

BY DAVID B. CHALCROFT, P.ENG., AND
KIRK THOMPSON, P.ENG.

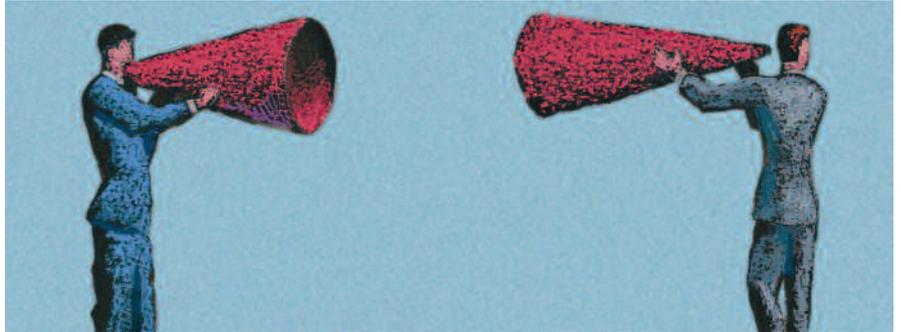
Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998 with explosive force, resulting in thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of families left homeless or deprived of their livelihoods, and billions of dollars of property damage. In the aftermath, a number of leading consulting engineering firms got together under the auspices of the Association of Consulting Engineers of Canada (ACEC) to see what could be done to improve Canada's response in the event of similar tragedies.

The idea behind this gathering was that Canadian consulting firms that are active in parts of the world where such natural disasters strike could rapidly deploy engineers and material to the disaster sites to help save lives and reduce suffering. The firms involved were not looking to benefit financially from such crises. On the contrary, they were prepared to subsidize, or even underwrite, the costs of providing staff when assistance was most needed.

ACEC approached the federal government with this offer, seeking acceptance, recognition and assistance to set up a secretariat to deal with future emergencies. The concept was that a network of executives, whose firms are active in the affected region, would coordinate their individual and collective responses. The effect would be a faster and better-targeted response.

Initially, the government reacted positively to this proposal, but its ardour cooled after hearing from a wider community of organizations active in the areas where this assistance was targeted. Some denounced the ACEC initiative as a thinly disguised money/power grab. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) pointed out that they, too, were active in these areas, and in a position to provide the same kind of on-the-ground assistance. Many others generally supported the initiative, with various reservations. The government's later response to ACEC, taking this feedback into account, was more muted, and the initiative was shelved.

International disaster response— an improved Canadian approach



Establishing a special secretariat to coordinate Canada's response to natural disasters, such as the recent tsunami in Southeast Asia, would allow aid efforts to flow more quickly to affected areas. The authors contend that such a secretariat would make better use of the skills and commitment of engineers in disaster prevention and mitigation.

Seven years later, Canada's response to the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean countries of Indonesia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and parts of Africa, is raising questions anew about Canadian cooperation or, rather, lack of it. This time around, Canada's response was certainly no better—and arguably worse—than when Hurricane Mitch struck. The 15-day delay in deploying the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the area clearly demonstrated how unprepared we were. The public wrangling between the Canadian Red Cross and CARE Canada underscores the divisions within Canadian service organizations about how we coordinate our efforts in response to such disasters. We, at RedR (Registered Engineers for Disaster Relief) Canada, received at least a dozen offers of help from various engineering companies, plus hundreds of offers from individual engineers and others with needed skills. We had no channels through which to put these resources to work, and had to say to them “Sorry, but...”

This article addresses three questions that arose from this episode:

1. Should Canada coordinate its overall response to international disasters?

The answer to this question is unequivocally, yes. Lives are saved and suffering is reduced when aid is deployed faster and is better focused on needs. This is the primary purpose of humanitarian aid. As to the benefits of coordinating the efforts of humanitarian aid service organizations, we have only to look at the successes we have achieved at the community, provincial and national levels within Canada. Think of where we might be today without our 911 community emergency service, our largely provincial responses to floods and fires, and our national response to such interprovincial catastrophes as the 1998 ice storm that hit eastern Canada. Admittedly, these services do not work perfectly, but who would advocate reverting to the previous status quo? In cases where these services do not work satisfactorily, it is simply a measure

of how much we must yet improve the workings of the organizations providing the services. It is not an argument for abandoning them.

2. How might a coordinated Canadian response work?

This question is more difficult to answer, because it depends upon context. We know, for example, that hurricanes, typhoons, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, and the like, will happen again, but we don't know where, when, or with what force they will strike.

Canada does not respond unilaterally to international disasters, but works together with other nations through many different, but complementary, channels. These channels include the United Nations system of agencies involved in disaster relief, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements, and various NGOs. The countries affected by the disasters are sovereign nations, whose established diplomatic ties with Canada are invariably respected, and who dictate how Canada responds. In some disasters, such as the recent tsunami, Canada's military deploys its DART team, and can provide other types of assistance if and when needed.

Our vision of how a coordinated Canadian response might work centres on three components:

- a small secretariat with a wide network of contacts both within and outside Canada;
- generalized preplanning of the types of assistance that Canada could provide, by type of disaster and by location; and
- a national budget that could be released on short notice and could be made proportional to the severity and cost of the disaster.

In responding to any disaster, speed in getting help to the site is critical because victims are most vulnerable in the immediate aftermath. This imperative must govern the selection of who is on the network, and must characterize the way in which the networking operates. Among the determinations that must be quickly reached are:

- What types of disaster-relief response are most appropriate for Canada and Canadian organizations to undertake, in relation to the expected and materializing responses of other nations?



In Galle, Sri Lanka, a woman does laundry in the rubble of her home, which was devastated by the December 26 tsunami.

- How much will Canada's response cost and how would the undertaking be funded?
- How should the various components of Canada's response be deployed?

We see the secretariat being outside government and accountable in its actions and performance to its stakeholders. Stakeholders include all organizations (government, military, NGOs, private-sector firms, etc.) that participate in disaster-relief efforts.

We do not envisage the secretariat being run by engineers, but we do envisage their role in setting it up, as discussed in the following question.

3. What role, if any, should the community of engineering professionals play in getting a coordinated Canadian response started?

Engineers are good at building, fixing and getting things to work properly. We have the mindset, drive, determination and skill sets needed to tackle this undertaking, and we should. In addition, we can export Canada's know-how in the areas of disaster prevention and mitigation to lessen the impact of future disasters in developing countries. What differentiates this undertaking from that of setting up a private-sector organization or industry association is the scope and nature of the work involved.

There are no viable alternatives. The federal government can help, but should not take on this task because of accountability considerations. Neither the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

nor the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT)—the two government organizations most likely to be tasked with this job—could do it without encumbering its creation with a bureaucracy that would stifle its very essence: speed of response to disasters.

Nor is there any single NGO that could command the respect of its peers and not be accused of promoting its own well-being at the expense of the others.

The vision of that group of engineers who, seven years ago, advocated the formation of a better and more coordinated Canadian response to international disasters, was right on the mark. The need is there. And it can be done. What was lacking at that time was a clear understanding of all of the stakeholders involved in disaster relief, and what is needed to craft an overall response from Canada that contributes materially to saving lives and reducing suffering. Now we have it.

Should we re-launch this initiative? We think so, but we need your support. ❖

David B. Chalcraft, P.Eng., is chair, and Kirk Thompson, P.Eng., is executive director, of RedR Canada, an international organization that provides trained personnel to humanitarian aid agencies.

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