INTRODUCTION

The tsunami and earthquakes that hit the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, caused a disaster so extreme and so unusual that it pushed existing models of international disaster response to the limit. The last natural disaster in the region even close to this magnitude was caused by the eruption of Krakatau in 1883. A 40 meter high wave descended on Java, killing 36,417 people. The 2004 wave was of similar proportion but the devastation monumentally more—more people, more infrastructure, more connectivity. The international community responded in an equally astounding way; as much as $9 billion in aid was pledged to the region, nearly twice the normal annual amount for total global humanitarian assistance.

Against this backdrop, the international aid community—donor nations, United Nations (UN) agencies, and major nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—have pledged to be accountable for how they raised and spent this king’s ransom. They have committed to reporting back, as a single community, on just how well they did in the first six months after the tsunami hit. The reports are due on the anniversary of the tsunami in December of this year.

No one has ever undertaken an evaluation like this before. Just how does one evaluate the combined effect of the plethora of agencies that responded to the disaster? From who’s perspective should the evaluation take place, and against what should it be measured?

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO EXTREME EVENTS

By almost every measure, the tsunami and the resulting response were extreme events: extreme violence and destruction on one level and, of course, extreme public response on another. Most people who gave 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:

- The tsunami was a great media event—a real-life disaster movie, on the scale of Armageddon, Dante’s Peak, and The Day After Tomorrow.
- It was Christmas—or, even better, the day after Christmas, when people in the West were at home, feeling a little guilty about all the presents and overindulgence of the previous day, and not plugged into the rush of a normal working day.
- The disaster had personal connections. For Sweden, this was their biggest ever natural disaster. Many Swedes on vacation in Thailand died. In the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, returning tourists told graphic tales of horror or miraculous escape stories.
- There’s no one to blame. This was no complex political crisis where the lines between victim and perpetrator, good and bad, are hopelessly blurred. In most people’s minds, this was as close to an “act of God” as you could get.
- It’s not Iraq. At least in the United States, and probably in most European countries, the simplicity of the scenario and the
potential to do something worthwhile stood in stark contrast to the morass of Iraq seen every day on TV.

Thanks to the Internet, donating has never been easier. Instant 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 agencies' own Web sites.

The geography of the disaster was extreme—essentially a thin strip of destruction, five miles wide at most, yet running for thousands of miles around the coasts of seven or more Indian Ocean states. Within the strip, devastation; just outside of it, normalcy. The result was a vast area in which spontaneous and local assistance could take place, as just as easily could exploitation and opportunism.

The tsunami struck at a time of extreme politics. The map of our geopolitical world is being redrawn. The economic and military pre-eminence of the United States, the drawing up of the battle lines of democracy versus terrorism, and the tension between free trade and central control mean that no event—certainly no event as big as the tsunami—could be played out without reference to the bigger picture.

Finally, the response was extreme: in scale (one of the biggest ever in the world), diversity (a massive rise in the number of previously unknown local and Asian agencies assisted), and in range of response. 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 these rolled into one and occurring at the same place and time.

**SHAPING AN EVALUATION**

How should the international community set about evaluating its response to this complex and tragic phenomenon? One approach would be to design the evaluation like the disaster, thinking in terms of a spreading wave of concern akin to the tsunami itself. At the center are the local communities (or what is left of them) and their views on the response. Further out are questions on how well the global humanitarian system performed. Finally, we have the issue of how this event might provide the impetus for global economics and politics—and global solidarity—to shape humanitarianism.

**THE VICTIM’S TALE**

Starting at the center, reports indicate that, in the Indonesian province of 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 and the way agencies were being manipulated to support the Indonesian authority's bigger plans for the province 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 1980s, and there are many lessons agencies could learn from that period as to how best to program relief and rehabilitation in a counterinsurgency environment.

In Sri Lanka, many of the same issues have surfaced, but the most controversial is the 200-mile wide coastal exclusion zone imposed by the government and resultant questions of land ownership and appropriation. The forcing of whole communities to relocate and construct new livelihoods, and the unabashed disregard for civil, economic, and human rights, cry out to be seriously examined.

In Thailand, the same issue of land appropriation can be seen—as one local community leader put it, “A second tsunami of corporate globalization and militarization.” Also in Thailand, the tsunami revealed just how many of the refugees who fled the repressive regime in Burma have ended up as cheap labor in coastal tourist resorts. It is estimated that some 60,000 illegal Burmese workers are now without...
income and cannot appeal for help or they will be deported back to Burma.

THE GLOBAL AID COMMUNITY
What does this extreme event reveal about the nature of the global aid community today? A primary benchmark is the way funds were pledged, committed, and disbursed. In the tsunami 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, such as the January 2001 Gujarat earthquake in India, there is ample evidence that independent donations 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 gap between what states promise and what they deliver. In some cases, pledges do not really represent new funds; rather, they are already committed development funds reallocated and dressed up in new clothing. In every major disaster in the past, pledges come up with impressive figures, which are much headlined. But, when researchers have gone back months or even years later, there are huge disparities between what states pledged and what they actually delivered. At present, pledges are not tracked—only commitments. If entire regions need to be rebuilt from the ground up, promises of financial aid should not be empty.

An evaluation should also determine whether aid was pledged based on assessed needs or simply as a shot in the dark. For government donations, the main vehicle for assessment and coordination should be the UN Consolidated Appeal Process; yet $5 out of every $6 pledged to tsunami relief was for needs outside the UN appeal. Of funds pledged for the health sector in the UN appeal, only a little over half was actually delivered as cash as of July 2005.

TO EACH ACCORDING TO 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 humanitarian action is its impartiality—to each according to need. The UN appeal to address the ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan, was about the same size as the tsunami appeal, but it received far less funding, and the critical but miniscule appeal for war victims in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has received hardly anything. These disparities in appeal figures are unsettling enough. 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 also flow both ways. Although the United States committed roughly $0.9 billion to tsunami-affected countries, every year it “takes back” $1.8 billion in clothing-export tariffs from the three worst hit (Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka). Other nations have similar balance sheets with regard to the devastated region. The point is, when a disaster thrusts 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.

CONFLICTING DRIVES OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE
Finally, we need to reflect on the changing nature of what drives humanitarian response. We delude ourselves if we think aid is solely needs-driven. It is driven by the emotions of the general public, who provide financial support and political clout behind an agency’s work. It is driven by the media, which shapes the disaster in the mind of the public and the relief agencies. It is driven by the local—and, of course, global—political and military 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 for it, and delivering it are now global endeavors hooked in, for better or worse, to other globalized processes: the media, world trade, the pursuit of
democracy, and the pursuit of a fair deal for the most vulnerable. Aid agencies need to examine these disparate driving forces—how much they skew response and how distortions can be guarded against in the future.

**CONCLUSION**

All of these issues and concerns occur in and shape every disaster, but in the tsunami, they happened in the extreme. Thus, they are more exposed and are easier to research. The tsunami is a tragedy of global proportions, but it is also a tremendous opportunity to make significant, meaningful changes in the way the aid system works. Evidence-driven research coming out of the tsunami response can feed into policy change and improvement in orchestrated response could rise from the ashes. None of us are likely to see a disaster on a scale of this tsunami again in our lifetimes. Let’s not squander a unique opportunity.

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