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Since the tsunami in Asia, I've heard from many colleagues and friends around the world asking how best to help.

Current estimates put the death toll from the event itself over 150,000 and it is feared that an additional 80,000 may die from outbreaks of gastroenteric diseases.

There are some lessons the disaster response community has learned over the years. Here is a quick listing:

1. **Send cash.** Every seaport and airport in the region will quickly be jammed with relief supplies, many of them of marginal value at best. The airport at Colombo, Sri Lanka is already nearly paralyzed. Cash is needed by relief agencies to purchase needs locally (e.g. clothing). They do this to bolster local economies rather than hurt them with imported supplies. Where supplies are not available (e.g. medicines), they are purchased abroad and flown in by the military or at significant expense.
2. **Contribute for reconstruction and development, not just relief.** The emergency period will be over in the next couple of weeks. Many of these needs are being met by international organizations, donor countries, and by the thousands of local volunteers. While the emergency needs are great, even greater, far greater, will be the need for funds with which to help rebuild communities and livelihoods. Unfortunately, many of the relief agencies that flood into countries after major disasters do not stay beyond the emergency period. This is why it is important to contribute to agencies and earmark funds for reconstruction and development in the affected communities and to select agencies that will be there for the long haul.
3. **Select agencies that know the countries.** Many of the relief agencies that are listed or advertising for contributions have never set foot in the affected countries. Unless they are very specialized agencies (e.g. Doctors Without Borders), many will waste time and money trying to figure

out how to operate. The best chance to help is to support those organizations with local offices already operational.

4. **Consider local organizations.** Most Americans will prefer to contribute to known US or European organizations. That is fine. If you wish, you can contribute directly to local organizations in the countries affected. The difficulty however is knowing which organizations are reliable and efficiently getting the money to them. Most do not have Internet sites set up for contributions like the major US and European agencies. Sending checks or wiring funds is unreliable to many affected countries. Where you can contribute directly, the money will go a long way though you will not get a US tax deduction for it unless they have a US-based 501(C)(3) non-profit channel.

5. **Most importantly, contribute to organizations that aim to lessen vulnerability, not just help rebuild poverty.** While rich tourist beach hotels were also inundated, a large percentage of those affected are poor people living on flood plains, poor fishing communities, or coastal slums. It is not enough to help people rebuild shanties. Every “natural” disaster is also an opportunity to help communities lessen their vulnerability. The most progressive international relief agencies (e.g. Oxfam, American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, etc.) know the conditions that bred such vulnerability and will work with local government and people to change those conditions.

I am appending a brief list of agencies that I feel meet the above criteria. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but represents a few organizations whose work and reputations I or trusted colleagues know well.

Also appended is a piece called “Five Questions to Ask Before You Give.” This may be useful if you are contemplating a significant gift to an agency I have not listed.

Please let me know if I can help you in any way to make a meaningful contribution. Please feel free to forward this letter to others if it is useful.

I wish you a Happy New Year. May it bring solace and justice to the affected families.

Laurence Simon

Here is a short list of relief and development agencies that I recommend

Oxfam America and Oxfam UK. International NGOs working in several of the affected countries. Oxfam UK has had a field office in eastern Sri Lanka for many years. You can contribute on-line at www.Oxfam.org.uk. If you wish a US tax deduction, contribute to Oxfam America at www.oxfamamerica.org.

Doctors Without Borders. International NGO working in Indonesia and may extend operations to other countries. You can contribute on-line at www.msf.org/

Sarvodaya. Sri Lankan NGO with a vast network in the affected communities. We have just set up an internet site for donations. Go to www.sarvodaya.org. Of all Sri Lankan organizations, I highly recommend Sarvodaya.

Mennonite Central Committee. US NGO working in Sri Lanka. You can contribute on-line at www.mcc.org/

WALHI – Indonesian Forum for the Environment. Go to <http://www.eng.walhi.or.id/> and follow the link to the Global Green Grants Fund site for US-based contributions.

American Friends Service Committee. Go to <http://afsc.org>

Other reputable organizations that generally meet the criteria include CARE and Catholic Relief Services.