

BRUNCH
Humanitarianism and the tsunami:
what does it mean to serve in the international community?
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Below are the key points of the interventions made and the follow-up Wisdom at Work discussions.

- **The first speaker**, from the UN humanitarian organization, provided critical insight into the humanitarian response and other action surrounding the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster in Asia. He expressed skepticism as to the degree of altruism involved in the international community's response, citing in particular strategic and geo-political posturing with respect to access to resources in the region, as well as significant levels of aid tied to country-specific private companies. Also, the international community response was in fact a third wave of response, following national and regional response. Nevertheless, he asserted that the international community response was a very good one, with UN teams committed and able to get on the ground within 48 hours, thereby raising both the profile and the funding for the crisis. In particular, this action came at an opportune time for the UN, as it was able to prove its "value-added" at a time when the credibility of the organisation was being brought into question. He suggested that optimizing the humanitarian response involved three levels – political (which was messy to tackle); as well as strategic and operational levels where the UN could usefully devote more energy and focus.
- **The second speaker**, of the Lutheran World Federation, asserted that the international response to the tsunami demonstrated that the humanitarian instinct was not dead. But it would not be safe to assume that this response could be transferable to other humanitarian crises or cases of social/economic injustice, since a number of specific factors contributed to the unprecedented response to the tsunami disaster, including the number of foreign nationals affected and its timing at a traditional family/charitable time at Christmas. He stressed that it was important to acknowledge the degree to which the multilateral machinery, both within the UN and civil society, was increasingly being bypassed in favour of politically driven bi-lateral activity. He underlined in particular that given this climate the challenge for the future of the multilateral humanitarian response may lay less in the area of delivery and more in the area of capacity-building and coordination. It was proposed that the event also provides an opportunity to address structural issues which have been brought into sharper relief by the crisis, including justice issues such as caste discrimination.

Main elements of the discussion:

- Given the significant role played by staff commitment and sense of collective responsibility in the immediate UN response, greater consideration should be given to attracting the right persons for the jobs. In particular, humanitarian personnel, including UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinators needed to be more fully

sensitized as to the real needs of beneficiaries and the implications for an effective response.

- It may be important to devise mechanisms that more systematically facilitate the sharing of this kind of field-based information, one which is inclusive of NGOs and other actors
- It was also noted that the proliferation of jargon surrounding humanitarian action may be in fact creating disconnect and distance between aid actors and beneficiaries, and the “contextualization” of humanitarian response was important.. Similarly, there was no universal understanding of the notion of “protection”, and respective mandates needed to be clarified.
- There was a need for more dialogue among UN, NGOs and other humanitarian actors. Despite the proliferation of actors, main voices should be identified and heard.
- From the broader perspective, perhaps new strategies were not a question of abandoning but of re-articulating principles, notably towards more practical application. Also, it was not realistic to expect pure motives from actors in the international system, but consideration could be given to identifying and making positive use of self-interests.