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Post-tsunami havoc: government waives aid agency accountability

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Abstract

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Keywords

Post, Tsunami, Havoc, Government, Waives, Aid, Agency, Accountability

Disciplines

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Post-Tsunami Havoc: Government Waives Aid Agency Accountability

Dr Anne Abraham

January 2005

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The paper concludes with suggestions for two further indicators that could be used in a more rigorous assessment.

Keywords: accountability, aid agencies, donations

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Post-Tsunami Havoc: Government Waives Aid Agency Accountability

On 26 December 2004 a massive earthquake, registering 8.9 on the Richter Scale, occurred in the Indian Ocean off the northern Indonesian island of Sumatra, causing a series of tsunamis across the Bay of Bengal and taking more than 230,000 lives and destroying villages, towns and livelihoods in 12 countries: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, India, the Maldives, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Seychelles, Bangladesh, Kenya and Somalia.

By 5 January, ten days after the tsunamis struck, the Australian people had personally donated 100 million dollars towards the massive relief effort.

People in unaffected nations were encouraged to donate as “The world is beginning its biggest-ever aid effort to help millions of victims of the Asian tsunami. Australians who wish to assist can donate to appeals launched by Australian aid agencies. Agencies are seeking cash donations to enable them to locally source food, medicine and shelter” (ABC Online, 2005b). This appeal was followed by a list of 21 agencies with an online donation website and a phone number for each, plus other details in some cases.

Other lists began appearing and the potential donor had to decide who to support. Two specific issues arose. First, were the appeals genuine, and secondly, could collecting agencies be trusted. This paper considers the accountability of those agencies seeking donations. The next section reports various instances of hoaxes and frauds in the immediate post-tsunami period. The third section discusses measures by which the accountability of aid agencies can be assessed. The fourth and fifth sections present the specific study and the findings. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

Were the appeals genuine?

Potential donors needed to be aware that not all post-tsunami appeals for help were genuine since “scammers often ride current affairs to add legitimacy to their plea” (Maslog-Levis, 2005b, 2). Just as with the scam attempts that surfaced after the US terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, research analyst, Jonathan Penn, asserted that

tsunami's devastation "is a good opportunity for the criminals out for a quick buck, and it's something that people are going to respond to" (Reuters, 2005).

By 3 January, fraudulent email messages, claiming to be from Oxfam (one of the worldwide relief agencies mobilising tsunami aid) and asking for donations for victims of the tsunami were being circulated in Hong Kong (*The Australian*, 2005). The emails urged donors to deposit money into a bank account in Cyprus.

By 4 January, a website was launched in Tasmania complete with the Red Cross symbol and the logo being used for their Asia Quake and Tsunamis Appeal (Smith, 2005). Potential donors were given a mobile phone number for credit card donations and a Hobart address to which cheques or money orders could be sent. Before the illegal site was pulled of the web, the designer alleged that he had collected \$10,000 which would be forwarded to the Australian Red Cross. However, another source (Maslog-Levis, 2005a) reported that the web site author had created the web site in order to locate his uncle how was missing in Thailand. Despite these inconsistencies and this attempt to hoax the public, the police did not lay charges, but merely cautioned the author. In response, Graham Tupper, chief executive of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), told *The Australian* that "the best way to avoid frauds was to give to recognised charities which were listed on the ACFID website" (Granger, 2005).

By 6 January, Australian were beginning to receive emails written in a similar tone to the notorious Nigerian emails (Maslog-Levis, 2005b). One such email presented the situation of a particular Sri Lankan fisherman who had lost his wife and children in the tsunami and then asked for financial assistance on behalf of the cooperative union of fishermen in his home town. People were asked to send their donations to a bank account located in the Netherlands. Other emails purported to have come from a former restaurateur in Thailand, a Thai victim asking from money to be sent to a London address and a Singaporean charity organisation asking for donations via a Western Union transfer.

Scams took other forms as well. On 7 January, a Queensland man was charged with fraudulently collecting tsunami relief funds in three shopping centres while claiming

he was from the Townsville and Brisbane Hospital foundations (ABC Online, 2005c). On 8 January, an ACT woman reported receiving spam from a person requesting financial aid who claimed to have been injured by the tsunami, about to die and promising to give his share of the funds to a charity organisation in Thailand (*SMH*, 2005).

