by Norman Sartorius



## **Counting our Blessings**

Tsunami, the big wave that has followed the earthquake near Banda Acer in the Indian Ocean, probably killed more than two hundred thousand people. Many more were wounded physically and emotionally, lost family and friends, and were deprived of their life's savings. The shocking images were all over the media, the world mobilized help and expressed sympathy. While expressing willingness to help, many of us felt lucky or blessed because we were not there and the earthquake did not shake the ground below our feet. These feelings - of wanting to help and of being grateful that we have not suffered directly ran strong for a short while, and then begun to wane. There are few who still think about the disaster at Bam and its thirty thousand dead only a year and a half ago and even fewer remember other disasters, other epidemics of grief, illness, misery, and unhappiness.

The blessing that we did not suffer directly from the tsunami is not the only one: there are many more of which we are somehow unaware. While reading these lines you do not necessarily remember that you are better instructed than the two billion people who never had a chance to learn how to read or write. And, while thinking about this for a moment, think also about what else you have: if, for example, you have a roof over your head and food to eat in your refrigerator, you are better off than three quarters of the world's population even when no specific disaster has occurred. If you also have some money saved or in a bank, you belong to the 8% of the world's population privileged in this respect. If this morning you have gotten out of bed in a reasonable state of health you are probably not going to be one of the million of people who will die because of disease before the week is out. If you wear glasses that help you to see the world clearer, you

are among only 10% out of those whose vision could be improved in that way. And if you have a computer, you are among the 1% of people who can reach the Internet and send e-mails from their own machine.

The fact that we are unaware of our blessings also relates to our health which we remember only when disease strikes. The curious disregard for assets such as good health is probably at the basis of the failure of many preventive programs that depend on the initiative of the individual rather than on the coercion by the government or by one of its agents, such as the schools. And yet, although these facts are well known, governments in many countries increasingly leave the initiative for health care and the prevention of diseases to the individuals. What makes things worse is that health education and other action that could raise the value of good health in people's minds and make them more interested in ways of preventing disease are receiving less and less money and attention. Nongovernmental organizations both national and international - have by direct action, ideas, initiatives, and material support partially compensated this withdrawal of governments from its responsibility to provide health care, prevent disease, and promote health. However, there are many areas of health care in which the reduction of governments' involvement was not covered nor compensated by anyone and had consequently lead to a significant deterioration of the populations' health care, quality of life, and life expectancy.

The withdrawal of governments from their responsibilities is particularly pernicious for those in the population who are at highest risk of falling ill – the poor, the uneducated, those with mental impairments, and those carrying heavy burdens of work, of care for the family or of some

other nature. They are least likely to benefit from private medical care, to know how to take preventive measures, least likely to know how to get legal aid that will make it possible for them to realize their rights to health care, least likely to be able to compensate their impairment by learning new skills, reorienting their lives.

Disasters can only rarely be foreseen: the preparation for them could, however, be planned and executed - knowing that sooner or later they will occur, because of natural causes or because of human ill-doing. But, unfortunately and in parallel to their gradual withdrawal from responsibilities for the health and welfare of their populations - governments are also not particularly keen to invest money into preparing the answers to disasters. There is only one major exception to this trend, however: governments are making plans and preparations for one kind of disaster - war which others might inflict upon them or which they will inflict on others. Armies can help in alleviating the consequences of a natural or human-made disaster: but what they can do to repair damage is hugely disproportionate to the investment that has been made in building them up and making them able to cause it.

The Japanese government will make a magnificent gift to the populations living around the Indian ocean: they will install an early warning system that will make it more easily possible to escape the devastating onslaught of tsunamis. While being grateful for this generous gesture, one cannot but think about the fact that such a system could have been installed at the same time when the early warning system for the Pacific has been put into operation and shown to work well. One could argue that the system would be useless without a prior preparation of the population about ways to use it: but there are no indications that there was any effort to make the population aware of the potential benefits of such a system and enable it to learn how to use the system if it were to become available.

We are still sufficiently early in the new year to add a wish to the many New Year's wishes expressed over the past few months by all to all – the wish that we become more aware of our blessings and do more to prevent them from vanishing because we did not invest into their protection. This is of importance for ourselves, in our lives: it is also an important and unalienable task for governments and all those responsible for the health and welfare of populations all over the world.