



## Monthly Review n° 1/2005 January 2005

### *Special Edition:* *Special Edition « tsunami in South-East Asia »*

#### **For an adequate protection of children separated from their family during natural disasters**

In a communiqué drafted in the wake of hurricane Mitch (November 1988) by the ISS, the International Catholic Child Bureau, Defence for Children International and Save The Children Alliance, principles for the protection of child victims of natural disasters were put forward, ranging from the emergency phase up until long-term solutions ([http://imu28.infomaniak.ch/access/www.iss-ssi.org/nph-proxy.cgi/010101A/http/www.iss-ssi.org/Resource\\_Centre/Tronc\\_DI/MitchEnglish.PDF](http://imu28.infomaniak.ch/access/www.iss-ssi.org/nph-proxy.cgi/010101A/http/www.iss-ssi.org/Resource_Centre/Tronc_DI/MitchEnglish.PDF)). Set out below, these principles can be applied just as they are to the tsunami situation.

#### 1) Emergency phase

During the emergency period, governments and the competent authorities must be sure that the children are not separated from their parents or from the people in charge of them. It is their responsibility to provide protection and special care for children, to find their family and reunite them (art. 20-21 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

- **Keeping the child in his/her living environment** : *international support for local programmes of minimal protection* for the child (accommodation, food, medical care, affective and psychological support, education) in his/her living environment, placing the child with others or with adults of his/her family or in his/her community.
- **Identification of the child's family**: procedures for *the registration of children and the identification of their family* must be set in motion as quickly as possible, so that the period of separation is as short as possible. While waiting, the child can be placed under the protection of people from his/her community, and support must be given to these temporary foster families.
- **Unaccompanied children**: a) children separated from their parents and for whom no adult is responsible by law or by custom, must be *identified as soon as possible and research be carried out into their family and community history* ; b) during this emergency phase, unaccompanied children must be *taken into care at the local level*, either in a foster family in their community, or be placed in existing institutions. **The creation of new institutions must be avoided as far as possible** (risk of abuse during their stay in an institution and the creation of institutions for trafficking purposes). Recourse to institutional placement must, therefore, be used restrictively and must maintain the aim of family reunification in the shortest possible time. Moreover, people and institutions to whom the children are entrusted during this phase must be clearly identified to prevent all forms of trafficking; c) searches for members of the child's family must be *quickly initiated and should last a sufficiently long period of time*. The exceptional circumstances effectively render the displacement of people and the coordination of information more difficult. Furthermore, the search for people and programmes of reunification must be *coordinated by an agency experienced in family and community reunification*.

#### 2) the medium and long term

Once the emergency phase is over and after the first year of reconstruction, steps for final family placement are taken for children who are still without parents. By applying the ***principle of subsidiarity***, solutions that allow the child to stay in his/her own country must be sought: preferably an intra-family provision of care or relative adoption and, failing that, domestic adoption. As a last resort, if no local or domestic protective measure has been found or does not correspond to the best interests of the child, a procedure for inter-country adoption can be undertaken. Decisions in favour of long-term placement must be inscribed in the national context of child protection policies and be taken on an individual basis (case by case). They must involve both the child (when he/she has reached the age required by law) and the community and must be motivated solely by the best interests of the child. As a reminder, a solution that enables brothers and sisters to stay together must also be found.

*In the case of natural disasters, the assistance must, therefore, concentrate on :*

- *On the one hand, to support families and ensure their survival, the focus is on emergency health and food programmes and the rapid reconstruction of the child's protective environment (the family and community living spaces) ;*
- *On the other hand, the emphasis is on restoring the diverse infrastructures and on rallying the sources of income for the family and the land.*

*The priority actions for child protection are those geared towards:*

- *no separation –even temporary – from their family or their community ;*
- *and the reintegration of unaccompanied children in their family, their community or their land.*