



Riding the Wave: How the Tsunamis Can Change Development

**Notes for a Speech delivered to The Group of 78
by Gerald Ohlsen
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Thank you Clyde. Friends,

A month ago tomorrow...Boxing Day 2004...the earth moved. A lot. The shape of the planet changed. It got a little rounder. It started to spin a bit faster on its axis. The seas rose up...and sucked away a quarter of a million lives in the blink of eye...leaving behind millions with no homes, no jobs, no future...but...because they are human beings, with hope.

The world responded to that hope in a way that was without precedent. Money poured into NGOs, allowing them to mobilize, get onto the ground and help, governments made huge pledges, meeting the initial UN appeal targets. Soldiers, sailors and aid workers from around the world descended on the Indian Ocean, bringing real, immediate help. For once, it seems, we are getting it right if...and it's a big if...the world stays the course, delivers the goods, and rewards the hope of the survivors.

Yet, during this month of unprecedented generosity, 150,000 children have died miserable, fever-ridden, painful, forgotten deaths in mud huts and crumbling shanties across the African continent. No terrifying, cataclysmic upheaval took those lives. The cause of death? Measles. Banal, preventable, treatable measles. Almost as many children, African too, had their lives drained away, literally, by gastro-intestinal disease. Dirty water killed them; nothing else. Then there is AIDS; third on the killer list, wiping out not just the kids, the productive minds and bodies of a generation.

And there is war, in Sudan, in the Congo, in Uganda and that litany goes on. Darfur...the place of the Fur...a place few of us, and we are aware people, might have been able to place on a map two years ago has generated 200,000 refugees in Chad, of all places. More than 1.4 million displaced...and its not over. Eight villages were burnt to the ground on Friday. What happened today? What, really, for all our gnashing of teeth, have we done?

Of course, you know all that. People, in Canada and around the world, are making these points, asking these sorts of questions and wondering whether the world really did change on December 26. Some say no, it will be business as usual tomorrow. Others say the world really has changed profoundly, but in so-doing, they point more to the demands of a newly aware public than to the responses of their governments. Writing in the Washington Post last week, Jeffrey Sachs said "The outpouring of grief and generosity after Asia's disaster shows that North Americans are ready-even yearning-to contribute to save lives and livelihoods." In Canada, yesterday Tom Axworthy wrote in The Star: "Many have debated whether the response of individual Canadians to the tsunami tragedy was a one-time affair or the harbinger of a more fundamental change. I believe it is the latter." Earlier, Allan Gregg said that the tsunami was an epochal, "seminal" event.

Well, maybe. There is a change. There is an openness to ideas and it is not limited to professionals, to people who, like us, work in the field. Last week I was in Edmonton. My daughter-in-law is a bus driver; when she spoke about the tsunamis, asked "but what about Africa? What about those places we forget?" She understood...and she is part of the change...but that change will only be meaningful if there is leadership. It will only matter if we, all of us together, make it so.

In the days right after the tsunamis, there was a stunning lack of leadership. The Prime Minister, Ministers, all of the opposition leaders, the leaders of the big NGOs...all of them...were invisible. It seemed that no one was in charge. The initial funding offers were ridiculous...\$1 million, \$4 million, \$60 million. There appeared to be no plan...and yet, from the opposition, from the humanitarian community itself...there was silence. I am not long retired from Foreign Affairs, so I was baffled, saddened when Minister Pettigrew offered the excuse that people did not realize the extent of the tragedy. Really. Ten minutes of watching television and the slightest exercise of imagination anyone could understand its extent, from the beginning.

Eventually, as Canadians demonstrated their commitment with their wallets, the government caught on. The Prime Minister returned, funding rose to an acceptable level...but still, there is no leadership offered to Canadians. No vision of what we can do, what we are doing, together.

That lack of leadership brought together small group of people - Mike Cassidy, Ian Smillie, Andrew Cohen, latterly David MacDonald and myself- to see what could be done to build on the outpouring of goodwill and generosity from Canadians. Some of the ideas I will put forward are theirs; I do not take all the credit, but happily take responsibility for any errors in what you may hear today.

As a first step, we would suggest, in good Canadian fashion, that the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, or its Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Cooperation, take up the issue of post-tsunami response as a matter of urgency. Ideally, if good witnesses are called and television coverage provided, this could be a national teach-in on disaster response, and lead to a powerful report with broad multi-partisan

support. This effort has begun; Members of Parliament are working to develop support for this idea today.

We also have few ideas that should be explored by the Committee. The first relates to that lack of coordination that seemed so plague the first days of the crisis. There was a sense that both among government agencies and between government and the humanitarian agencies that actually do most of the work on the ground, there was no one in charge. To remedy this, we suggest consideration of the creation of strong disaster relief coordinating office, involving both government and NGOs, under an independent Coordinator whose task would be to cut red tape and see that goods, people and money actually flow. There is a precedent for this; David MacDonald served as coordinator for Ethiopian famine relief in the 1970's, the greatest outpouring of Canadian public generosity until this tragedy. The lessons learned from that experience should be reexamined, and a similar approach perhaps tried again.

