

Guardian obituary

Robin Needham

The manner of Robin Needham's death, aged 51, was of a piece with his life. He spent more than 30 years addressing, with complete dedication, the human consequences of many of the world's worst natural and man made disasters. It was typical that he should die while providing practical help amidst a global catastrophe: he was last seen shepherding people to safety on a remote island in southern Thailand before himself being swept away by the tsunamis of Boxing Day 2004.

Robin's life was one of remarkable scope lived with both intensity of purpose and infectious *joie de vivre*. Serious though never solemn he displayed equal commitment to his work, to many personal interests and above all to his beloved family.

Brought up in Yorkshire, he attended Eton, studied Chinese at Leeds University (1972-77), including a year on a British Council scholarship in Beijing, and later gained an MSc in social planning at Swansea University (1983-4).

His commitment to aid and development began during his gap year in the refugee camps of India and Bangladesh. There, and later in Thailand, he worked with the Irish charity Concern, then briefly for UNICEF, where he met the American Lucy Bucknell whom he married, before joining CARE, the leading American agency.

Over the next 24 years he held a succession of increasingly responsible postings: Thailand (1980-81); Somalia (1982-83); Kenya (1984-85); Britain (1985-88) where he set up CARE's UK fundraising operation; Bangladesh (1988-91); Ethiopia (1991-97) and Nepal as Country Director since 1998.

His professional success was based on natural leadership qualities, borne of sublime self-assurance; formidable organisational ability which he applied equally to the logistics required to feed thousands of refugees and to the domestic arrangements of the Needham household; and an ability to be at ease with anyone he met – from untouchables to senior diplomats and royalty.

Lucy and Robin already had two young sons, Nathaniel and Robert, when they adopted twin Bangladeshi orphans Sunali and Rupali, with whom he had a special bond. An affinity with children generally was enhanced by his skills as a magician, which also enlivened CARE conferences and workshops. At the end of strategy meetings he was known to bring forward the regional director, seat him on a chair,

hand him an umbrella, and pour water into a folded sheet of paper held over the director's head before announcing "So we see the strategic plan holds water."

[Social gatherings of all kinds were also enlivened by his lifelong enthusiasm for malt whisky and his colleagues' travel arrangements were complicated by a childlike enthusiasm for electronic gadgets, in whose collection and delivery they were called upon to act as couriers.]

His six years in Nepal, coinciding with the rise of Maoist insurgents and the murder of the royal family, nevertheless suited both Robin and Lucy: she being able to pursue her Buddhist practice; he using all his diplomatic skills and experience in a complex and delicate political situation.

[One incident demonstrates his pragmatic *modus operandi*. Friends were surprised and alarmed by his sudden interest in the Old Etonians until the practical possibilities became clear. Learning of a reunion at which the King, an OE, would be present Robin secured a last minute invitation. Afterwards he reported that having found a seat next to the Queen and opposite the King he was able to do more business in an hour or two than in months through official channels. Sadly the effort was in vain as the King was murdered the following week.]

The visionary and the practical aspects of Robin's work came together in Nepal where his work increasingly focused on children and on conflict resolution. He had been closely involved in the preparation of a Watchlist report on the impact on children of the conflict in Nepal. The report, to be launched on 26 January, has been dedicated in Robin's name.

Robin was in his prime and had become a well known figure in the corridors of power in Washington, New York and London, whether promoting a scheme to enable the rich nations to pool resources in response to major disasters or urging support for a non-military solution to the conflict in Nepal.

His love for Nepal was reciprocated: following news of his death 108,000 butter lamps were lit in his honour in Kathmandu. Apart from its demonstration of high spiritual esteem Robin would have appreciated the practical achievement: despite all his skills he had struggled to organise the lighting of 50,000 lamps for a peace vigil on the eve of the invasion of Iraq.

Robin cleared his desk with typical efficiency before the family's departure for the annual Christmas visit to their retreat at Golden Buddha Beach. On her return to

Kathmandu Lucy found only a single sheet of paper. On it was scribbled a quotation, no doubt as a reminder to himself, but now his epitaph and an exhortation to the rest of us: “Go forth, and make the world less miserable.”

Christopher Senior