

## CHILDREN OF DISASTER

# When emergency aid is just not cricket . . .

Donors may restrict immediate funding to the basics but youngsters value the return of school uniforms and play, writes Sarah Murray

When natural disasters strike orphans are created, children and young people are separated from parents and – as for all victims of disasters – food, water and shelter are all desperately needed.

At the same time, the long term effects of these events can be profound, and agencies and non-profit organisations stress the need for young people to be given a means of making a living as soon as possible so that they themselves can contribute to the recovery process.

The other pressing need for children and young people affected by such events is to regain an element of normality. When visiting regions affected by the Asian tsunami of December 2004, Robert Davies, chief executive of the International Business Leaders' Forum, was interested to see how much focus was being put on finding school uniforms for children.

Even though their schools had been destroyed or had lost teachers, books and equipment, the schoolchildren wanted to get back into uniforms, he says. "It's very important for children to come back to some semblance of normal life as quickly as possible."

Mr Davies also cites the example of a football stadium that was constructed

in Phuket, southern Thailand, at a time when people were still living in temporary shelters. "But the impact of organising facilities for tournaments was enormous," he says. "So don't underestimate the power of sport as a way of rehabilitating young people."

Save the Children has recognised this power and routinely creates what it calls safe play areas in the days immediately after a disaster. This might involve erecting large tents for children staffed by the community or, as was seen in Pakistan, creating small cricket pitches and providing basic sports equipment.

"It all sounds a bit soft but when you see it happening you realise it's incredibly important," says Toby Porter, director of emergencies at Save the Children UK. "Because it gives the kids back a bit of normality."

The United Nations Development Programme is looking at the role sport can play in refugee education, something that is often neglected because of competing demands for humanitarian aid. In partnership with Nike, the US sportswear company, the UNHCR is promoting sport as way of getting more girls in refugee camps in Kenya to participate in education.

Part of Nike's role in the Together for Girls project, which is focused on camps

that are home to thousands of Somalians, was to design culturally sensitive clothing that young refugee women could wear while playing sports in camp.

The impact of such initiatives demonstrates the importance of local consultation in the aftermath of disaster, whether natural or man made. "There is absolutely a need to talk to young people and families and consult them about what's being provided," Mr Davies says.

Too often, vast amounts of toys sent by well-meaning individual donors in the west simply clog up the logistics supply chain and occupy vital warehouse space. And donors' perceptions of what is needed on the ground do not always match the reality.

"What's interesting is that education is always very much higher on the priorities of affected communities than it is on the list of services provided by the international community," says Mr Porter. "Donors have a core set of sectors they like to restrict their immediate funding to, such as food, health water and sanitation, all of which are important. But victims themselves often classify schooling as more important."

Young people also need help to find sustainable livelihoods.

This is the motivation behind an initiative

launched by the International Youth Foundation in tsunami-affected regions to help rehabilitate young people between the ages of 16 and 24 that have left school and may be out of work.

The idea behind the IYF's Tsunami Initiative is to find employment opportunities or encourage entrepreneurship by working with the private sector and local training organisations.

Esther Benjamin, vice-president of the foundation, believes that, given the right tools and knowledge, young people have great potential to contribute to the reconstruction process.

"They have enormous strength and skills, and they have the ability to create opportunities for others in the community," she says.

When visiting the affected regions, the IYF team found that a lot of attention was being paid to short term needs but there was less of an emphasis on longer term requirements – findings supported by an IBLF report published in December.

The report, Best Inten-

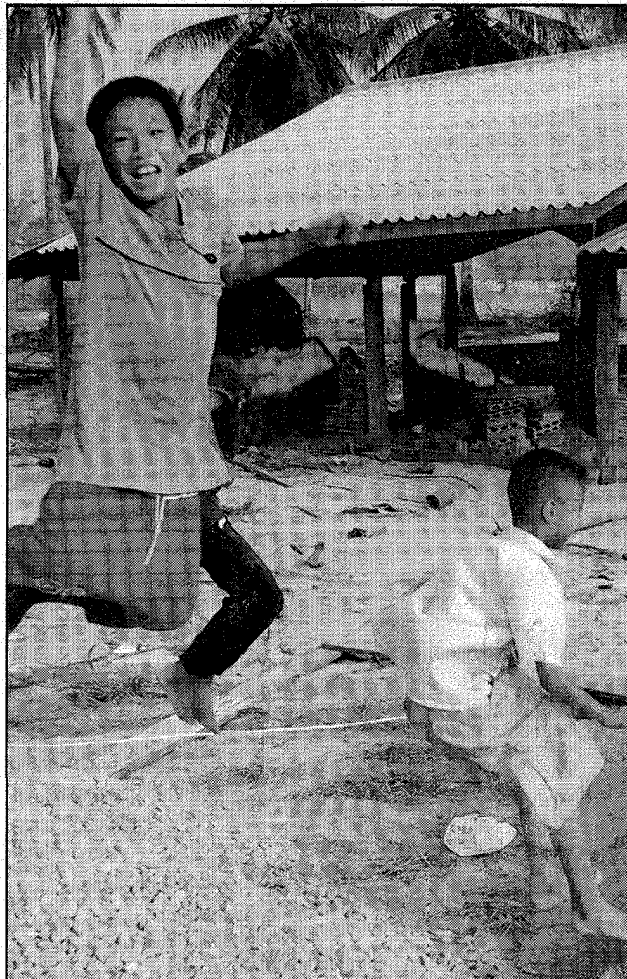


tions, Complex Realities, points out that the huge response provoked by the tsunami has not been matched by delivery of long-term economic recovery in the region.

“That’s where we chose to focus our work – on longer term employability – to not

only engage young people in the rebuilding of their communities but also to improve their prospects,” says Ms Benjamin.

“Because long after the relief agencies have gone, young people are still trying to get on their feet.”



**Even a building site can be a play area on the Thai coastline**

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