



Executive summary

The tsunami struck the Indian Ocean region on 26 December 2004. In the 14 affected countries, over 225,000 people died or are still missing. Overall, an estimated two million people have been directly or indirectly affected, and 1.7 million of these were internally displaced.

This evaluation is one of five thematic evaluations undertaken by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) on the international humanitarian response to the tsunami. The other four in the series cover: coordination; the impact of the response on local and national capacities; linkages between relief, rehabilitation and development; and the funding response to the tsunami. This report evaluates the adequacy, appropriateness and effectiveness of the assessment of need in the first three months after the tsunami. It focuses on the impact of assessment on the response of international agencies and institutional donors and, ultimately, on the affected populations.

Over 300 officials or actors from over 50 agencies were interviewed for this study in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and seven donor countries. National consultants and research associates assisted in the review

of approximately 200 reports prepared in the first months after the tsunami. Non-structured interviews with 135 affected individuals were also conducted during the field visits.

There are several distinct types of needs assessment that are not easily compared:

- assessments of short-term, fast-changing and most immediate humanitarian needs, such as health, food and shelter, in contrast with assessments of damage and loss (economic valuation of recovery needs)
- cross-sectoral assessments versus more specialised thematic or sectoral surveys
- formal, structured and often scientific assessments as compared to descriptive compilations fuelling situation analysis
- assessments available or intended for general, common use as opposed to those left unshared and kept for internal agency planning.

The main body of this report reviews assessments intended to influence the decision making of the international community at large. Most findings focus

particularly on UN or interagency reports, as needs assessment from the Red Cross movement were not formally available to the evaluators. Selected sectoral or thematic assessments – on health, water and sanitation, food and nutrition, livelihood recovery (in particular fishing) and shelter – are reviewed in greater depth in the annexes to this report.

General findings

The following criteria are used to describe the needs assessments: timeliness, coverage, validity, coordination and continuity. The effectiveness of needs assessments is reviewed in terms of added value, dissemination and influence on appeals and decisions.

Timeliness of humanitarian needs assessment was determined by the capacity of the agency to identify qualified personnel, mobilise logistical means and inform the decision makers on the magnitude of need. Many actors rushed to the affected areas in an attempt to identify the most urgent needs of the affected population in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The mass media, not the UN or another humanitarian body, was able to provide early and 'convincing' comprehensive formal assessment of immediate needs. If the timeliness of UN and Red Cross assessments directed to a broad audience was questionable, the assessments carried out by agencies for their own planning were, by design, timely, as decisions were dependent on the outcome of those assessments.

Needs assessments for recovery, especially the damage and loss assessments carried out by the international financial institutions (IFIs), were remarkably early compared to what has been achieved in other disasters. In Indonesia, recovery assessments were initiated within days of the tsunami.

Providing comprehensive coverage of needs was difficult, given the geographical scope and magnitude of the impact. In fact, no cross-sectoral humanitarian needs assessment covered all affected areas even in any single country. Wider geographical coverage was achieved in thematic humanitarian surveys (on nutrition, food and disease surveillance) and in specialised livelihood assessments (on food and shelter, for instance) but coverage was best achieved by the economic macro-assessments of damage and loss.

Little information on methodology is available to judge the validity of the many needs assessments reviewed. A few shortcomings are evident, however: the lack of a unique format for rapid assessments; the variable definition of who is affected and eligible for assistance; and the tendency of assessors to disregard local coping capacity as if none of the needs were or would be met by national or local actors. The confusion about target population and the number of potential beneficiaries was still a major issue at the time of the evaluation (September 2005).

Coordination was best in countries with a strong government, such as in Thailand, India and the Maldives. A serious effort toward international coordination of initial needs assessment was noted in Sri Lanka where donors, UN agencies and one single NGO joined forces, and in Indonesia in the case of the inter-agency health assessment from the USS Abraham Lincoln air carrier.

Humanitarian needs change very fast as assistance pours in and priorities of the affected households shift toward recovery. The humanitarian community was not able to monitor the evolution of those short-term needs on an ongoing basis, except in a few limited sectoral areas (for instance, communicable diseases risk and, at times, food availability). Humanitarian needs assessments rapidly became obsolete.

Household livelihood needs (for example, for boats and housing) changed less quickly, and mechanisms were progressively put in place to monitor those needs in real time.

