

**Testimony of**  
**Mary E. McClymont**  
**President and CEO, InterAction**

**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**United States Senate**

**On**  
**Tsunami Response: Lessons Learned**

**February 10, 2005**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before this Committee on the “Tsunami Response: Lessons Learned”. I also want to acknowledge the leadership and support that you, Senator Biden, and many others on this Committee have provided on issues of importance to those of us in the humanitarian and development community. I am grateful for this opportunity to present some of the views and perspectives of InterAction members on the response to the Tsunami crisis.

InterAction is the largest alliance of U.S. based international development and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. Our 160 members operate in every developing country and have decades of experience on the ground in working to overcome poverty, exclusion and suffering by advancing social justice and basic dignity for all. While many of our members have a long and successful history of partnership with U.S. government agencies, collectively, the members receive \$3 billion in annual contributions from private donors, including direct contributions from the American people. Both faith-based and secular, InterAction members are headquartered in 25 states and have branch offices and/or constituencies in every state in the country. Furthermore, when one looks at the donors, sponsors, and supporters of our member organizations, InterAction reaches millions of Americans who care about and support in some form our foreign assistance programs.

The world has not seen in recent memory any natural disaster equal to the magnitude of the Tsunami crisis in sheer geographic scope, level of destruction, unprecedented private giving, and extensive international response. These factors make it all the more important to consider the response and lessons learned to date, as well as those we know from previous experience. We can apply them in our current relief activities, in the long term recovery and rehabilitation phase in which we will be engaged for years to come, and in the major natural disasters inevitable in the future. The Committee is to be commended for launching this reflection so promptly.

I also wish to commend the President, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, Members of the Congress, and USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios for the personal concern for those affected by the crisis they have demonstrated by their public statements and commitment of resources. The personal visits to the region undertaken by many prominent American leaders, including members of the Senate and this Committee, have underlined the depth of American compassion for those now trying to rebuild their lives and American commitment to assist them. Furthermore, the response of the United States military, in collaboration with the civilian agencies, was critical in getting relief to vulnerable populations and saving lives in the initial phase of the crisis response. And finally, I want to thank the American people for their generous donations to help the victims in this crisis.

### **Reviewing the Humanitarian Response to Date**

72 InterAction organizations, or almost half of our 160 members, are engaged in some way in this crisis, either by responding directly on the ground operationally, working with local or international partners who are operational, shipping commodities for the use of partners in the region, or undertaking advocacy. Although our members are working in

nine of the affected countries, most are engaged in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India, which were the worst hit. I therefore will focus my remarks based largely on their experience in these three nations.

Many of our members had a long-established presence in each of these countries when the Tsunami struck. In Indonesia and Sri Lanka, for example, many have been engaged in humanitarian assistance as well as development for more than a decade, helping to deal with the consequences of the civil strife each of these nations has long endured. With hundreds of local staff working at the village level in these three countries, they were able to respond quickly to immediate needs for clean water and food, to help reunite family members, and to assist survivors in finding temporary shelter. Medical personnel arrived from abroad within days of the Tsunami and began to treat physical injuries. Assessments were initiated of water and sanitation, as well as health needs. Survivors were assisted in digging latrines, collecting the bodies of the deceased, and removing debris from roadways.

In every natural disaster there are impediments to overcome in delivering humanitarian assistance. The magnitude of the crisis in the worst hit countries made some of these obstacles daunting, such as the immediate creation of coordination mechanisms. Many local officials, health and social service providers and educators were among those killed, injured, or missing. In Indonesia's Aceh Province alone, it has been reported that 70 percent of the health care providers and 1,500 teachers were killed, missing, or fled the area. Roads were washed away, bridges collapsed, vehicles were sucked into the sea, communications systems were destroyed and fuel supplies quickly were exhausted. Access to some areas became impossible, except by helicopter. Some airports close to severely affected areas became congested due to staffing, offloading, and storage capacity shortages. Finally, the ongoing civil strife in Indonesia and Sri Lanka posed potential challenges to the delivery of relief. In Aceh Province, for example, international aid workers had been banned for over a year. There was little NGO capacity already in place and a concern that those from elsewhere in Indonesia, as well as those arriving from abroad, might be denied permission to enter the region. It was not clear if the ongoing conflicts there and in Sri Lanka would put survivors at increased risk and imperil relief workers.

