

INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI 2004 : 10 LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE FUNDED BY THE FRENCH STATE¹

Groupe URD :

François Grünewald

Béatrice Boyer

Dr Hugues Maury

Peggy Pascal

Translation by Annabel Green-Lavielle

1) Groupe URD is a research, evaluation and training institute specialising in humanitarian action and crisis management (www.urd.org). Groupe URD is responsible for the evaluation of the humanitarian response funded by the French State under the DIPT/CPT mechanism. A first series of multidisciplinary missions took place in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India between October 2005 and March 2006.

Tous droits d'adaptation, de traduction et de reproduction par tous procédés,
y compris la photocopie et le microfilm, réservés pour tous pays.

Conception graphique couverture : Aurette Leroy et Anne Caminade
Création / Impression : mediatys / Groupe Corlet
Photos : Ambassade de France Jakarta / Groupe URD
© Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes, 2007
ISBN : 978-2-11-096960-6
ISSN : 1249-4844

List of Contents

	1. Type of natural disaster	5
	1.1 A series of consecutive natural disasters	5
	1.2 A rare event	5
	1.3 Immediate impact and delayed shocks	5
	1.4 High mortality	5
	2. The affected zone	6
	2.1 A specific affected area	6
	2.2 Varied contexts	6
	2.3 A relatively unstable region	6
	3. National and international response	7
	3.1 Importance of aid delivered by local communities	7
	3.2 Variation in national aid	7
	3.3 Large numbers of western victims served as a catalyst for international aid	7
	3.4 Massive international humanitarian response	7
	3.5 Competition for visibility	7
	4. Main characteristics of the response funded by the French State	9
	4.1 Response coordinated in France	9
	4.2 Providing aid to several countries	10
	4.3 Supporting a large range of operators	10
	4.4 Multi-sector response	10
	4.5 Support provided for emergency relief and reconstruction efforts	10

5. Lessons learnt	11
Lesson 1: ‘Too much money detracts from common sense’	11
Lesson 2: Ensure solid coordination amongst donors at the outset	11
Lesson 3: Understanding constraints is just as important as analysing needs	11
Lesson 4: Ensure that ‘capacity analysis’ is an integral part of the initial assessment	11
Lesson 5: Distinct, even conflicting objectives will need to be managed	12
Lesson 6: Post-crisis reconstruction is more complex than emergency relief	12
Lesson 7: SCAC teams require support in specific resources for field monitoring	12
Lesson 8: Existing partnerships created some true added value	12
Lesson 9: Important not to confuse visibility with communication	12
Lesson 10: Humanitarian aid may have an impact on local politics and conflicts	12

**The report is available in its entirety (in French)
on the website of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs :**
http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/364-Int_Tsunami.pdf

1. Type of natural disaster

(26 December 2004 to 19 March 2005)

1.1 A series of consecutive natural disasters

The natural disaster that hit the Indian Ocean was characterised by several events. On 26 December 2004, an earthquake followed by a tsunami hit North Sumatra. A series of tsunami waves wreaked havoc on the coasts of Sri Lanka, India, Burma, the Maldives and, several hours later, the East African coast. In March 2005, a second earthquake shook the island of Nyas, opposite North Sumatra.

1.2 A rare event

As a result of two overlying plates, earth tremors are fairly common along the Arakan arch and there is significant volcanic activity in the region (from the Burmese coast to central Indonesia). However, local history has little to tell us about previous tsunamis, except for traditional know-how on the Andaman Islands and a popular legend in Sri Lanka. Without these references, both the population and local authorities alike did not have the necessary reflexes to act appropriately.

1.3 Immediate impact and delayed shocks

After the immediate shocks and damage in the region caused by the earthquake, a sudden surge of energy in the ocean gave rise to a series of waves. These tsunami waves caused widespread damage on coastlines over a variable lapse of time, ranging from a few minutes to several hours depending on the distance from the epicentre.

1.4 High mortality

These events reminded the international community of the lessons learnt in previous natural disasters. On the one hand, a tsunami, unlike an earthquake, kills fast, but injures few. To ensure a swift delivery of medical assistance in this type of situation, it is therefore essential that the response takes into account these characteristics. The fear of widespread epidemic is often unfounded and must be eradicated immediately if humanitarian organisations are to provide an appropriate response to people's health needs after this type of disaster.



2. The affected zone

2.1 A specific affected area

The tsunami had a direct impact on thousands of kilometres of coastline. Most damage was recorded within a few hundred metres of the coast although in some areas this reached up to a maximum of 3-4 kilometres when waves raced up streams or across lagoons. However, areas that were indirectly affected by the disaster often suffered more long-lasting consequences as coastal economies were paralysed.

