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Comment

The money trail

The Disasters Emergency Committee raised millions for the tsunami relief effort, but its failure to let donors know how and where their money has been used will compromise any future efforts, writes Ken Burnett

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The first appeal hit me the day after Boxing Day, emailed by a friend in Holland unable to sleep because of the terrible images on her TV the night before. She said: "We can't grasp their suffering but we can help meet their urgent needs now. We can support them in picking up their lives."

That's all most of us aspired to. When David Dimbleby's reassuring face came on my telly, like countless others I sent my biggest donation for some time to the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal he launched. In the following days, as the full horror sunk in, I sent them two more gifts.

When disaster strikes, rapid, relevant response is everything. The machinery of international aid is now much faster and more focused than it was. So as the tsunami's impact reverberated round the world and the donations poured in, donors, fundraisers and charity workers could take comfort from knowing that the British system for responding to international emergencies is the envy of the world.

The DEC, whose members include the major aid and development charities, is the umbrella organisation that launches and coordinates Britain's national appeals in response to major disasters. There's much to admire in the way the DEC works. Instead of an off-putting scramble for funds, one major appeal is quickly launched on TV and elsewhere. The DEC's strengths are its ability to mobilise rapidly, its unrivalled links with broadcasters and its 'pull' with businesses - so it gets the most of what it needs quickly and for free. No other country has this system, though many aspire to copy it. Britain should be proud.

So why am I critical of the DEC now, especially as the unprecedented response to this appeal has so swamped them? I take my hat off to these people, and wouldn't decry their efforts even slightly.

But as a donor and fundraiser, I'm unhappy. More than a month later, I've had no acknowledgement that my gifts even arrived. The automated phone system set up before the tragedy didn't ask for my email address, yet through email it's easy to ensure donors get information directly, quickly and cheaply. I don't want thanks, but as a fundraiser I know prompt acknowledgement and feedback generates all-important further gifts.

One Oxfordshire community has raised three times more per person than the DEC. Why? They promised every penny would go overseas, that donors would get detailed feedback, that the money would be used quickly to restore shattered livelihoods. Former Oxfam deputy director John Whitaker was involved and reckons this touched people's belief in what was needed. Everyone responds better when they can see what their gift will achieve.

Yet the 1.7 million people who phoned in donations to the DEC haven't been told what's being done with their gifts. It'll be another month before the DEC has the capacity to write to them, even if their trustees agree that's what they should do. This is neither good accountability nor good fundraising. When the next disaster strikes, it won't be surprising if these donors wonder what happened last time they gave, and question why they should give again.

Aware of these shortcomings, the chief executive, Brendan Gormley, has been reassuring people that accountability and donor development are moving up DEC's agenda. But the DEC may also be a victim of its masters, the aid charities, who don't want to create in the DEC an advantaged competitor. This shouldn't block change. These charities can easily reassure donors they offer great value for money. Surely the least the public can expect for their generosity is to know what their

giving achieved, and what future needs might be, before they forget completely why they gave?

The clear lessons from the tsunami disaster are that ordinary people have a huge, powerful voice and are prepared to use it when they see a need. Email and the internet have given this voice instant expression. To unite the two, all that's needed is a little leadership, which if it comes will be more credible from the voluntary sector than from those with political agendas. The major campaigning and fundraising organisations such as the DEC and its members are uniquely placed to show this leadership. But to convince the giving public that dramatic social change is, at last, a real possibility, they need to believe in it themselves, and to prepare for it appropriately.

• Ken Burnett is the author of *Relationship Fundraising* and a former chairman of trustees at ActionAid, one of Britain's largest development charities. He can be reached at ken@kenburnett.com

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