

1-2 The Global Response to the 2004 Tsunami

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake beneath the Indian Ocean set in motion a series of events that affected hundreds of millions of people around the world. The shifting ocean floor sent a series of gigantic tsunami waves toward the coasts of South Asia and Africa, completely engulfing many populated islands along the way. As the weeks passed, the outside world looked on in horror as the death toll climbed to more than 225,000.

The international relief effort that mobilized to rescue the injured, provide shelter to the homeless, and address long-term economic needs was one obvious sign of globalization. Through volunteer labor and donated money, sympathetic people and governments around the world could gain some sense of control in the face of the massive natural disaster. Beyond the humanitarian effort, however, lay more complicated aspects of globalization, including social interrelationships that span the globe and vast economic disparities between one part of the world and another.

Most of the devastation caused by the tsunami hit relatively poor areas of the world. As a result, the global economy barely flickered, and the insurance and financial markets escaped virtually unscathed. Had the tsunami hit the coast of North America or Europe, the results would have been far different. In fact, to guard against such catastrophe, a sophisticated tsunami detection and warning system had been in place in the Pacific Ocean for about 40 years, to offer some measure of protection to industrial giants Japan and the United States. No such network existed in the

Indian Ocean, where neighboring countries lacked the resources to create one. Expensive warning systems and risk management plans, also common in affluent countries, were nonexistent in the area hit by the 2004 tsunami.

Though the areas affected by the tsunami were populated by some of the poorest, most vulnerable people in the world, pockets of incredible affluence could be found there as well. From the vantage point of the region's expensive resorts, vacationing Westerners used their camcorders to videotape the 30-foot waves as they pounded the coast and swept

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through the streets. Because such resorts offer almost the only form of economic development in the coastal areas, within weeks of the calamity, nations like Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka were urging tourists to return to the stricken zone. Their desperate attempt to restart the shattered tourism industry underscored the privileges that citizens of wealthy nations enjoy. Globalization permits them to pass effortlessly across national borders to visit such luxury resorts, where they pay for a single night's lodging with a sum the local people must work a year to earn. The same borders

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Another aspect of globalization was the political reaction to the disaster. Within days of the arrival of the first foreign assistance, the government of Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country, announced that U.S. soldiers would be permitted in the disaster area only without their sidearms. All Western relief organizations were to be out of the country by March 30, whatever the needs in the stricken areas. This unusual step of turning away assistance must be viewed in a global context. At that time, the United States occupied two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. Indonesian officials wanted to make clear that their country would not be subject to a similar occupation, however unlikely that scenario. Today, events in one part of the world impact people everywhere, in ways that cannot always be predicted.

Let's Discuss

1. Have you ever lived in or traveled to a place where the very wealthy lived side by side with the desperately poor? If so, where was it—in a foreign country or the United States? Explain the economic relationship between the two groups.
2. Which of the three major theoretical perspectives would be most useful in analyzing the social effects of the 2004 tsunami? Explain your answer.

Sources: Geist et al. 2006; Seabrook 2005; Swiss Re 2005; *The Economist* 2005a.

the contributions of Karl Marx, Jane Addams, and Ida Wells-Barnett also stressed this sentiment for the overarching importance of social inequality and social justice. Joe Feagin (2001) echoed it in a presidential address to the American Sociological Association.

Throughout, this book will highlight the work of sociologists on social inequality. Many chapters also feature a box on this theme.

Speaking across Race, Gender, and Religious Boundaries

Sociologists include both men and women, as well as people from a variety of ethnic, national, and religious origins. In their

work, sociologists seek to draw conclusions that speak to all people—not just the affluent or powerful. Doing so is not always easy. Insights into how a corporation can increase its profits tend to attract more attention and financial support than do, say, the merits of a needle exchange program for low-income inner-city residents. Yet today more than ever, sociology seeks to better understand the experiences of all people.

Sociologists have noted, for example, that the 2004 tsunami affected men and women differently. When the waves hit, mothers and grandmothers were at home with the children; men were outside working, where they were more likely to become aware of the impending disaster. Moreover, most of the men knew how to swim, a survival skill that women in these traditional societies