

Youth-based Social Entrepreneurship: Post-Tsunami Crisis Interventions

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Ever dream about wanting to change the world? Have you sometimes felt powerless as you witness massive human suffering around the world? At times, have tears filled your eyes as your television shows children's bodies on the nightly news?

Then this story is for you. It's a tale of taking action, reducing human suffering, and lifting the poor. It is a tale of students and faculty from Utah's Brigham Young University mobilizing as a class with a new semester right after the devastation of the December 26, 2004 Asian tsunami.

It occurred in a remote jungle area, far from Utah where most people had never heard of BYU.

This is the story of a humble little band of college students who actually dared to practice what Mahatma Gandhi taught: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." While the tsunami garnered global headlines, this effort was far from the media, and was not carried out with big crowds watching, or the power of public relations. Rather, it was done quietly, devotedly, as an act of personal and collective stewardship—based on the belief that human beings have responsibilities toward helping each other.

This is the true saga of how a group of dedicated BYU students and friends started out a new semester and ended up changing the world. We began assuming it would be simply another course on theoretical concepts and abstract tools, but ended up having an experience of individual transformation.

The tragic devastation of the December 26 tsunami shocked people around the world. Ten days later, I stood in front of my new class at BYU's Marriott School.

The Challenge

As a faculty member whose role is to "profess" something, I challenged the group to literally consider how we might try and practice an inner call to action in our own lives. I asked the class to consider how we might design a project that could provide relief and comfort for a few of the tsunami's survivors: What could be done? How might we proceed? Does college, and more particularly a business school, have any use in alleviating human pain and pathos?



Wave volunteers assist a villager in the construction of his house at Bang Sak.

From that opening question, we began to design a humanitarian strategy to empower the poor who survived the terrible tsunami. We formed a project under the umbrella of a not-for-profit foundation called Empowering Nations. It grew out of a similar BYU course I taught several years earlier. For this new 2005 effort, one student suggested we call our new project “Wave of Hope,” a sharp contrast to the tsunami’s huge waves of destruction, death, and hopelessness. So this is our story — one of service, sacrifice, and practicing social entrepreneurship.

In the paragraphs below, I seek to do three things: 1) provide an overview of the 12/26 Asian disaster and give it a context; 2) articulate how this effort mobilized many youth volunteers; and 3) report a few significant impacts.

The Asian Crisis

The need for global aid was unprecedented in history as the 9.0 earthquake and 500 mile-an-hour powerful tsunami waves of up to 60 feet high wreaked havoc of epic proportions. Eleven countries throughout the Indian Ocean were affected, from Indonesia to Africa. Official death rates range from 230,000 on up, but the unofficial toll may have been much higher. For example, in Thailand — where we decided to help — government estimates were that 8,500 were killed, but such a number does not include some ten thousand missing aliens, mostly Burmese laborers who, because of desperate conditions in their own country, had been doing menial jobs in the tourist area of Khao Lak, Thailand. The same occurred elsewhere as well.

Thus, it may be assumed, that the region’s total death toll was closer to half a million people. Hundreds of aftershocks since 12/26 continued to keep people on edge throughout 2005, including an 8.7 quake that killed hundreds more in March of that year..

With millions more injured, without houses, jobs, schools or medical care, the overall need was almost unfathomable. Experts estimated that some places like Sumatra and Sri Lanka were set back decades. Towns and villages were completely demolished, industries destroyed, education systems decimated, and transportation in shambles. Infrastructure like roads, bridges and rail lines were obliterated. Wonderful beaches and upscale tourist amenities disappeared. Tens of thousands of families lost their loved ones. The so called "survivors" lacked food, water, shelter and security.

Government relief from nations around the earth was quick and helpful. Billions of dollars were promised, and groups like the Red Cross and United Nations were soon on the scene. However, many of the large, multilateral organizations withdrew from damaged areas after a few months. Much of the promised cash from world governments never did materialize.



It's all fun and games at Laem Pom Village as BYU women are busy shoveling sand for foundations.

Hence, the time seemed ripe for us as student volunteers to go and serve. The tough and complex work of jump-starting the Thai village economy and rebuilding destroyed villages was imperative. We were not a big, rich nongovernmental organization (NGO), with millions of dollars and donors. We were just a small group of college volunteers who possessed the moral energy and some new skills to make an impact. We couldn't do everything, but we felt we could each do something.

As we saw it, many Americans seemed stunned by the horrendous devastation of the tsunami. Some wrote out checks to provide emergency aid, as did people from various other nations. Then Hurricane Katrina and other storms smacked into the U.S. itself, and media attention shifted to those calamities.

Today, 3 years after the tsunami, the world's media has turned from agony and death to "important" new events such as the recent February 2008 Academy Awards and the upcoming "March Madness" of college basketball playoffs. Meanwhile, tsunami orphans suffer. Broken-down families try to eke out an existence as refugees in tent camps. Day-to-day survival has become the norm for millions of individuals.