While our members were mobilizing staff in the region and assigning personnel from around the world to respond to the emergency, InterAction formed a working group to facilitate the exchange of information and coordination between the members responding to the crisis. Our regular meetings almost immediately were supplemented with weekly meetings hosted by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in which NGOs and USAID officials shared information and concerns. As a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the body established by the United Nations General Assembly more than a decade earlier to coordinate responses to emergencies, InterAction began sharing information and engaging regularly with the UN agencies responding to the crisis, as well as with the Red Cross movement and our NGO colleagues in Europe.

We initiated several actions to facilitate our work and respond to the overwhelming public interest in assisting those affected by the Tsunami. Within 48 hours after the onset of the crisis, we published the initial list of our members accepting contributions with

descriptions of their activities. We posted on our website information on appropriate ways to give, and distributed to the media video and radio news releases we had prepared earlier on the same topic. Our consistent message in such disasters is that cash is best. We also posted on our web site guidance for the American public on considerations in selecting a relief agency to which to contribute. We responded to myriad press inquiries about our members' responses, the situation on the ground and how concerned citizens could help.

In the region, the governments of India and Sri Lanka immediately assumed responsibility for coordination of disaster response activities on their territory. The Indonesian authorities asked the United Nations to assist in managing the international effort even as it directed the domestic reply. Disaster Response Teams from OFDA arrived in the affected countries within days, as the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs sent assessment teams and personnel to assist UN officials assigned in the affected countries. U.S. military helicopters, personnel, and commodities from the Abraham Lincoln and its escorts extended the reach of the humanitarian community into parts of Aceh cut off by road and addressed other logistic constraints to effective delivery of assistance. U.S. Navy personnel provided similar assistance in Sri Lanka. In each country participants in the civil conflicts seemed to welcome relief activities. Although skirmishes between belligerents have occurred in Aceh, these incidents did not impair the delivery of humanitarian relief. Apprehension that the Indonesian military would ban or impose tight controls on the programs of foreign relief organizations have proved unfounded. We hope and trust that this will continue to be the case as the relief phase moves to recovery.

Today, an estimated two million people throughout the affected region are receiving some form of assistance from their own governments and the 4,000 humanitarian personnel who have come from abroad to help them. With over 275,000 known dead or missing, the casualty toll is indeed catastrophic. But the good sanitation practices of local populations, several timely immunization programs, generally adequate nutrition, and good fortune have so far prevented a second tidal wave of lethal disease among survivors, many of whom nevertheless remain vulnerable to cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever, measles, malaria, and other contagious illnesses.

The devastating disaster has had major psychological effects on survivors as well, especially children. While the resumption of normal work and living conditions will help survivors to regain their mental and emotional equilibrium, many will need longer-term psychosocial support to deal with the profound trauma, loss and other repercussions of the disaster. The crisis has amplified the psychosocial needs and heightened protection risks to children, such as separation, trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Early fears of trafficking in children, however, have been allayed by measures taken by the extended families of children whose parents were lost and by government bans on travel by children without accompanying family members. But given the prevalence of trafficking in some affected countries this and other protection concerns bear watching in the months ahead, in addition to the ongoing psychosocial needs.

Hundreds of thousands of survivors remain displaced, an estimated 400,000 in Aceh alone. Many have sought refuge in spontaneous settlements. The Indonesian government

has plans for moving many of these persons to 24 relocation camps. This may be an appropriate interim solution but past experience suggests that camps are not always the best answer to the needs of displaced populations. They may be particularly inappropriate in Aceh, where local people have been moved into camps in the past for political reasons. Camps should be created only in consultation with the survivors and movement to them should be voluntary.

Although some cash for work programs have been initiated by NGOs, most survivors remain unemployed. As you have read, thousands of fishing boats have been destroyed, and the fields of many farmers have been washed away or damaged by salt water. It will be some time before these people will again be self-sufficient. Meanwhile they will remain dependent on their governments and the donor community for food and other basic necessities.

