

“Un aiuto subito” (Fast aid) and Civil Protection

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When the directors of Corriere della Sera, Stefano Folli, and of Tg5, Carlo Rosella, informed those of us on the “Un aiuto subito” Committee that they intended to collect donations for the tsunami from readers and viewers, we were more than a little perplexed. How could we manage such funds in foreign countries? With “Un aiuto subito”, we had accumulated not so much long experience as intensive experience in Italy, starting with the Umbria and Marches earthquake of 1997, which was when we were set up, and then the flooding at Sarno and in neighbouring towns in 1998, the

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earthquake in Molise and Sicily in 2002, the flooding in northern Italy in 2002, the dead at Nassiriya in 2003. On many of these occasions we had had to interact with the Civil Protection Department, with more than satisfactory results, and we already knew Guido Bertolaso, having collaborated with him after the Molise earthquake on construction of the “temporary”

school of San Giuliano and the neighbouring village. To dispel any doubts about how we would operate abroad, it occurred to us that we could propose that Civil Protection manage the donations we collected: for us, it would be a guarantee in terms of speed of action as well, since the teams organised by the Department had been at work right from the evening of December 26. In our contacts with other parties collecting donations for the tsunami’s victims, this idea was well received. The good news came on December 29, when the government gave us the go-ahead to collaborate with Bertolaso and his men. We met right away in Via Ulpiano in Rome, at the Civil Protection offices, with other fundraisers, and we experienced first-hand the story told in these pages. “Un aiuto subito” – with Vito Oliva from Tg5, Giuseppe Richero, General of the Carabinieri, and yours truly – became part of the Donors Committee, together with representatives of mobile telephony operators and of RAI. We were systematically consulted on the choice of initiatives to be promoted, on changes to be made to the Programme, in a sequence of meetings that always made us feel a part of the operation, from beginning to end. We were able to see that the goals of our contribution were respected: immediate aid, then the construction of schools, hospitals and homes. All objectives first envisioned and then reached by the Programme were funded partly by donations collected by us, for a total of 9,203,899.21 Euros. I have personally gone three times already to the devastated areas in Sri Lanka, and I was able to see first the delivery of the fishing boats with their nets and the start of various construction projects, and later participated in ceremonies turning over the finished

works. With each trip, I remembered the first experience in 1997, in Umbria and the Marches, when we did not have help from institutions, and for two years we spent weekends in those areas to see how work was progressing. What I saw in Sri Lanka convinced me that our Committee had finally found the right partner. In Sri Lanka, Civil Protection's work was outstanding right from the start: my memories of the first trip, in March 2005, dazzled me as an Italian, because I saw with my own eyes how different our reception camps were from those organised by other organisations and other donor countries. We offered the tsunami victims the same tents, materials and care that we provided to our citizens; other things I saw made me think that not all donors followed the same criteria. And, as an Italian, I was proud of the enthusiasm of Bertolaso's men and women, who took the assignment as a mission and carried it out on behalf of all of us and of our country.

A story of miracles great and small

CHANTAL HAMENDE

Spokesperson for 3, member of the Donors Committee

AS of 2004, December 26 is no longer St. Stephen's Day, playing bingo with the family, eating the umpteenth slice of panettone for tradition's sake, out of boredom... No, as of 2004 that holiday that always finds us satiated with everything has become the day of the tsunami. Many of us did not even know what that was, and then the official images came in, the amateur videos, the explanations from experts, and we understood. One enormous, destructive wave swept

away everyone and everything, local residents and tourists, the old and the young, teenagers and children, men and women, luxury hotels and poor houses, schools, hospitals, fishing boats, everything, everything, everything. The dimensions of the tragedy, distant yet at

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the same time nearby because it seemed to involve many of our citizens who were there on vacation, the extraordinary media coverage, the Christmas atmosphere set off a worldwide rush to solidarity right from the start, and it quickly became awesome. In Italy, along with so many others, the Rcs-Mediaset "Un aiuto subito" Committee (a key player in 2002 in collecting funds for the communities hit by the San Giuliano earthquake) propose to Telecom Italia, Tim, Vodafone, Wind and 3 to set up as quickly as possible a single SMS number for micro-donations of one Euro: normally a difficult thing to do, almost impossible in the midst of the Christmas holidays, with the added problem that many operators were closed down at that time. But this is a story of miracles great and small. The first miracle of those days was this in fact: on Monday, even though it was December 27, almost all

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the employees of this department were in the office or on call. We got to work quickly to set up the single number, 48480. There had already been some precedents for collaboration among companies that are normally in fierce competition with one another: the Molise earthquake, the TV marathons for muscular dystrophy research, a few other initiatives, but on that day we quickly understood that we were doing something different and extraordinary. In the course of a few hours we were all ready when the call came from TG1, which also wanted to be a promoter, with another SMS number, for fundraising.

