

Emergencies such as the one playing out in the former paradises of the Indian Ocean grab the attention of the world. The tragic earthquake and resulting tsunamis in Asia have dominated the news of the past two weeks. The initial devastation is simply unfathomable for those of us thousands of miles away. Unfortunately the horrors of those waves and the ensuing destruction are not the only concerns for the people who remain. Now, in the aftermath of the tsunamis and through the recovery efforts, focus must be given to providing safe drinking water and sanitary services. Fortunately, many governmental and non-governmental (NGO) organizations from around the world are assisting in the re-establishment of these vital services. As we watch, we are reminded of just how much we take for granted, including the availability of a safe water supply.

There is one organization that never underestimates the value of a water and sanitation system. Water for People was formed with the vision of providing “clean water, adequate sanitation and basic health services” to all the people of the world. As Water for People is not an emergency service provider, they will not be directly assisting in the recovery efforts throughout the Indian Ocean. They will however, continue their efforts to help impoverished people improve their quality of life through the development and maintenance of water and sanitation systems.

Water for People began as a realization that members of water utilities, manufacturing companies and engineering consultants to the water industry had a social responsibility to work toward “a world where all people have safe drinking water and a world where no child dies from a water-related illness.” In February of 1991, Water for People became incorporated as a non-profit development organization. It also became the charity of choice for the American Water Works Association.

Since its inception, Water for People (WFP) has partnered with governments and NGOs in 43 countries around the world to establish water and sanitation systems. The need is great. According to WFP, “every 15 seconds, a child under the age of five dies needlessly from a water related illness...2.4 billion (2 out of every 5 people) in our world have no access to adequate sanitation.”

WFP sees water as the first step out of poverty. They work with communities to build water and sanitation systems, which they say “creates positive conditions for people to achieve other goals, make decisions that benefit the whole community, and devise innovative solutions for long-term sustainable development.”

The success of WFP programs is found in people and in the WFP creed of “give a hand up, not a hand out.” WFP works as a partner with the people in the communities it helps. The local people are involved in every step of a WFP program, from inception and planning through design and completion of the project. This promotes ownership of the projects and ensures their success.

WFP's efforts are not limited to the development of a water and sanitary system. WFP helps people build skills that enable them to operate and manage the systems that are developed. They also provide education on health and hygiene to minimize the spread of disease and make the connection between clean water and good health.

In addition to educating impoverished people the world over, WFP educates those of us in developed nations who have ready access to clean water and sanitation. WFP offers opportunities for us to volunteer and learn about the needs of our world neighbors. One such way they educate us about these needs is through tours of the communities in which they have assisted.

The feeling of helplessness in the wake of the Asian disaster has left many of us yearning for a way to help others. Certainly monetary donations to the areas devastated by the tsunamis will provide the most immediate help. However, in the days and months ahead, after the emergency has passed, remember the people all over the world who struggle to survive in communities devoid of clean water. Take a moment to learn more about Water for People by visiting their web site at www.waterforpeople.com. WFP is always looking for volunteers willing to lend a hand to a neighbor in need, and provide a safe and healthy environment in which a child may grow.