

The YMCA response to the disaster caused by the 2004 tsunami in Asia

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Introduction

On December 26, 2004 an event of epic proportions occurred in Southeast Asia. A tsunami at an unprecedented level for modern times occurred at about midnight local time. The impact of the tsunami was felt in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, and extended to Africa on the western side of the Indian Ocean. In that event, the tsunami moved from east

to west bringing destruction to thousands of communities. Over 162,000 people were killed, 142,000 people were missing, and nearly one million people were displaced (fig. 1).

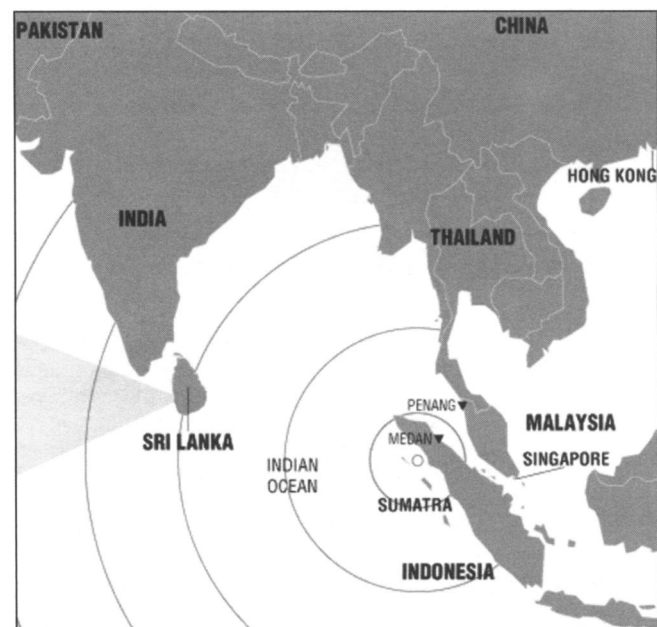


Fig. 1: The epicenter of the 2004 earthquake and the areas affected by the subsequent tsunami.

The overall demographic impact of the tsunami in the entire South Asia region was devastating. Thirty-eight percent of the casualties from the tsunami were children under age 18. Due to the aftermath of the tsunami, one million children did not have proper school facilities and resources, the economic livelihood negatively affected four million jobs, and over two million homes were damaged or destroyed.

The YMCA and the tsunami

Immediately following the event, the International Division of the YMCA of the USA commissioned a small group to Sri Lanka and India to represent the United States national movement as part of a global YMCA response.

The YMCA Movement works with a unique volunteer – professional full-time paid executives partnership, and its policy making responsibility lies with the volunteer leaders while the YMCA professional leaders provide the technical advice and support in making policies and executing those policies.

There are currently 38 YMCAs in Sri Lanka through which over 50,000 people are served (fig. 2).

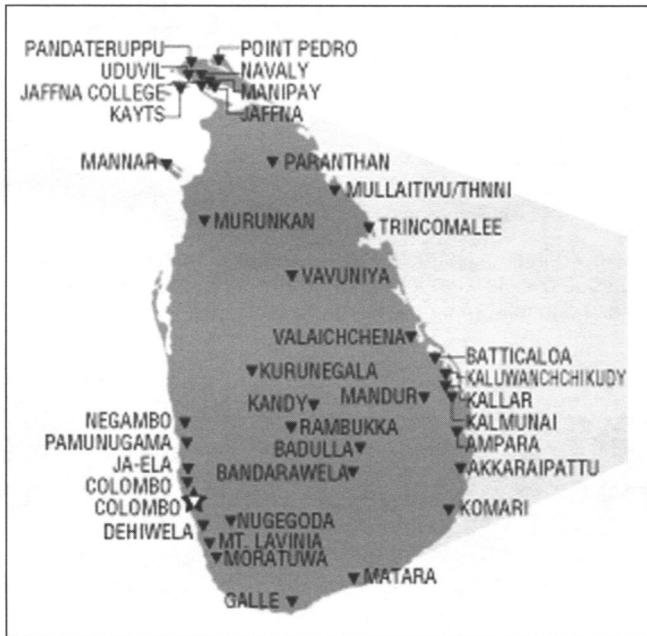


Fig. 2: The location of YMCA centers in Sri Lanka.