2.2 Varied contexts

One of main characteristics of the affected area is its important political, cultural and economic diversity. National and local policy for the management of natural disaster was diverse, ranging from requesting outside assistance to refusing it. Cultural and religious aspects (Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism) are also complex and sensitive, notably when the issue of caste is raised. The difference in economic levels of the various countries concerned, but also within each country, results in a varying capacity for short-term reaction and medium-term management.

2.3 A relatively unstable region

The area that was affected by the tsunami on 26 December 2004 includes regions in conflict (Aceh, Sri Lanka, Somalia), unstable areas (Southern Thailand, Burma), politically strategic positions (Andaman Islands and Nicobar in India) and some areas at peace (the Maldives, Kenya). It is easy to imagine the complexity brought about by these diverse geopolitical dynamics when managing such a crisis.



3. National and international response

3.1 Importance of aid delivered by local communities

In the short term, it was thanks to the mobilisation of local communities that lives were saved rather than international aid. Local communities, composed of neighbours, extended family and local authorities, were responsible for covering initial basic needs. It is regrettable that the role and potential of local communities are all too often overlooked by both international humanitarian actors and the media alike.

3.2 Variation in national aid

The capacity of local authorities to deliver aid varied considerably depending on the different countries and their contexts. In some cases, local authorities were effectively implementing an emergency response in no time at all (even though in India and Thailand they have been criticised by civil society), but in other cases, the scale of the disaster brought everything to a halt (for example, the Maldives). In other regions, such as Somalia, local authorities were incapable of delivering assistance and they relied almost entirely on the international community.

3.3 Large numbers of western victims served as a catalyst for international aid

In these tourist areas, the large number of western victims and the instant impact of images that were widely diffused thanks to modern telecommunications (mobile phones, video cameras, etc.) created a strong feeling of solidarity, resulting in a highly specific humanitarian response.



3.4 Massive international humanitarian response

Within hours, the international community launched an emergency response, which was characterised by a certain degree of professionalism (deployment of UNDAC teams, disaster and emergency services, NGOs specialised in emergency relief and crisis management) as well as amateurish initiatives (massive influx of NGOs, strong presence of government officials, numerous individuals and organisations mobilised an emotional response without necessarily having the right experience) and obvious coordination problems.

3.5 Competition for visibility

The question of visibility and competition amongst organisations quickly became an issue. Certain actors had succeeded in raising significant amounts of funding, and felt compelled to identify programmes quickly to ensure that all the funds were spent. It was a race, disturbing at times, to see who could identify beneficiaries and design projects first, resulting in significant incoherence in humanitarian practices.



4. Main characteristics of the response funded by the French State

Aid provided by the French State to countries affected by the crisis of 26 December 2004 can be characterised as follows.

4.1 Response coordinated in France

The whole of France responded to the Tsunami crisis: NGOs, local and national authorities, decentralised cooperation services, local water boards, private companies, schools, etc. After several days of indecision when the response was characterised by dispersed and uncoordinated individual initiatives, except for the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, an interdepartmental state delegation was set up in mid-January, the Interdepartmental Post-Tsunami Delegation (DIPT²), which became the Post-Tsunami Coordination (CPT³) in July 2005. This coordination network was run by experienced high-ranking government officials, with the support of the French Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DgCiD⁴) framework and the Cooperation and Cultural Action Sections (SCAC) within the French embassies concerned. The DIPT was responsible for coordinating interdepartmental operations as well as managing the allocation of funds (approximately €25 million) to NGOs and other organisations, on the basis of a transparent and effective project analysis process. This process facilitated the rapid allocation of DIPT/CPT funds to humanitarian programmes. As well as the DIPT/CPT, two non-governmental organisations played an important role in private fundraising, namely the Fondation de France (FDF) and the French Red Cross (CRF). There was a good level of cooperation between the DIPT/CPT, FDF and the CRF in term of allocation of resources to the various projects, which in itself resulted in a good level of co-financing for a number of projects.

Finally, efforts were made to participate in the coordination networks set up by the international community, notably the European Commission (ECHO), the Global Coalition (managed by Bill Clinton) and, in a broader scale, multilateral authorities (United Nations, International Financial Institutions, Tsunami Evaluation Coalition). Although these efforts were probably insufficient, they were nonetheless significant.

