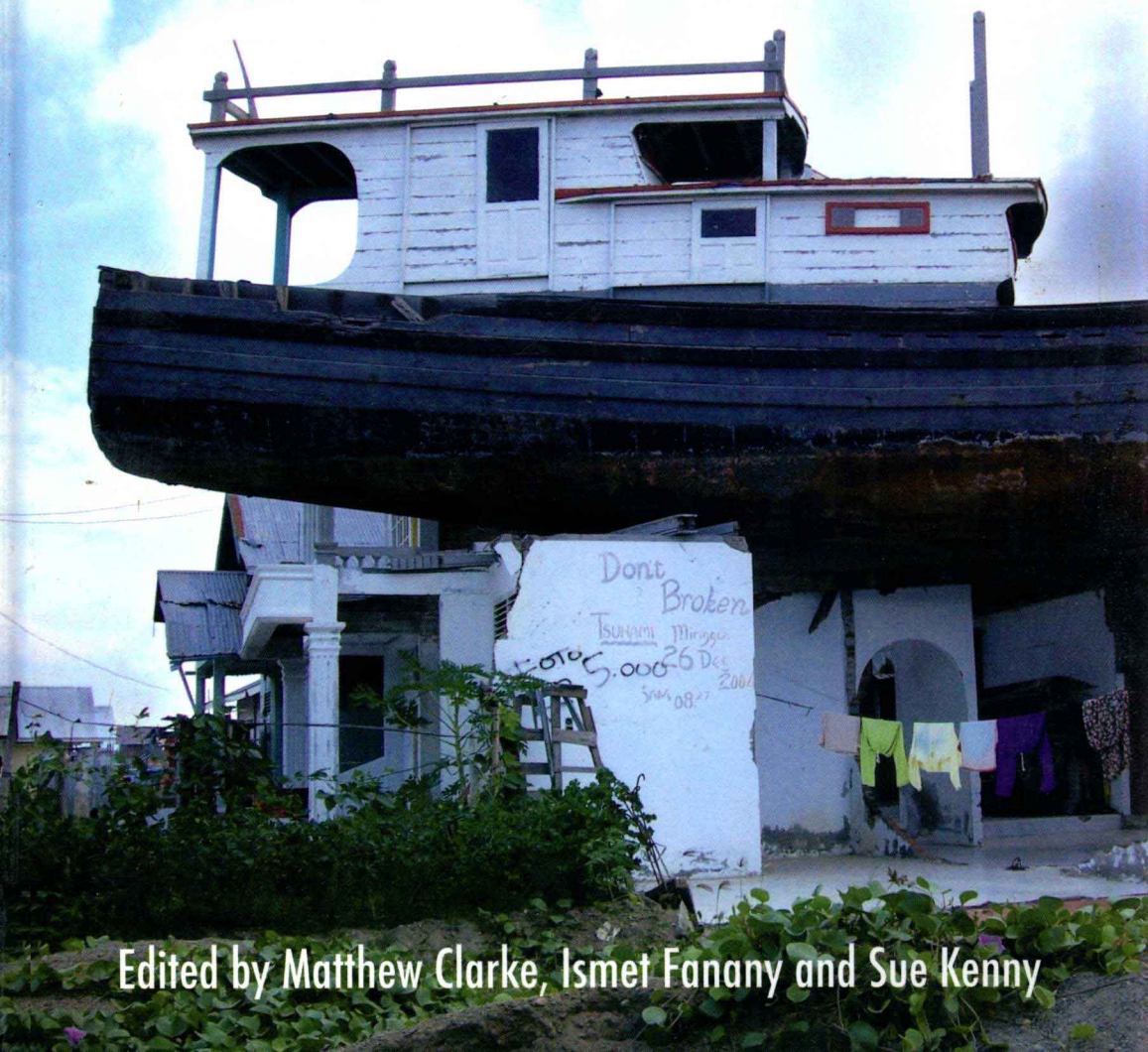


POST-DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION

Lessons from Aceh



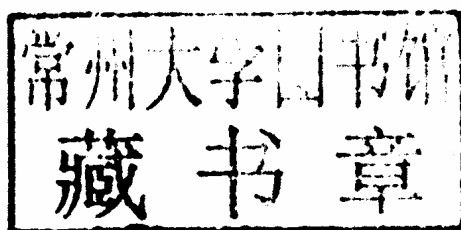
Edited by Matthew Clarke, Ismet Fanany and Sue Kenny

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Preface

Silence can be Deafening and Emptiness can be Blinding¹

When the Indian Ocean tsunami hit, on 26 December 2004, I was in Melbourne, Australia. The news that first day was that various places in the region had suffered some destruction and loss of life. However, as further reports came in, the numbers of casualties grew by the hour as the true extent and severity of the disaster became clear.

