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Response to the Tsunami

The surge of response to the earth-shaking events of December 26 and the resulting deaths of over 150,000 people in South East Asia reflects the multiplication of individuals whose hearts were moved.

In front of this event, we are left wondering what is there to be done, and ultimately, what is the meaning of this event, considered by many to be the worse natural disaster of our time?

The number of channels available for contributing financial resources to the cause is great, yet a number of justifiable concerns have been raised as to the best way to proceed. How can we assure that those who really need the money will get it? How will this surge of aid help in reconstructing the livelihoods of the affected communities in the long-term, and will efforts be made to prevent such destruction in the future? With all of the attention being focused on tsunami disaster relief, what will happen to the resources previously planned for other worthy causes?

With the buzz of these preoccupations and critiques aside, **we still find ourselves provoked to act with some gesture that symbolizes**, in whatever miniscule way, **our empathy with those who are suffering**. Although AVSI did not have on-going activities in the region of the disaster, a great number of supporters have voiced interest in a response. Moved by our constituents, AVSI has opened up an opportunity to express solidarity with the people of South East Asia.

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Newsletter Edition 1

January 2005

AVSI-USA Mission: To support the AVSI network by leveraging resources and contacts in the U.S. in order to enhance and broaden the achievements of member organizations in promoting human dignity in developing countries.

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Welcome letter from Ezio Castelli

Greetings from AVSI-USA and best wishes for 2005. This year promises to be one full of new beginnings for us, and I am glad to initiate the year with this newsletter, our newest means of communication and dialogue.

The purpose of this newsletter is to keep you, our friends, abreast of the activities and new developments which are constantly taking place throughout the AVSI network in more than 30 countries around the world. It is our hope that this simple tool will facilitate our sharing of learning experiences as well as the pursuit of collaborations and exchanges.

Through this newsletter, I hope that together we can also take a critical look at what is going on in the wider arena of international cooperation and humanitarian assistance, and when provoked to do so, offer our judgments based on the experiences being lived by our staff in developing countries.

If you have not done so already, I invite you to take a quick visit to our brand new website, www.avsi-usa.org. We look forward to your feedback, including comments on the articles you read herein.

Education to Reduce Child Labor in Uganda, U.S. Department of Labor

From January 10th to 14th, Elena Locatelli, AVSI Project Manager based in Kitgum, Uganda, was invited to spend one week in Washington, DC to attend the Second Annual Meeting of the U.S. Department of Labor's Child Labor Education Initiative.

In partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), AVSI has completed the first year of implementation of **"Opportunities for Reducing Adolescent and Child Labor through Education,"** (ORACLE) in the northern region of Uganda. ORACLE seeks to reduce the vulnerability of children to becoming engaged in child labor by improving attitudes and awareness among the community, enhancing the quality of education, and increasing access to both formal and non-formal education for vulnerable children. The project is operating in Kitgum and Pader Districts in Northern Uganda, a region destabilized and suffering from the persistent conflict and rebel activities over the past 18 years.

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OVC Program in 3 Countries in East Africa, U.S. AID

A highlight for AVSI in 2004 was clearly the award of a cooperative agreement with USAID for a project entitled "Increased Care and Support for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in East Africa." This four-year program builds on the services which AVSI and our local partners are already carrying out in Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda.

In approving this funding source for AVSI, USAID has recognized and valued not only the established presence and thorough local knowledge of AVSI and our partners in the field, but also the coherence of our method which considers the individual person holistically, and as deeply embedded in a family and community setting. For AVSI, this collaboration with USAID represents the opportunity to demonstrate the high quality and professionalism of our field team and management staff, and the method of project design and implementation that keeps the individual and his needs at the center of all efforts.

Through years of living among and working with communities in East Africa, AVSI has understood the many dimensions of the AIDS epidemic and its debilitating impact. AVSI programming since the late '80s in Uganda and the mid 90's in Rwanda and Kenya, has given privileged attention to a holistic approach that incorporates schooling, nutrition, psycho-social support, vocational training, and support for foster homes.

The objectives of AVSI's strategy for this project are:

- à to allow dignified living conditions, to give life skills and to promote autonomy in HIV/AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children and adolescents (OVC);
- à to build up the responsibility and the capacity of families, communities and CBOs to take care of their OVC and support their growth;
- à to reinforce quality service access and provision for the OVC.

Building on the trends of support provided by AVSI programs in the three countries, the project staff estimates improvements in the life skills and health of 12,000 children, and support of 50,000 families and 120 local community-based organizations to care for OVC and their growth.

In December 2004, program staff from the three countries met in Kampala to plan the logistics for project initiation and to establish the basis for sound working relationships.

Civil Society and the Environment in Argentina

On December 7, 2004, AVSI co-hosted a panel entitled, "Climate Change and Carbon Emissions in the Center-North and North-East Regions of Argentina," at a high-level UN conference in Buenos Aires.

