A few months shy of the anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, the world has witnessed multiple disaster tragedies—including Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the recent earthquake in Kashmir—that focus our attention once again on pressing questions: How can we as societies be better prepared for disaster? How can we respond more quickly and more efficiently? How can we address the underlying problems of marginalized and poor communities to lessen their vulnerability to these catastrophes?

If history is any guide, the window to address these issues will be narrow and the urgency the global community feels now will ebb into complacency and inaction. In part, this natural human reaction is driven by the daunting enormity and complexity of the solutions required. Disaster preparedness and recovery is not the domain of any one sector, and in fact it requires a high level of collaboration among local communities, citizen sector organizations, international relief organizations, governments, and military units. As Katrina proved, even the vast resources of a Western nation are ineffectual in the absence of coordination, communication, and planning.

Studies of the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and other disasters (such as the Fritz Institute’s first-ever aid recipient survey and the World Disasters Report 2005) have given the world clear directives on what works and what doesn’t. Clearly, it is more cost effective to invest in preparation and mitigation than in recovery: According to the Worldwatch Institute, every dollar spent on disaster mitigation can save seven dollars in economic losses from a disaster. The multimillion dollar price tag on the levee improvements in New Orleans that were left undone has been dwarfed by the multibillion dollar cost of rebuilding flooded neighborhoods in the wake of the hurricane and the ensuing storm surge.

Although the engagement of social entrepreneurs is just one component of an effective approach to mitigating and responding to disasters, the citizen sector historically has been the most reliable source of innovation and creative solutions to social problems. (See Changemakers.net “Transforming Disaster Relief into Community Building,” and the current OneWorld Perspectives: Dealing with Disasters.) With this in mind, we now challenge this community to devise new ideas and strategies, and help spread successful solutions, that take advantage of this window of attention from the world. The Changemakers.net “Meeting Disaster” competition is soliciting proposals from social entrepreneurs (the deadline for submitting entries is November 22) that address any aspect of preparation or response. Finalists will be selected by a panel of judges and then this online community will vote to select the three winners who will each receive a $5,000 award.

The Meeting Disaster Mosaic of Solutions provides principles and strategies for disaster preparedness and response. The mosaic contains examples of social entrepreneurs whose work illustrates how the principles can be applied to the fundamental problems of meeting disaster. Their work does not address every aspect of meeting disaster—for example the mosaic does not specifically address recommendations for government response. But the mosaic is a starting point for thinking about and discussing the key challenges posed by disasters, and developing creative, effective solutions, informed by the knowledge that the worst disasters can provide the brightest opportunities for real social change.

Barriers to effective disaster preparedness and recovery:

Simultaneous systems breakdown causes paralysis. Communication between various actors can be limited and chains of authority may be unclear in the wake of significant physical structural damage, magnifying the impact of a disaster. Moreover, the sudden and extreme situation makes it difficult to prioritize and choose what to address first, and how.

Lack of scenario planning and preparedness. The most obvious, important and cost-effective approach is advance planning, training, and coordination of local and national responders, as well as communities themselves, but these plans rarely have a sense of urgency or budget mandate until a disaster actually strikes.

Inadequate infrastructure. Various forms of infrastructure may not be robust, or may be wiped out by the disaster, particularly in the developing world and poverty-stricken and rural areas, making access and relief delivery more difficult.

Existence of marginalized communi-
ties magnifies devastation. Studies suggest that people in low-income countries are four times more likely than people in high-income countries to die from a natural disaster. As Katrina highlighted, even in wealthy nations, poor people are more vulnerable, as they are less likely to have the means to flee, or the accumulated resources to rebuild on their own. In some cases, special interests have exploited the increased vulnerability of communities affected by disasters to widen the gulf between the “haves” and the “have nots.”

Poorly deployed external aid weakens communities. Aid driven by responders from outside a community may be poorly suited to specific needs, culturally inappropriate or unevenly deployed. It can build dependency rather than empower local residents. According to the World Disasters Report 2005, issued by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, one of the primary problems in the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami was a glut of resources of some kinds, and a shortage of others. The report found: "Ten international field hospitals were set up in Banda Aceh, none of which worked at full capacity. There were too many surgeons. One UN witness in Meulaboh saw '20 surgeons competing for a single patient'. Yet midwives and nurses were in short supply. Women had to give birth without medical assistance."

Principles:

Mobilize or repurpose existing local resources. In recent disasters, social entrepreneurs reacted quickly by employing their community-based organizations, resources, and strategies in support of local survivors. Because they were often the most trusted organizations and those most connected to the communities themselves, they were able to accurately assess needs and deploy resources through their already established networks. Mobilizing local community residents empowers them to improve their lives so that they are less vulnerable to future disasters.

Let survivors' input shape response. One of the biggest factors in the appropriateness of a response plan or a recovery effort itself is the degree to which those hit hardest by the disaster had a role in shaping the action. Tapping local knowledge and awareness of community needs and encouraging local involvement in both prevention and response heighten the effectiveness of planning and strengthen community.

Use disaster as opportunity for greater social change. The destruction of old systems, and the media attention and resources that disasters inherently draw to an area, create opportunities to address larger social issues ranging from upgrading infrastructure in poor communities to empowering girls whose ideas about their futures may be altered by contact with relief workers, or the roles they themselves play in recovery.