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Few disagree that the United Nations-led international relief effort in the days and weeks after the tsunami was remarkably successful. Although more than 200,000 perished in the disaster, prompt intervention prevented the deaths of thousands of survivors from hunger and disease.

Despite the inevitable chaos and confusion in the immediate aftermath, compounded by immense logistical problems in bringing aid to affected areas, millions of people were provided with food, clean water, medical care and temporary shelter.

Of course, distribution and co-ordination have not been perfect. UN officials admit that aid coverage, though comprehensive, has been uneven, and there have been reports of aid supplies stranded and petty corruption at a local level.

Still, six months on, the UN believes it has done a good job. Jan Egeland, UN humanitarian co-ordinator, says no other agency could have set out to co-ordinate donations from 60 countries, military assistance from 26 nations, and hundreds of international, national and local aid groups. "Only the UN has the universal legitimacy, capacity and credibility to lead in a truly global humanitarian emergency," he wrote in the FT in March.

The UN has also made strenuous efforts to improve transparency and accountability to donors. A new real-time tracking system for donations and how they are spent has been put in place with the pro bono help of PwC and put on the internet for anyone to consult.

The UN Development Programme is instituting a similar system, also with PwC's assistance, for contributions to longer-term recovery and reconstruction projects.

The emergency relief phase over, UN officials say even tougher challenges lie ahead. While doling out food is relatively straightforward, planning for recovery is much more complex.

James Rawley of UNDP points to the rebuilding of permanent homes as an example. Local people have to be consulted, governments must decide on siting and action required

to sort out legal issues in circumstances where people have lost documents.

"There is a need for even more co-ordination, more support to government, including at the local level, and more support to local communities," says Joel Boutroue of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Over the next six months the UN and partner aid agencies are planning to build tens of thousands of housing units, repair critical infrastructure, rebuild schools and health centres, and help put people back to work.

But for recovery and reconstruction to begin in earnest, already overstretched governments need to draw up the plans, attract the finance and move forward with implementation.

They also need to convince donors there are measures in place to stop corruption and that development funds will be fairly distributed.

Reconstruction is estimated to take at least two to five years and in some places up to a decade, at a cost of Dollars 9bn-Dollars 10bn (Euros 7.45bn- Euros 8.3bn, Pounds 4.9bn-Pounds 5.5bn). While about Dollars 4bn has been pledged by donors for long-term recovery, most are keeping the cash back until they see how it will be spent.

David Nabarro, who heads the World Health Organisation's crisis unit, says it is imperative not to repeat the failures seen after the Bam earthquake in Iran in 2003. Returning to Bam a year later Dr Nabarro found a disintegrating community "locked in despair because they were still living in tents and shacks".

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