Coordination of relief efforts is becoming more effective each day, particularly among agencies working in specific sectors. The governments of Sri Lanka and of India are playing strong roles. In Aceh, for example, Indonesian and UN officials are sharing responsibility and working together increasingly well. The UN has established two offices in Aceh and expects to open two others soon. Regular meetings of humanitarian personnel, including our member groups, around various sectors of concern—primarily water and sanitation, health, shelter—are being hosted increasingly under the joint auspices of the Indonesian government and the UN in Aceh. The transition from military to civilian services in key areas such as transportation is going smoothly.

The most serious impediment to good coordination appears to be the large number of inexperienced organizations and individuals that have arrived in some of the affected countries. There are an estimated 400 NGOs now present in the region, 150 in Aceh alone. While UN organizations, the Red Cross movement, and established international NGOs and their local partners have been working together on sectoral assessments and a rational allocation of resources, some of the agencies, unaccustomed to these environments in which they are working and the kind of coordination used, have not been as constructive. We hope and anticipate that this problem will diminish over the coming weeks as the initial relief phase winds down. The more experienced international NGOs are making efforts to reach out to those willing to collaborate and to help them benefit from participation in coordination mechanisms.

### **Learning and applying lessons**

As we look ahead during the recovery and rehabilitation phases of the Tsunami crisis and as we anticipate other emergencies that surely lie ahead, I highlight below several of the lessons from our experience in responding to this crisis to date, as well as those we know from prior experience and should bear in mind going forward.

**Accountability.** The past six weeks have reminded us of the extraordinary compassion and generosity of the American people. As of February 7, 60 InterAction members report they have received in the aggregate over \$765 million in contributions from private donors, most of it from individuals. We established the InterAction “Tsunami Barometer” on our website to track these donations. Our members recognize that we are accountable

to the public for the careful and effective use of these funds. Members subscribe to a set of standards adopted by the InterAction alliance over a decade ago. They address performance, fundraising, governance, program and financial management. Conformance to these standards guides our members' work and helps assure donors that funds are being spent in an accountable and effective way. Members are obliged to "full, honest, and accurate disclosure of relevant information concerning their goals, programs, finances and governance." We are working with our members to remain true to these important principles, and to provide timely, detailed information on the use of all funds entrusted to them.

**Appropriate Giving.** In their public comments InterAction and its members promote the theme that cash is the most appropriate contribution a private citizen can make, a message that appears to have been largely accepted by the American people. It certainly helps enormously when that message is delivered from the White House by the President, as it was on several occasions after December 26. In contrast to the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, when warehouses in Gulf ports were crammed with used clothing and other commodities not urgently needed in Central America, our fellow citizens used their checkbooks, credit cards and wallets to make their contributions this time.

**Military Response.** The superb performance of the United States military personnel assigned to assist the relief effort is a reminder that our armed forces have capabilities that are indeed unique in situations of natural disasters of this magnitude. While the armed forces of over 20 countries responded to this crisis, the reach of our navy and the transport, water purification, and logistic assets it brought to bear are indeed unrivaled. One indicator of how well the humanitarian and military responders worked together is the UN's report that the military forces on the scene replied affirmatively to 97% of the specific requests from humanitarians for transportation and other services. Now that the NGOs and the UN have had time to lease civilian helicopters, ship in trucks and obtain more water purification equipment, the military will no longer be needed and civilian professionals can carry out relief and reconstruction work unaided. The US military's role in Tsunami relief serves as a good example of an appropriate role for our armed forces in providing assistance in such settings.

**Essential Services.** An initial assessment of the response in Aceh, and our recent experiences in the Bam earthquake and in Darfur, indicate the international relief community can provide adequate emergency medical services but is not as well resourced in dealing with sanitation and provision of clean water. UN Emergency Response Coordinator Jan Egeland initiated a systematic inventory of the community's capacities several months before the Tsunami. When the results are available later this year, IASC members and donors will have to consider whether a reallocation of resources and capacities to cover shortfalls in the essential services would be appropriate.

**Applying Humanitarian Standards.** The humanitarian response to the crisis is far from over. As I already have indicated, hundreds of thousands of those who survived the Tsunami remain displaced, without employment, and still vulnerable to disease. As relief activities continue, NGOs and other humanitarian responders must be careful to maintain a level of care equal to the internationally accepted "Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response". Incorporated into our InterAction standards,

these are recognized by the U.S. government and throughout most of the international humanitarian community as appropriate guidelines for relief work.

