



SUCCESS STORY

Tsunami Response Unites Adversaries

Ethnic adversaries work together to help communities recover



Photo: USAID/Julie Fossler

Youth volunteers aiding the tsunami cleanup in Trincomalee establish relationships across ethnic boundaries.

“This disaster has displaced traditional ethnic divisions,” said Wayne Brook, head of USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives in Ampara.

Two days after two-thirds of Sri Lanka’s coastal villages were ravaged by the tsunami, Sinhalese volunteers called USAID to offer their help for relief efforts in the hardest-hit areas. The villages in most need of aid were predominantly Tamil and Muslim—Sinhalese adversaries in two decades of armed conflict. A month later, hundreds of Sinhalese volunteers continued to arrive, clearing destroyed houses, felled trees and endless debris.

As the only international organization with a presence in Ampara at the time of the tsunami, USAID is working with Sri Lankans to respond—despite the fact that several relief workers were themselves victims. The worst-hit schools have been a priority for cleanup so that communities can re-establish stability in the lives of children traumatized by the tsunami. Sinhalese volunteers, with the help of USAID translators, have also offered to help Tamil residents clean up their homes.

“This disaster has displaced traditional ethnic divisions,” said Wayne Brook, head of USAID’s Ampara Office of Transition Initiatives. “Each of our ongoing conflict resolution programs includes components encouraging people of different ethnicities to come together for some purpose, which has manifested itself in this spirit of volunteering.”

In the northeastern Trincomalee district, USAID is taking a youth-oriented approach to the recovery, in an effort to strengthen relationships across ethnic boundaries. Multi-ethnic teams of 400–1,000 youth volunteers have been awarded grants to obtain protective gear, clothing and emergency medical supplies.

Immediately after the disaster, USAID provided emergency food, shelter, water, sanitation and medical supplies. But now it is helping Sri Lanka plan its long-term recovery, by establishing cash-for-work programs to clean up debris and repair damaged property. Small loans are helping people repair boats, reopen shops and start new businesses. USAID is also working with international and local organizations to provide psychological and social support to help individuals, families and communities cope with the trauma they experienced.