The above technicalities would be inconsequential if the needs assessments were effective in guiding the international response. Although internal assessments (those carried out by agencies for their own programming) may have been effective, assessments intended for public use by other actors were not so. The slow moving humanitarian needs assessment did not drive the initial humanitarian response. The availability of enormous amounts of funds in search of activities was the driving force.

A major weakness was the absence of any perceived added value of those humanitarian assessments for decision making. Other factors included the lack of analysis and compilation of a comprehensive picture of what the priorities ought to be, the climate of 'competitive compassion' preventing the dissemination of internal reports and data to other actors, and the extreme pressure from donors (public and government) to use the funding promptly. In brief, the mass media seems to have been the prime if not only influential source of information on needs for individual or institutional decision makers, outside the affected countries. Reports from the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC) or the Field Assessment and Coordination Team (FACT), the UNDAC equivalent in the Red Cross system, notoriously failed to influence their respective constituencies.

As a result the international response was a poor match for the real aspirations of the people affected by the tsunami, who felt over-assessed but not consulted – as

shown by the non-representative sample of households interviewed in this evaluation and the more comprehensive survey within the TEC evaluation on local capacity (see TEC Capacities Report, 2006). A notable exception was the empowerment of affected households achieved through several cash-based programmes implemented by the Red Cross and NGOs.

Conclusions

Many, if not all, of the shortcomings noted by the evaluators have also occurred in past sudden-impact natural disasters, from Hurricane Mitch in Central America to the earthquakes in Gujarat (India) and Bam (Iran). Undoubtedly, there were also unique circumstances affecting the tsunami response: the fact that Southeast Asia is an area of important geopolitical and economic transition; Aceh's civil conflict taking place in the largest Muslim country in the world; the presence of many tourists among the victims; and timing coinciding with holidays in much of the Western world. Above all, however, the intensity of media coverage and the literally overwhelming generosity of the public distinguish this disaster rather than its geographical scale, logistical constraints or the security and political environments.

Generous funding not only exceeded the absorption capacity of an overstretched humanitarian industry, and deprived it of its customary excuse for built-in systemic shortcomings, but also led to the proliferation of new actors with insufficient experience (and therefore competence) as well as to established actors venturing into activities outside their normal area of expertise. Finally, the relative excess of funding was a disincentive to assess, to coordinate and to apply the results of the few collective assessments.

This evaluation compared the performance of livelihood recovery needs assessment to assessment covering short-term humanitarian needs. Assessment in the first few days presents a formidable challenge compared to that carried out weeks later. The short life of humanitarian needs also renders assessment obsolete almost as soon as it is completed. Finally, fewer (and often more experienced) agents focused on recovery, while a plethora of often inexperienced actors organised the more immediate and visible humanitarian activities. Humanitarian agencies have much to learn from the successful approach adopted by the IFIs: expedient cooperation among all partners (above all, the national governments), significant influx of expertise and visibility, and use of teams of analysts to reconcile and compile the various sources of information.

Assessments should differentiate and prioritise between different types of need: those resulting from pre-existing conditions, those truly life-threatening, those that are better met locally and, finally, those perceived as priority by the 'beneficiaries' themselves rather than by the assessing agencies. Too often situation reports and assessments served the interests or mandate of the assessing agency more than those of the potential beneficiaries.

Assessments were carried out by a large number of organisations or teams created for and dedicated to the purpose of generating or managing information. This evaluation reviewed organisations including UNDAC, the Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC), FACT, the sectoral or cluster lead agencies, and numerous bilateral teams.

- UNDAC needs significant strengthening. Scarce human resources focused more on coordinating the large number of partners in Indonesia than on contributing to the assessment and analysis of new and useful information

portraying unmet need. It is urgently necessary to rethink the whole donor-based concept of UNDAC.

- HIC is an excellent initiative in the aftermath of natural disasters. It should become part of a broader UN knowledge management capacity with a more analytical as opposed to archiving function. Documents available in HIC archives were out of date and not often of practical relevance.
- Interviews and documents received through informal networks strongly suggest that the Red Cross movement's FACT had no more impact on the decision to dispatch the Emergency Response Units (ERUs) of participating Red Cross Societies than UNDAC had on governmental and non-governmental interventions. The audience of Recovery Assessment Team (RAT) reports was restricted to the Red Cross movement. Their influence on guiding the recovery response toward the priorities of affected families could not be ascertained.
- UN agencies leading a given sector (or cluster under the new OCHA terminology) are responsible for both informing and guiding the response in their area of expertise. The direct execution of relief projects distracted some of the agencies from this primary responsibility. A contradiction between technical priorities (identified locally through needs assessment) and those adopted at policy level (in headquarters) affected the credibility of the lead agency in some sectors.
- Three international actors played an increasingly important role in the aftermath of the tsunami: the IFIs that acted earlier and with better coordination than in past disasters; the foreign military whose interventions were massive albeit costly; and of course the mass media that indirectly

influenced (and arguably determined) most of the key strategic decisions at public and government level in the Western world. Interaction of humanitarian organisations with the latter two actors was largely ineffective.

