



Executive summary

Introduction

The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) initiated five parallel evaluations of the international response to the tsunami, of which this is one. The purpose of this evaluation was to determine the impact of the tsunami response, primarily the role of international actors, on local and national capacities for relief and recovery, and risk reduction. The ToR identified the following six objectives.

- Assess how local and national capacities changed as a result of the tsunami response.
- Assess how well international actors engaged with local and national capacities in providing relief and recovery assistance.
- Assess the intended and unintended changes to local and national capacities as a result of the tsunami response by international actors.
- Assess the extent to which transition/risk reduction/recovery programming, planned and implemented, is likely to influence local and national capacities.
- Distil lessons learned for efforts to strengthen local and national capacities for future crisis response and recovery.
- Ensure that all the above assess and highlight gender differences and the varied experiences of women and men.

Fieldwork was undertaken between mid-September and mid-November 2005 in four of the affected countries – Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Thailand. A team of three international consultants studied the four countries between them, with additional international assistance for the Maldives. National consultants supported the process in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand while staff from the Care Society supported the study in the Maldives. Structured surveys of claim-holder views were conducted in Aceh (Indonesia) and Sri Lanka.

For the purpose of this evaluation, the term ‘capacities’ has been taken in a broad sense, i.e., to mean much more than technical skills, also encompassing the ability to access services and programmes, to influence and set policies and longer term recovery and reconstruction agendas, and to open and use the space to hold duty-bearers at all levels accountable. It includes the processes by which these

outcomes are achieved, notably participation, consultation and information sharing. The evaluation does not attempt to evaluate the performance of specific agencies but to focus on the overall impact and draw lessons from the response taken as a whole. The Team recognises that there is wide variety in performance and that there are many examples that may be exceptions to the general trends observed.

National and local capacities

At the national level, Thailand was successful in managing the response, drawing on well-prepared structures and plans. In Indonesia and Sri Lanka the response was marred by lack of coordination between government entities, while in the Maldives there was a quick and effective initial response, but then some lack of representation of outlying communities. In all four countries such tendencies toward over-centralised control caused difficulties in relation to the local administration. National capacities for future disaster preparedness have been strengthened by the international agencies, especially in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Thailand. In Indonesia the state has initiated important developments in national policy and capacity, which are yet to be proven. Across the region, the international community played a useful role in raising states' awareness about the rights and entitlements of internally displaced persons, although not always with the desired results. But the interaction of local and national government remains problematic.

The results are less positive at the community level. The evaluation finds that local ownership of the tsunami response was undermined and some local capacities were rendered more vulnerable by the response to the disaster. The Sri Lanka

survey indicates that although there was a generally positive rating for the response initially, this declined over time. The problem relating to capacities is demonstrated by the finding that only about 20 per cent of claim-holders were satisfied with the way in which their skills were used, while nearly half found this engagement somewhat unsatisfactory or worse.

The surveys also indicate perceptions of lack of fairness in the response. Women-headed and poorer households were most disadvantaged while those who were more articulate received greater benefits. This tendency seems to have increased gradually. Aid was provided to marginal groups during the relief phase but, being less informed and organised about their rights and less able to access common services, they were overlooked in the recovery and reconstruction phases. Their special needs and constraints required a more proactive and strategic response.

Women registered a lower level of satisfaction with the general response than men (in Sri Lanka, at least). This may reflect a lack of attention in the response to issues of protection. There are some notable successes in this field but generally international agencies did less than they should to protect women. The most vulnerable were those who were marginalised by several different factors at once, especially conflict, and also women in camps. Women with few assets before the tsunami tended to receive less in compensation than men who already had many assets. This is particularly true in the case of livelihood support.

Underlying the problems at community level is a lack of engagement at the earliest stage with community-based and local non-governmental organisations (CBOs and NGOs). Many of these had played a major role during the search-and-rescue phase

but were marginalised during the relief process; relations had become strained, or capacities weakened, by the time that agencies sought their cooperation in the recovery phase.

One of the most successful aspects of the response was the use of cash transfers, allowing communities and individuals a greater degree of choice than with distribution of materials. In the Aceh survey, 90 per cent of those surveyed felt that cash was better than food or other relief items. Among Sri Lankan respondents the majority (53 per cent) preferred cash to goods, which was supported by another 12 per cent who felt that cash would enable them to buy what they wanted.

Issues in the international response

Specific aspects of the response that have undermined local capacity include 'poaching' of staff from other organisations, especially local NGOs, and burdensome requirements for reporting. There was too much emphasis on speed and profile, leading to unnecessary and wasteful use of expatriate staff, many of whom had little relevant experience and were at a particular disadvantage in addressing the highly complex social structures of communities in the region. Structurally, this reflects an underestimation of local capacities, which were generally coping with most of the immediate problems. The findings in all four countries show that most of the life-saving activity was conducted by local communities before the arrival of national and international assistance. They needed support to continue into the recovery stage.

These early mistakes in developing supportive relationships compromised the effectiveness and efficiency of international assistance in the long term. By behaving as if they were saving lives long after that phase of the response was over, international agencies undermined recognition for local capacities and made long-term recovery more difficult. It is hard to find the right balance between delivering immediate relief and engaging with local capacities, but in this case the international agencies were unduly impetuous, possibly because of exceptional pressures to spend money rapidly.