On 11 January, in response to such hoaxes, Sky News Online made the following announcement:

Finance experts are urging people to donate to aid agencies via official websites, rather than responding to unsolicited emails. MasterCard International says Internet con-artists are trying to exploit Asia's tsunami disaster by tricking people into revealing private information" (Sky News Online, 2005).

To assist provide information for potential donors on "how to help", the Australian Government established a "Tsunami Assistance" website on which it stated

The Australian Government is working closely with domestic and international aid agencies to respond to the magnitude of the December 2004 Tsunami. It welcomes the generous level of cooperation which has been extended and the donations which have been made to various appeals. The most effective form of assistance which can be offered by members of the public wishing to help is a cash donation to the charity of their choice (Australian Government, 2005).

This was followed by a list of 29 hyperlinks to various aid agencies, but no indication of how they were selected was provided, beyond the statement that they had launched appeals. In addition, nothing was said regarding the accountability of these organisations in collecting and distributing cash donations. Donors may be so moved by the plight of the people in the tsunami-affected regions that they may give to an organisation without actually investigating how their money will be spent or the agency's past history in aid distribution. However, some may decide to analyse who will use their donations in the most effective way before giving, which leads to the second issue of trust and accountability.

Measuring accountability

In defining accountability, there are two questions that need to be considered:

- a. To whom agencies are accountable, and
- b. For what activities and performance levels the agencies are responsible.

The simplest answer to the first question is that an agency is accountable to its donors and its Board of Directors. However, there have been calls to extend this accountability to encompass aid recipients, aid partners and the general public (Brown and Moore, 2001; Churchill, 2003; Foreman, 1999).

With regard to the second question, responsibility should focus on both efficiency and results and can be considered as three distinct three levels of accountability: fiscal, process and program (Drucker, 1992; Martin and West, 2003; Quarter and Richmond, 2001; Quarter, Mook and Richmond, 2003). Fiscal accountability documents how funds are spent and addresses stewardship issues. Process accountability focuses on how the agency carries out its stated activities. Program accountability (which includes social accountability) embraces how the aid is delivered and to whom.

The recent call for increased nonprofit accountability (Brown and Moore, 2001; Churchill, 2003; Light, 2002; Maude, 1999; Ospina, Diaz and O'Sullivan, 2002; Robinson, 2003) has led to the emergence of a number of "watchdog" organisations which are "rolling out programs to evaluate and accredit nonprofit groups" (Silverman, 2004, D.1). One of these US organisations, GuideStar, suggests that "being a good giver takes more than just heart" (GuideStar, 2005) and provides ten pieces of advice to potential donors. In relation to accountability, GuideStar asserts that "a reputable organization will define its mission and programs clearly, have measurable goals and use concrete criteria to describe its achievements". Another US watchdog organisation, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) states that "good charities willingly answer tough questions" (ECFA, 2005b) and suggests that while all nonprofit organisations believe in accountability, ECFA is able to provide assurance to potential donors, because its members "have acted upon that belief by voluntarily submitting to the ECFA Standards of Responsible Stewardship and demonstrating their compliance through an annual review process" (ECFA, 2005a).

In Australia, another watchdog, the Australian Council for International Development's (ACFID) has established a code of conduct of non-government development organisations which

defines standards of governance, management, financial control and reporting with which non government development organisations (NGDOs) should comply. It identifies mechanisms to ensure accountability in NGDO use of public monies. The Code aims to maintain and enhance standards throughout the NGDO community, ensuring public confidence in: the integrity of individuals and Organisations comprising the NGDO community; and quality and effectiveness of NGDO programs (ACFID, 2004, 1).

ACFID's code of conduct also specifies particular requirements for appeals. They include

- truthful solicitations which accurately describe the agency's identity, purpose, programs and needs;
- using donations as promised or implied;
- making known how any excess funds will be applied;
- a note explaining the use of any ratios provided;
- establishment of internal control procedures which minimise the risk of misuse of funds, and
- reporting mechanisms which facilitate accountability to members, donors and the general public.

