver, Hanover, Brindisi and Dubai. Those facilities were immediately accessed and other pre-planned stock arrangements with suppliers and transport companies in Kenya, Canada, India, Pakistan, Thailand and Australia filled most of the remaining gaps. This ability to activate pre-planned stocks of relief supplies proved vital.

The involvement of experienced staff was also an important factor. Following the death of a World Vision relief

worker in Mosul and in light of the constant deterioration in security in Iraq, World Vision had closed its Iraq programme in October 2004. That meant there was a number of highly experienced relief workers ready to take on a new assignment. Experienced people bring with them existing relationships with other relief professionals and agencies; in the chaotic early days of the emergency, the ability to quickly establish good working relationships with NGOs and UN agencies greatly facilitated the effective delivery of aid.

## What of the future?

World Vision expects its tsunami programmes to continue for a minimum of five years, covering a broad range of projects such as micro-enterprise development for small businesses, reconstruction of homes, businesses, roads and bridges, new water and sanitation systems in coastal areas and enhanced child protection in schools and villages.

Some lessons learned from previous disasters proved helpful in the tsunami response.<sup>1</sup> As a result of child protection protocols developed in the previous two years, child-friendly spaces were established in Sri Lanka, Aceh and India. Decentralised decision making at the national office level allowed for a quicker response, especially in India and Sri Lanka. But despite the effectiveness of most aspects of the relief operation, there is concern for the future. What if there is another major disaster in the near future? The tsunami response has drawn deeply from the well of capacity of all agencies. If there is another large-scale rapid onset emergency soon, many agencies – even the large ones – will be hard pressed to mount an appropriate response.

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1. See After Action Review (involving World Vision International, CARE, OXFAM GB and Catholic Relief Services) at [www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/reference/docs/Care\\_Evaluation.pdf](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/reference/docs/Care_Evaluation.pdf)