Aceh was barely mentioned during those first hours. I later learned that this was because communication out of Aceh was near impossible, and there were almost no reporters there at the time, owing to the armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) and the Indonesian government. This conflict had severely restricted access by outsiders for a number of years. Very soon, however, Aceh dominated the news concerning the tsunami, as it became apparent that it was the hardest hit.

I returned to Jakarta on 1 January 2005 and it was only then that I began to have an inkling of the magnitude of what had happened in Aceh. As was the case for most people at the time, I had no idea how bad the situation really was, even though I had learned that thousands of people had been killed in Aceh and that many more were missing or otherwise unaccounted for. I was unable to reach any of the many friends I have in the region, but this fact, in itself, did not bother me unduly, since telephone connections often fail following natural disasters. However, I did wonder about them, and if any of them or their families had died.

Yenny Wahid, the Director of the Wahid Institute, where I serve as Executive Director, had just returned from Aceh. She had gone there the day after the tsunami, and she spoke of destruction, human tragedy and death, on a scale which was like nothing I had ever heard before. There was little time in which to visualize the situation or think about her story, however, as she instructed a small team, of which I was part, to prepare and assemble as many relief supplies as possible. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, joined the team. We were to leave for Aceh within days. I had never imagined that I was about to participate in the world's largest relief effort ever undertaken in peacetime,

involving so many people from so many countries, and so many millions of dollars. Governments all over the world pledged large amounts of money, and NGOs arrived unannounced in Aceh en masse to offer help and their experience. Thousands of individuals volunteered their time and energy and donated money. Military forces from several countries were sent to Aceh by their governments to lend their equipment and personnel. It was a remarkable response that reflected the severity of the disaster.

This is my story of the disaster. Since this is a book about the reconstruction of Aceh, it is appropriate that we should begin with the damage, destruction and loss. It was these effects that reconstruction efforts have tried to address. It was the purpose of the massive relief effort that the damage should be repaired, the destruction rebuilt, and the loss replaced. The reality, however, proved less straightforward.

As my aircraft approached Iskandar Muda airport in Banda Aceh, I could see from the window that I was coming to a strange place, quite unlike its former self, that I had visited many times before. This once familiar place now seemed very unfamiliar. The airport was surrounded by hundreds of tents that had changed the landscape completely. I saw large cargo planes and military helicopters from other nations. The arrival hall was full of people from different parts of the world. The faces of the people I saw and met were strange to me, and all wore an unsettled expression of dread mixed with curiosity. I did not yet understand the full effect of the tsunami, and had no idea what I was about to see.

On the way from the airport to the city, I encountered two things that left a lasting impression on me and that, from then on, provided a frame of reference in understanding the effects of the tsunami. The first was the smell of death. Before I had seen the first corpse (of many that I came across during that short five-day visit), I was struck by the stench of rotting human flesh that was present everywhere. It was strangely powerful. The smell that day in Banda Aceh made me wonder how many bodies there were, as the smell was so strong, yet at first not a single body was visible. Smells can leave a lasting impact that is never forgotten.

The second thing I encountered was the first visual evidence of life lost, a mass grave. Gus Dur asked the driver to stop and everybody got out. We went to the grave and said a prayer, led by Gus Dur. What I saw then gave me my first indication of the extent of the disaster in terms of loss of life. It showed in no uncertain terms that this was no ordinary disaster. Clearly we were in the midst of an unusual situation that demanded an unusual response. The mass grave, with no indication of who the dead were, symbolized a finality that I found both strange and saddening. I had been told from the time I was very little the importance of remembering and paying respect to family members who had died, by visiting their graves, for example. But

as I was saying my prayer next to the mass grave that day, I knew that no family members of those who were buried there would ever come to visit.

For the rest of the journey to Banda Aceh, silence reigned in the car. It was as if everybody was having a private conversation with themselves. I was thinking about the smell, and the mass grave: the visible and invisible signs of the tsunami's devastation. During my short stay in Aceh, I was to see much more visible damage, destruction and loss, and would also perceive much that was invisible.

I, like the other team members, spent all my waking time in Aceh travelling in and around Banda Aceh, including the most affected areas on and near the beaches. One of the most striking sights in all these places was the mess and scattered wreckage. I had never seen so much! The whole area was covered by it. It restricted people's movements and hindered emergency work. By the time I was there, the debris that had blocked most of the main roads had been cleared aside and was piled high. In some areas, the walls of debris were up to five metres high. Another striking aspect was what the wreckage consisted of. All sorts of things littered the place: leaves and branches; plastic items; parts of buildings, cars and trucks; cloth and clothing; all in large quantities, thrown about in an unsightly manner as if hurled by an angry, insane giant.

