

**Government of Maldives and United
Nations Post-Tsunami Lessons
Learned and Best Practices Workshop**

Report on Main Findings

Maldives, 17-18 May, 2005

Summary

The **Lessons Learned Workshop in the Maldives** was a two-part process conducted over a day and a half. It began in the afternoon of 17 May with participation by personnel from the UN System, International Organizations and local NGOs. The focus of this first component was a review and updating of agency activities in response to the tsunami. The second day of the workshop included most of the people who attended the first day with the addition of Government of Maldives personnel. In all, **more than seventy-five people attended** the workshop and more than fifty participated throughout the lessons learned process.

The workshop was opened on both days by **Mr. Patrice Coeur-Bizot, the UN Resident Coordinator and The Honourable Ismail Shafeeu, the Maldives Minister of Defence**, who is also the chief coordinator of the national disaster management effort. On the second day, these two officials were joined in the opening ceremony by **the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Planning**. In addition, several other government ministers were in attendance.

The unique and devastating nature of the tsunami along with the fact that it was the first ever major natural disaster to strike the Maldives was a key point raised during the opening sessions. It must be noted here that for a country, which has never experienced an event such as this, the response by the government and the people of the Maldives was extraordinary. It was also noted that the level of support provided, since the tsunami until now, by the international community was immensely valuable and sincerely appreciated.

In his opening remarks, **the Minister of Defence emphasized an important feature of the relief and recovery environment**. The amount of time, energy and dedication contributed to the response effort by literally thousands of people was beyond calculation. **The challenge facing the Maldives now is one of sustainability. How can the level of commitment and motivation that characterized the first two months of effort following the tsunami be sustained through the recovery process, which has only just begun?** The Minister noted that people are returning to their more normal ways of working, their normal focus on their own areas of interest, mandates and procedures. **We need to re-energize the process to assure that the recovery process receives the level of commitment required to assure its success.**

To understand the complexity of the disaster in the Maldives, one must know that the Maldives is a chain of 1200 islands spreading over a distance of 900 kilometres across the Indian Ocean. The islands form 26 clusters called atolls, which for the purposes of administration are grouped into 20. Each atoll is a ring of breakwater coral reefs, studded with islands and pierced by a few narrow ocean channels.

The tiny, low-lying islands have an average elevation of just a few feet above sea level. The highest elevation among all these islands is not more than three and a half meters and the vast majority of islands do not rise more than two one and a half meters above sea level. It remains to be understood why some islands were severely affected and others had only limited impact. The specific location and configuration of some islands holds only part of the answer.

In one respect, the small island geography of individual islands may have been a reason that the impact of the tsunami was not more devastating than it was. In

places like Thailand, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka where landmasses are much greater, the tsunami first sucked the seawater away from the shore, which it did here. It then rushed inland destroying as it did so. But then, the water flowed back into the sea across much of the same land it had crossed on its way in. In the Maldives, the wave or waves flowed up and across the islands from the east and continued onward across sea to the west.

In human memory, there has never been in this region a disastrous natural event of this magnitude. This - coupled with the fact that the Maldives has never experienced a major disaster of any kind - it is not surprising that the country was not prepared for the tsunami of December 26, 2004.

It should be noted that, while the focus of the lessons learned workshop was inescapably on the tsunami, an effort was made to assure that lessons learned are largely applicable to other natural or man-made disasters.

The focus on lessons learned began with seven working groups, each reviewing a different set of topics related to disaster preparedness. Their task involved assessing

1. what was done well
2. what can be improved
3. the lessons learned from each.

A similar process was followed in a review of

1. international
2. national
3. & local response to the disaster.

The output produced by each working group was reviewed, discussed and refined in plenary sessions.

Disclaimer. The opinions, perceptions and comments of participants reflected in this report do not represent the official views of the United Nations nor those of the Government of Maldives.

Disaster Preparedness Issues

Structures for the disaster management

There was no system for early warning at any level.

No national or local level institutional structure for disaster management was in place. There were no personnel trained to deal with a disaster of this magnitude. Training and rehearsals had been conducted for disasters of a smaller scale such as airplane crashes and oil spills, but not for a disaster of this magnitude. At the time the tsunami struck, there were no emergency operations centers and no persons designated as information focal points.

Communication systems

Consequently, the existing inter-island communication facilities and systems, which under normal conditions functioned well, were vulnerable and on most affected islands were knocked out for some time. There were no back-up communication systems. Similarly, there were no response plans, no evacuation plans at any level.

Transportation

For most of the population, even at the best of times, transportation is a time consuming exercise. Rescue operations were, for the most part conducted using the slow local vessels called dhonis.

Emergency Shelters and Supplies

There were no emergency shelters and no storage places for emergency equipment. No emergency supplies were pre-positioned in any location.

Fresh water

Some islands had fresh water wells. Most collect rain for drinking water. There were no provisions for emergency water supplies.

Public Education

There was no public education or formal school curricula other than of a general nature relating to disasters. As a consequence, public awareness of what a tsunami represents and what to do when a tsunami approaches the coasts was almost nil. Similarly, there were only a handful of trained responders.

