

Speech to Hazard and Disaster Researchers Conference
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Good afternoon. My name is Robert Reynolds, and I have been living in Asia and Thailand for the past 14 years. I just flew in from Thailand, so it is 3am for me, I will try to be as coherent as possible. I am a permanent Thai resident and able to read, write and speak Thai. I mention this because it gives me a different perspective than the average westerner, and has had a direct impact on my research approaches.

This is my first disaster conference, and my guess is that my path to this podium is a bit different than most attending this conference, for I am not a trained disaster researcher, I am a disaster survivor.

After retiring from fifteen years on Wall St., I have been running several businesses on the Andaman Coast of Southern Thailand—including a consulting company, as well as being a freelance journalist for the past 20 years. My introduction to disaster relief aid started the morning of Dec. 26, 2004, when the Indian Ocean tsunami hit the west coast of Thailand. I was at the beach when the tsunami hit and was thrown into the evacuation and relief efforts from the start. Most of you have seen images of the tsunami, so while I have many photos, they are not pertinent to this presentation.

As a result of living through the tsunami, I was involved in many aspects of the initial emergency relief, aid and reconstruction. While being overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks we all faced, I tried to document as much as possible from the start. While thousands of volunteers and aid workers were to be applauded, I saw many projects and activities that were of questionable value. At the time I didn't think it was within my right to question the way many of relief operations were being managed. I was under the impression that the large professional organizations knew how to handle the relief and aid projects. Although I had no formal training, and no exposure to the literature on disaster relief at that time, I did over time gain access to a large database of records and documents from the tsunami.

So my approach to disaster research came from a different direction than most. While many may establish an academic foundation before doing field work, I spent several intense years in the field while starting to research disaster literature to try and understand what I thought to be the troubling aspects of the relief effort. I was disturbed when I saw international relief agencies come into a given area and implement programs that even an inexperienced relief worker could see was inappropriate. I wanted to understand the dynamics that would allow this to happen.

Since I had spent so many hours, weeks, months and now years working with tsunami survivors, in many cases trying to repair or undo inappropriate programs after the relief agencies left, I felt impelled to research the literature on disaster relief to see if others had the same experiences. My research took me to review sudden onset disasters in developing countries such as in India, the Marmara Turkey earthquake of 1999 and even the 1995 Kobe earthquake.

Many researchers in developing countries criticized the “top down” approach taken by many international NGOs. These same critiques related directly to the tsunami efforts in Thailand as I watched relief and reconstruction projects either fail or be managed poorly. Worst was to watch the relief agencies pack up and go home, often leaving behind a bewildered group of survivors behind. My early writings on the tsunami were filled with anger, and as time went on others wrote about the relief efforts with the same emotions as I. However, I realized this bias would only be a detriment in my efforts to try and uncover what was wrong with the approaches used by international aid agencies.

The paper that resulted from my research is a case study of the grassroots recovery on the island community of Phi Phi Island. This is the island made famous by the Leonardo Di Caprio movie, “The Beach”. Originally I planned to compare the success of this grassroots effort with the inefficiency of the top down approach used by the international agencies, but it morphed into its present state, as a stand alone narrative of the characteristics that make for a successful locally led recovery effort. My field research and literature research were running parallel, and both pointed in the same direction-how local populations were capable in managing their own relief efforts.

Disaster research literature is full of examples of criticisms of top down programs imposed on those in lesser developed countries as well as the hijacking of the use of “participation”. However, there are few examples of grassroots led disaster relief efforts.

In the first days after the tsunami, I traveled with some volunteer rescue workers to Phi Phi Island. The island, with a population of about 10,000 at the time of the time of the tsunami had been quarantined by the government. There were no NGOs or government relief agencies, only the local Thai who remained on the island and the army and the navy removing the dead bodies. I began interviewing those that remained as they began to organize their home grown projects.

The approach they used was to set up a central command center in the middle of the most devastated area, and to bring locals Phi Phi residents who were in resettlement camps on the mainland back to the island to volunteer for the reconstruction projects. They later would receive wages. A food canteen was established to feed all the volunteers, as well as a medical clinic. Daily projects were posted for people to sign up for and volunteer, the projects being designed by the local residents. The management of the projects was run under the principle: “It is their land, their homes, and their community.”

