

Observations from Aceh: Tsunami and the NGO machine

I have been in Aceh for the last month, evaluating and supporting the Action Contre La Faim (ACF) agricultural recovery programme in Aceh. It has been hard work and fun. In short, I was flying between the three field bases of Lamno, Calang and Teunom, and the coordination office in Banda Aceh. They are rehabilitating rice fields, distributing seeds and tools and that sort of thing. ACF are also involved in income generation, water and sanitation, food security surveillance, and hygiene promotion.

The agro projects are all OK, although they started late, and with a poor logistics / management / coordination setup common to NGOs, they are struggling to get the seeds and tools out in time. They are, in fact, late – the rains have started, and communities have told me that if they don't receive seed and tools by the end of the month they may as well forget it!

For me it has been a memorable time, being shocked by the devastation caused by the tsunami, as I never really realised just how bad it was from the TV. The enormity of the 3 waves that came in has to be seen to be believed. The town of Calang, big enough to have 2 banks and a district governors office, was reduced to only 4 buildings still standing after the tsunami. The rest of the buildings are now the floor or foundations only. The walls have gone.

Rice fields were scooped out, or tons of sand, mud, trees and buildings were dumped on them, along with loads of salt.

In Banda Aceh, a generator boat (big enough for the whole city – this is a BIG boat) is now 2 km inland.

Apparently the tsunami sounded like a helicopter from the distance, so when the first emergency teams turned up in helicopters, there was panic.

People have been very slow to return to fishing, or to move back to the coastal areas, for obvious reasons. The WFP food rations have to include tinned fish even though there are abundant fishes in the sea, because all the boats are destroyed and people are unwilling to go near the sea. Fishing is much more concentrated off bridges and up creeks: still on terra firma.

On the first day I got there, I was taken to the tsunami zone, and that night I couldn't sleep, I felt too close to the sea. I can't imagine how the Acehnese people feel.

There is so much money flowing in, that NGOs don't know what they can do with it. There are even cases of NGOs distributing cash to people (in the hope that the cash will be invested well, not just squandered). One international organisation is setting up a bank in a town where there was no bank before, and handing out \$250 packets to everyone as starter accounts. Another had \$8 million to spend in 3 months on rice field rehabilitation, but the Jakarta government had stalled it, and released it only one week before the rains. Thus 11,000 ha of rice field that would have been rehabilitated miss their chance, and the organisation will simply divide the money between the owners of the 11,000 ha and hope they don't abuse it.

There are few examples of rehabilitation work considering the long term impacts of their work, and my prediction is that Aceh is on the road to 'development dependence', as I've seen in Africa, Cambodia, East Timor and Australia.

WFP plan to continue to distribute food aid for another 3 years, removing people's incentive to rebuild their lives. Ridiculous. Nobody even likes the food that WFP distributes, and are looking forward to having their own harvests.

People are mainly still living in tents, that are now falling apart after 9 months, because they are waiting for UNHCR to give them permanent houses. UNHCR is, predictably, late. They will not provide permanent houses to people with 'semi-permanent houses (?)', only to temporary houses (tents), so people are forced to stay in their tents.

A tree was pulled out by its root by the tsunami, carried 100m or so across a rice field, and left still upright. It is still alive too.

The whole area is completely unstable. There are earthquakes almost every day, the biggest one while I was there was a 5.4 or so.

The tsunami forced the Indonesians to allow in NGOs, who are now being the witness of the world, and which has caused the conflict to fizzle out. The peace process is going well, so there are good things to come out of natural disasters too. However, Acehnese people say that the tsunami was far worse than the conflict, even though the conflict has gone on for decades.

A peace treaty has been signed, between the government of Indonesia and the GAM (Free Aceh forces). This treaty guarantees, among other things, that Aceh gets to keep 70% of its oil revenues, and if that actually happens, Aceh could be on the road to recovery. How much will filter down to the Acehnese people, through all the corruption that is so endemic in Indonesia, remains to be seen.

Some Acehnese people believe that God was behind the tsunami, that Allah was punishing them for being bad Muslims...

I leave impressed and humbled by people's ability to survive, put up and look forwards. The politeness, hope and smiling faces have left a deep memory in me, a profound faith in people.