Few men and even fewer women knew how to swim.

Disaster Preparedness Lessons Learned

Perhaps, it goes without saying that lessons learned in disaster preparedness portray an opposite picture to the one presented above. It is also important to note that, because the nation is comprised of individual islands, to some extent what is done at the central level must be replicated at the local level.

1. Need for a regional and national tsunami warning system

There is a need for a regional and national tsunami warning system. The know-how exists to develop such a system. The political will and commitment of resources are what is necessary to establish such a system. Coupled with the need for national early warning systems, is a need to dispatch warnings out to the individual islands. Options, including a system that links a warning system to mosques at the island/atoll level, or to the mobile phones (sms) at national level, were discussed.

2. Need for a national institution or national operations center

A national institutional framework or mechanism for disaster management which links individual islands and atolls to a national institution or national Operations Center is needed. The establishment of such a center must be augmented with a comprehensive disaster management capacity building effort. Just as an institutional framework must extend from the national level throughout the islands, human capacities at all levels must be developed.

3. Need for supportive legal, policy, fiscal environment

An essential part of an institutional framework is a supportive legal and policy environment for emergency management. Policies that establish standard operational priorities and procedures, emergency transport regulations, immigration and customs regulations for emergencies; and procedures for managing financial and in-kind aid contributions are among those that were identified.

4. Disaster management planning is essential

Disaster management planning is essential to create a readiness to respond. A range of planning needs was identified. A comprehensive national disaster management plan linking the national to the local level, must be developed. Components which should be included in this plan are:

Disaster management plan components

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities at all levels.
- A logistics and transport plan, which includes provisions for both central storage facilities in Malé and, at a minimum, regional storage facilities of emergency supplies. Minimal storage facilities should be developed on most islands.
- Hazard maps for each atoll.
- Capability and vulnerability assessments.
- Island level emergency evacuation plans.
- Emergency medical plans.
- An emergency communication plan, which includes required facilities and human systems.
- An information management plan and system with designated focal points at each level.
- A broadcast media plan to assure accurate disaster information dissemination.
- Contingency plans.

5. Emergency shelters

Presently, islands do not have emergency shelters. There are models in other low lying countries that could serve as examples of what might be constructed here. Emergency shelters should be equipped with basic survival supplies including water, life preservers, food and first aid equipment and supplies.

6. Education and trainings

A nationwide campaign offering swimming lessons and basic first aid training to the population should be encouraged.

Since public awareness of common disasters and how to respond is very limited, school curricula needs to be revised and teachers trained to cover natural disasters

and emergencies. Island level adult education courses could also be conducted to raise awareness among men and women in the community.

Disaster education is also needed by personnel in relevant professions including line ministry personnel, medical staff, media people, atoll and island administrative personnel, Island Development and Women's Development Committees.

Disaster Response Issues

Disaster response is directly linked to preparedness. Therefore, many of the issues identified during discussions of disaster preparedness are linked to disaster response. Notwithstanding the above, there are a number of issues specific to disaster response:

Management

- There were not enough vessels with sufficient heavy load capacity, which can land equipment and supplies on islands.
- Island Task Forces were created, but there are no standard Terms of Reference for these task forces.
- There was not a clearly designated authority as responsible for psycho-social support.
- Island Task Forces were created, but there are no standard Terms of Reference for these task forces.
- The absence of coordinated assessment and unclear targeting of communities has led to a lack of clarity about what kinds of relief assistance were needed by whom and what was not.
- There is no existing mechanism to assure liaison with aircraft operators.

Demand and supplies

- A variety of brands of desalination plants were delivered from different sources - the long-term maintenance is a problem for government.

Donors

- The “thematic approach” (provision of specific kinds of assistance) applied by some donors led to a mismatch between demand and supply in some sectors.
- In the first days after the tsunami, a large number of donor representatives arrived and there was no system in place to manage them. Linked to this was the fact that, early on, there was very limited coordination between line ministries, the National Disaster Management Committee and international donors.
- In some cases, conflicting information was collected by donor and government agencies.
- There was no coordination among individual donor and international agency personnel visiting islands during assessment procedures. The same kinds of questions were repeatedly asked. Some of these personnel made commitments to local communities that have, thus far, not led to a lot of recognizable actions at least from the perspective of many IDPs.
- Transport costs have escalated significantly with the demand for delivery of goods and personnel. This has been caused, in part, by international agencies working independently from government through local NGOs.

Civil Society Community involvement

- In most circumstances, disaster and damage assessments were conducted without the involvement of affected communities. In addition, the needs of specific elements of the community, e.g. pregnant women, the disabled and elderly were not always addressed.

- Aid distribution has largely been handled by island authorities and/or National Security Service personnel without the involvement of host or affected communities.
- Two-way information sharing and communication between affected communities and responsible authorities was not always effective. In particular, information on decisions was and is not effectively communicated to IDPs. The absence of updates creates fear, serves as a fertile ground for rumors and may create resistance against authorities
- Local NGOs are not represented in the national disaster management structure.

Gender

- Emergency management is almost exclusively managed by men.
- Supplemental food supplies for lactating mothers were not included in relief supplies.
- There is a clear lack of participation by women in island level decision making process.