The core programs of the YMCA of Sri Lanka consist of peace and reconciliation work, nursery schools and daycare programs, youth education assistance, youth employment and vocational training, sports, camping and recreation, and community micro credit. The YMCA of Sri Lanka is one of the oldest social service organizations in the country and well-positioned to support the rehabilitation process of Sri Lanka. It is also important to note that 95 percent of the people that are served by the YMCA in Sri Lanka are non-Christian.

The tsunami exacerbated both the existing needs for the community as a whole but also the dangerous political condition in Sri Lanka and disturbed the cease-fire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) signed in 2002. (The Tamil Tigers fought for 20 years to carve out a separate homeland in Sri Lanka's north and east for the country's 3.2 million minority Tamils, who are largely Hindu. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, most of whom are Buddhists. The violence has persisted and escalated and severely affected efforts to intervene following the tsunami).

With many barriers to overcome, the YMCA as a global movement responded with authority and existing infrastructure to meet the challenges created by the extraordinary event.

The YMCA post-tsunami capacity-building priority needs were identified and included:

- the renovation of the damaged YMCA;
- infrastructure, the procurement of equipment and supplies;
- the recruitment and/or re-training of staff and volunteers; and,
- strengthening of the local, national and international YMCA collaboration,

to sustain the work needed in order to scale up vital youth services.

Tasks and collaborators

• **Tasks:** To address the tsunami rehabilitation, the focus of the YMCA was to develop core competencies and expertise in three key areas:

• **Youth and family development:** To emphasize the work of educational assistance, to repair and rebuild homes and the rejuvenation of programs and services.

• **Community mobilization and empowerment:** The critical factors are to rebuild civil society to improve inter-faith dialogue and to work for the legal rights of women and children. This second agenda is an extraordinarily important and a persistent need in Sri Lanka given the protracted civil war and civil unrest that has existed in the country for nearly three decades.

• **Collaboration between other non-governmental organizations, the government and businesses:** It is important for the YMCA to help create a relational and infrastructure capacity so that non-governmental organizations in the non-profit sector can work in collaboration with government and private industry to sustain economic progress.

• **Collaborators:** The partners in the work of the international movement of the YMCA focused on

- the World Alliance of YMCAs; and,
- the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs.

These are two strong organizations representing the global movement as well as the regional movement in Asia and the Pacific.

• The North American/South American YMCAs that collaborated to provide ongoing resources are the United States, Canada, Honduras, Ecuador, Mexico and Argentina;

• Representing Asia and the Pacific Alliance of YMCAs were Japan, Australia, Korea, Hong Kong, Tahiti, Singapore, New Zealand, Taiwan/Malaysia, and Bangladesh.

• The European YMCAs included Y-care, which is the philanthropic branch of the YMCA of the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark.

YMCA partners also include the governments of India and Sri Lanka, the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, and the Sri Lanka Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation. This presentation acknowledges the contribution of all of these partners whose work forms the basis of this lecture.¹

Program of action

The priority interventions were laid out in three different timeframes:

• **The immediate work** from January to March of 2005 was focused primarily on relief efforts. The YMCAs immediately assisted over 50,000 people through emergency food, water, clothes and shelter, community volunteer mobilization, devastation clean up, trauma counseling, recreation and education.

• **The mid-term work** was rehabilitation and to assist 50,000 people by upscaling work to include educational assistance to 10,000 youth, provide home sustenance to 5,000 families, directly repair 500 damaged homes, and to provide trauma counseling to 1,000 youth and families.

• The third area is **long-term development** and to continue the work by assisting 125 youth and families by 2008 in the following priority areas: youth sports, recreation, camping, and after-school activities, trauma counseling, vocational training and micro credit, rebuilding livelihoods, job assistance programs, building and repairing homes, civic education, and youth and community volunteer service learning.

The YMCA has been recognized as a credible partner in the region for many generations. With a pre-existing organizational, programmatic and financial infrastructure in place, the YMCA

was able to have a great impact in community redevelopment. There is also a widely-held understanding that the YMCA needs to exist in the long run because the repair of the damage is likely to take between three and five years.

Management and responsibilities: The management roles and responsibilities allocated among the partner countries were divided into key and distinct areas.

● **Primary responsibility** for local and national implementation was the responsibility of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka and India. YMCA partner groups were allowed to participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programs, and the YMCA of the United States in particular coordinated assistance with local YMCAs in the United States to find financial and other resources that were delivered to the region. (The United States was also heavily involved in areas of governance, transparency and accountability, given the specific standards for disclosure under the United States law and best practices that are transferable from the United States context into the global context).