CIOMTA (the *Centro de Investigación, Observación y Monitoreo Territorial y Ambiental*—Center for Territorial and Environmental Research, Observation and Monitoring) is a program implemented jointly by AVSI and ACDI (*Asociación Cultural para el Desarrollo Integral*—Cultural Association for Integral Development) in conjunction with the Catholic University of Santa Fe and in operation since November 2002. This panel featured the scientific directors of CIOMTA who presented the observation and monitoring activities underway and presented initial results. The presentations highlighted the role of civil society organizations in implementing high-level governmental strategies to combat climate change and carbon emissions. In particular, CIOMTA, represents an innovative collaborative effort among a local development organization, a research university, and the government in a developing country, together with European counterparts providing direct support and financial resources to make a sophisticated contribution to the field.

This event was organized within the framework of the 10th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 10) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The conference gained significance and renewed political momentum with the recent announcement that the Convention's Kyoto Protocol will become legally binding on February 16, 2005.

CIOMTA's primary objective is to contribute to poverty reduction and improved standards of living for the rural population of the Center-North and Northeastern regions of Argentina through strengthening the capacities of local organizations to develop policies adequate for sustainable development. The work undertaken at the Center utilizes sophisticated towers to measure carbon flows in the atmosphere, and to monitor and analyze carbon emissions and climate change. Given that there is no systematic monitoring of carbon emissions or climate change at the national level in Argentina, CIOMTA's initiatives in the northern regions are establishing precedence for future work and are informing discussions of policy-makers interested in socio-economic development.

Tsunami Response Continued from Page 1

One friend, an astrophysicist, faced the question of the evil that seems to be behind an event such as this. His observation was that the massive energy which shook South East Asia is tiny in comparison to the total energy in action in the universe; in fact, our life on earth exists in a fragile niche. He explained, *"Nature is not cruel; rather, it is imperfect. Nature is not God; rather, it is the mirror of each one of us and our condition: well-intentioned, but imperfect, fragile, confused."* In front of this realization, the profound question of our own existence radiates with intensity: *"In front of the unleashing of nature and the misery of our limits, the profound question regards the meaning of existing. And it is the sharing of this meaning of living that makes us share also the needs and pain of each and every desperate mother and each and every child left along on those devastated beaches."* (M. Bersanelli)

Within any gesture of solidarity must be the desire to understand reality, the meaning of life and death. *"If an affirmation can be drawn from the cataclysm that has struck us, it is that the world of nature and of men—of individuals and of peoples—is not sufficient unto itself. It needs a God who never abandons us, a Presence who is friend, who is strong, who rescues us in life when it seems lost. This for me is the experience of faith, which does not abolish evil, but does, however, attack its aspect of despair."* (G. Cesana) The horror of this natural disaster is, therefore, an opportunity for our own education, to recognize and understand the truth of this statement, written by a friend of AVSI.

As of January 31st, the AVSI international network, including AVSI-USA, has received generous support of hundreds of people and organizations totaling over \$600,000. In the U.S., in addition to individual and family donations, others have managed to secure matching contributions from businesses while other friends are organizing special fundraising events. One event, an evening of live music at a local bar, will be held in New York City on Friday, February 4th.

In February, two AVSI missions to the field will explore opportunities to support social and educational programs in Sri Lanka and Thailand. During these visits, AVSI will identify capable local partners and will establish the contacts from which long-term relationships of support for the reconstruction and rejuvenation of livelihoods can spring forth.

ORACLE Project Continued from Page 1

Children targeted: under 18 years, former child soldiers, children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, child heads of households, child mothers.

"Worst forms" of child labor: those forms of work that are likely to be hazardous or interfere with a child's education, or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. This includes, but is not limited to: military service, sex slavery and commercial exploitation, overly strenuous manual labor, excessive hours.

After year one, the ORACLE team reported that **almost all of their targets had been surpassed**. In fact, project staff is likely to double the target number of vulnerable children receiving support. Key accomplishments from 2004 include:

- 1,303 children enrolled in both formal and non-formal education programs, with 99.5% retention
- 377 primary school teachers received training
- Teaching and learning materials to 85 primary schools, 19 secondary schools and 1 teacher training college
- Water and sanitation facilities provided for 26 schools
- 802 primary, 151 secondary and 370 college students received individual scholastic kits
- Market survey to guide vocational training

During this year, the ORACLE staff has learned some interesting lessons. One of these is that out-of-school youth are an untapped resource that can be utilized to develop the capacity of these young people to engage positively in their communities. During their holidays from school, youth leaders were engaged through workshops that addressed psychosocial, reproductive health, and hygiene issues facing the community. Given the very real environment of conflict and stress, the ORACLE team has learned to manage by helping field staff develop coping mechanisms to overcome stress and maintain positive morale. The team has also found it necessary to train staff in psychosocial concepts to better equip them to deal confidently with traumatized children.

The ORACLE project has come up against a few challenges to the strategy of using educational incentives to reduce child labor. The lack of school feeding programs is a real disincentive to school attendance. Also, while school offers children a respite from work during the day-time, the high poverty levels in the IDP camps leads to children still having the need to work in any free time outside of the school day. Schools have low numbers of female teachers and counselors, thus frustrating, to a degree, the project's efforts to promote girls' education.

The ORACLE project is breaking new ground in establishing the importance of education as a priority in emergency or insecure areas. Education, with a holistic approach that considers the psycho-social needs of the child as well as his concrete life skills, is an invaluable asset to re-building self-confidence and responsibility in youth and in communities, thus enabling them to better face the future.