The second idea is one that will require close consultation among the major NGOs involved in disaster relief, reconstruction and, perhaps, in development. (As those of you in the field know, this is for professionals an important and difficult distinction, too complex to discuss now...but it is one that is totally lost on the victims of disaster and those in grinding poverty.) That idea is the creation of a common funding appeal under a committee made up of key agencies and possibly CIDA. There are precedents for this in the UK, Norway and the Netherlands.

In the UK, they have the Disaster Emergency Committee, which carries out joint appeals in response to specific disasters. The funds so raised, and government matching grants, are then allocated among the participating agencies according to their track record, existing presence on the ground and capacity to respond in a particular case. Funds go to the agencies that can best use them, rather than those that are good at raising money.

Consider a couple of examples from the current crisis. An agency for which I have great respect, that does wonderful work on the ground, World Vision, was able to raise substantial funding for work in Indonesia...but, because of their faith-based nature, they have in the past been unable to work in Aceh, that most Muslim of Indonesian provinces. Save the Children, on the other hand, which has worked in the region at great risk throughout its ongoing crisis, has had great difficulty raising funds. In Sri Lanka an agency I knew well during my time there, SOS Children's Villages, who run wonderful orphanages, and whose inland facilities have taken in hundreds of kids, got no immediate funding from the wave of tsunami funding. None.

An agency such as this could help distribute funds more equitably among disasters as well. It could ensure that funds do go to Darfur, or to the camps in the Congo where people subsist on half rations. It is a means of helping addressing the terrible phenomenon of "forgotten disasters".

Establishing such a grouping will not necessarily be easy; there may be resistance from some of the larger agencies, but it is something that must be considered carefully. The

Foreign Affairs committee should look at it, and invite witnesses from countries that have tried it.

The strongest argument may simply be that a joint appeal will raise more money. The anniversary of the Tsunami Disaster will be Boxing Day, the day when traditionally people who had some money made up boxes of food and gifts to give to the poor. What better day to hold a national appeal for disaster relief, or perhaps, as they do in Norway, for all aspects of development? It is something we should think about.

A third issue that the committee should look into is not one that our little group has particularly favoured or examined, but has been a favourite of editorial writers and conservative politicians. That is the question of "lift capacity" and the role of the military in disaster relief and development. It is a complex question. As a peacebuilder, I believe that there may well be a need to buy those big C-17's-sometimes we do need to get Canadian troops on the ground quickly. (By the way, did you notice how a lot of the commentators seemed to be as offended by the fact that the planes we rented were Russian as by the fact of renting them? The Cold War is still with us.) There are things-like search and rescue-that only the military can do, but as a humanitarian, I am inclined to approach its role with caution.

First, its expensive. When I was in Rwanda I was warned at length by a very senior Canadian military officer to be cautious when asking for military support for humanitarian action. The army, he said, was always a highly effective way of getting things done, but it was never cost-effective. It is a very expensive way to do things.

Consider, for example, the DART. It costs \$20 million dollars to put that thing into the field for six weeks. It can treat 250 out patients a day. It produces a lot of clean water...but, how many water purification tablets and plastic jerry-cans would \$20 million buy? We need to think very hard about this.

Second is an even more difficult question, and one that is outside the scope of my talk today,.which is the question of the militarization of the "humanitarian space" and securitisation of the development process. These are issues that are causing real concern to professionals in the humanitarian sphere, concerns that need to be carefully weighed. These are questions that should be considered by the Foreign Affairs committee as it undertakes its work.

These are all important issues...but to some considerable extent they are technical questions, and ones that need to weighed by the professionals who, in the end, deliver the goods. Nevertheless, we need decisions and should help them to make them quickly.

There is, however, another question, of another order, that we need to consider.

On that terrible day...December 26, 2004...when Mother Earth shrugged her shoulders and shed her children...we all were changed. Throughout the world, and here in Canada, there is a new sense of unity, of oneness, of sharing with each other. Two-thirds of

Canadians, more than vote, have done something in response to that moment. Some wrote \$5 million cheques; others collected nickels door to door...but they did something. And they want Canada to do something, to be something, more in the world.

There is a sense of sharing and shared purpose among Canadians but it lacks focus, it lacks leadership. Together, let us now call on the Prime Minister to lead it...it is his job. Lets call on his Ministers, on the leaders of the humanitarian community themselves to take the lead and create a new clear focus for Canada in the world.

As a start, let us finally commit to keeping a promise that made three decades ago to bring Canada's aid level to 0.7% of our GNP. We have constantly failed to keep that promise...but now is the time to call on all Canadians to support that goal, to build a national coalition to demand that Canada live up to its word, as Denmark and Sweden and Norway and the Netherlands have done before us. Let the government come forth with a clear plan, with benchmarks to achieve that objective by 2015, as part of Canada's commitment to the United Nations millennium goals. Perhaps an additional billion this year and next, after all we have the money, then 15% increases for a few years...and we are there. It is quite possible.

So my request to you today is to join together, to bring together all of NGOs and agencies that are working in the field to reach out to their supporters-two-thirds of Canadians is a heck of mailing list- to get them to demand that their government at last live up to the promise it made so long ago.

To win this battle, we need business, we need labour, we need the NGOs, we need the media., we need politicians.

We need you.

Thank you.