My initial aim had been to document how this mixture of local Thais and tourists created their own organization to develop relief and aid programs from the bottom up, without any outside agency assistance. Several of these groups, the Muslim and sea gypsies, were minorities and often marginalized in the political affairs in the provincial community.

At times I felt quite isolated as the mainstream agencies were not interested in the work being done by the locals on the island, for they had their own agenda. It wasn’t until the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) released some early criticisms of the international relief agencies that I found supporting literature of my findings. The TEC released a large report of over 40 projects that pointed out how many of these top down projects were inappropriate . Their independent analysis was in stark contrast to the agency’s self evaluation studies. The TEC pointed out the difference between the opinion of the level of service provided between the survivors and the aid agencies. The TEC final report’s conclusion was to push the development and implementation of these programs to the lowest level—to the local

survivors—and for the large international aid agencies to hand the power over. The differences in aid between top down relief and grassroots developed aid can be seen as follows:

Top down relief aid

- Providing improper clothes and food for religious groups
- Duplication of programs, little or no coordination by agencies—too many long tail boat projects!
- Reliance on current power structures to implement programs that reinforced inequalities in gender and minority groups (village headman)
- Construction of shelters and later, homes that were inappropriate in design, there was no input from the survivors
- Programs were short term in nature-and the locals saw them as such
- Treatment of survivors as victims with limited skills or abilities
- The focus of some agencies on gender empowerment did have a positive impact on several communities, bringing woman's voices into community affairs for the first time.

Grassroots aid

- The programs are designed and managed by those with the local knowledge
- inclusive of all minorities
- Locals have "ownership" of the programs
- Programs are seen as long term in nature
- There can be problems of financing locally managed projects, but in the case of Phi Phi it was self financed through the website and thus the local managers were independent in setting the priorities for the projects without outside influence.

The recommendation of a more participatory approach has been echoed by many profile researchers and championed by writers such as Robert Chambers. While the participatory approach itself has been criticized for its confusion over its definitions and the highjacking of the term by many, at least many international organizations were paying lip service to local participation in their programs. However, many top down bureaucratic organizations were and still are uneasy about relinquishing power. Some have pointed out there is little documentation or evidence to suggest that a relief effort can be planned and implemented at the local level.

This paper documents how a group of local Thai and tourists on the island were able to direct their own relief efforts and it focuses on those elements and key success factors for future relief efforts. The key success factors are like a 3 legged stool, while the legs are not always constant, the legs must be of approximately the same length or the same power or the stool will be unbalanced.

3 Skill Sets:

- 1) Local skills—a person in the organization who is trusted by the locals, they may be of an ethnic or religious minority. This person communicates the needs of the locals to the larger group.
- 2) Political skills-this person helps gain access to the local government and raises the profile of the local organization, helping communicate the locals need so inappropriate programs are not forced onto the local population
- 3) International skills—are needed for fundraising and marketing, and reporting to any donors.

With these 3 skill sets a locally organized relief organization can create effective programs after a sudden onset disaster.

As a final thought I would like to point out that I found many disaster researchers exhibiting some of the same types of practices as the top down relief agencies. It seemed a lot of research was being done ON people, not WITH them or FOR them. While many of the research techniques used were sound or technically correct, they were implemented without a proper or thorough understanding of the culture. I have lived in Thailand for 14 years, and still have difficulties with the cultural nuances. These nuances can make a well thought out research project come to an incorrect conclusion. A case in point was a prominent medical school made a study on the Thai Army to determine how those who were HIV positive became infected. The results showed some 95% contracted the disease through heterosexual sex. What the researchers did not understand was that if a soldier admitted to being gay or taking drugs intravenously, they would be discharged without any medical benefits. Obviously, their answer of heterosexual sex was to protect themselves in the hope of receiving western medical aid. So the result of the study was faulty due to a misunderstanding of the possible implications of their answers. So as in relief aid, research should incorporate the local input and perspective into its design and implementation.