- One source of needs assessment was systematically overlooked: the national and district authorities. All international assessments relied heavily on data collected by local authorities. The weakness at national levels, especially in Indonesia, was in the validation, compilation and dissemination of these raw data. A modest external investment in building national capacity would have gone a long way toward providing a consolidated picture of needs – the ‘big picture’ that, in the opinion of many donors and decision makers, was sorely missing from the overall response.

Many government agencies and NGOs carried out censuses of subgroups of the affected populations. Most of the affected households in Sri Lanka are probably registered into several independent databases. Some registers are cross-sectoral but limited to the clientele of a specific NGO or Red Cross Society; others are thematic but nationwide (on agriculture, fishery, welfare, or housing, for example). A centralised common database would have been possible and far more effective.

Overall, the international humanitarian response to the tsunami was insufficiently evidence-based. Despite the weakness in needs assessment, however, the response was arguably effective. Effectiveness, in all fairness, was the least to be expected given the large amount of funds (around US\$8,000) allocated per survivor. Efficient it was not. The response was often excessive in areas or sectors granting more visibility and, at times, was outright inappropriate. As documented in some sectors, the problem was not merely technical but political.

Agencies organising assessments were too often unwilling to use their findings to discourage self-serving forms of assistance. This observation leads to the most fundamental question: why invest in initial, formal cross-sectoral humanitarian assessment, if the results are mostly irrelevant to key decision making?

Recommendations

The 17 recommendations are derived from this evaluation, and suggest steps toward the following overall objectives to improve international needs assessment:

- The international community should adopt a more pragmatic approach to needs assessment (recommendations 1–5).
- Transferring back to the affected populations the power of decision making will alleviate the need for thematic assessment by outsiders (recommendation 6).
- Streamlining the many currently duplicating or competing assessment mechanisms will improve the quality of the assessment (recommendations 7–10).
- The mass media will continue to play a determining role (recommendation 11).
- New financial and administrative arrangements are essential to mobilise assessment teams rapidly and effectively (recommendations 12 and 13).
- A change of attitude is required – quality control and accountability should be brought into the world’s largest ‘unregulated industry’ (recommendations 14–16).
- All affected individuals or households should be registered in a central database, also including details of their situation and needs (recommendation 17).

1. The UN and Red Cross should either invest massively in rapid humanitarian needs assessment or stop pretending that assessment influences decision making.
2. Donors and agencies should continue investing in early, high quality needs assessment for livelihood recovery.
3. All should invest in building national assessment capacity (preparedness).
4. Future assessment should be conducted jointly with national authorities and be the subject of formal agreement made in advance of any future disaster.
5. Initial rapid assessment with national government should make greater use of remote sensing (satellite imagery).
6. Adopt a cash-based response when possible.
7. UN and Red Cross should join forces to support the government in the rapid initial assessment of need.
8. The UN should integrate all assessment support components of its response (UNDAC, HIC, and UNJLC) into one knowledge management programme. Human and material resources for coordination and assessment should be clearly separated.
9. OCHA should increase its capacity to analyse data and provide a comprehensive consolidated and ongoing picture of the needs and gaps.
10. Specialised sectoral lead agencies should not be distracted from their primary assessment and coordination functions and drawn into direct implementation of humanitarian activities.
11. Embedding mass media representatives in rapid assessment teams should be more seriously considered.
12. Funding should be earmarked and routinely made available for rapid assessment.
13. UN procurement and recruitment procedures must be improved to secure immediate human resources and logistic support. If not possible, outsourcing should be considered.
14. Past the immediate emergency, donors should make their funding conditional upon solid assessment and a clear plan for monitoring the evolution of need.
15. The UN should improve the reliability of the estimated number of affected individuals and their needs. It should also proactively discourage inappropriate forms of assistance.
16. Assessment capacity should be one criterion in the proposed international accreditation of humanitarian organisations.
17. All affected individuals/households should be registered in a central database managed jointly by the national authorities, the UN and other international actors.