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# **STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

## **Upfront**

**Listening to Tsunami Survivors: Treating aid recipients like  
valued customers gives insights into disaster relief.**

**By Leslie Berger**

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Strategic philanthropy works best because it allows companies not only to benefit society, but also to learn how to apply their core competencies in new areas, improve employee morale, stimulate customer demand, and enhance their attractiveness in the labor market, the authors write. In other words, strategic philanthropy strikes a balance between meeting the corporation's needs and those of the beneficiaries, says John Coy, who handled John Deere's con-

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**Playing to core competencies while meeting beneficiaries' needs is the most effective form of corporate philanthropy.**

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tributions for years and now consults with Fortune 500 companies about giving. "Somewhere between pure philanthropy and commercial self-interest," he says, "lies a strategic approach to being a responsible corporate citizen: where a company voluntarily addresses issues important to both society and its business, and at the same time builds valuable goodwill with key stakeholders," he says.

Garlinghouse articulates the happy medium this way: "The best philanthropy is in the best interest of the company, but will also ultimately make the biggest difference for the world." —Alessandra Bianchi

## Listening to Tsunami Survivors

*Treating aid recipients like valued customers gives insights into disaster relief*

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**H**ow much good did all those donations to tsunami relief actually do? To answer this question, the Fritz Institute, a San Francisco-based nonprofit, broke the mold for international aid studies and asked a rarely heard group: the aid recipients themselves. The institute released a report of its findings last December.

"In all these years of disaster management, there never has been a real understanding of the perceptions of the customers of the aid," says Anisya Thomas, the Fritz Institute's managing director and a co-author of the report.

In keeping with the institute's mission, which is to apply private industry methods to humanitarian aid, researchers approached tsunami survivors like customers and asked them how satisfied they were with the goods and services they received. Over the course of 10 months, trained interviewers spoke with 3,700 people in scores of Indian, Sri Lankan, and Indonesian villages.

*Their main findings, which may not be a surprise to frontline aid workers, include:*

- Many donations were useless. Western clothing (used business suits, high-heeled shoes, etc.) is inappropriate in tropical, rural settings, as are bags of rice without pots and potable water to cook it in. Other dubious tsunami donations, according to Thomas, were fiberglass motorboats, which local fishermen are unable to maintain.
- Even in the traditional cultures affected by the tsunami, survivors appreciated the psychotherapy they received and wanted more of it.
- Local preparedness is critical, because neighbors, relatives, and municipal employees are the first-response rescuers.
- Nine months after the tsunami, life was far from normal, with survivors reporting significant decreases in their incomes and a lack of permanent housing.

"It seems commonsensical, but we in the international aid community have never paid much attention to the recipients and how all the assistance we provide affects their lives," says Mary B. Anderson, executive director of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, a nonprofit group in Cambridge, Mass., that analyzes disaster relief and peace work. Anderson's group recently launched its own recipient-centered study called the Listening Project, for which interviewers are speaking with people from all walks of life in 20 countries ravaged by war or natural disaster.

Both the Listening Project and the Fritz Institute's research are part of a growing trend in assessing the long-term effects of aid on recipients, says Johan Schaar, special representative for tsunami operations for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. He notes that these projects recognize that "we are accountable not only to those giving us resources but to the people we're trying to assist. This is one way of shouldering that responsibility, by paying serious attention to the people on the receiving end of what we do." —Leslie Berger