

The Tsunami, Partnerships and the Future: What can we learn?



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Abstract: *Martin Lee, who took the helm at Global Connections last year, was previously Director of Christian Organisation for Relief and Development, an organisation he founded twenty five years ago. In this paper he draws on his experience of facilitating partnerships for relief and development to ask some of the hard and some may think, "unthinkable" questions about partnering in relief, development and mission.*

Boxing Day 2004 shocked the world. The devastation of the tsunami impacted thousands of people and led to an unprecedented international response. No other disaster has captured the hearts, minds and pockets of so many in such different nations.

The response has been massive, diverse and unique. A three-minute silence took place all over the world. There was blanket media coverage on TV, radio, newspapers and magazines. In the UK, over £200m was raised by the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC), a consortium of 13 major UK NGOs. This eclipsed all past DEC appeals, the previous highest being £53m raised for Kosovo in 1999.

Across the world, over \$2.4 billion has been raised from the public. Thousands of medically qualified staff, emergency workers and volunteers offered their services or even paid their own fares to go and help out. Governments too followed, digging into their own coffers to the tune of \$4.2 billion with Australia leading the way with \$820m, Germany with \$653m, Japan with \$500m, the USA with \$350m and the British trailing in 9th place with \$93m. Even smaller countries joined in with the two most generous nations in terms of giving per citizen being Kuwait and Qatar.

We could be cynical about the real size of the response and the reasons behind it, even the possible negative effects it may have on mission giving in the future or the ongoing long term disasters of TB, malaria and HIV that rarely hits our TV screens. But that is not the issue here. The world genuinely seems to have united together on something, believing that by responding together we can be more effective than doing it apart. It wasn't the worst disaster of recent times, the earthquake in Tangsten, China in 1976 with 655,000 dead has that dubious honour. But its widespread nature across several countries and the scale of the response, mean it is a type of its own.

The response to the tsunami has been incredible but not without its tensions. The American Government tried to dictate where its military would provide assistance without clearing this with the Indonesian Government. Westerners turned up with no knowledge of the local culture or environment. Even the DEC came under attack for being a cartel. Behind these issues, are questions about what partnership is and whether we are as good at it as we may think we are! Before my present post, I worked for twenty-five years in disaster and emergency situations with CORD, a Christian NGO. During that time, I learned a lot about partnership through involvement in a number of different collaborative groups. For me, partnership is about equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit. Partners need to be confident that they are on the same side; that there is a balance of power, that no one partner is able to "control" the other; a belief that the partner will deliver; and a sense of mutual accountability.

This understanding has led me to question three key areas of how we partner together. Firstly, the apparent competition between western groups and the impact this has on our use of resources. Secondly, the need for authentic partnerships with local people and groups that values each member. Thirdly, the importance of respecting the local environment, economy and the community, and not simply importing goods and skills because it is easier! These areas of concern are not to deny the incredible sacrificial attitudes of those that responded to the tsunami, or the wonderful sense of working together. Yet I have this increasing unease about the three questions I have just raised. These questions may make us uncomfortable (they also make me uneasy!) but surely it is important to ask them so that we can learn to serve each other more effectively.

So how can we do it better? Let's look at the three issues in turn.

1. **Western groups partnering together.** Perhaps it is the individualism of the West, but there seems to be a growing number of groups responding to some crisis or another. In 1991 there were 500 groups working with the homeless in London, now there are 2,000. I see the same trend in Christian relief agencies, though I have no firm numbers. I am sure all have been formed out of a genuine concern to want to do something. Praise God for that. Yet we somehow seem always to be competing with each other, for money, staff and resources. We seem to co-operate together so little. This isn't just true for the Christian world, but as Christians is this an area where we should be more distinctive?

There are signs of hope. Recently a new group called "Integral" (see Article 4 for more details on Integral) was established. Integral is comprised of twelve western-based Christian agencies, including Tearfund UK, that are committed to joint working particularly in relief situations. Again, four small UK relief groups worked together under the title Christian Response to assist in the tsunami. Medair, ZOA and CORD have a formal agreement to work together in emergencies and not in competition, supporting each other's initiatives and projects. These are just a few examples, but does it demonstrate the need for more? Shouldn't some of us look closely at partnering formally, or even merger? What holds us back?

