



TIDES OF HOPE?*

Warren Feek**



My thoughts and support go to all affected by the earthquake and Tsunami in the Indian Ocean rim. Your pain is impossible to comprehend.

Naturally, the international development community needs to do all in its power to ensure that the immediate, cruel and devastating tragedy of the Indian Ocean Tsunamis is mitigated to the greatest extent possible. But we also need to ensure that the immediate, emergency response does not set the conditions for a slower, drip feed, development problem.

The immediate response to the huge waves that swamped, drowned and shattered so many individual lives and sucked the lifeblood out of so many communities is to focus on rescue, care, shelter, food, disease prevention and reconnecting those families and communities that somehow, miraculously, survived. No one should much care who does this work or how it is done. Just bring on all the expertise, funding, food, water purification, medicine, shelter and other essentials and get them where they are needed, as quick as possible. Bring it on, in the best possible sense of that phrase.

When everyone who has survived has all the food, medicine and shelter they need and what is left of the communities and extended families are re-united, then we need to ensure that the long-term development strategies adopted by the international agencies do not compound the immediate tragedy caused by those huge waves. It is vitally important that people whose lives have been spun completely out of control are supported to rebuild those lives themselves. It will be a tragedy, nowhere near on the scale of the waves themselves, but a tragedy nonetheless, if the metaphoric flood of longer-term international development engagement in the areas ravaged by the Tsunamis compounds the feelings of dependence and helplessness created by those massive waves. Effective development communication strategies need to be an inherent and central element of this longer term response.

But what should constitute the core elements of that communication strategy? Perhaps the following could be considered. They are designed to ensure that the communication processes support the voices and perspectives of the people most affected - a vital factor for long term

ISSUE 1
May 2005

recovery.

1. CASH INTO LOCAL HANDS

This may seem a strange element for a communication strategy but, as we all know, who controls the cash is a vital element of each and every development process. We should all try to get as much cash into local hands as soon as possible. The immediate idea is about Bank accounts. Of course this may not be appropriate or realistic but it does allow an explanation of what could happen. Why not identify every bank account possible in every bank in all affected regions and put USD 500 into them all? And/or identify the Bank account of every community group, local NGO, local government and local charity and put USD 50,000 into those accounts? It is vitally important that the development support cash available gets directly to the people and organisations in those regions. They need to control how the contributed funds are spent. Because so much money has been raised/promised this may be one of the few times we have had an opportunity to genuinely "spread the wealth" in this manner.

Of course the Bank idea may not work. Very few people may have a bank account, many branches of the banks will themselves have been destroyed, and many accounts will now, tragically, be those of people who perished. But there must be a way to get as much money as soon as possible directly into the hands of the people affected. The control and choice that brings is a vital building block for any development strategy. They will know how best to allocate their resources. Though business premises and equipment may have gone, the skills of many of the people who survived remain. People will spend with local businesses and organisations, helping the regeneration of the communities and their economies. Having those funds will greatly increase people's control over what they need now and what they want to develop long-term.

2. REALLY FREE TRADE

Debt relief for the affected countries has received considerable attention but why not go further and advocate for removing all restrictions and penalties that may exist in all major trading blocks [e.g. NAFTA and The EU] affecting the exports from all of the places so devastatingly affected by the Tsunamis. [Actually why not do that for all countries but as we are speaking of the Tsunami...]. It makes absolutely no sense if the so-called developed countries are pouring in short term aid only to then restrict the long term economic development of those same places by discriminating against their products in the markets of the economically richest countries of the world. And opening those markets without restriction provides a further opportunity for local people to regain control and make something of their own lives rather than be dependent on the charity of others.

3. CREATE AND SUPPORT PUBLIC SPACES

Not even in the economically richest or safest communities in the world will all the people in those communities agree on what needs to happen. But they will all want to have their say. Debate and dialogue is necessary and vital. The same principle is even more important for the communities temporarily destroyed by the Tsunamis. The survivors will want - and should have - a major say in how their communities now develop. For that to happen they need public spaces. Both spaces for formal debate and discussion and spaces for informal gathering and dialogue. Such spaces may or may not have existed in the pre-Tsunami era. They are absolutely essential now.

4. NEGOTIATING SPACES

The communities swamped by those waves will, over the short- to medium-term at least, experience an incoming tide of international development workers as the major agencies deploy their staff and resources. Though there is, at the time of this writing, a growing international issue related to overall coordination, the real coordination issues lie in local communities. It is of the utmost importance that local people and organisations are centrally involved in that coordination. The traditional tendency has been that the agencies coordinate amongst themselves and the local people are recipients of that coordinated relief. This may be very appropriate during the immediate rescue, relief and disease prevention phase, but it is unacceptable in the medium- and long-term development processes that follow. The major development agencies, as central parts of their programmes of action, need to create and support the spaces in which they all negotiate their work with local representatives. This is an equally important plank in the "reinforce local control" process that is so vital for a successful long-term phase.

5. LOCAL MEDIA

There is no way at present to know how many local radio stations, newspapers, magazines and other local media were silenced by the Tsunamis. One report had most of the journalists in Aceh killed by the quake and the floods. Even where they survived, the local media will have been dramatically weakened through the cruel combination of trained people missing or dead, and facilities and equipment gone. Local media will be crucial in the long-term recovery/development process. They provide an important sense of local identity, map and monitor the recovery process in local terms and language, are a forum for expressing local views and are a pressure point on the "authorities" for faster action on more appropriate matters. Structural support for the [re]generation of local media should have a very high priority.

6. LOCALLY MANAGED MONITORING

How will we gauge the success of the global support and development efforts that are now being mobilised in response to the killer quakes and waves of the Indian Ocean? The immediate actions are comparatively easy to assess - prevention of disease, staving off malnutrition, reuniting families, safe shelter, security, etc. They are internationally determined and universal, irrespective of context and culture. The longer term development goals are more difficult to establish. The setting of locally appropriate goals and the monitoring of progress towards them should be locally driven and managed. Such control is vital for relevant long-term development. If the "outsider" agencies -either explicitly or implicitly- set the long-term goals and then develop programmes that seek to "deliver" those goals "for" the populations in which they have intervened, then it will be a perversion of good development practice: local monitoring and the accountability of all agencies to the locally set goals and locally run monitoring processes.

One of the reasons to outline these essential factors as core elements for the medium- and long-term investments by international agencies is the fear that the understandable patterns of the immediate response will continue to dominate the medium- to long-term response: that providing and caring for people will win out, even in the long-term, over supporting people to redevelop their lives and communities under their control and according to their debated and negotiated requirements. Let's hope that we can avoid this and turn Tsunamis of destruction into tides of hope.

* Originally published by *The Communication Initiative*

<http://www.comminit.com> on January 20 2005 as one of a series called "ConunDRUMs". Please see

<http://www.comminit.com/conundrums/conundrums/conundrums-10.html> for direct access to the original article.

** Executive Director, The Communication Initiative.
wfeek@comminit.com

