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WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: A THEOLOGICAL DILEMMA

FATE, KARMA, BAD LUCK OR GOD'S HAND?

Moving beyond compassion fatigue

By Michael Diamond
president of World Resources Chicago

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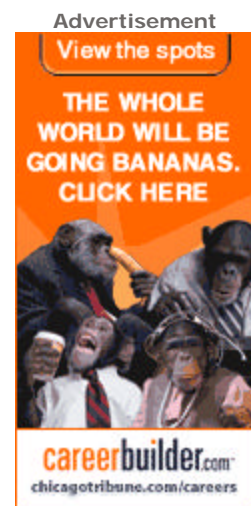
In 1977, while working in Bangladesh, I was walking along a raised mound of dirt that served as the only road among the bright green rice paddies in Khulna. I was puzzled by sections that had recently been washed out by the monsoon rains, since people's livelihood depended on this road to transport their rice to their homes and markets. When I asked the local farmers why their road was in such poor shape, their response was even more puzzling. They were waiting for the international relief agencies to come back and pay them to rebuild their road.

Since 1971, Bangladesh, a country slightly smaller than Iowa with a population of more than 130 million, was recovering from its struggle for independence and from a series of catastrophic tidal waves from the Bay of Bengal. An estimated 2 million to 3 million people had died, and 20 million more were displaced. The outpouring of compassion from around the world was unprecedented. George Harrison had organized the Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden, and millions of dollars and scores of humanitarian agencies went into Bangladesh to provide humanitarian relief.

Some organizations had visited this village in Khulna and had seen the washed-out roads. So they paid the local farmers to rebuild their roads. Even though these farmers had built these roads and maintained them for hundreds of years, the farmers were now waiting for these rich agencies to come back and pay them to rebuild the roads again. This experience made me realize that it's difficult to be compassionate without undermining the local capacity.

The tsunami disaster has raised this issue again. More than \$600 million has been donated in the United States. Volunteers have traveled to remote areas where they risk their lives searching for missing people, reuniting families, helping bury the dead and clear debris. This is not unusual. After the horrific hurricane season, people from throughout the United States donated their services to rebuild affected communities in the South.

All of these contributions and services reflect underlying values that make our country and our communities as strong as we are today. And it is not just our values that enable us to be so



compassionate and generous, it is also a reflection of our capacity.

We have economic surplus to share with those less fortunate through government programs, civil society organizations and the private sector. We have skills that are vital to our own community development and serve us in disasters. We have insurance companies that cover part of our losses. We have access to credit, from commercial financial institutions and government programs. We have friends, neighbors and family who help us cope. When we exercise our compassion at home, we use these resources to bolster and strengthen the local infrastructure by rebuilding and rehabilitating our communities, as well as enhancing our capacity to prepare for future disasters.

Vulnerable communities in low-income countries have the same infrastructure, except theirs is more fragile. They have families, political and social structures, religious institutions, schools, businesses, roads and markets. However, there is little redundancy. They may have a road, but only one road that is easily washed away. They may have drinking water, but the water has to be carried several miles or comes from open tanks or wells that may be contaminated. They have access to credit, but from money lenders who will charge outrageous interest. They are hard workers but they live on a small margin and are extremely susceptible to disasters. One crisis is sufficient to completely destroy their way of life.

When any disaster strikes, this fragile infrastructure is strained beyond its capacity and breaks down. People starve, there are epidemics of cholera, typhoid, malaria; the surviving families often have to leave their homes in search of employment in the cities or even other countries, or seek even more drastic options such as selling their children to labor or sex traffickers.

Yet when a community has organized itself to build its irrigation system or health clinic or school, this infrastructure is more likely to be maintained by the villagers themselves, and the skills they learn from organizing and building these systems are useful in responding to future disasters.

Thanks to telecommunication, we can view these disasters almost immediately, feel people's suffering; our hearts reach out, and we open our wallets. When the news frenzy dies down, so does our compassionate response.

Compassion fatigue is setting in for the tsunami disaster and other critical areas around the world. It seems to me that several challenging questions emerge.

How do we get beyond the headlines and consider less popular disasters such as the millions of people who suffer from persecution, starvation and genocide in Darfur, Sudan, or from drought in Ethiopia or who struggle every day to survive against overwhelming challenges in Liberia, Haiti, Bangladesh, Romania, El Salvador, Bolivia, India or Indonesia?

How can we maintain our compassionate spirit beyond the immediate disasters, avoid compassion fatigue and encourage relief aid to help people rebuild their own communities and at the same time provide financial and technical assistance so that they can continue to support themselves and develop a greater capacity and be better prepared for the next crisis?

How can we respond to disasters in terms of sustainable social and economic development, and promote public policies that enable these vulnerable lower-income countries to be more economically competitive on the world market and better able to respond to their own needs?

There are no easy answers to these questions.

Each of us must search for solutions that we find satisfactory, share our ideas, experiences and concerns,

and challenge ourselves to forge new mechanisms of cooperation. With so many compassionate people who truly care about others around their corner and around the world, I am confident that we will find those answers.

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