Conclusions

Capacity cannot be separated from issues of power. A society that effectively manages its own issues of inequality and marginalisation is likely to be able to cope well with disasters. Local capacity is not just a means for delivering relief but has a long-term role in disaster mitigation. But this is not a simple matter; in many of the countries there were serious problems of social division and even conflict. Building capacity in such societies is not simply about supporting institutional structures but is a more complex political process involving the empowerment of poorer and more excluded people so that when disaster strikes they have a valid claim on their community, local officials and national government.

From this perspective the tsunami response must be assessed not only in terms of delivery of goods and services but also in terms of whether it supported local capacities, especially among the most marginalised groups. But this was not always recorded and too often the social effects of aid are unknown even to the agencies that caused them. Capacity

strengthening should be better recognised as an issue in itself. The importance of a capacity strengthening type of engagement is that it represents a more sustainable approach to disaster response. Its benefits come from the long-term impact of mitigating and preventing disaster as well as from addressing immediate needs.

The importance of capacity strengthening is recognised in the guiding principles for humanitarian response, although not clearly enough linked to disaster mitigation. This evaluation highlights the disparity between the stated policies of international humanitarian actors and the operational realities in terms of direct execution, engagement with local capacity and community participation. When the aid system is under pressure in crisis situations, the imperative to deliver services is dominant – the tsunami response being perhaps an extreme example.

Inevitably, there is strong pressure for ‘results’ from the headquarters of international agencies. But even among field staff there is a general tendency to underestimate local capacity and give excessive importance to the delivery of external assistance. This is a process that re-confirms itself. By ignoring local capacity, the role of external aid is made to seem all the more important. The more external aid there is, the more that local capacity is undermined. The hitch is that, having started off in such a way, relationships and strategies then fail to develop more positively during the recovery phase. The response stalls at around the six-month mark, as it did in the case of the tsunami disaster.

There is a need to rethink the end goal of humanitarian assistance and move from a service delivery approach to a capacity empowering framework, or in other words to

shift the emphasis from only delivery to support and facilitation.

Key messages

The evaluation team identified three key areas for the attention of international actors. All of them relate to existing international standards but on the basis of this evaluation appear to be areas in which the tsunami response has been weak in practice.

- **Engagement with local and national capacities.** This includes the ability to recognise and identify local capacities and the need to include local communities in planning and decision-making through participation and consultation, and commitment to devolve decision-making as far as possible.
- **Attention to social inequalities, exclusion and hierarchies.** Capacity should be defined in relation to not only skills and training but also the empowerment of poorer and marginalised groups. The capacity of a community to resist disaster is sensitive to this. It includes not simply the identification of such groups but ensuring that particularly their voices are heard in decision-making.
- **Contribution to an enabling environment and context.** Marginalised groups need to improve their position in relation to communities, and communities in relation to district and national authorities. The basis for this process is empowerment through the strategic management of information, and strengthening downward accountability. Advocacy is also an important element but should be based on enhanced local capacities rather than external interventions.

Recommendations

For recommendations on specific countries, please refer to the individual report summaries presented in the Annexes. The key messages above translate into the following general recommendations for international agencies.

Overarching recommendation

Sector-wide discussions at the global level should be initiated to address the need for a fundamental re-orientation of the humanitarian sector based on the principle that the ownership of humanitarian assistance should rest with claim-holders. This implies a shift of emphasis from delivery to support and facilitation. Such discussions are expected to facilitate implementation of the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Engagement with local and national capacities

- International agencies should prepare in advance for the problems of scaling up not simply by identifying resources but also by making their systems and practices suitable for maximum participation by local people and national governments.
- They should make plans to shift into more collective ways of working during 'mega-disasters' in order to ensure that they do not extend beyond their competence but instead link with others and share roles.
- They should have clear partnership strategies and develop local partnerships from the start in order to achieve a smooth transition from relief to recovery.
- They should institute procedures for making grants for longer time periods even from the outset of an intervention,

and should critically examine their reporting requirements to ensure that they do not discriminate against CBOs.

- Specific agreements and protocols should be made to prevent 'poaching' of staff, to ensure local capacity is not undermined.

Recommendation 2: Attention to social inequalities, exclusion and hierarchies

- Strategies should be developed to ensure that women and marginalised groups have full access to information.
- Women claim-holders should be represented in all decision-making bodies affecting them.
- Planning should be based on the assumption that aid is likely to reinforce inequalities within the community unless corrective action is taken.
- Planning should also take account of the complexity of community structures and the consequent need for knowledgeable local intermediaries with power to influence decisions.
- Inclusion of the most marginalised people should be treated as a fundamental principle or right, regardless of costs.
- Aid should be given according to need rather than being limited to a particular disaster – in the case of the tsunami, people affected by conflict should be included in aid responses.

Recommendation 3: Contribution to an enabling environment and context

- Support communities to develop their own contingency plans for disasters and receive material support on the basis that adequate provision must be made for poorer and marginalised groups. This should extend to a wide range of

civil-society organisations including women's groups.

- Support national governments in disaster-prone countries to develop comprehensive plans and procedures for disaster management, including the management of information in order to ensure that communities are kept fully informed at all stages of the response.
- They should also support plans not only for the establishment of a central body to manage disaster responses but also to enable cooperation between departments and between the centre and local government.
- Those responding to a disaster should ensure that full information about their activities is available to all those affected, especially in local communities. This might include public notices giving financial information, and public audits.
- Agencies should strengthen watchdog movements and support the mass media to promote downward accountability through better understanding of the response and opportunities for feedback and dialogue.