

Crossing oceans

A brief case study from the Andaman Islands, Indian

Introduction

How do you respond to a disaster that has hit a small group of islands 1,450km away, across an immense ocean? How do you respond when the islands' governing authorities become defensive when you offer to help? On 29 December 2004, a team of six people from three independent relief agencies landed in Port Blair, the capital of the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. It was three days after the tsunami wave had hit their shores. A well-connected Christian campaigner met them at the airport and introduced the team to senior officials on the island. He organised a meeting of local church leaders and eventually made a link for them to work with, among others, an evangelical church. The church had no tradition of social action, yet over the coming months its members enthusiastically ran a feeding centre, helped to build temporary shelters for tsunami survivors and, as a result, changed their understanding of what it meant to be 'church'.



Aims

- To deliver, with the help of a local church, effective relief to 500 internally displaced people (IDP) in Port Blair, South Andaman, over a period of a month.
- To build 350 temporary shelters in Hut Bay, Little Andaman, 12 hours away by boat

Steps in the process

Pre-tsunami

Three NGOs – the Evangelical Fellowship of India Committee on Relief (EFICOR), the Discipleship Centre (DC) and Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) – had been assessing their responses to the devastation caused by an earthquake some years before. They had held meetings to see how they could complement each other's work more effectively, to achieve greater impact as well as minimise duplication when the next disaster arose. As a result they set up the Disaster Coordinating Committee (DCC).

Post-tsunami

a) Relief

NGOs: When the tsunami struck, a DCC meeting was organised in Delhi and on 29 December six staff, two each from EFICOR, DC and EHA, flew in to Port Blair. They presented themselves to government officials and church leaders as one relief agency, rather than three separate ones. The churches on the island decided that their schools and church buildings should be opened to people coming by boat to the harbour at Port Blair. The DCC then looked for volunteers and equipment to run a feeding centre at Middle Point School, which had been allocated to them.

The Pentecostal Mission (TPM): The assistant pastor of TPM met the DCC team by chance and offered stoves and cooking utensils for the camp kitchen at Middle Point School. He thought it unlikely that people from his church would volunteer, but eventually six women did. During January 2005, volunteers from the church rose to 50 as they purchased and cooked food for 500 people each day. Members also offered counselling and prayer for the families they were serving.

Case studies in brief

b) Rehabilitation

The DCC was given permission to build 350 temporary shelters on Hut Bay, a 12-hour boat journey from Port Blair, from where most of the people attending the feeding centre at Middle Point School had come. TPM members went to work there, both on a paid and voluntary basis, helping the Hut Bay islanders to construct temporary homes.

Impact

- A larger and more effective response was achieved by three agencies working as one.
- TPM met the food and shelter needs of 500 people efficiently and with compassion.
- TPM's experience in relief work increased their understanding of what it meant to be 'church'.
'Our deeds were the real epistle – we can show love of God through our deeds – the living epistle!' 'By being involved as we were, we had a burden of prayer for them which we did not have before.'

Lessons learnt

NGOs

- Significant practical and psychological preparations were needed for the three agencies to feel free to give up their independence:
 - Clear pre-operation procedures needed to be established
 - Staff needed to become familiar with the new organisation and line management structure.
- The efficiencies gained by working together as one unit proved to be significant:
 - Set-up costs and running costs were significantly reduced
 - The local authorities were more willing to deal with one organisation that could offer a wider range of skills, abilities and scale of operations, than three smaller ones.

Church

- The leadership of the church must be willing to support such a response if a relief effort by the church is to be sustained, as it causes significant disruption to normal church routines.
- Members must be allowed to find their own ways to contribute to the relief effort. Creating the right environment for women volunteers to work is important.
- The local church will discover how much it can complement the role of an outside agency, the more they get involved in the work. Local knowledge is invaluable.
- Some of these discoveries will add a new dimension to what it means to be 'church' and to people's understanding of witness.

Conclusion

It is possible to bring a co-ordinated and comprehensive relief and rehabilitation response, involving the local church, to displaced people in a remote and politically sensitive location.

Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

NGOs

- The relief agencies share a similar way of working.
- The NGO Chief Executives know and trust one another.
- The NGOs have previous experience of coordinating work together.

Church

- There is a champion from within the church leadership advocating involvement in such work.
- The tasks being asked of the church are ones that fit with its skills and outlook.

[Click here for a more detailed version of this case study.](#)

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