● The World Alliance and the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs took responsibility for the **coordination of resource mobilization and information dissemination** within the Asia/Pacific region and global arena to ensure proper alignment of resources and the continuing driving of the message that urgent help was needed at the time.

● **Monitoring and evaluation of financial accountability** is extraordinarily important because of the massive amounts of resources needed and the issue of long-term credibility. Without transparency, financial accountability, it would be impossible to sustain the philanthropic requirements to fund the elements of the program. December of 2005 was the first evaluation of the program. And early in 2006, a revision would be necessary to address the development strategies to reflect the realities on the ground.

The fundraising goal over a three-year period was \$6 million U.S. dollars. (The YMCA tsunami rebuilding process in Sri Lanka has developed the participation of 20 government institutions, 20 bilateral and multilateral organizations and 18 national and international NGOs).

● **Sustainability** is also a very important theme within the local communities. This is important due to the nature of the event and the rush response to address the restructure of the surrounding areas. The YMCA took the responsibility to ensure that the re-development reflected these modern standards. And it is important to note that program interventions were designed with community participation as a grassroots effort to strengthen the local movement.

Restructuring goals

Accordingly, the YMCA movement to re-structure focused on the following goals:

- to strengthen the governance structure and transparency, ensuring that there is a strategic vision in alliance with the YMCA's goals and objectives;
- to increase membership,
- to improve board and volunteer recruitment and training;
- to strengthen civil society in areas of persistent civil unrest,
- to improve staff recruitment and training;
- to strengthen resource mobilization; and finally,
- to promote the YMCA and non-YMCA organizations through partnership and collaboration.

● **Financing:** In Sri Lanka, the cooperation of the international partners in conjunction with the domestic and global community has been impressive, and over 70 percent of financial pledges have been converted into firm commitments.

Despite this high conversion rate, funding gaps are likely to occur in certain sectors due to the cost of reconstruction and has

been impacted by inflation that often accompanies economic shifts following wide ranging disasters. Shortages in supplies are exacerbated by disruption in supply chains and governmental regulations with dubious rationale and questionable impact.

● **Temporary housing:** The YMCA partners report that close to 50,000 units of temporary shelter were in the process of being completed by fall 2005 and close to 2,000 were in progress. The total goal for temporary housing is approximately 60,000 units, however, short-term housing is not the ultimate goal of the program because they are not built for permanent residence and deteriorate quickly under the local conditions.

● Two programs have been designed for **housing construction and rehabilitation**. Under the Donor Built Reconstruction Program approximately 50,000 units of housing are required. The Home Owners Program funds are given for nearly 55,000 self-help repair or reconstruction. Progress has been much slower than anticipated because of various causes of delays and difficult local political issues often associated with favoritism and patronage.

Our partners also report that between 70-85 percent of households affected by the tsunami have regained their main source of income and ninety percent of lost fishing boats have been restored and the fishing industry is gradually recovering. Concern also exists that the agricultural sector suffered losses and is not receiving appropriate attention. On the other hand, at least 15 percent of the tsunami affected is living off an income (foreign remittances, government welfare) or from temporary relief work, not necessarily earned through regular work. The percentage of persons living off other sources is presumably higher in areas with lower economic activity. This will be a serious area to monitor to ensure that a permanent new class of public-assisted persons does not become established following tsunami recovery.

In 2006, the YMCA will focus its Tsunami efforts on the completion of the housing construction and continuing the education scholarships. The YMCA is awaiting confirmation of funding to commence Advocacy, Play Therapy and Partner Capacity building for Human Rights and Youth Empowerment.

We hope to be able to commence these activities, and return to much needed Peace & Reconciliation work and focus on strengthening the YMCA movement in 2006.

Priorities for future action

- Beyond 2006, **the three- to four-year focus** of the YMCA's continued Tsunami response will expand to include:
- Giving educational support, including needed materials, along with 10,000 scholarships to children in 15 communities;
- Provide home sustenance assistance to 5,000 families in 15 communities within the year;
- Repairing 500 damaged homes in 15 communities;
- Building up to 200 homes;
- Providing recreational programs and camps for youth and psycho-social counseling;
- Helping 400 families to build livelihoods through Vocational Trainings, support grants and provide boats for fishermen;
- Repairing 6 YMCA buildings damaged by the Tsunami.
- **The longer range commitment** will entail establishing and equipping two new centers for Vocational Training, supporting another 13 YMCA centers already involved in Vocational Training, providing playgrounds for children, and establishing a micro-credit program to support small business development for those receiving the vocational skill training.