Disaster Response Lessons Learned

The environment of the Maldives is unique in the world. The tsunami has created a great deal of devastation. **Recovery efforts should focus on protecting the environment.** Attention must be given to assuring that waste and rubble are properly managed.

Demand and Supplies

- Disaster response efforts must be managed to assure a match between demand and supply of relief items.
- A general list needs to be compiled of the kinds of supplies that are needed and those that are not needed in an emergency.
- The country is in need of number of vessels capable of carrying heavy loads and landing them in the islands.
- There must be a mechanism for assuring the continuity of the "cold chain" for certain medical supplies.
- A general list needs to be compiled of the kinds of supplies that are needed and those that are not needed in an emergency.
- Disaster management policies should be established to assure a greater level of standardization in the acquisition of specialized equipment such as desalination plants. The need for spare parts (filters, or example) and the responsibility for long-term maintenance of this equipment will surely place a burden on the island administrations.

Management

- External military assistance needs to be appropriate, timely, cost effective and coordinated.
- Regional warehouses established during the response to the tsunami need to be permanent.
- An emergency transport policy regulating pricing and designating delivery points is needed.
- Aid contributions must be properly documented.

- Two-way information sharing and communication between affected communities and responsible authorities must be improved.
- At the moment, there is not clearly designated body responsible for monitoring response and recovery efforts.
- Disaster management planning efforts should include a formal arrangement between the government and aircraft operators.
- An emergency transport policy must be established to assure that in the case of emergencies such as these, transport prices are controlled.
- Disaster and damage assessments must be better coordinated and communities more clearly targeted.

Donors

- Country, atoll and island profiles are needed for outside agencies to assure a better understanding of context.
- Donors need to improve the balance between accountability and efficiency.
- Any conditions which donors wish to apply to the aid packages they provide must be clarified before aid is provided.
- UN emergency procurement must be well coordinated.
- A formalized system needs to be put in place to manage the influx of donor representatives who arrive to provide assistance to the country. Linked to this is the need for greater coordination between line ministries, the National Disaster Management Committee and international donors.
- Coordination among individual donors and international agency personnel visiting islands during assessment procedures must be improved.
- At the moment, there is not clearly designated body responsible for monitoring response and recovery efforts.
- Disaster management planning efforts should include a formal arrangement between the government and aircraft operators.
- An emergency transport policy must be established to assure that in the case of emergencies such as these, transport prices are controlled.
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- Disaster management policies should be established to assure a greater level of standardization in the acquisition of specialized equipment such as desalination plants. The need for spare parts (filters, or example) and the responsibility for long-term maintenance of this equipment will surely place a burden on the island administrations.
- Personnel from international agencies must be aware that each island is unique. Differences may not be readily observable, but they do exist and aid personnel need to be sensitive to these differences.

Civil society /Community involvement

- Disaster and damage assessments should be conducted with the involvement of affected communities. In addition, the needs of specific elements of the community, e.g. pregnant women, the disabled and elderly must be addressed.
- Efforts must be made to assure that affected populations are involved in decision-making and kept informed of developments.
- Standard formats are required for reporting, including standard and mutually understood terminology.
- Standardized terms of reference need to be developed for Island Task Forces.
- While island administrative authorities have done an outstanding job of addressing the needs of affected populations, efforts must be made to

assure greater involvement of IDPs in decisions related to the recovery process.

- Local NGOs must be represented in the national disaster management structure.
- Two-way information sharing and communication between affected communities and responsible authorities must be improved.
- Personnel from international agencies must be aware that each island is unique. Differences may not be readily observable, but they do exist and aid personnel need to be sensitive to these differences.
- Disaster and damage assessments must be better coordinated and communities more clearly targeted.
- A long-term mechanism should be developed to assure follow-up between communities and decision makers in the implementation of recovery plans.

Gender issues

- Supplemental food supplies for lactating mothers must be included in deliveries of relief supplies.
- Efforts must be made to assure that emergency management operations actively involve women, especially at the island level.
- The participation of women in island level decision making must be improved. This is particularly important for women among the IDP population.
- Policies for assuring protection of children, women and disabled need to be developed and included in disaster management operations.
- There must be a clearly designated authority responsible for psycho-social support.

Suggested Next Steps

The lessons learned presented here are not formal recommendations. It is fair to state that they represent an overall perception and general consensus among the workshop participants. Had there been more time, there surely would have been more formalized and detailed recommendations; however, what is important is action. Below are some of the steps that might be taken at the country level:

1. Initial review by the UN Country Team and the Cabinet Ministers Committee.
2. A joint review of these lessons learned by the Cabinet Ministers Committee responsible for the on-going management of response and recovery effort and the UN Country Team, donor and NGO representatives. Priority actions could be identified and specific task groups assigned to develop plans to address these priorities.
3. Lessons learned related to atoll level and island level response and recovery efforts could be directed to these levels for planning and implementation.

These lessons learned will be presented and discussed along with those generated in similar workshops conducted in the other tsunami-affected countries in the region at a conference in Medan, Indonesia on 13-14 June.