**Long-Term Commitment.** Experience with myriad natural disasters has taught us that full recovery and rehabilitation from such devastation takes between five and ten years. There is understandable pressure to show quick results, and, as I have indicated, relief activities to date have preserved hundreds of thousands of lives. But the task of rebuilding livelihoods and restoring communities requires planning, strategizing, and realistic timeframes. We are encouraged that leadership roles within the UN and the international financial institutions have been identified to consolidate assessments and start reconstruction planning. We hope the Administration and Congress stay the course on what will surely be a lengthy reconstruction effort, building on the goodwill we have generated through our relief efforts.

**NGO Participation in Reconstruction Planning.** We also must remember that within the InterAction alliance, different agencies perform different functions. Some respond only in the initial short-term relief phase, providing basic clinical and public health services, water and food, temporary shelter, etc. Others remain for the extended recovery and reconstruction phase, helping to rebuild the communities that have been destroyed, either where they were or in more secure locations. Many of the 70 InterAction member agencies responding to the Tsunami are planning to be engaged over the longer-term. Thanks to the generosity of the American public quite a few of our members are at or well on their way to meeting their funding targets, which will enable them to do this. We underscore the importance of NGO participation in the donor conferences expected to be convened later this year. We believe that the resources we will bring to the reconstruction phase, our long engagement with the local communities, and the partnerships we have with local organizations will enable us to play an important role in the deliberations on reconstruction planning.

**Respecting local communities and capacities in the recovery process.** As we plan for the future we believe it important to remember, in the words of my colleague Peter Bell, President of CARE, USA, that “ the largest contribution to the reconstruction effort will come from the hard work, ingenuity and capacity of citizens in affected countries.” It will be important that national governments and donors include in their planning processes consultation and coordination with civil society and local authorities. The role of local communities in their own development and rehabilitation is critical, with a focus on helping them rebuild their capacities. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups such as women-headed households, low caste individuals, children, and others who are traditionally outside the formal decision making structures of their communities. Likewise, and particularly in those countries beset by civil wars, recovery programs must be designed and implemented in a manner that is perceived as fair and equitable, so that they do not compound mistrust and existing grievances, especially in conflict areas.

**Meeting Pledges.** Mr. Chairman, the financial commitments made by the international community to relief and recovery have been extraordinary. But it is no secret that many pledges go unfulfilled and that it sometimes is hard to tell how much funding is “new money”. At this early stage we also have only preliminary estimates of the full cost of recovery and rehabilitation. Judging by what we have heard from Members of Congress,

we are gratified by what appears to be broad support for a generous American government contribution to the financing of long-term programs. Furthermore, my colleagues and I are persuaded that governmental funding to assist those affected by this disaster must be provided on a multi-year basis and on flexible terms while memories of the devastation and suffering are fresh. We have been pleased to hear the President and members of the Congress emphasize the need for a long-term approach.

**Forgotten Crises.** Sadly, this crisis reminds us of all the equally tragic crises in the world that are not receiving as much attention, such as Sudan's Darfur region, northern Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In just these three countries many millions of lives have been lost and millions of innocent people continue to suffer the deadly consequences of conflict and violence. Some crises are silent, like the 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty in the developing world. It is our hope that our leaders, including members of Congress, will take the opportunity to further educate and sensitize the American public to these ongoing humanitarian crises and extreme poverty. We will do our best to keep the spotlight on all of these crises. The President was helpful on this front when he underscored to Americans that the funds provided for relief and reconstruction to those affected by the Tsunami should be seen as "extra help" and not as a replacement for donations for other important needs.

**Funding Needs.** With these concerns in mind, we have recommended that the Congress provide \$2 billion in emergency supplemental funding to meet needs not only in the Tsunami-affected countries but also those elsewhere. We have urged that \$500-600 million be used for non-military relief and reconstruction assistance to Tsunami-affected countries, including the replenishment of USAID development and disaster accounts from which funds were drawn for the initial Tsunami response. An additional \$400-500 million is needed for other humanitarian needs in Sudan, Congo, Uganda and elsewhere that otherwise would go unmet. Finally, \$1 billion should also be available for addressing the global shortfalls in emergency food aid, some of which is needed in Tsunami affected countries.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your comments and to responding to your questions.