

BULLETIN

Helping others: our support is making a difference

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On December 26, 2004 an earthquake rocked the ocean floor. The resulting devastation, and ultimately the loss of more than 150,000 lives, galvanized the world's communities in an unprecedented relief effort. NUPGE components, including HSA, joined with unions across the country to respond to the call for help in response to the aftermath of the tsunami in Southeast Asia.

In all, unions affiliated to the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) contributed \$150,000 to Oxfam Canada's Tsunami Relief Fund.

HSA made the donation on behalf of all HSA members who, like people around the world, were looking for ways to help the millions of people affected by this tragedy. In tandem with the donation to Oxfam Canada, the HSA Board of Directors approved a donation of \$5,000 to the BC Branch of the Canadian Association of Food Banks in recognition of the need to ensure the local and ongoing needs of the people in our own communities were not compromised.

At a recent meeting of NUPGE's national executive board, Oxfam representatives attended to personally thank NUPGE and provide firsthand accounting of the difference that our contributions made.

Oxfam Canada Executive Director Robert Fox said the support of the National Union and others made a significant difference in providing emergency relief and long-term help to rebuild communities devastated by the tsunami. I learned a great deal about the stages of disaster relief and I came away very impressed with the work of Oxfam and what they have accomplished to date.

Oxfam International has raised more than \$305 million for tsunami relief and reconstruction. The response has focused on providing relief and assistance through six main activities:

- **Public health provision:** In the days and weeks following the tsunami, the threat of the rapid spread of infectious disease was a key concern in countries hit hard by the tsunami. Oxfam's speedy deployment of dozens of water engineers, sanitation specialists, health promoters and equipment played an important role in preventing mass outbreaks of cholera and other water-borne illnesses.
- **Food security:** Ensuring that everyone who lost homes, livelihoods and family members were able to feed themselves in the wake of the tsunami was a top priority for Oxfam.
- **Construction of temporary and permanent shelter:** Providing people displaced by the tsunami a safe, sanitary, and economically viable place to live, both in the short-term and in the long-term, is a central focus

of Oxfams response. Shelter will be a major part of what Oxfam does over the next five years in the countries where it is responding to the tsunami.

- Restoration of basic social services: The damage caused by the tsunami affected every sector of the communities it struck. Oxfam is continuing to help communities restore basic social services that were wiped out.
- Restoration of livelihoods: Oxfam began its efforts to enable communities impacted by the tsunami to support themselves as soon as it could. Working in close consultation with affected populations, Oxfam will work hard over the next five years to help people in tsunami affected areas alleviate poverty, not just rebuild the often unacceptable status quo that existed before the tsunami came.
- Disaster management: Because of its commitment to supporting local organizations in the countries where it works, Oxfam has been actively involved in helping local groups in tsunami affected countries recover from the disaster and play a lead role in the reconstruction of their own communities.

Our presentation included a first hand account from Oxfam humanitarian officer Mia Vukojevich. Vukojevich had recently returned from Sri Lanka, and explained how the six stated goals were put into effect in that country. The success of the intervention was evident when we heard that there was no out-break of disease, no food shortages or malnutrition, most children had returned to school within days and there were no people without shelter. The individual examples of restoring livelihoods by the replacing lost, but simple utensils ... like bowls ... brought it to a very human level.

There has been some speculation that there was an overabundance of financial support directed to tsunami relief. Robert Fox disagreed and explained that the response has been as successful as it has because there was actually adequate support for relief agencies to fulfill their complete mandate.

I believe that HSA as an organization, and every member who contributed individually, can be proud that we were part of the support that assisted Oxfams tsunami relief.

The need didnt begin with the tsunami, nor will it end there.

While the events of December 26 resulted in an extraordinary response, HSA continues with our regular work of supporting agencies assisting people in need through our Committee for Equality and Social Action and the Solidarity Fund.

There is no question that our contributions make a difference, just as there is no question that coordinated short- and long-term planning for immediate crisis support and subsequent long-term rebuilding is critical for relief efforts to meet all their objectives. 

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