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## PART I: INTRODUCTION

On December 26, 2004, an underwater earthquake deep in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of western Indonesia, set off a series of waves that became known as a tsunami. The result was one of the largest disasters of modern times. The tsunami struck the coastlines of 14 countries; upwards of an estimated 225,000 people perished or disappeared and more than one million more were displaced.<sup>1</sup>

In the immediate aftermath, local people carried out most of the recovery work, tending to the injured, feeding and sheltering the homeless, and recovering bodies. However, the scope of the damage was overwhelming and dealing with it was beyond the capacity of many local authorities. Many of the hardest-hit areas were remote and already suffering from high rates of poverty. In some of the worst affected parts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, people already lived impoverished lives in fractured communities with poor infrastructure due to decades of insurgencies and violence.

By January 2005, Habitat for Humanity had joined other international non-governmental organizations in responding to

the shelter needs of the survivors. Habitat's response quickly became an ongoing commitment that is now due to be completed by the end of 2010, to be superseded by regular Habitat programs.

Historically, Habitat for Humanity viewed itself as a development organization, rather than a relief agency. It sought — and continues to seek — to break the cycle of poverty by offering affordable, good quality, permanent housing solutions. Increasingly, Habitat was asked to respond after natural disasters, such as Hurricane Andrew which hit Florida in 1992 and the aftermath of earthquakes in Gujarat, India, and Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002. The provision of decent housing in the wake of a disaster had to mean more than responding to immediate shelter needs. A permanent home was seen to provide relief to survivors while better protecting them against potential future disasters.

In responding to the Indian Ocean tsunami, Habitat employed strategies designed to leave communities stronger than before, with access to the many benefits that safe and

decent housing brings. These benefits include better health, education and employment opportunities.

Habitat's approach for post-tsunami reconstruction emphasized:

**Community-based strategies:** Local people were at the heart of decision-making about rebuilding as well as about planning to reduce risks associated with future disasters.

**On-site reconstruction:** Most families with whom Habitat worked rebuilt "on-site" — either elsewhere within their immediate neighborhood or sometimes on the foundations of their former houses. Staying within their communities strengthened the ability of those communities to respond and helped people return to employment more quickly.

**Core house model:** The preference was for a low-cost house of about 36 sq. m. that could be expanded or



improved upon once families had additional resources. While the governments of both India and Sri Lanka dictated larger house sizes, Habitat's core house model became widely accepted.

**Habitat Resource Centers:** These specialized centers provided facilities for planning, designing and managing building projects, making and storing construction materials such as window frames, blocks and roof tiles, and training local people in the building trades.

**Strong partnerships:** Working with other organizations, particularly other local or international NGOs, helped maximize resources, allowed houses to be built more quickly and efficiently, strengthened communities, and created educational and employment opportunities.

**Focus on need:** In tsunami-affected countries, Habitat for Humanity provided aid according to the affected families' need for housing, depending on whether their former houses were destroyed or damaged by the disaster. As

assistance for the poor was a priority, Habitat sometimes supported low-income communities that had been indirectly affected, such as those whose members had lost their jobs in tourist areas.

**Using volunteers:** Habitat leveraged its ability to mobilize volunteers. Local and international teams of volunteers provided useful labor while cutting costs.

**Planning for the future:** From early on, Habitat planned for the long-term, looking at how the experience could strengthen local Habitat capabilities. It thereby laid the foundation for Habitat to assist ever greater numbers of those in need through more conventional Habitat repayment programs. Habitat also built the disaster response capabilities of local Habitat operations in each country, helped families to expand or improve on core houses, boosted their employment prospects through livelihood training, and better prepared the communities for surviving future disasters through mitigation and preparedness courses.<sup>2</sup>

The unprecedented scale of the Indian Ocean tsunami and the response that followed provided a platform for Habitat to work with partners and families in building safe, solid, permanent houses. In the course of its work, Habitat forged new alliances with donors, governments, agencies and other NGOs while strengthening old ones. Habitat for Humanity's country programs in India, Indonesia and Thailand in particular established a long-term presence in areas where they had not worked prior to December 2004. Organizationally, Habitat increased its capacity and expertise in disaster response.

Half a decade on, Habitat's work has helped transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and hundreds of communities. The transformation has included better access to education, employment and social development, as well as permanent shelter solutions.

In this report, Habitat for Humanity shares its work and the strategies used in its response to the tsunami. The experiences of individual families, partners, donors and communities demonstrate the impact of solid housing and the value of partnerships. □