Based on these types of requirements, it was suggested that donors "should ensure that money goes only to those agencies committed to complying the Australian Council for International Development's [ACFID] code of ethics" (Matheson, 2005). In addition, Myles McGregor-Lowndes, Director of Queensland University of Technology's Centre for Philanthropy and Non-Profit Studies was able to assure *The Courier-Mail* that "Australia's overseas aid organisations are up there with the best – if not the best – for having safeguards in place. The level of accountability and scrutiny is pretty enormous" (Thomas and Thompson, 2005). However, there is still

the question of whether aid agencies running appeals are actually members of ACFID, and even if they are, whether they comply with the code.

This raises the issue of how to obtain such information. The two most common ways for the general public to be able to get information about aid agencies is through either websites or annual reports. Then there is the additional question of whether the available information actually provides insight into the financial and social accountability of the organisation.

The most accessible information source is through the hyperlinked websites. But what sort of information is provided? What assurance is given about the trustworthiness and financial accountability of the organisation? If a prospective donor moves around the site, what additional information will they find? Are there financial statements available indicating the organisation's past performance?

The Study

Of the 37 organisations listed on the on the Australian Government's updated "Tsunami Assistance" website (as at 25 January 2005), three have been omitted from the study: ACFID (an umbrella organisation), Australian Giving Centre (a page with links to organisations) and Sri Lankan Events Calendar (a page with links to community events held to raise money for the tsunami appeal). This study investigates remaining 34 aid agencies listed by considering how assurance of their financial and social accountability is initially provided to the public.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Three indicators are considered

1. Membership of watchdog organisations.

Membership of ACFID provides an initial credibility for an aid agency. Further accreditation is necessary for agencies receive AusAID NGO status. Thus, the study will investigate whether an agency is a member of ACFID and also whether it is an accredited AusAID organisation.

2. Specific information provided in the agency's tsunami appeal

Section 5.5 of the ACFID code of conduct requires that

Donations shall be used as promised or implied in fundraising appeals or as requested by the donor. When funding is invited from the general public for a specific purpose, the Organisation shall have a plan for handling any excess and shall make this known as part of the appeal (ACFID, 2004, 4).

Consequently, issues that will be considered are

- Does the agency provide details of the projects for which the funds will be used?
- Does the agency indicate where excess funds will be channelled once the projects or programs have been accomplished?

Graham Tupper, executive director of ACFID stated that “donors have a right to know how the money is spent” (Thomas and Thompson, 2005), so another issue is

- Does the agency specify the percentage of total donations that will actually go overseas and the percentage that will be used on administration?

3. Investigation of website one month after Tsunami to gauge feedback provided to donors and the general public.

On 25 January 2005, Oxfam New Zealand released an eight page brief entitled “Learning the Lessons of the Tsunami – One Month On” which was largely centred on Oxfam’s work in the tsunami-devastated regions. However, the brief also presented six lessons that needed to be learnt. The first of these was that “survivors need appropriate aid, not any aid” and that “some of the aid provided has not been appropriate” because there is “the need to ask people what they want” (Oxfam NZ, 2005, 1). Bringing this assessment together with ACFID’s requirement that “reporting mechanisms which facilitate accountability to members, donors and the general public” (ACFID, 2004, 4), agency websites will be assessed in relation to feedback (if any) provided one month after the tsunami regarding their use of the donated funds.

The Results

Of the 37 organisations listed on the website, three have been omitted from the study: ACFID (an umbrella organisation), Australian Giving Centre (a page with links to organisations) and Sri Lankan Events Calendar (a page with links to community events held to raise money for the tsunami appeal). Table 2 presents the individual results for each of the remaining 34 aid agencies in relation to six criteria.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The information was obtained from the website of each agency from the link provided on the Australian Government page - the easiest source of information to which the majority of donors would have access. Specific results in relation to the three issues specified above are discussed in the following sections.

1. Membership of watchdog organisations.

The list of agencies that appears on the Australian Government Tsunami Assistance website is preceded by the statement that

The most effective form of assistance which can be offered by members of the public wishing to help is cash donations to the charity of their choice (Australian Government, 2005).

