









Moving Beyond the Tsunami

The WHO Story



Acknowledgements

If the word 'tragedy' sums up the tsunami, then the word 'generosity' describes the immediate post-tsunami response. The health sector response to the tsunami — everything related in this book — could not have happened without the tremendous support, financial and otherwise, from across the world. The support of all donors and development partners is gratefully acknowledged.

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Contents

Preface	1
Introduction	3
Chapter 1: The Emergency and its Aftermath	4
Black Sunday	6
The searing statistics	12
Keeping sickness at bay	20
The fightback begins	21
First line of defence	36
Chapter 2: The Response	40
The globe gets together	42
Assessing needs	44
Coping with Injuries	52
Communicable Disease Risk	55
Keeping Track	63
Stop and Check	68
Managing Infections	72
Defence as offence	73
Mothers and Children	75
Environmental health	76
The Right Food	84
It's in the mind	87
Chapter 3: Management and Coordination	92
In it together	94
Logic in Logistics	104
IT as a force multiplier	107
Media Message	109
Human Hands, Humane Deeds	113
The Economy of Compassion	116
Chapter 4: The Lessons Learnt	118
Recovery Plus	120
Lessons Learnt: WHO's Experience	130
Moving Beyond the Tsunami	135



Preface



Some dates and events are stamped forever in the world's collective memory. 26 December 2004 is one such date, when hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and millions were affected, by a severe earthquake and tsunami. Among the countries affected were six Member States of WHO's South-East Asia Region. The scale of devastation and the large number of people affected, across so many countries, was unprecedented.

The disaster left in its wake formidable public health challenges which needed immediate response. For example, thousands of injured people needed medical aid. The health infrastructure was totally destroyed in some areas. Health personnel were among those who were adversely affected; many lost their lives, many more lost family members, friends, homes and entire neighbourhoods. People were crowded into relief camps, leading to the risk of outbreaks of communicable disease. There was an urgent need for safe drinking water and medicines. The mental health of

survivors, traumatized by the severity of their loss, also demanded special attention.

In this grim scenario of death and destruction, the health sector had to restore a semblance of order as soon as possible, and have health systems functioning again. No national or international organization could do this alone. Goodwill and support poured in from the global community, from neighbouring countries as well as from people in villages and townships near the affected areas. There was an unprecedented degree of cooperation and collaboration between governments, international and national agencies, the private and public sector, as well as civilian and military forces. The tsunami brought out the best of the human spirit.

One of WHO's most important roles was in assisting the health authorities and coordinating the work of hundreds of health agencies and nongovernmental organizations involved in tsunami relief work.

For WHO, this was a unique learning experience. Never in its history had it responded to a natural disaster of such scale and geographic spread. The challenge was to ensure timely assistance to the affected countries while maintaining standards, norms and procedures and ensuring accountability.

Within hours of receiving the information about the tsunami, a WHO Tsunami Task Force was established and

a 24-hour Operations Room activated in the Regional Office. Human resources and emergency medical supplies were mobilized. Technical guidelines were compiled, updated and disseminated for use by emergency teams in the field. WHO facilitated logistics, restored medical supply chains, and helped set up surveillance systems to monitor any possible outbreak of diseases. Water and sanitation experts monitored water quality to ensure its safety.

Over the past few months, the affected countries have faced unprecedented challenges. These challenges, however, have been used as opportunities to improve health systems to address the needs of the people in the long term. As we move from the emergency phase to the rehabilitation phase, local health capacity and infrastructure have been fortified, and people trained to serve their communities better.

As always, the welfare of the people has been our priority. "Moving beyond the Tsunami: The WHO story" narrates how the health needs of the affected people are being met. As we move ahead with the tasks in hand, this book enables us to reflect on our activities of the past few months, to take a critical look at ourselves and to keep in mind the lessons learnt from the disaster, so that we may serve the people better.

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