

## REBUILDING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS – AGRICULTURAL MISSIONS' RESPONSE TO THE TSUNAMI DISASTER

BY WINSTON CARROO

Disasters are said to *"bring out the best in people and the worst in people."* The tsunami of December 26 that devastated Southeast Asia is no exception. The generosity and sympathy that poured into the affected countries were also accompanied by acts of selfishness and greed. There were stories of people trying to lure and kidnap tsunami created orphan children for the sex trade; there were stories of price gouging and corruption in the distribution of relief and reconstruction aid.

The tsunami not only swept away homes, livelihoods, communities and institutions – it also decimated indigenous community organizations that provided education and advocacy to and on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged. Given the ensuing weakness or absence of these organizations, business interests and even government entities are taking actions that deny people their rights; exclude them from having a voice in the reconstruction efforts; and appropriate their lands and other natural resources. Beachfront lands are prime targets. Tourism interests are lobbying to gain access to those places that the fisher folk have used for as long as anyone can remember. In many instances governments are forbidding people from rebuilding near the beaches on grounds of safety while allowing hotels and other tourism-related development. The absence of effective opposition to these acts makes it easier to perpetuate these injustices.

Some governments, with the backing of the International Financial Institutions and big business interests, are busy, using this opportunity to push the neoliberal economic agenda of privatization and free trade that have been long stalled by public opposition. Privatization of water distribution and other utilities and cuts in social services to the disadvantaged are being forced on a people who are still dazed and preoccupied in a daily struggle for survival. Again, the absence of organized opposition is making these actions possible.

We at Agricultural Missions, Inc (AMI) firmly believe that the best way to address this endemic problem of disenfranchisement of the poor is to assist them to mount grassroots opposition to these injustices. Assisting local organizations to return to their roles as advocates, educators and mobilizers is of primary importance if this situation is to be slowed and stopped. But, sad to say, with the hundreds of millions – and even more than a billion dollars in aid that is being spent, very little is going to support indigenous community organizations to rebuild and restore their capabilities. This is very critical for lasting reconstruction and development after the international aid agencies depart and the tsunami recedes from the news and the consciousness of the world.

Agricultural Missions is currently embarking on a program to accompany and assist local community organizations to "get back on their feet" and be able to again address the issues of justice for the less fortunate.

Some of these organizations have been our partners for several years and others are new to us. But we see this as an opportunity to build new relationships, cement friendships and provide the space for mutual learning and support.

We have received an initial grant of \$100,000 from the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) for this effort. But this is a drop in the bucket compared to the need, the importance and urgency we face. ■

**You can support this effort of rebuilding indigenous community organizations by making a designated gift to Agricultural Missions, Inc. for this program. Please contact this office if you need more information.**