And that was the second miracle: not only did we operators quickly find ourselves agreeing to back the importance of the fact that the single number should

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remain just that, but, with a good dose of diplomacy, common sense and firmness, we started a sort of negotiation and got the directors of Italy’s two main news broadcasts to give us the best possible answer, which was that TG1, showing great intelligence, was “adopting” the 48580 number, contributing to the success of the fundraising.

For once, a virtuous mechanism had been set off, a pooling of energy and professionalism that in just 14 days produced the greatest private Italian donation ever. Everyone did their part then: Corriere della Sera, TG5 and TG1 documented the evolving situation and asked Italians to use their cell phones to make their contribution; mobile operators mobilised on other fronts as well, for example checking how many customers were on roaming, i.e., temporarily registered on foreign networks, to figure out how many Italians might be there. They worked with the Foreign Affairs Ministry; they gave phone credits to customers located in disaster areas but unable to call, to ask for help, to calm down, to just say “We’re alive”. During those days, among us telephone operators, all the usual stereotypes, the result of years of merciless competition, were swept away: setting aside any reservations whatsoever, we exchanged data on how many customers we had in Southeast Asia, ideas on how to help them, and we agreed to eliminate promotion of our brands from communications in this fundraising campaign.

I was and still am working for the youngest operator with the smallest market share: for us that fundraising effort on 48580 was the first real fundraising with a joint SMS; it could have run aground because of any technical problem, or it could have made us lead players in this solidarity competition. I remember drafting a press release, historic in its way because it started out – after manual “cutting and pasting” – with the five logos, in which the “telephony operators” jointly announced activation of the single number 48580 for donations of one Euro and, in subsequent updates every six hours for the next two weeks, committed themselves to give an accounting of how the fundraising was going.

We learned to trust one another and, scout's honour, no one profited from it; indeed, we glimpsed a new way of working that became a common heritage among those who, over the years, started handling solidarity SMS's. Continuing with the miracles of those days, we must not forget the technical one: the mobile networks, traditionally stressed out with holiday calls and SMS's, got them all through, despite the abnormally high peaks of traffic they were subjected to. During those days even what the collective imagination sees as the barren bureaucratic centre of the country, the Ministry of Economy, did its part and did it right, eliminating the tax on solidarity SMS's in support of the people stricken by national catastrophes, by decree 315, issued on December 30, 2004, just four days after the tsunami.

Meanwhile, less than twenty-four hours after the tragedy, the Civil Protection Department was already on the scene with the first rescue teams and became the recipient of the funds raised, and responsible for their proper use: this was the start of an extraordinary case history. Extraordinary because in the last three years, with about 28 million Euros donated by Italians using their cell phones and the resources provided by other fundraising, they completed all scheduled projects, which enabled people to once again have homes, schools, hospitals and fishing boats. Extraordinary because, three years after the tragedy, all project sites have been closed, and we can proudly say: "Mission accomplished".

During these years, we telephony operators have always been kept informed and updated on the progress of the work. There's more: during on-site inspections, we were able to touch the reconstruction work with our own

hands, but what is even more important, Dario Cucé, Alessandra Karrer, Dario Scancarello, Mauro Travaglini, Marco Muretto, Teresa Simeone, Patrizia De Santa and Maria Elena Carlini were able to do it: they had each donated one Euro by sending a simple SMS, and they were chosen by lottery to become, in the eyes of all Italians, the witnesses of how their money was spent. This management, as maniacally transparent as it was effective, has become a model for all of us to strive for in our fundraising activities. After the tsunami fundraising, things changed for the better for telephony operators: this extraordinary collaboration has become a normal thing; we exchange information, ideas, doubts, we treat each other properly; we have become more selective, and we have grown.

