

Prevention, assistance and reconstruction

March 2005

The split response

On the days following the Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster we had many existing and new members asking about our tsunami related activities. Architects for Peace does not dismiss the idea that in the future we could have teams of volunteers ready to contribute in this type of emergency. However, central and prior to any involvement is an analysis of the situation, from a moral/ethical point of view. This is what makes AFP different to other organisations and where our strength and relevance lies. A critical analysis of how we can best respond to such situations from the perspective of the urban domain makes us aware of our potential manipulation by political interests seeking to pursue their own agendas, even in situations as unexpected and devastating as the Tsunami disaster. It is wise to be mindful of fear, greed, complicity or complacency acting to undermine and distort humanitarian compassion.

The tsunami appeal has been one of the most internationally shared experiences of compassion and no one could deny its value. However, what is it that makes us compassionate about this natural disaster and not to human-made disasters in which we could most definitely have made a difference before, during and after?

The day after the tsunami, people from almost everywhere in the world had mobilised to gather aid for the victims. We were all confronted with the saddest images of devastation and human loss, some shockingly graphic. How would people react to the human-made tragedies if confronted with the same resulting images of dismembered bodies, orphan kids, and catastrophic urban and environmental devastations, all set in the context of our making? I believe that people would react with exactly the same compassion and add to it outrage at our culpability.

Undoubtedly, we welcome our professional organisations taking a responsible role in the reconstruction process of those affected areas. Press releases were most timely, so were the newsletters sent by many (or perhaps all) of our universities. But why is it that a preventable catastrophe such as Iraq has not merited the same type of compassion from these institutions?

The conundrum of man made/natural disaster and our nation mixed response is evidenced by the Australian Government rightly assisting the tsunami victims while failing to acknowledge our national complicity in an unjust war. The result of our involvement in this human made disaster is equally as tragic - the killing of thousand of people in Iraq, destroying their cities and environment. Two thousand people were assassinated in Fallujah alone and 250,000 people displaced from that city, while we have simultaneously imprisoned asylum seekers from that region for years under inhuman conditions in Australian detention centres. The tsunami victims are as deserving of compassion as our own war victims. In our denial of responsibility, the Iraqi tragedy is presented to us as the result of a suicide bomb or car bomb, which is like saying that the tsunami deaths were caused by the houses that fell while forgetting to mention the earthquake and tidal wave.



Destroyed university in Dili, Timor Leste

Human-made disasters will prompt a variety of point of views and no single answer will please everyone, isn't it then more important to create the debate for the sake of knowledge and professional objectivity? What is it that is preventing our professional institutions from debating and taking a stance on human-made disasters?

It was however not surprising that organisations such as VLGA and the City of Port Philip among others, consistent with their impartial treatment of disasters, have been quick to organise assistance for tsunami victims, having previously condemned our involvement in the War on Iraq, our treatment of asylum seekers, and addressing important issues such as poverty and globalisation. We commend their stance and value their contribution.



Rebuilding the destroyed cathedral, Managua, Nicaragua. Photo by Anthony McInnery

Reconstruction

AFP acknowledges the many difficult issues regarding reconstruction, the most obvious one is what we call emergency solutions - those quick responses to solve the immediate need for shelter and services, which in poor countries most often become permanent features, making well thought long term solutions very difficult. Though most of our professional institutions will not be involved at this stage but in the next, the reconstruction presents other issues for consideration.

Our enthusiasm in trying to assist, with our views of what is social and environmental sustainable is not necessarily applicable to other societies. Many of which have not yet undergone the industrialisation process that has shaped our cities, socially, economically and environmentally. If we face difficulties implementing changes here in Australia – a country responsible for the highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the world - we can perhaps understand why it would be an even more sensitive and difficult arena for us to respectfully implement our ideas in a foreign nation.

Central to any discussion on reconstruction is the understanding that there is never a *blank canvas* to work on - those tsunami affected areas and communities have history, memories of their former cities, social and infrastructural needs to which we can only positively respond by working with and for the local professionals and affected communities. The issue of responsible and responsive assistance - not tainted by advantage to Australian industries - is an important and highly sensitive topic that needs thoughtful discussion.

The “Under-Construction” Reconstruction Workshop

AFP will be coordinating a workshop addressing the issues of reconstruction. We believe there is a wealth of care, knowledge and experience among our own members. This experience varies from people working on development and reconstruction (in Australia and overseas) to members working with communities at Local Council levels, with aid organisations and NGOs such as Oxfam, CAA, AVI among others. The workshops will address the topic of reconstruction from both a practical and theoretical point of view and AFP is inviting professionals and organisations with similar interests and experiences to join us to open up this discussion. The workshop will draw on case studies and discussions to identify ways in which we can assist other communities or nations, while minimising detrimental effects.

Beatriz C. Maturana

B.Arch M.Urb.Des. MPIA

Architects for Peace