The local schoolchildren surround the bookshelves, tables and benches made and delivered by the Thaikea project.

In the tsunami, many Asian coastal villages lost both people and infrastructure. After 12/26, the region of Banda Aceh, Indonesia was turned into a massive junkyard of twisted steel and cement, uprooted yards, rubble from tons of cars, and thousands of human corpses strewn over the area, becoming a large breeding ground for terrible diseases such as dengue, malaria and other infections.

The waves rushed to engulf everything in their path, sucking up bodies and violently smashing debris with massive waves three yards high, going as far as six miles inland. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami death toll was 24,000, with another 7,000 missing. More than 1.5 million people in that country alone were forced to flee their neighborhoods, including 880,000 who no longer had houses at all. The shockwaves in the Indian Ocean, I believe, will both go down in the history books as an epic calamity on a huge scale.

A Call to Action

So Wave of Hope was launched as a response by a few individuals to see how much we could do. In our early labors, some experts we consulted with we considered us as a kind of “Students-Without-Borders” project growing out of a college course. It was Organizational Behavior 490: “Becoming a Global Change Agent/Social Entrepreneur.” Self-organizing teams were established to design and implement our strategies: NGO start-up steps, fundraising, volunteer recruitment, PR, conceptual training in social entrepreneurship, Thai culture, travel logistics, meeting effectiveness, conflict resolution, and so forth. A representative from each group also served on an overall management council of eight leaders to share reports and progress, solve overarching problems, and generally oversee the entire project.

The class consisted of 33 registered students. Approximately half of them were undergraduates from sociology, international development, pre-med, business, the sciences and/or humanities. The other half were masters degree seekers: MPA, MBA, accounting, law, education, social work, and so forth. We began to plan for at least 50 volunteers to go to Thailand for a month or more each. A college dean chided our efforts, suggesting we would be lucky to find a half-dozen willing volunteers. When I countered that we would mobilize perhaps a hundred individuals, bureaucratic laughter ensued. I was told we would not be able to raise enough funds for even a dozen to go to

Asia. Yet I felt quite confident that the growing student interest in this project would yield greater numbers than any campus administrator could imagine.

Beyond the thirty-three regular students, about a dozen others from across campus sat in on the class. They either couldn't carry the extra credit hours because their course load was too heavy, or they only learned about the course after the add deadline had passed. One person even drove an hour from Salt Lake City each session to participate. But they all joined in, read the required scholarly material, took the tests, and participated on a service-learning team. No one received credit as a grade for their commitment to join Wave of Hope and go to Thailand. However, individuals were graded according to their rigorous academic performance: heavy reading, quizzes and tests, papers on self-reliance, social entrepreneurship, project design and/or implementation, OB team skills and planning strategies, and in-class presentations.

In addition, more than a thousand hours of collective volunteer group project work occurred outside of regular class periods. Students also attended four other Wave of Hope meetings during certain evenings: a forum experience with guest speakers from Thailand, a new volunteer orientation and training session, a Khao Lak logistics briefing session, and a final send-off meeting at the end of April.



Wave of Hope volunteers crafting the trade of brick laying at Tap Tawan Village.

These Wave of Hope college youth had a sense of calling and caring. In January 2005 they began to build models of post-tsunami service and useful tools to rescue the poor among Thailand victims. We realized that the people of Asia were desperate for shelter. They needed an income sufficient to buy rice and beans. They also needed education for their children, and their schools rebuilt or reopened.

Clearly, the situation for many college youth in America today is a far cry from that of the tsunami survivors. Many might be described as middle-class individuals, often from homes where both parents worked to be able to send a daughter or son to college. In my class a few came from families who dwelled in luxurious homes with ample garages to hold one's Mercedes Benz or BMW, along with snowmobiles, dune buggies, and boats. As a class, the group determined that they needed to sacrifice some of their comforts, as well as their money. However, more was needed to lift the poor of the tsunami than just sharing our financial resources. Writing a check to

assist devastated villagers along Asian coastal regions was a good thing. But some of these BYU students were able to even do more.

We felt we should reach out to sustain those poor, destitute Asian families who suffered greatly. In our course on global change agency, I attempted to help students develop a sense of stewardship. They became part of a work in which we human beings learned to go beyond ourselves. Wave of Hope global change agents became able to think more consciously and broadly than just focusing mostly on themselves. They learned how to respond to the suffering of others. As social entrepreneurs we were able to look beyond the here-and-now to greater social justice in a better future.

