

“You have to look at the needs”

An interview with Dominic Xavier, Director of Reaching the Unreached Trust

Monique McClellan, Permanent Representative to the United Nations Agencies, BICE

In this interview, Dominic Xavier – Director and founder of Reaching the Unreached Trust (RTUT), a small humanitarian NGO near Pondicherry in India – relates how RTUT interrupted its ongoing work in the shantytowns to respond to the tsunami, and how they were forced by circumstances to change their way of working within a few hours. From a community development organisation working on the rights of children in impoverished communities they were pushed into providing emergency assistance. And they attempted to apply some of the principles of their ongoing community work in a situation where there was little time for reflection.

Last year your programme was developing well, you had set up some systems and some routines. Then what happened?

In the early morning of 26 December we heard on the tv that a big wave had struck the coast, with maybe a few hundred people dead. We soon learned that the wave had been huge, that it devastated large parts of the Southeast Asian and South Asian coastlines and that there were many thousands of people missing.

Our office is three kilometers from the shore, so it was not affected. Pondicherry itself escaped destruction because a big stone wall that remained from colonial times had blocked the wave. I tried to rush down to the waterfront villages, but before reaching the sea I was stopped by the police. Apparently, where I had known the coastal villages to be, the wave had swept everything away.

Everybody was afraid, wondering whether there could be another wave, and quite honestly, nobody really knew what to do. In fact we had never heard of a tsunami; we didn't even know how to spell it. On that day, nobody, including the police, knew of the impact that the wave had had, but we realised that something terrible had happened and that help to the survivors was needed fast.

We managed to assemble a good team of volunteers, all strong men. Early next day we made our way to the shore and we were confronted by wiped-out villages, dead bodies lying about, hanging in bushes and in trees. As we moved along the shore, we met people erring about, looking completely disoriented, crying. Everybody was crying. Women and men were looking for their children, for their spouses and family members, children were looking

for their parents. Then we realised that thousands had died.

Those who survived had no cooked food, no drinking water, often no clothes. Government services were not yet functioning. So we organised with others to take people away from the seashore, to higher places where the wave had not reached. We sat them down, those who had not been hit by the wave shared what they had with those who had nothing: water, food, some basic clothes. The community response was spontaneous. Our volunteers also searched for the missing and identified and buried the dead.

Following your first impressions, how were you able to develop concrete responses, cutting through all the confusion and terror?

We built on the fact that there was a tremendous willingness among the population to help those who had been hit. The government didn't really start acting until several days later. But the people took their two-wheelers and anything with wheels and came towards the sea to help rescue people and a few belongings they were able to save. And they helped with the recovery of the dead. We found a car for hire and covered the coast line for over 30 kilometers or so, to see how we could best extend support.

Then, thanks to our existing network, we contacted local NGOs, individuals who could help and the press, and told them where to go, where the need was greatest and where people were suffering most.

We organised those who could contribute water to go to specific villages, those who had quantities of cooked food to where the need for food was greatest. The first week was really basically a rescue period

A partner of the International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE), RTUT is primarily concerned with implementing children's rights. The partnership with BICE concentrates on implementing a cooperative community-based programme to combat sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children. The community project started in an environment where social and health services and general community care were non-existent, where many children did not attend school, where single mothers try to keep the children fed and where alcoholism and drug addiction are frequent among men – most of whom are unemployed.

At the heart of all the work done by RTUT is the participation of the beneficiaries – they are involved in all the planning and decision making that concerns their welfare and their future. Another priority, and an important pillar of the work ethics of RTUT, is to recognise the ability of traumatised or hurt people to respond positively when they are encouraged to develop their individual resilience. Resilience must be promoted at all times to help traumatized individuals, families and communities to develop this capacity to recover and lead normal lives.

What about any foreign NGOs?

The central government in Delhi had indicated that they did not want any direct foreign aid. But we have quite a few international agencies who are based here and who work with Indian partners, and they started to respond immediately. Then the government distributions started as well. They provided rice, kerosene, mats, blankets, and vessels to cook the food. We were able to provide a little sugar, *dhall*, oil, rice, milk and the like, which the families needed immediately. In our particular area of coast line, this meant that we got to know the survivors.

This in turn made it possible to ask the villagers by the end of January, a month or so after the disaster, what they felt was an important way to proceed, while they were still trapped in the midst of chaos. They were getting more and more depressed by the remaining signs of death and destruction, an environment of sorrow, with parts of a wall sticking out here, a bit of a house there, smashed bits of boats on the sand. We all decided that it was important for the men and the youth to clean up the shore, and we were able to pay them a small fee. Instead of

just handing out the money, it was good for them to change their environment in a small way. And they could buy some necessities that way.

You in particular and the team in general had spent some years developing ideas of how the most desperately poor communities can be assisted by involving them fully in the process of change. But you probably did not have much time to reflect on how to apply a carefully planned community empowerment approach after the tsunami struck?

For the first few days I don't even remember ever sitting down. There was no time to think. Eventually we decided on three phases: Phase I was immediate rescue and assistance, which we were trying to provide already. Phase II would have to be emergency assistance to set up some basic systems. And phase III would involve community recovery and redevelopment. The first phase took a week or so, the second some months, and the third phase will take two to three years.

