

Oxfam International  
Tsunami Fund Final  
Evaluation:  
Communications  
Review Executive  
Summary

# An evaluation of external communications in Oxfam International's response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami

by Alex Wynter



**Oxfam**  
International

## Tsunami Evaluation series

As part of its ongoing aims to learn from experience and to hold itself accountable for its actions, Oxfam has commissioned a wide-ranging evaluation of its response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. This comprises 14 thematic evaluations, 12 of the 14 studies have been conducted by independent consultants, while the remaining two conducted by members of Oxfam International Tsunami Fund secretariat (\*)

Recurring issues and key themes from the 14 individual evaluations are brought together in this evaluation summary report 'In the Wake of the Tsunami'.

The reports available in this series are:

Evaluation summary report: 'In the Wake of the Tsunami'

Thematic evaluations:

1. Livelihoods Review (Rajan Alexander)
2. Public Health Review (Pradeep Bharwad & Wim Klassen)
3. Shelter Review (Sarbjit Singh Sahota & Dave Hodgkins)
4. Gender Review (Annette Salkeld)
5. Downward Accountability Review (Ravinder Kumar & N. Raghunathan, Catalyst Management Services)
6. Corporate Accountability Review (John Chilver\*)
7. Advocacy Review (Alasdair Collins)
8. Disaster Risk Reduction Review (Man B. Thapa)
9. Partners and Partnerships Review (Stuart Kenward)
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11. Communications Review (Alex Wynter)
12. Funding and Finance Review (Clive Surman & John Chilver\*)
13. Management Issues Review (Simon Harris)
14. OITF Architecture and Structure Review (Geoffrey Salkeld)

The evaluation summary report and the executive summaries for the individual reviews can be found on the Oxfam website at [www.oxfam.org/emergencies/tsunami](http://www.oxfam.org/emergencies/tsunami). Full versions of the individual reviews are available on request from the Oxfam International Secretariat via [www.oxfam.org/contact](http://www.oxfam.org/contact)

Philip Horgan,  
Oxfam International Tsunami Fund Monitoring and Evaluation  
Coordinator, December 2009

**Cover image:** Two boys play up for the camera while an Oxfam worker records activities in Lamrabo IDP camp, near Banda Aceh, where people from Pulo Aceh have sought refuge. Credit: Jim Holmes/Oxfam

## Executive summary

This report is part of the final evaluation of the special fund set up by Oxfam International (OI) for the Indian Ocean tsunami. It is based on affiliate responses to a specially designed 30-part questionnaire that was intended to encompass all major issues that arose in the relevant evaluations and discussions to date, in interviews with affiliate communicators, country team members, and Oxford-based staff at OI and OGB, and from those written evaluations themselves.

The questionnaire (contained as an annex in the full evaluation report) was completed by all 12 OI affiliates directly concerned. In many questions, one option implied strength or success, a second failure or weakness, and a third fell between the two. Although they were invited not to answer if they felt that none of the three choices fitted their experience, very few questions were left unanswered. In that sense, if no other, this report is a comprehensive OI-wide exercise.

*The Tsunami Communications Review* of July 2006 ('TCR06') concluded that the media was the arena where OI functioned most effectively and that Oxfam had emerged with its public reputation intact, even enhanced – but that the OI Tsunami Fund Management Team (TFMT) had not given a sufficient lead on communications. This report agrees with that evaluation, although many affiliates felt that the TFMT was as focused on communications as anyone had a right to expect it to be under the circumstances.

The breadth and scale of the tsunami was so exceptional that it is unlikely that Oxfam worldwide could ever have been prepared for it in advance, any more than any other agency. However, the results of the questionnaire highlight the reality that the modus operandi of affiliates, when confronted with a major 'sudden onset' emergency, were not standard. There was no clear protocol governing their response to such an exceptional circumstance.

Only two affiliates agreed that their own emergency procedures helped significantly, and all but one said that they felt overwhelmed by the volume of media enquiries in the first few days. Yet the earliest of Oxfam's successes in the immediate

aftermath of the tsunami was arguably that at least half the media enquiries that many affiliates received were from new press contacts – who were probably approaching Oxfam because of the organisation's reputation as a credible source.

Affiliates have their own stories to tell of the media profiles they gained in the first few weeks after the tsunami, and these reflect the essential picture revealed by one of the sets of monitoring data still readily available: that of OGB. This shows a huge peak in coverage in January 2005, with a spike at the first anniversary, then a rapid falling off almost to nothing. Although it is not a formal recommendation of this report, Oxfam affiliates (including OGB) might consider preserving such data in a slightly more extensive form after future disasters, as part of the contribution that communications make to accountability, and perhaps even paying for it.