The implication for donors is that these organisations all have Government approval and are fitting recipients of their cash. However, many of these agencies do not actually have recognised external credibility. The results in Table 3 show that over 44 percent of agencies are not members of ACFID and over 38 percent are not accredited with the AusAID program, and yet they are listed on an Australian Government list.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

2. Specific information provided in the agency's tsunami appeal

As discussed above, three specific areas were examined in relation to information each agency provided in its tsunami appeal: the disclosure of the use of donations, the application of excess funds and amount that would actually be applied to disaster relief as opposed to administration costs. The results are summarised in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

- Use of donations

Most agencies specified how they would use the donations raised (85.3 percent) and an additional three agencies, while not specific, explained the nature of the local organisation in the tsunami-affected areas to whom they would be sending the funds. However, two agencies made no attempt to indicate how monies would be spent anywhere on their website, but merely asked for donations and provided bank details for how these could be given.

- Application of excess funds

Three agencies out of the 34 actually reported what they would do with any excess funds raised. One of these, Medecins San Frontieres announced that it had put its tsunami appeal on hold. Having reached its target of \$1 million within two days, it was still accepting donations but would direct them to its general medical aid funds. A spokesman stated that

It is our feeling that to continue accepting donations for the emergency appeal at this point would violate our ethical standards of transparency and accountability and indeed our responsibility to our donors (ABC Online, 2005a).

This information was also reported on the agency's website. Another of the three, ADRA Australia revealed on its website that "all funds collected during the tsunami appeal will be used for emergency relief and rehabilitation projects in tsunami affected areas" and that this was possible because it had a number of "implementing offices" in tsunami-affected areas which would be "constantly identifying needs and developing project ideas". The third agency, Baptist World Aid Australia, stated that "All funds designated for the Tsunami Relief appeal will go towards that appeal. As this will be an ongoing project over the next 5 to 10 years, we do not expect that we will have more money than we need".

Of the 31 agencies that did not reveal where they would direct excess funds, sixteen are actually members of ACFID whose code requires that the information be specifically stated in the appeal. Disclosing the information in the appeal is essential

to ensure that all donors know what is happening. One organisation, World Vision, seemed to have realised this omission from its appeal because its spokesperson, Belinda Richardson later told *The Age* (5 Jan 2005) that they “could never have enough money for this particular appeal ... we will never close the appeal”. However, such belated comments to the press, while laudable, do not meet the accountability requirements.

- Funds used for disaster relief vs. administration

Information regarding the percentage of the donations that would be applied to disaster relief was directly provided in their appeals by ten of the agencies. A further six had information elsewhere on their websites which informed the public of how funds were distributed, but this data was often embedded in layers and not easy to find. However, the issue of most concern is that more than half of the agencies (52.9 percent) did not specify how the funds would be applied.

3. Post-tsunami feedback

If donors revisited websites four weeks after the tsunami to obtain updates on what had been accomplished with their funds, they would be disappointed. Only 35.3 percent of organisations provided feedback after 22 January. A further 17.6 percent had provided information up until 15 January. Thus, almost half of the 34 agencies provided no information to their donors beyond their initial appeal information with one website having closed down. This lack of reporting raises serious doubts about the public accountability of many of these agencies.

Concluding comments and further research

From these three preliminary indicators, there appears considerable lack of accountability on the part of many of the 34 agencies listed on the Australian Government tsunami assistance website. Thus the Government has waived its normal accountability requirements as it has provided credibility for these agencies by listing them on an official website and donors may be forgiven if they believe that these agencies have been approved by the Government. It is disappointing that the Government has moved away from its two accountability programs, ACFID membership and AusAID accreditation, at such a time, when donors want to give but also want to know whom they can trust.

Further research could provide a more rigorous assessment by assessing the agencies' accountability on the basis of two additional indicators. First, it would be fruitful to assess other information disclosed on the agency's website that would provide assurance to potential donors. This information will be investigated in the light of both past performance and the history and reputation of the agency.

