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Five years after Indian Ocean tsunami, affected nations rebuilding better – UN



Aerial view of vast destruction of the Indonesian coast caused by 2004 tsunami

29 December 2009 – Five years after the massive Indian Ocean tsunami, which left a devastating trail of death and destruction, millions of people have benefited from the influx of aid by rebuilding stronger infrastructure, social services and disaster warning systems than existed before the catastrophe, according to the United Nations agencies at the core of the recovery effort.

The largest emergency relief response in history was prompted by the earthquake off the coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra on 26 December 2004, which sent waves as high as 30 metres crashing into 14 countries, claiming nearly 230,000 lives and leaving around 2 million people homeless.

The international community pledged over \$14 billion in aid for the overall emergency relief and recovery operations, according to a recent UN Children's Fund (**UNICEF**) report summarizing the results of its programmes, which have received almost \$700 million to date.

The report noted that communities whose livelihoods, homes, schools and health facilities were destroyed have had opportunities to build back better health, education, water and sanitation services, as well as improve the security of areas vulnerable to natural disaster or violent conflict, and provide safer environments for vulnerable children.

For example, the UNICEF-supported Darusada Children's Centre in Aceh – a region on the northern tip of Sumatra with the closest major population to the epicentre of the 2004 earthquake – opened in 2007 and currently serves around 120 children who have been orphaned, abandoned or sexually assaulted.

In addition, the court house in the regional capital Banda Aceh has added a juvenile court which is presided over by a judge who has been given special training by UNICEF. Changes in the juvenile justice system in Indonesia were also adopted after the tsunami to strengthen child protection provisions.

The UNICEF report noted that the unparalleled international response to the tsunami created a unique opportunity to bolster the peace process between the Government of Indonesia and the separatist Free Aceh Movement which resulted in the signing of a peace agreement in 2005 after 70 years of conflict.

Recovery efforts in Thailand have been instrumental in building a model Child Protection Monitoring System, which was initially established in 2007 to identify and monitor children orphaned by the tsunami, as well as other at-risk children.

The report also underscored some of the lessons learned from the relief and recovery operations, with efforts in Myanmar positively influencing preparedness and response to other emergency situations. Following Cyclone Mala and other emergencies in 2006, as well as Cyclone Nargis in 2008, for example, UNICEF was able to swiftly mobilize and deliver emergency relief supplies, including family and child survival kits, insecticide treated bednets, and essential drugs for local health centres, in the affected areas.

In the Maldives, all the houses on the island of Dhuvaafaru are newly built, and construction to defend against rising sea-levels is ongoing. After years spent in temporary settlements on other islands, Dhuvaafaru has been transformed into a new home for an entire community displaced from nearby Kandholhudhoo by the tsunami, but with 4,060 people living in 600 homes, around 80 more houses need to be built.

Expanded social services are also helping to protect and promote children's right in the Maldives, and a UNICEF-backed non-governmental organization (NGO) is at the heart of the fight against the growing problem of intravenous drug use among adolescents since the tsunami.

UNICEF noted that recovery programmes in some countries have now drawn to a close, with continuing projects handed over to the national authorities or integrated into existing programmes carried out by the UNICEF country offices. Due to the scale of the recovery required in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the agency said it will continue to support reconstruction activities through the end of 2010.

The UN Development Programme (**UNDP**) has highlighted the power of community involvement in the reconstruction process, with shopkeepers, fishermen and women getting together to plan and build their new homes.

"There was a great rush to get people back into permanent housing, but that rush could create problems, preventing a meaningful discussion with people and with the communities," said UNDP Deputy Resident Representative for Thailand Hakan Bjorkman.

"It took a little bit longer but the results were much better, and this is the essence of the 'build back better' concept – to have people involved in their reconstruction," said Mr. Bjorkman.

UNDP noted that since the tsunami governments, international agencies and civil society organizations have banded together to construct 250,000 permanent houses, over 100 air and seaports, thousands of schools and hospitals, as well as create national and regional tsunami warning systems by placing early detection buoys in the Indian Ocean.

In collaboration with other UN agencies, national and international organizations and in cooperation with the Discovery Channel, UNDP has made a documentary telling the story of how community engagement has been successful in the mending and rebuilding lives affected by the tsunami in the hardest-hit areas of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Maldives.

The film shows that many formerly marginalized groups are playing increasingly more significant roles in their communities as a result of recovery initiatives, such as job training for women in fish processing, as well as marketing and business.

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