

Reconstruction of Relief: A Historical Review of Life-Saving Humanitarian Aid

SUMMARY

This presentation will be intentionally provocative, attempting to expose the range of deficiencies that persist in humanitarian relief.

The Tsunami - Impact and Response

The epidemiologic, mortality curve of the tsunami was characteristic of relatively short hazard exposure, with the consequence that most of the aid resources brought into affected areas were spent more on recovery than on life-saving relief. This follows a pattern seen historically in recent earthquakes and floods. All the primary life-threatening hazards were played out within hours of the earthquake and the tidal waves reaching land. By the time most UN and NGO assessment teams had arrived, days later, there were no further emergency threats to life, though other needs were created in livelihood, psycho-social grieving and infrastructure reconstruction.

Yet, the signals that continued to be sent worldwide focused on lives at risk for a full three weeks after the tsunami had receded, and aid agencies continued to frame their work using the term "relief," the same rubric also used in protracted emergencies where the excess mortality remains high for a long period, therefore where the relief can be life-saving. Funds were raised with the expectation that the relative risk of death a month after the tsunami had hit was in some degree comparable to the scale of relative risk of death among Ethiopians in 2000, Rwandans in Goma in August 1994, or Somalis in late 1992. Relief agencies suffer a persistent reluctance or mental block to correct public perceptions. Instead, each new instance to gain public attention is fed with the same theme "the situation is deteriorating," always deteriorating.

Early Response

The US Government was overall critical of the timing and quality of UN response to the tsunami in the Aceh region. One reason for this harsh attitude was the contrast with the relatively rapid response by USAID and the US military, which benefited from some serendipity. As occurs in a fraction of large emergencies, military capabilities added considerable value in expediting transport, demonstrating the relative weakness of civilian aid agencies in working in or based from maritime environments. US military capabilities in the rapid re-establishment of bridges proved a critical part of the response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America. And US offshore military capabilities also demonstrated key value in transport and water desalinization after the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh.

NGOs responded in force, for the first time in decades raising so much more money from private donations that government donations were small in comparison. The Red Cross movement, the UN, and the five largest NGO movements raised over \$1 billion each in one month. NGOs in Aceh cooperated with logistics, leased helicopters (a relatively novel action for non-profits) and moved quickly into cash-for-work and livelihoods-restoration.

UN agencies demonstrated new attributes. UNHCR showed that it could be a disaster relief agency. OCHA showed that it could, for the first time, capture the high ground in asserting a very public image as coordinator. New UN structures were demonstrated again, such as the UN Joint Logistics Center (JLC).

UN Reform and Disasters

Both ECOSOC and the US Congress are currently reviewing how the UN system responds to disasters with an eye on UN reform. Despite a swelling in the size of UN OCHA, and the addition of common services (such as the JLC), a UN architecture has not yet been arranged where key gaps are met, including water supply, leadership in relief to and protection for internally displaced persons, provision of micronutrients, conflict prevention and risk reduction. As well, UN agencies have yet to establish a culture of measuring results or conducting evaluations that can compare and contrast results.