

Lessons from the tsunami**Too much of a good thing?**

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Quality counts as much as quantity in disaster relief

AFTER the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, aid agencies clubbed together to review their efforts. The main conclusion was sobering: "It was local people themselves who provided almost all immediate life-saving action." But "international agencies often brushed local capacities aside."

This lesson is relevant to Haiti now. Focused on raising money, bedevilled by disputes over logistical precedence and haunted by fears that the country is too weak to help itself, the Haiti operation shows signs of becoming an aid stampede. Like the tsunami, the earthquake has produced an outpouring of generosity amounting to \$1 billion so far.

The experience of the tsunami suggests that agencies will not be able to spend it. Nine months on, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had disbursed just 39% of the money they had promised to spend. A French NGO, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), stopped emergency fund-raising, saying it did not need more. It was criticised for this, but in retrospect was justified. As the tsunami evaluation put it, "allocation and programming...were driven by the extent of public and media interest, and by the unprecedented funding available, rather than by assessment and need." This seems to be happening in Haiti, too; MSF has again asked people to switch donations to its general fund.

Viagra, ski jackets and Father Christmas costumes were all sent to tsunami victims. Indonesia destroyed 75 tonnes of out-of-date medicine. And sometimes aid was worse than merely useless. There was a fashion for financing new fishing boats after the tsunami. A UN agency found that a fifth of the boats given to Sri Lanka were unseaworthy. Much reconstruction work was shoddy. A private company with no medical experience built health centres in the Indonesian province of Aceh.

Because reconstruction work takes longer to organise than emergency relief, it has to begin right away. Sri Lanka built 40,000 transitional shelters—something between a tent and a proper house—in six months.

The tsunami also shows why someone has to be in charge. The aid operation worked best in countries, such as Malaysia, that have the most effective governments. Aceh, the tsunami's epicentre, had huge problems because the destruction was worst there, the province had been riven by rebellion in the 1990s and 180 different NGOs were operating there at one point.

Organisational problems may be worse in Haiti, which before the earthquake had more NGOs per head than anywhere else in the Americas. But Aceh managed to bring a measure of control to the flood of aid by setting up a special agency. Paul Collier, an economist at Oxford University who has advised Haiti's government, says it and the UN should do something similar.