Natural disasters from the global to the local scale

As YMCAs, we help build strong communities in local facilities around the globe.

As demonstrated in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, we are also a key community organization that is looked to as a beacon of service in times of destruction and despair.

The Tsunami taught us that it has become crucial to take steps today to prepare for a better tomorrow, should the unthinkable – now a startling thinkable – happen.

In August of 2005, **Hurricane Katrina** became that unthinkable tragedy within the Mississippi Delta region of the USA. Sixteen YMCAs in the Mississippi Delta were impacted in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana (fig. 3).

slaughter of these disasters? There was also a failure of technology that produced a failure to respond at the local level. There was also a failure to plan and to anticipate what can happen, what will happen, when global disasters or local disasters occur. And perhaps most disturbing, there was a failure of social and political systems to be accountable to and justly serve the people that they are elected or appointed to serve. During Katrina, as the stories of delayed reactions unfolded before us in the media, none of us could escape being personally impacted by the controversy surrounding the lack of immediacy of the evacuation ef-

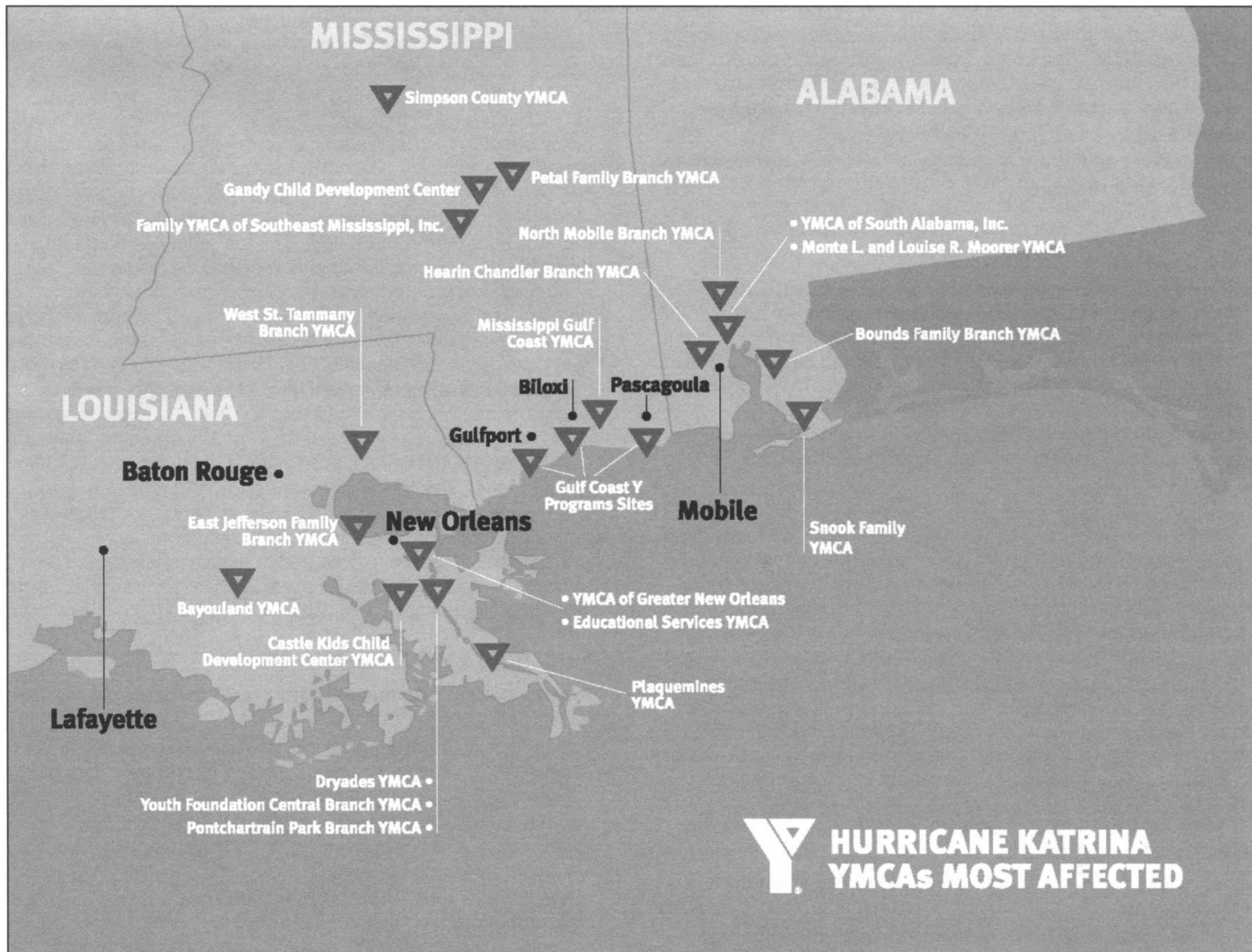


Fig. 3: Hurricane Katrina – YMCAs most affected.

Whether globally or domestically, what the Katrina Hurricane shows in conjunction with the Asian tsunami is that in times of *natural* disaster, equally as contributory to the destruction is the multiple failures of *human* systems. Fundamentally, in both instances, there was a failure to communicate adequately the impending disaster. We cannot help wonder, how much would have been averted had there been an early warning system, or an ongoing warning system to be able to communicate the on-

forts and the compelling racial and economic implications. As purveyors of equal access and services to all, the YMCA's goal is to take steps to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

We must also accept, in looking at these two global and highly impactful disasters, that nature will always win. Political, social and economic forces shape land use. Improper land use decisions lead to potential failure and real failure. The human social systems protect differentially. The human systems tend to

protect better wealthy people, and poor people have fewer practical choices.

The implications from an ekistics point of view are that disasters certainly occur from the scale of polis to Ecumenopolis, that nature is deeply involved in everything that we do, that our shells and human settlements are greatly impacted by these disasters, and that our networks of anthropos are economic and political infrastructure require local and global responses.

Local identity and culture have broad impacts on land use decisions, and deep cultural patterns are also impacted and do impact. The legal and regulatory structure and framework and the laws of nature are often in conflict.