2) Délégation Interministérielle Post-Tsunami

3) Coordination Post-Tsunami

4) Direction générale de la Coopération internationale et du Développement



4.2 Providing aid to several countries

Given the scale of the disaster, it was necessary to determine priorities in terms of people's needs. The bulk of the humanitarian response focused primarily on Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the most severely affected countries, whilst ensuring that India, Thailand and the Maldives were not overlooked.

4.3 Supporting a large range of operators

From the outset, the French response was designed to provide support to a large range of operators. The main priority focused on multilateral organisations (UN, ICRC), followed by French NGOs. Subsequently, support was provided to certain projects implemented by local authorities.

4.4 Multi-sector response

In view of the complexity and manifold needs, the French response was multi-sector by nature. Support was provided to projects in all sectors, from food security (food aid and agricultural rehabilitation), water and sanitation, health, shelter, education and disaster prevention.

4.5 Support provided for emergency relief and reconstruction efforts

One of the characteristics of the French post-tsunami response is to have swiftly adopted, notably after Kobé, a holistic approach. In this way, support was provided to a variety of programmes, including emergency, reconstruction/rehabilitation and disaster prevention.



5. Lessons learnt

It is possible to identify a certain number of lessons that have been learnt from this experience.

Lesson 1: 'Too much money detracts from common sense'

The significant, but not overwhelmingly high levels of French funding resulted in programmes that focused primarily on quality rather than quantity. There was no immediate pressure on operators to spend funds rapidly and they were therefore able to develop projects that were both original and participative, placing the accent on craftsmanship rather than mass production.

Lesson 2: Ensure solid coordination amongst donors at the outset

From the outset, the DIPT/CPT proved its validity as a coordination mechanism for processing project proposals and allocating funds. A clearly-defined interdepartmental role, a relatively efficient process for analysing project proposals, good support from the DgCiD, good upstream communication with donors (DIPT/CPT, CRF, FDF), all these elements contributed considerably to the coherence of the response. Coordination with ECHO was also an important element.

Lesson 3: Understanding constraints is just as important as analysing needs

On the ground, it is essential that stakeholders are capable of overcoming constraints, especially during the initial emergency phase. This includes accessing information and setting up the necessary logistics. During the Indian Ocean Tsunami, armed forces had a vital role to play, especially because for the first time the soldiers involved in supporting logistical activities were unarmed. The pressure on human resource management and the rapid rotation of personnel is still in many cases problematic. Specific complications may arise in contexts that are significantly affected by seasonal changes.

Lesson 4: Ensure that 'capacity analysis' is an integral part of the initial assessment

As well as providing an overall analysis of the situation, the initial assessment should include an investigation of people's needs and the constraints, and a true analysis of the capacities of national and local actors. Failure to include this element in the initial assessment meant that many operators reproduced existing activities, or were simply unable to work.



Lesson 5 : Distinct, even conflicting objectives will need to be managed

It is not always easy to reconcile ‘rapid reaction’ and ‘quality’, ‘satisfaction of local populations’ and ‘satisfaction of local authorities’, especially in contexts where needs are high and the political situation is fairly sensitive. Transparency, awareness campaigns and popularisation are essential.

Lesson 6 : Post-crisis reconstruction is more complex than emergency relief

There are many difficulties involved in ensuring that the reconstruction process fully takes into account all the problems, constraints and issues related to sustainability. Land ownership, integrated management of coastal areas and social processes to be supported require relevant human resources and skills.

Lesson 7 : SCAC teams require support in specific resources for field monitoring

French ground support and follow up mechanisms have always been constrained by limited resources. SCAC teams were often strongly involved, with much effort by all those involved and risks taken by certain individuals. They would benefit from supplementary human resources and basic equipment which could easily be made available.

Lesson 8 : Existing partnerships created some true added value

Operations that were implemented by partnerships existing prior to the disaster were often of good quality, although it would be unwise to over-generalise for ideological reasons. Local partners also have their limits, especially when they are required to channel important sums of money and respond to the pressing demands of international operators.

Lesson 9 : Important not to confuse visibility with communication

A visibility campaign based on distribution of stickers is passive, and the resulting ‘war of logos’ often reaches ridiculous levels. It is important to develop a true communication policy.

Lesson 10 : Humanitarian aid may have an impact on local politics and conflicts

The diversity of the political contexts in the tsunami-affected region highlighted just how sensitive the link between ‘emergency relief and reconstruction’ and between ‘conflict management and underlying local tensions’ is. If the tsunami diplomacy process proved successful in Indonesia, it may have been one of the factors contributing to the deterioration of the conflict situation in Sri Lanka.

