

ALLENTOWN, PA

ANOTHER VIEW

Tsunami relief might have ripple effect on other charity



ROLAND KUSHNER

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No one who has seen it has not been horrified and saddened by the suffering and devastation caused by the Dec. 26 tsunami. And, many have reached into their pockets to contribute to the relief efforts. The Chronicle of Philanthropy reported on Jan. 26 that \$597 million had been raised in the weeks since the disaster. By the time you read this, that figure will doubtless have increased considerably.

Using private contributions and combining them with support from global governments and the United Nations, expert non-governmental organizations have taken leadership roles in the global response to the tsunami. American donations to tsunami victims have been made to American Red Cross, as part of the international Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, to CARE, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, Doctors Without Borders, and to other effective humanitarian relief charities.

International humanitarian relief is only one facet of the charitable nonprofit sector. Charities make invaluable and irreplaceable contributions to the social fabric of our communities. Over the decades, individual Americans, and businesses small and large, have been increasingly generous to all kinds of charities, through direct donations, and

indirectly, by electing governments that forego tax revenue to subsidize charitable donations.

The rewards for that generosity are apparent in soup kitchen meals, concert hall performances, health care delivery in nonprofit hospitals, and restored wildlife habitat in the U.S., and in long-term relief and development around the world. Many local and national social service, educational, health, cultural, religious, and environmental charities are shining examples of the power of what Lester Salamon of Johns Hopkins University has called "private initiative for the common good."

The tsunami occurred in late December, during a season when Americans are at their most generous. Among the many blessings of the holidays are their proximity to the end of the tax year, when many individuals and families make final decisions about which charities they will support. Congress swiftly passed and President Bush signed a bill allowing tsunami donations made in January 2005 as deductions from 2004 income. For all these reasons, the outpouring of support was immediate and substantial. Best of all, it is truly likely to benefit those affected by the disaster.

But here's a concern: Did gifts to relieve suffering on the other side of the planet have unexpect-



ed, and even negative effects on the charities and causes that we support on a regular basis? There are sudden and pressing needs for relief in South Asia, but nothing has diminished the needs of Americans at home, or others in danger around the globe. Those needs may now be less visible to TV viewers and news readers,

but they are still present, and their victims just as vulnerable.

In fact, they could be at more risk because of the tsunami, if support for this disaster reduces, or crowds out, support for other charitable causes. People with a fixed contributions budget may have had a difficult choice in late December: Direct their few dollars to causes long supported, or target them at the pain and misery caused by this new and very present disaster.

Hopefully, the answer was "both," for a triumph of generosity. But it has happened before that donations to high-profile and to priority causes temporarily crowd out support to other nonprofits. Many organizations lost charitable support in the 1980s as donors responded to the emerging AIDS crisis. After Sept. 11, support for its victims was one factor that tended to reduce donations to other charities in late

2001.

Now, we may be in a similar situation. And there is no doubt what the right solution is: Donors can't let tsunami relief be a drain on their existing commitments to charities. In fact, it should be a springboard, a catalyst for more.

The big picture here is not whether one person's suffering is of more consequence than another's, or whether domestic charities need support more than those addressing global needs. Rather than make those comparisons, donors should do what they can to increase total charitable contributions, to continue the pattern of generosity without the pitfall of crowding anyone out. Every local need that was present before is still here and will still affect people, as are the continuing causes of suffering around the world — even as tsunami victims have immediate and pressing needs. Rather than choose between them, individual, business, and foundation donors should make additional donations and broaden, rather than narrow, the scope of their generosity.

Roland Kushner, Ph.D., is director of Kushner Management Advisory Services in Bethlehem, which provides consulting and research services to nonprofit organizations. His e-mail address is roland@rjkushner.com.