Conclusion

What does this mean for the future? It means that the World Society for Ekistics needs to be prepared to respond to global crises whether they occur in the Bay of Bengal, in Bangladesh, in the United States, in Africa, other parts of Asia, anywhere in the world.

As an organization, we must face the question of relevance – does the WSE have anything concrete to offer in contrast to the on-the-ground and established local, regional and global resources of the YMCA? Should the WSE offer itself as a collaborative partner in association with other groups that are marshaled to plan and implement work?

If the WSE does have tangible resources to work in partnership, are we organized in such a manner to deliver where we can best be utilized? Is the WSE prepared for practical and sustained engagements as a collective of practitioners and what next steps must our organization take to be prepared to respond to the next disaster or call to action?

Note

1. The following individuals and national movements comprise the global Sri Lanka YMCA response team:
Mr Bart Shaha, General Secretary and Mr. Emile Stricker, Executive Secretary, World Alliance of YMCAs
Mr Yip Kok Choong, General Secretary, Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs

Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee Members
Mr Eraj Wijesinghe, Chairman, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Chrisantha Hettiaratchi, National General Secretary, YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr Sriyantha Senaratna, Executive Committee member, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr Ravi Algama, President, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr Kalum Peramune, Vice President, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr Christy Antony, Member, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Dennis de Costa, Member, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Anesley Gomez, Member, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Jude Simion, Member, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Russel de Zilwa, Member, Sri Lanka YMCA Tsunami Response Task Committee
Mr Felician Francis, Executive Committee Member, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr S.T.Thoumiyan, Vice president, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr A.P.Jayantha Kumar, Treasurer, National Council of the YMCAs of Sri Lanka
Mr Chris Roles, Chief Executive, YCare International, UK
Ms Boon Chin Tan, Associate Director International, YMCA of USA
Mr Art Wannland, Mr Evan Page and Mr Charles Collins, YMCA of the USA
Mr Albert Ching, General Secretary, Singapore YMCA
Mr Tom Cusons, Malta YMCA
Mr Stefan Nicholas, YMCA of Germany
Mr Matt Feutnill, YMCA of Australia
Mr Yamane Kazuki, Executive Secretary, National Council of the YMCA of Japan
Mr Bob Nicholson, YMCA of Australia
Mr Jinho Song, YMCA of Korea
Mr Charles Allison, General Secretary, Hong Kong YMCA
Mr Michael Weil, YMCAs of Canada
YMCA of Bangladesh
Y Global Norway
YMCA of New Zealand
YMCA of Sweden