Wave of Hope Results

Because of the support, donations, and mobilizing efforts of many, Wave of Hope had huge results. In spite of doubtful predictions from critics, some 90 dedicated volunteers were able to travel to Thailand in 10 teams to carry out reconstruction efforts of those devastated by the coastal tsunami. They included individuals from 7 countries and 14 universities. Some 22 older BYU alumni from across America with backgrounds as CPAs, entrepreneurs, management consultants, and homemakers also gave of their skills. Wave of Hope became a unique collaboration of many people from across the world, including 40 volunteers who worked on the U.S. Support Team, helping with project design and fundraising. An additional 13 in-country advisors gave technical assistance, management expertise, and other training to ensure success.

The TA in my BYU course who was born in Mexico, grew up in Canada, now lives in Panama, and was a Peace Corps leader in Kenya, defined our task: "We need to match volunteers' skills with on-the-ground problems in Thailand in order to maximize our impact." Ultimately, we raised more than \$200,000 (cash and in-kind goods) and recruited 143 committed individuals.

Over a five-month period, during summer 2005 our teams served in the hot, humid Khao Lak region of the Pang-Na province of Thailand, where the tsunami had devastated whole villages and left thousands of Thais and Burmese either killed or tragically missing. Our volunteers served to restore the quality of the victims' lives. Instead of villagers' desperation, they gained dignity. Rather than feel isolated and alone, they felt support.

Wave of Hope gave more than 14,000 hours of service to many different projects, laboring with other volunteers from around the world. On beaches we gathered debris for miles, and worked in the ocean with divers to clean up trash from homes, hotels and shops taken out to sea by the tsunami. We were able to clear away many tons of garbage. Other Wave volunteers helped the Thais construct and paint furniture for their homes and play sets for their schools, teaching Thai adults how to use donated power tools. This group took the word "Thai" and linked it with "Ikea," the big Swedish furniture store, a rather fun play on words. They operated as a worker-owned cooperative to build new household items for the new homes being built—tables and chairs, beds, shelves, etc.

Many of our social entrepreneurs worked with the Thais on their house rebuilding efforts in the villages of Thap Tawan, Laem Pom, and Bang Sak, preparing and pouring foundations, raising walls, installing roofs, applying plaster finish, and painting the completed houses. In all, we helped in the construction of more than 120 houses. Still others worked in the boatyard, applying waterproofing caulk and paint to the newly constructed boats for fishermen who had lost their livelihoods. Some 40 new boats were constructed, and we secured for each a new, donated motor from a U.S. NGO so the families could restart their family fish businesses again. We also completely funded the building of a long-tail fishing boat (\$4,000) that the fishermen named "The Wave of Hope" as a memorial to our efforts.



Volunteers look on and cover their ears as fireworks precede the launching of the first boat rebuilt after the tsunami.

The BYU student fundraisers also generated money with which to buy supplies. With these funds, Wave of Hope assembled and delivered more than 700 school and hygiene kits to impoverished families suffering in the survivor camps, played games and sang songs with orphaned children. The total value of clothing, quilts, and kits was worth thousands of dollars. Additional social entrepreneurs taught children English in the schools, as well as to adults who needed to improve their language skills for future hoped-for tourism jobs.

Various other income-generating projects were started. An example is that we formed and trained a group of men and women in pearl jewelry making. The effort, called Tsunami Pearls, was officially launched as a worker-owned cooperative. Upon our return to the U.S., we began to market the co-op's jewelry in America through several outlets. Our strategy was to continue funding this start-up venture until it created long-term jobs for tsunami victims and eventually became sustainable. Other income-generating projects were established later as we evaluated viable possibilities.

Our lives as BYU students and faculty were changed as we served those trying to recover from the devastation on their own. The tsunami victims were aided in their efforts to rebuild their lives and benefited from our volunteers' time and money, as well as by the generous contributions of many donors.

Readers are invited to get more details about this project, as well information about the future efforts of Empowering Nations, on our website at www.empoweringnations.org. After summer 2005, we sent follow-up volunteers during the next two semesters. Then, in summer 2006, more students returned to Thailand to assess our long-term impacts, do further business consulting with income-generating projects, and so on.

That same summer, Empowering Nations also recruited and designed projects for serving impoverished villagers in northern Ghana. Some 43 change agents spent at least a month each living in village homes, teaching in schools, doing medical and relief work, and strengthening the quality of family life. After that, Empowering Nations has spread to countries like Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Kenya, and Mozambique, as well as continuing service in Thailand and Ghana.

The post tsunami experience of Wave of Hope in 2005 was the highlight of many students' entire university experience. Our little band of global change agents came back from the summer's Thailand service feeling we truly did understand Gandhi's call to be the change that the world needs. His message had become internalized. Students also acquired meaningful skills in social entrepreneurship as a practical tool for building civil society. How to create and succeed in starting a social enterprise were important lessons of our volunteerism. Wave of Hope made a difference in the lives of many — the tsunami victims especially, but the volunteers as well. None of us will ever be the same.



Wave of Hope volunteers teaching English at re-opened Bang Sak School.