I have learnt many lessons from both the successful and unsuccessful partnerships in which I have been involved. Some of them I highlight here and could be applied to any partnership, joint venture or whatever.

- A partner needs to bury its own agenda, whatever this is, for the good of the people we seek to serve together. "I must decrease that He might increase", must be the heart felt cry. So what if you don't get your group's name in lights, or the money you need, as long as the aim is fulfilled. Does our heart leap for joy when we enable someone else to fulfil our goals? Otherwise we just seek to build our own empire first rather than Christ's, and will complain when others unintentionally or otherwise seem to steal our staff, expertise and resources.
- Each partner must understand the benefits the other partner brings. Each partner brings different skills and resources, not all of which can be measured in financial terms. We must value those whom we are working alongside.
- Partners need to be open with each other. When we start to feel excluded by the other, we need to talk about it and not stew on it. Not easy for the 'stiff upper lip' Brit!
- Agreements need to be written down, constantly revised and ultimately evaluated.
- Partners need to agree at which level the partnership is founded – strategic, tactical or financial.

Huge numbers of western groups have responded to the tsunami and launched this and that appeal. It was both a fantastic reaction to the scale of the event and yet at the same time a reflection that the Christian world hadn't got its act together. So I pose the question – how can we do it better next time?

2. **Partnering genuinely with local partners.** I write this part with mixed emotions because some of the good things in the West such as the desire to respond and be involved, seemingly have led to the negatives of uncoordinated, dysfunctional and imperialistic responses. The newspapers were full of the exploits of the hero from the West – how many stories have we heard of local people and their response? It is not that one group is more important than the other but that to be in partnership we need to genuinely value and appreciate the role of each other.

The problem with the word 'partner' is that we may use it differently in different contexts. I remember being at a meeting ten years ago where local agencies asked me not to use the word partner any more. It was a dirty word to them implying inequality, control and lack of trust by the western group. I have never been so ashamed. A recent article in Third Sector highlighted the views of public service charities in their relationship with government bodies. Only 13% of respondents felt treated as equal partners. I suspect it may be no different for many of our "partners".

Do we keep control in inappropriate ways? Do we make all the decisions, hold all the strings, demand local groups play our tune? We often use the word 'corruption' in talking about work in many countries. Yet power corrupts, and money in a relief setting equates power. All the lessons on partnership above also apply equally here in these relationships.

I am sure many of us have nothing but respect for our local partners. But is it truly a partnership, or have we allowed the power we have to affect our judgement? How can we do it better next time?

3. **Treating communities with respect.** Perhaps this is one of the most difficult lessons for all of us to learn. We westerners have it all and know it all, don't we? Local resources, both human and material, were often ignored by the western press during the tsunami response, but were we, Christians, any better? Certainly local infrastructure was poor already and the wave destroyed much else, including the lives of many skilled people. Yet there were still resources available locally or at least in the region, so why the constant stream of planes from the West? Did we really try to support the economy of the region?

Did we make best use of local knowledge and culture? Or did we just pile in without any local contacts or knowledge of the area? If we were new to the area, did we seek out agencies that had a track record? Did we source as much locally as possible? Did we seek the views of the local communities? I am sure many agencies did these things as a matter of course, but again how can we do it better next time?

I do not seek to sound negative but I do want to ask the questions that flow from my own experience of partnerships. Over the last 25 years I've made all the mistakes but I remain passionately committed to encouraging the West to show forth God's love to those who have so little. At the same time can we somehow start to come together in the West in partnership, partner truly with local groups and churches and treat countries with respect so He is glorified even more?

Maybe too this is not just about responding to disasters but how we treat our partners in all types of mission activity. How can we be more effective, creative, fair and Christ-like in the way we use the incredible resources we have in the West, empowering our partners, both international and local, and especially the very people we seek to serve? How can we recognise the incredible innate ability, skills, resources, trustworthiness and dedication of our local partners? How can we truly empower all our partners, restoring integrity to the word again and making them proud to be associated with us?

We can look back on the tsunami with great sadness that such a catastrophe happened. We can look back with pride that the world, and Christians too, responded in such a powerful way. I hope we can look forward to how we can partner together more effectively in the future. Ultimately, we need to put aside our own aspirations, so that God's love is demonstrated more effectively by how we serve one another.

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