

## FOCUS ON GLOBAL ISSUES

# A Wave of Relief

BY BARRY GILBERTSON, FRICS, CRE



AS THE NEWS OF THE TSUNAMI STARTED TO COME IN, on the day after Christmas, I began to realise there was a situation unfolding that was potentially without precedent. The initial death toll gave way to ever more horrifying numbers of lives lost, of families displaced, homeless and, for some, seemingly, a life without immediate hope.

Why has the world taken this terrible natural disaster to its collective heart, and wallet, compared to other disasters? A difficult question, but the answer may lie in the scale of the wave—whilst in America, in January, I saw a silhouette of the United States superimposed on the Indian Ocean at the same scale, and it fell well within the distant shores. So many countries were affected, even Kenya and Somalia....more than the full width of America away from the epicentre. Also, of course, these were countries with holiday destinations and there were many international tourists and families involved or affected by the dramatic events.

I wondered what, if anything, RICS could do to show its global leadership in the face of a global disaster. Writing emails to our RICS leaders in Asia, in Sri Lanka, in Thailand, keeping our Governing Council and the wider membership informed—all good practical short term palliatives. Using my own contacts at the United Nations has raised their awareness of RICS and its members' capabilities. Hearing that Ranasinghe Silva, the chair of RICS Sri Lanka, was safe and that his family had survived the disaster, was good news. Hearing that they had no idea what help they really needed was less good.

Haydn Thomas, chair of RICS Thailand, told me that only 2% of Phuket is affected and the best thing we could all do to help, in his opinion, would be to visit his country on holiday to boost the inward cashflow and help to balance the economy.

Many RICS members were, and still are, just itching to help in some way. The Construction Faculty's new list of relevant member skills and the Building Control Forum's contacts with the Red Cross are two great examples for us all in getting initiatives under way. Getting an RICS-wide solution created and implemented is really very difficult. Surely the best idea to emanate from the Governing Council intranet forum is to recognise that disasters, both natural and terrorist, are part of our lives today and to work out now how to respond in the future.

Accordingly, I have set up a Presidential Commission to explore how RICS can be better prepared for the future, how we can evaluate the response needed, on whom we can call in an emergency, how we can interact with the world's leading aid and survival agencies, how much of our member's resources it would be right and proper to allocate to these tasks, how we can ensure that the skills that we have to offer—on a cross-faculty basis—can be made available at the right stage of redevelopment. Finally, what are the criteria for our involvement?

## About our Featured Columnist

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## INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

The next question must be "how can professional bodies, internationally, find a way to share their knowledge, and their experience, for the greater benefit of the global community?"

Having set the scene, I now pose this question to my fellow Counselors. It seems to me that one of the key differentiators for the CRE is the Consulting Corps concept. That very idea is founded on the same principles as my thesis...sharing knowledge and expertise for the benefit of those less privileged than ourselves.

So, what can CRE contribute to the RICS Presidential Commission? What skills can you bring to the party? What expertise do you have, individually, and corporately, that might alleviate suffering in the longer term?

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My sense tells me that our best contribution is not actually in the immediate aftermath of this disaster, or in fact any disaster, whether natural or terrorist (man-made). Our real opportunity to assist must come in the second or third phase, beyond humanitarian relief, beyond the provision of food and emergency shelter accommodation—there are plenty of international relief agencies to provide that help. Where we can bring our weight to bear is at the reconstruction phase, and before, in the strategic planning of the reconstruction, so that the lives, homes and businesses of those affected, in the vicinity of the disaster, are immeasurably improved for the longer term, not replicated (with all the attendant possibilities of a repeat performance).

Any help that we do offer needs to be cognisant of the diversity created by different nations, different religions and different traditions, rather than impose our own solutions in a "clash of cultures."

Here is a list of some of the things that we could do, together:

- master planning towns, villages and commercial environments
- construction cost advice
- tendering procedures and tender evaluation
- valuation of assets for bank lending and international grant application, both pre-build and after occupation
- capital fund raising for construction and investment including "private finance initiative" and special government funding schemes
- construction cost and project management
- building control regulations—creation, management and monitoring of regulations and strategic advice, to ensure that rebuild costs go into buildings constructed in accordance with relevant international best practice
- corporate occupier and multi-family housing advice and management
- real estate investment strategic advice
- eventual disposal advice beyond rental structuring and strategies to release capital value from real estate for further reinvestment

My guess is that there are plenty of other skills we could bring to bear, too.

What do you think ?

The Commission will have begun its work by the time that you read this column, but it is never to late to become a corresponding member. If it would interest you to participate, please email me on [REDACTED] ■