

A Year of Progress, a Year of Setbacks

Many challenges, from lack of coordination to an overabundance of aid, have hampered recovery efforts in tsunami-stricken regions

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The Indian Ocean tsunamis that struck South Asia last December triggered one of the largest charitable responses the world has ever seen.

Donations to American relief groups alone topped \$1.6-billion, and so far at least a third of that has been spent, a Chronicle tally has found. That is an unprecedented amount of money for an international emergency, and thousands of charities from many countries have been helping to rebuild the disaster-ravaged region.

Yet signs of progress remain rare as the calamity's one-year anniversary approaches.

Lack of coordination among charities and government agencies, as well as misguided gestures by well-intentioned donors, volunteers, and charities, are key reasons.

Relief groups also say efforts to construct new homes for those displaced by the tsunamis have faced many obstacles. In some areas, records were destroyed, making it hard to sort out just who owns which parcel of land. And concerns about introducing new inequities with new construction have added to delays.

Temporary Housing

In Indonesia, where the massive waves killed at least 128,000 people, and in Sri Lanka, where 31,000 people died, miles of decimated coastline have yet to be rebuilt, leaving many tsunami survivors living in makeshift huts or even tents.

But those same countries, as well as India, the nation with the third-largest loss of life, also received an overabundance of some types of aid.

Pressure from American donors and others, some charity officials say, has hampered the recovery. Charities feel they must show the results of their work quickly or donors will complain, but sometimes the fast reaction meant groups didn't provide what was needed most in the long term.

Venkatesh Salagrama, director of Integrated Coastal Management, in Andhra Pradesh, India, says that for some nonprofit groups "boats were the quickest way to spend the money." As a result, he says, so many boats were donated that the industry risks overfishing, and some people are not making decent wages from fishing so they need to find other ways to earn money.

Yet many aid officials say that expectations of a quick recovery or a flawless response are unrealistic given the scope of the devastation.

The disaster is "such a big problem, and there are so many moving parts, that if you wanted to list all of the mistakes and all of the problems, it would be a big book," says Michael R. Wiest, a vice president at Catholic Relief Services, in Baltimore. "But if you step back — given the complexity of it and the magnitude of it — I would say this was a good response."

In many ways, the sheer volume of money donated sets the tsunamis

apart from other natural disasters.

"Unlike the usual course of affairs where organizations are competing for donor attention, here they were fighting to spend," says Mark P. Haselkorn, director of research at the interdisciplinary program on humanitarian relief at the University of Washington, in Seattle.

Bill Clinton, the former president who was appointed a United Nations special envoy for the disaster, said last month that more money was contributed by government and private donors to tsunami causes than was needed. Once South Asia has recovered, he suggested, surplus funds could be used to support efforts in Africa to fight AIDS and malaria.

Some charity leaders question whether the extraordinary amount of aid that has poured into South Asia has in some ways disrupted the natural economies of some areas and caused too many survivors of the tsunamis to become overly dependent on government and private relief programs.

In Komari, Sri Lanka, Thambiraja Kulandiran, a baker who lost two children to the waves, says the clean water and food being distributed in displaced-persons camps have had the unintended consequence of keeping people from coming back to town.

"If the people stop receiving aid in the camps," he says, "they will return."

In Indonesia, Lutheran World Relief, a

Baltimore organization, is working with local charities to fight dependency and instill a sense of ownership in recovery efforts by asking aid recipients for a "sweat equity" investment — but their efforts are being undercut by the large number of organizations competing to provide free assistance.

"They were going into the community and saying, 'Yes, we'll help build your houses, but you need to clear the land,'" says Kathryn Wolford, president of Lutheran World Relief, about the nongovernmental organizations her group is working with. "But then another NGO — generally an international NGO — would come in and say, 'Oh, we'll do it all.'"

The presence of so many charities has led to other problems. Some local nonprofit leaders fear that as international aid groups increase their activities they are hiring the best and brightest employees away from local charities, causing a brain drain of sorts. Some foreign charities have more than doubled the sizes of their staffs since the disaster. CARE Sri Lanka, for example, grew from 222 to 560 people.

Close Scrutiny

Because the tsunamis captured the attention of so many American donors,

nonprofit leaders say they are keenly aware of how carefully their performance is being watched.

American nonprofit officials say they understand that they must prove that charitable dollars are being well spent and hope that donors will be patient.

"Everybody from early on recognized that this was such an outpouring of support that they had better be even more vigilant and diligent in accountability than we ordinarily would be," says Neal Keny-Guyer, chief executive of Mercy Corps, in Portland, Ore.

As part of this increased emphasis on oversight, a few organizations have started soliciting opinions from the aid beneficiaries themselves — one of the first times such an effort has been attempted over a vast geographic area.

The Fritz Institute, in San Francisco, has conducted a series of surveys asking survivors in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka to assess the quality of the aid they have received, while the Asia Foundation, also in San Francisco, together with the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Indonesia, is producing a series of progress reports on recovery efforts in the Indonesian province of

Aceh based primarily on interviews with tsunami survivors.

Besides making sure donors don't get upset about their tsunami gifts, many charities also hope that they can use the disaster to demonstrate to Americans that they can play an important role by supporting nonprofit groups that work abroad.

Raymond C. Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America, in Boston, says his organization is working hard to encourage the 125,000 people who gave to the charity for the first time after the tsunamis to give again.

But just as critical, he says, is to try to educate them about the full range of issues Oxfam tackles, such as responding to man-made emergencies like the genocide in Sudan and advocating for fair-trade policies.

"We think it's very important that the American public begin to see themselves as global citizens who are engaged in wider conversations, not only about emergencies, but issues of global poverty," says Mr. Offenheiser.
