

Terminology

This report uses the term 'agencies' to refer to humanitarian actors such as the Red Cross movement, United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and the aid administrations of donor governments. It uses 'affected population' to refer to the people affected directly by the disaster. These may relate to aid agencies directly or through their regional and national political structures, depending on the context.

The term 'relief' in the report refers to immediate aid to prevent distress and suffering and the term 'recovery' to rebuilding people's economic and social lives after the disaster. The term 'local capacities' refers not only to the resources, skills and knowledge of the local community, but also to their ability to set and influence policies and to hold accountable those with a duty toward the community (such as the aid agencies who raised money to help the affected populations).

'Ownership' in this report refers to the control of the response, to decisions about programme policies and priorities and the nature of the response.

Limitations

The tsunami was a sudden-onset natural disaster and the worst affected countries were middle-income countries with well-developed local capacities. While some may think this might limit the general applicability of the TEC recommendations, not only do the operational problems seen in the tsunami response mirror those seen in complex political emergencies like Rwanda in 1994 or Kosovo in 1999, but lower income countries can also have significant local capacities. While every humanitarian crisis needs to be considered in its own context, the TEC recommendations are therefore considered to be more broadly applicable – and indeed are probably applicable in the majority of such crises.

The TEC focused on the first 14 months of the response by the international humanitarian community. It took a sector-wide approach rather than looking at individual agencies. The TEC reports make some reference to local organisations and national governments, but these were not the main object of the TEC evaluations. As a result the recommendations from the TEC are mainly, with a few exceptions, for humanitarian agencies rather than for the people and governments of the affected countries. The TEC reports do not reflect changes in practice that may have occurred after the first 14 months. In particular the report does not deal with the efforts toward humanitarian reform, including the cluster coordination model and the strengthened Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

Summary of TEC findings

The TEC studies found the international response to the tsunami disaster helped the affected people and reduced their suffering. They identify many examples of good practice in emergency response, and some welcome innovations. However, overall the studies conclude that the response did not achieve the potential offered by the generous funding.