

Building Resilience Through Disaster Recovery

Aceh 10 Years On from the Tsunami



Achieving longer-term disaster recovery

The Asia-Pacific Region is the most disaster-prone region in the world. Between 2005 and 2014, it accounted for 40% of disaster events reported globally, 60% of all disaster-related deaths, and 45% of total economic damages caused by disasters (EM-DAT, 2015). An effective recovery process is essential to restoring livelihoods and building resilience after disasters. Yet a review of the literature suggests that the disaster recovery phase, and particularly the notion of long-term recovery – which can

stretch out for years after the disaster – is relatively under-researched and poorly understood (e.g. Smith and Wenger, 2006; Rubin, 2009).

Indonesia, one of the countries most frequently affected by disasters in the region, was struck particularly hard by the Indian Ocean Tsunami on 26 December 2004. The disaster, triggered by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake (Richter scale) off the southwest coast of the island of Sumatra, devastated the province of Aceh, killing

about 200,000 people and causing close to US\$5 billion worth of economic losses and damages (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006). As part of the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research (APN) research project “*An analysis of longer-term (5–10 years) recovery following major disasters in the Asia Pacific Region: Lessons for resilient development*”, we conducted a case study of the long-term recovery process in Aceh.

Building community and institutional resilience in Aceh

After the tsunami, billions of dollars in aid and hundreds of entities poured into Aceh to help with disaster response and with recovery over the next several years. A central focus of the post-tsunami initiatives was to rebuild livelihoods in fishing communities throughout Aceh, and to ensure that socio-economic conditions did not just return to their pre-tsunami state, but were improved. “Build back better” became the catch-all goal of the tsunami recovery in Aceh, as efforts were made to reduce the underlying causes of vulnerability and build community and institutional resilience to future disasters (Ingram et al., 2006).

Achieving that goal was complicated by political and economic context in Aceh, however. Thirty years of civil conflict, combined with inequitable trends of economic development prior to the tsunami, had made Aceh one of the poorest provinces in the country (Fan, 2013). As a result of these and other factors, recovery from the disaster took many years. The mandate of the ministerial level agency for the coordination of the tsunami recovery, the BRR (Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi, or Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency) for Aceh-Nias, ended in 2009, but subsequent investigations have suggested that communities in Aceh were still recovering, and continued after the BRR had shut down (e.g. Fan, 2013).



Engaging with customary institutions

Our case study focused on the role of a local customary institution, the Panglima Laot (sea commander), in the long-term recovery of selected fisheries communities in Aceh following the 2004 tsunami, with the aim of arriving at key lessons and recommendations for building resilience through recovery policies, frameworks, programmes and activities. We examined two key questions:

1. What were the expected and actual roles, influence, and outcomes of the Panglima Laot in the recovery of fisheries communities?
2. What factors contributed to the success or failure of the Panglima Laot and the post-tsunami recovery in Aceh?

We began with a literature review on the tsunami recovery, focusing on the involvement of the Panglima Laot in recovery programmes and the long-term outcomes of such programmes in building resilience, or “building back better”. The documents analysed included peer-reviewed journal publications, donor agency and NGO reports, policy frameworks and documents, and relevant statistical guidebooks. We then conducted key informant interviews in Aceh in August 2015, with individuals representing relevant stakeholder groups, including

community members, current and previous Panglima Laot leaders, NGO workers, local government officials, local academics, local business owners, and the current Aceh Disaster Management Agency. Interviewees were asked about the anticipated and actual roles of the Panglima Laot, how external agencies such as NGOs worked with the Panglima Laot for the recovery of fisheries communities, and what factors they perceived to be important in achieving successful recovery outcomes.

The aim of this case study was to examine one of the most well-documented and comprehensively investigated post-disaster recovery processes to develop recommendations for building long-term resilience through disaster recovery strategies and programmes. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami was a seminal moment for disaster risk reduction practitioners and researchers alike, and even 10 years on, new research is offering invaluable lessons (Shaw, 2015). In this regard, the post-tsunami, post-conflict landscape in Aceh presents a prime example of how disaster impacts can manifest themselves as opportunities to enact positive socio-economic development changes, transform the lives of affected people, reduce vulnerability, and build resilience (Birkmann et al., 2010). The recovery phase of a disaster is the prime window for such change.

Lessons for improving post-recovery policy and practice

The case study showed that recovery interventions by NGOs and their donors that engaged with the Panglima Laot as a partner to assess the actual needs of fishing communities and implement projects were perceived to be more successful than those that did not engage in this way. The Panglima Laot and its leaders were also an active partner of the BRR, and helped achieve some cohesion across the variety of activities being undertaken to support the recovery of fisheries communities and their livelihoods. The leadership and mediation skills that the Panglima Laot leaders require in their regular jobs proved to be invaluable for an efficient and effective recovery.

The case study also showed that the aim of “building back better”, conceived and promoted by the Indonesian government, the BRR, and international recovery actors, was not

embraced by local fishing communities. Instead, the priority for those communities, with the support of Panglima Laot, was to return to normal pre-tsunami conditions as soon as possible, rather than trying to build long-term resilience through the rehabilitation and recovery effort.

The case study is part of a larger project that will continue in 2016. The purpose of the project as a whole is to produce the key findings and recommendations, including a synthesis of this and other case studies, that will lead to changes in governments’ post-disaster policy and practice and in NGOs’ strategy and programme design. Longer-term disaster recovery processes are under-studied, and this research will contribute to understanding how those processes can build resilience in at-risk societies and communities.

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