In phase II we first provided cloth and pens to each village, so that they could write out on a banner all the information concerning their village, and the banner was strung up by the main road, away from the coast. On it they indicated the name of the village that had once been there, how many people used to live there, how many people were believed to be still alive and the most urgent needs of the survivors. This helped those who passed on the road to respond in an appropriate way.

This really was the only means of communication available. And it helped, because people had come from all over to assist those in need. When there was no banner by the road, we knew the village had not been affected.

Talking with villagers we also realised that although they had welcomed used clothes initially, they did not want to be confronted with piles of inappropriate clothes, but rather make some simple ones themselves. We were able to purchase bales of cloth and distributed them to the population, as well as rubber flip-flops for the children so they would not burn their feet on the hot sand.

Part of this second phase was also to establish and reinforce networks with other NGOs. We shared responsibilities, some contacted government offices, another one local people who could help, officials and so on. Although we have developed networking



Photo: BICE/NANBAN / RTUT

The most severely hit age group are children between 5 and 11 years old

over the years, this is the first time that we worked so closely with other bodies. We had to. There was no time to think alone. The problem before us was too huge.

How did you develop the idea of three phases?

This was based on my previous experience when I first developed the programme to combat sexual abuse and exploitation. You have to first of all listen

to what people are asking and you have to hear what they are telling you. You have to look at the needs. You must find out what the people themselves can offer, the resources they carry within them, and finally, you have to assess your assets and resources to see what you can do. That is how we knew what we could do right away, what must be done within a few months, and what is going to take two or three years.

By early May, we were just ending the second phase. Not being an emergency agency we had a lot of learning to do. It was not always easy for us to understand that the government or officials have certain rules, about food distribution for example. When we thought we were providing emergency assistance, they insisted we follow regulations. One NGO brought material for 150 thatched huts, and put them all up so that people could move back into their own shelters. The government official made them take everything down again because the huts had been built too close to each other, and if one caught fire the whole place would burn down. It made sense, of course, but we were upset

all the same. It is important to really know what emergency assistance is about – compared to long-term development.

Also, the people who live along the seashore are pretty rough. We had to learn to understand their way and not be turned away. Once the police stopped me and asked what I was doing. I said I was helping the tsunami people. “Don’t waste your money on them,” he said, “they will sell what you

give them, and gamble the money away.” In fact, we later found out that in some areas the rice we distributed was indeed being sold. But after talking with the people, we learned that they were receiving only rice. They sold some of the rice to buy other food items, such as oil, sugar and *dhall*, to cook a meal. This made us realise that we had failed to talk to the people about their needs. From then on we distributed smaller portions of rice but added other food items so that they could cook a basic meal.

It is easy to see that in such an emergency a child rights organisation has to look at the entire community. But as you deepened your understanding of the situation, what was the impact of the disaster on the children?

Children were the most heavily affected group. Mostly children and women died when the wave came. The men were stronger, they could run faster, and they could swim. The most severely hit age group are children between 5 and 11 years old. The older ones were faster and stronger, the smaller ones were carried more easily. Now, five months later, all children appear to be very scared of the sea. They don't want to go near it, and of course they don't want to go into boats. Even very small children scream when their mothers try to carry them to the seashore. But sometimes being in a boat is part of the daily family routine. So we started working on stress management for children. We were able to ask specially trained doctors from a hospital in Bangalore to come and work with the children.

What about the illegal adoptions of orphaned children, or the sale of girls, as has been reported by some news media?

To my knowledge this has not happened in the Pondicherry area. The government immediately issued very strict rules to prevent adoptions: orphaned children would initially be cared for in government-run homes and no adoption of tsunami orphans would be permitted. In some cases we are aware of young girls having been taken in by families to do domestic work. There have been isolated reports of abuse. But this is a situation where the experience from our slum project will be extended, and we will find a way to involve the fishing communities in conversations to prevent exploitation.

We have spent a lot of time right after the tsunami to try to identify the members of the wider family of children, so that they could be living with them. We believe very strongly that the psychological and social rehabilitation of the child will be more likely within the community, rather than in a government institution.

We have now selected five of the affected villages to work on the promotion of child rights and the prevention of sexual abuse. Later we will extend this work to other communities along the coastline. We involve the children and some adults who would like to participate, to prepare banners, posters, and hand bills. There will be many discussions and we will develop role playing to introduce difficult concepts.

Have there been other ways for you to work with children who were affected by the tsunami?

As soon as the first rescue operations were over, we began to collect children into small groups, talking with them, listening, encouraging play, and those who were able to return to school can be helped with their school work. We helped children to get school uniforms again – they are stigmatised if they try to go to school without – and we feel that many of the children we are in contact with are slowly opening up and shedding some of the stress. Many children believed that the tsunami was a curse. We spent much time explaining the geology of an earthquake and the ocean floor, and how the government is now trying to establish warning systems. It seemed to help to explain away the superstitions. Maybe the most important thing is that they always know there is somebody to talk to whom they can trust.

How have the beneficiaries of your ongoing project reacted to the tsunami victims?

Some of our child leaders and children involved in the child-to-child programmes in the slums have accompanied us to meet with the affected children. This has been very helpful for both sides. We identified children and adults who had been especially resilient in overcoming trauma in their lives, to come and talk to those along the seashore and spend time with them. Especially the most traumatised of the children seemed to benefit from talking with other children who had known very tough periods in their lives.