Secondly, there could be a consideration of the usefulness of annual reports (if provided) for decision-making by donors. However, it is not sufficient for annual reports of aid agencies to disclose financial data (FRBR, 2005; Quarter et al, 2004; Weisinger and Salipante, 2005) but also to include a broader concept of accountability encompassing the social capital (Leonard and Onyx, 2005) and aspects of operations including "the people who work for them, communities that are affected by them or their products, and the use of public goods, such as infrastructure or education and training" (Dellaportas, Gibson, Alagiah, Hutchison, Leung and van Homrigh, 2005, 218). To this end, the annual reports would need to be assessed in relation to financial, social and environmental accountability.

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Table 1: Aid agencies seeking cash donations as listed on official Australian Government Tsunami Assistance website (as at 25 January 2005)

Archbishop's Appeal Unit Tsunami Appeal	International Fund for Animal Welfare
ADRA Australia	Medecins Sans Frontieres Australia
Anglicord	Muslim Aid Australia
Austcare	National Council of Churches in Australia
Assisi Aid Projects	Opportunity International Australia
Australia for UNHCR	Oxfam - Community Aid Abroad
Australian Foundation for the Peoples of Asia and the Pacific	Plan Australia
Australian Red Cross	Royal Thai Consulate General Sydney, Tsunami Appeal
Baptist World Aid Australia	Salvation Army
CARE Australia	Save the Children
Caritas Australia	Sri Lanka Association of NSW
CCF Australia	Sri Lanka Society of Queensland Inc
Christian Blind Mission International	TEAR Australia
Compassion Australia	Thai Disaster Fund Victoria
Forgotten Children Rescue Foundation	UNICEF
Friends of the Earth (Australia)	Union Aid Abroad
International Committee of the Red Cross	World Vision Australia

Table 2: Consolidated Results

	AusAID	ACFID	Projects	Excess	% distrib	Feedback
Archbishop's Appeal Unit Tsunami Appeal	Yes	Yes	General	No	No	No
ADRA Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	27/1
Anglicord	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Vague	No
Austcare	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Assisi Aid Projects	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	19/01
Australia for UNHCR	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Australian Foundation for the Peoples of Asia and the Pacific	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Australian Red Cross	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	27/01
Baptist World Aid Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	25/01
CARE Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	20/01
Caritas Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	26/01
CCF Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Christian Blind Mission International	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	27/01
Compassion Australia	No	No	Yes	No	General	26/01
Forgotten Children Rescue Foundation	No	No	Yes	No	General	No
Friends of the Earth (Australia)	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	20/01
International Committee of the Red Cross	No	No	Yes	No	No	19/01
International Fund for Animal Welfare	No	No	Yes	No	No	21/01
Medecins Sans Frontieres Australia	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	General	No
Muslim Aid Australia	No	No	No	No	No	None
National Council of Churches in Australia	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Opportunity International Australia	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	None
Oxfam - Community Aid Abroad	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	25/01
Plan Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	24/01
Royal Thai Consulate General Sydney, Tsunami Appeal	No	No	No	No	No	None
Salvation Army	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Save the Children	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	25/01
Sri Lanka Association of NSW	No	No	Yes	No	No	25/01
Sri Lanka Society of Queensland Inc	No	No	Vague	No	NonSpec	Closed
TEAR Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	22/01
Thai Disaster Fund Victoria	No	No	Yes	No	No	21/01
UNICEF	No	No	Country	No	No	17/01
Union Aid Abroad	No	Yes	Yes	No	NonSpec	None
World Vision Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	26/01

Table 3: Membership of watchdog organisations (n = 34)

	ACFID % (n)	AusAID % (n)	Both ACFID and AusAID % (n)
Members	55.9 (19)	61.8 (21)	52.9 (18)
Non-members	44.1 (15)	38.2 (13)	47.1 (16)

Table 4: Information disclosed by agencies in relation to tsunami appeals (n=34)

	Specific use of funds % (n)	Application of excess funds % (n)	% of donation going overseas as opposed to admin costs % (n)
Specified	85.3 (29)	8.8 (3)	29.4 (10)
Not specified	5.9 (2)	91.2 (31)	52.9 (18)
Other	8.8 (3)	-	17.6 (6)