However, to some extent, monitoring data can be reproduced using electronic searches – either of media company archives or of the internet itself, using the advanced-search facility of Google, for instance. Searches carried out for this report, while not conclusive, do reinforce the anecdotal evidence brought to light in the questionnaire: that when it came to raw media profile measured in simple terms of column inches or 'mentions', Oxfam's profile was very high.

Equally, only a thoughtful campaigning agency like Oxfam, with an eye for policy as much as operational success, would ask: *what was all the coverage for?* And it is possibly in the field of the sometimes difficult relationship between advocacy and media – especially over the gender reports – that the most ambivalence about the communications history of the tsunami lingers.

Perhaps the most telling comment came from the interviewee who said that, with the tsunami, 'communications drove advocacy, but at Oxfam – in more normal times – it would be the other way round'. Almost all affiliates now conclude that advocacy struggled against the demands of the news agenda, though the questionnaire does not provide any evidence for believing that more central co-ordination would have helped resolve a situation in which advocacy and media professionals were sometimes left to 'fight it out'.

One of the most surprising results is that only the OI secretariat thought that the lack of a proper communications strategy until after the first anniversary of the tsunami was a 'serious handicap'; not one affiliate agreed that this seriously hampered them.

Looking back, affiliates probably did not need as much central co-ordination in communications as was thought necessary at the time, and TCR06 may have exaggerated the significance of the absence of an 'overarching' communications strategy as 'one of the biggest failings' of the period.

Reputation management emerges as another success for Oxfam, with almost all affiliates realising immediately that media response to the tsunami was unprecedented for a natural disaster, and that the sheer quantity of money raised (from the public, as opposed to institutional donors) would lead to expectations that might not be met.

Above all, on the Aceh fraud incident in early 2006 there is commendable unanimity that owning up ahead of likely exposure by the media was the right thing to do. A retrospective review of some of the relevant press coverage also shows that it was not only sympathetic, but that some actually praised Oxfam for its honesty.

This, surely, is good evidence for what is often regarded as the first rule of corporate communications (about early disclosure of wrongdoing), and one of the recommendations of this report is that this should be Oxfam's default position in future operations, unless absolutely exceptional legal or political circumstances dictate otherwise.

Affiliates and interviewees alike are divided, however, on how *strategic* a success reputation management overall was for Oxfam. The majority view that, in fact, Oxfam was not immune from at least some of the critical publicity directed at NGOs and the UN collectively also seems reasonable.

An especially disappointing result is that not many affiliates, nor the OI secretariat, reported finding the Dashboard extranet extremely useful and actually used it, at a time when the Dashboard should have been the easiest way for affiliates to

get the content that would provide them with a competitive edge in communications.

The trend toward the wholesaling of content online seems clear, and this report argues strongly that OI might have taken more advantage of the tsunami to raise its game in this area, especially given that some Oxfam affiliate websites score highly on web analytics when compared with other agencies.

One affiliate interviewee said flatly that the tsunami response represented a 'turning point', and all but three agreed that Oxfam's profile after the tsunami strengthened the brand to a point from which it has not retreated.

The 2008 questionnaire and this report do not significantly qualify the main conclusions of TCR06 that, while Oxfam International was not particularly well set up to handle a major emergency, the organisation emerged with its public reputation intact and even enhanced. Put at its simplest, OI tsunami communications were a resounding success, but whether because of good decisions by senior managers or despite their absence is much more moot and is a distinction that does not appear to have been closely examined since. (It is astonishing, for example, that the first addition of surge capacity to the OI secretariat, in the shape of an emergency communications co-ordinator, was still being debated as late as March 2005.)

The 2008 recommendations are essentially those of 2006, in adapted form, with four additions. The most important of the former is that confusion still exists about the role of OGB in a sudden major emergency; this should be clarified.

The additions are that Oxfam's early disclosure of suspected fraud in Aceh should be institutionalised as a standard operating procedure across the network, barring exceptional legal or political circumstances; that editorial guidelines should be issued proscribing the use of expert reports to substantiate predetermined media angles; that consideration should be given to rebalancing the entire communications operation in favour of online delivery (to media, affiliates, donors, and other stakeholders) on the public website of high-quality retail content; and that greater use should be made of leadership personalities (such as Barbara Stocking) in raising Oxfam's profile.

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**Oxfam International Secretariat:** Suite 20, 266 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DL, UK

**Tel:** +44 1865 339100 **Email:** [information@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:information@oxfaminternational.org)

**Web site:** [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)

For contact details of Oxfam International advocacy offices, please see the website of Oxfam International Secretariat, or: **E-mail:** [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

#### **Linked Oxfam organization.**

Oxfam International and Ucodep Campaign Office (Italy)

**Email:** [ucodep-oi@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:ucodep-oi@oxfaminternational.org)

#### **Oxfam observer members**

The following organizations are currently observer members of Oxfam International, working towards possible full affiliation:

**Oxfam Japan:** [www.oxfam.jp](http://www.oxfam.jp)

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