

Mandate in Action: OFDA's Tsunami Response

By *Fiona Shanks*

As the most widely publicized natural disaster in history, the enormity of the devastation wrought by the tsunami on December 26, 2004, needs little retelling. Although the scale of the disaster took several days to unfold, it did so before the eyes of the world, captivated by images of devastation and tales of survival. What merits a closer look is OFDA's response, which embodied the office's simple yet profound mandate in its entirety. Even as the world learned day by day the true extent of the havoc wreaked by the power of water, OFDA was in action,³ saving lives, alleviating human suffering, and mitigating the social and economic impact of disasters.

Saving Lives

OFDA dispatched more than 50 disaster experts and other emergency personnel to the affected region immediately after the tsunami struck. Through 15 airlifts of emergency relief commodities, OFDA helped ensure that the urgent needs of the survivors were met. OFDA also helped to make certain that the countless humanitarian airlifts provided by the U.S. military reached beneficiaries in the affected areas as effectively as possible. More than \$84 million in OFDA emergency programming in the areas of health care, water and sanitation, nutrition, and shelter thwarted epidemics from following on the heels of the tsunami. As former President Clinton expressed to members of the USAID response and reconstruction teams in May 2005, "I thought there would be mass

³ OFDA worked closely throughout the response with counterparts in U.S. Embassies and USAID Missions, the U.S. military, humanitarian assistance organizations, and authorities in the affected countries.

Left: A house remains in a once-crowded neighborhood in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

outbreaks of cholera, dysentery, which did not occur. I was convinced we'd have major public health problems. That didn't happen. It is an enormous tribute to all of you."

Unlike less publicized humanitarian emergencies, the tsunami disaster did not suffer from a lack of financial resources. In fact, the opposite was true. The outpouring of global generosity was such that the typical humanitarian funding pyramid, in which donor countries supply essential funding to NGOs, was turned on its head. Several implementing NGOs and other organizations had so much money that they were not dependent on the U.N. or other large donors to facilitate and fund programs. Many NGOs had sufficient resources to supply their own helicopters, and several large NGOs went so far as to stop accepting further donations in the first weeks of the emergency response. However, OFDA's traditional role in supporting implementing partners was not diminished by the unusual situation of NGOs having, in some cases, larger operational budgets than the donors. In fact, OFDA's long-standing ability to rapidly fund programs from both headquarters and the field enabled on-the-ground personnel to implement programs as soon as needs were identified, thereby bolstering and accelerating relief efforts.



RON LIBBY, USAID

A child benefits from OFDA interventions in tsunami-affected areas of Aceh Province, Indonesia.



ALEXANDRA RIBOUL, USAID

Through OFDA-sponsored cash-for-work programs, tsunami survivors begin to rebuild communities in Sri Lanka.

OFDA funding also allowed small but high-impact agencies without large amounts of private funding to make key contributions. The strong relationships OFDA has fostered through years of collaboration in the most challenging circumstances gave many implementing partners the confidence to immediately deploy teams and begin emergency programs, knowing that OFDA would be there with financial and technical support. Indeed, OFDA's reputation in the humanitarian community for speed and flexibility, and the reputation of the DART for being versatile and willing to consider creative solutions, ensured that even those NGOs that did not need USAID's financial support continued to regard OFDA as an essential partner during the tsunami response.

"A little more than two weeks ago, the world witnessed one of the worst displays of natural destruction in history. Since that time, the world has witnessed one of history's greatest displays of compassion."

President George W. Bush,
January 2005

Alleviating Human Suffering

The tsunami exacted a tremendous loss of life, but conditions for those who survived the wave of destruction threatened to take what the water had not. The physical and emotional pain of the survivors was evident in the aftermath of the disaster, and OFDA wasted no time in implementing programs to alleviate this suffering. Early reports from the DARTs of high levels of distress among the affected populations led USAID to prioritize psychological and social programming.



ALEX MAHONEY/USAID

Fishing boats near completion in an OFDA-funded livelihoods program implemented by IRC in Calang, Indonesia.

In response to widespread fear of the sea and of continued earthquakes, as well as to help people incapacitated by grief, OFDA designed programs to “foster functionality.” By providing emotional support and physical activities, OFDA helped the survivors of this disaster to regain a sense of control in a chaotic environment. Children were a main focus of USAID’s efforts. Through the construction of child-centered spaces, OFDA created a physical space for children to begin the process of emotional healing through purposeful activities—educational as well as recreational. For adults, OFDA funded mobile teams of mental health professionals to identify and assist people in need of psychological and social support. In addition, the provision of jobs through cash-for-work programs gave adults the opportunity to resume their customary social roles. These first few steps back towards normalcy alleviated suffering and helped people begin healing.

Mitigating the Social and Economic Impact of Disasters

While fulfilling the second element of OFDA’s mandate, cash-for-work and livelihoods programs simultaneously served to realize the third element. While by no means the first time OFDA has funded livelihoods programs in response to a disaster, the tsunami response marked the first time these activities formed a core part of USAID’s response strategy. Initial cash-for-work programs gave people much-needed income, while longer-term livelihoods programs that soon followed hastened the end of dependency on humanitarian aid. OFDA favored programs that drew upon and strengthened local resources and tapped into nascent civil society groups rather than supplanting them. Providing people with work not only injected cash into the affected communities and restarted elements of the local economies, but also mitigated the social impact of the disaster. By enabling the affected communities to resume work and to rehabilitate schools and places of worship, OFDA played a part in putting *life* back together for the survivors of the disaster.



OFDA partner IRD manages water and sanitation activities at a temporary shelter site in Aceh Province, Indonesia.

The Road Ahead

OFDA responded to the horror of the tsunami with a reflex developed through more than 40 years of putting mandate into action. With regional offices in Asia and long-standing programs in many of the affected countries, OFDA drew on established relationships with USAID Missions, international and regional organizations, and NGOs to guarantee a rapid and effective response to an unpredicted and unprecedented calamity.

OFDA provided crucial support for livelihood and economic recovery and market revitalization activities alongside lifesaving interventions in recognition of the vital link between relief and recovery. By simultaneously implementing all three elements of the mandate in the emergency phase of the response, OFDA set the stage for the longer-term rebuilding of the lives and communities affected by the tsunami—efforts which will continue for years to come.

From disasters affecting a few hundred people to those, like the tsunami, that affect millions, OFDA remains committed to an underlying principle: the importance of assisting those in need, in whatever form that need takes, whenever and wherever it is felt, until the victims of disasters regain self-sufficiency. Decades of responding to emergencies prepared OFDA to put mandate into action as news of the tsunami reverberated around the world.

“When you see families torn apart by this tragedy, and people desperately trying to rebuild schools and places of work and worship, then you realize that, despite our differences, we are bound together by our common humanity, and we all have an obligation to help the victims of the tsunami have the blessings of a normal life.”

Former President William J. Clinton,
January 2005