The effect of the huge amount and variety of debris was further emphasized by the fact that many objects had ended up in the most unlikely places: twisted cars in rice fields; a whole boat on part of the ground floor of a house whose top floor had been torn off; fronds from a coconut palm in a roofless living room; and so on. The whole place was chaotic. Things were in places they were not supposed to be, and things that one expected to be in a particular place were somewhere else.

I never thought that the impact of seeing objects where they were not supposed to be, or of not seeing things where they were expected, could be so great. This was particularly the case when I went to an area near the beach, where rows of houses once stood. The houses had all gone. There was no sign that even a single house had ever stood there, let alone rows of them. Even the land where those houses had been was gone – it was now ocean! There was nothing there, except the water moving slowly and rhythmically, as gentle and benign as the waves at any swimming beach. I stared at the water where there had once been houses. I had visited one of them several times. People talk about silence that is deafening; that day I learned that emptiness can be blinding.

But perhaps what moved me most in terms of what I could see around me was the dead bodies. There were so many of them, all over the place, mixed with all the debris. And this was already the second week of hard work by so many people who had come to help. The dead bodies were lying

in all sorts of positions and conditions. They were swelling. Most were without any clothes. I could not bear to watch, as they were collected and buried in mass graves using tractors and other types of heavy machines. The people doing this attempted to do so in a dignified manner, but I found it hard to accept that the dead had to be collected and buried in this way.

And then there was the smell of rotting human flesh again. It was present all the time, everywhere I went. But if the smell was not bad enough, what I witnessed next was even more harrowing. It concerned the surviving victims of the tsunami. By then, most of them were already in temporary emergency accommodation, such as tents. After running around frantically for a couple of days, studying the physical destruction and handing out supplies to victims, I began to look at the faces of the survivors. These included children who had lost their parents, parents who had lost their children, husbands or wives who had lost their spouse, boys and girls who had lost their siblings, men and women who had lost their friends or neighbours or someone else. In short, practically every survivor had lost someone. And all of them had lost the physical elements of their life.

Several things that were notable by their absence struck me as soon as I tried to talk to the survivors. In children, I noticed the absence of a desire to play. Many of them simply sat, looking sad and confused. I remember talking to other volunteer workers about the children's lack of interest in games. We tried to get them some toys, such as soccer balls, but this made little impression. It was as if what they had experienced had been so massive that it had erased any other impulses they might have felt at normal times.

In adults, I noticed silence. They would sit or lie down, their faces empty of expression. They looked, without seeing anything. Their blank stares reflected an emptiness of soul. Just as the first smell of rotting human flesh I encountered in the car from the airport on the day I arrived had told me something about the loss of life from the tsunami, so the children's lack of desire to play, and the adults' blank stares, indicated to me incredible suffering, part of which was caused by the damage, destruction and loss I had witnessed, and part by the manner in which it had occurred. Some of them may have had some inkling of the future uncertainty that would no doubt follow. All were reluctant to face the future, and were frightened of what might come next.

It was not what these survivors said, but rather what they did not say, that meant much. No one spoke about feelings. Some of what they did say, however, indicated the complete helplessness felt by many. This partly explained the silence and the blank stares. They said, for example, that the disaster had been the wrath of God because they had not been good enough Muslims. It occurred to me that, to people with such a strong view of God, there must be nothing more frightening than His wrath.

Another thought that came to mind in the face of their silence and blank stares was the faith-shattering effect of the tsunami. Muslims believe that Allah is supremely merciful and loving. In addition, they also believe that Allah is all-forgiving, and will absolve those who repent. The tsunami had occurred just days after the end of the fasting month of Ramadhan, at the end of which Muslims believe they are freed of their past sins. The whole month of fasting is supposed to erase all wrongdoing. Under this conception, the tsunami, as an expression of the wrath of God, had occurred during a period of purity from sin.

I did not know, and still don't, to what extent this explained the survivors' condition that I witnessed. I do know that this idea became one of the most common themes of sermons at the mosques, when they addressed the tsunami and its aftermath. I also know that some of my friends and acquaintances in Aceh have become more religious, outwardly at least. They now practise the five daily prayers more regularly, go to the mosque more often, and, in the case of women, are more observant of Islamic dress requirements, such as the wearing of headscarves.

What I also realized at the end of my five-day visit to Aceh was that the tsunami had inflicted two types of disaster on the Acehnese. One was physical destruction: the death of family members and friends, destruction of houses and other property, damage to infrastructure, loss of businesses, and so on. The second was destruction of the soul: shattered faith, lost hope, a crippling sense of helplessness, and a loss of certainty about how the world works. I left Aceh with the belief that the two were equal in their severity. I took away a concern that the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, with all the good intentions and sincerity that accompanied them, might fail to recognize the nature and extent of the second type of destruction. If this proved to be the case, it would mean that this psychological destruction would not receive much attention. The efforts to help the people of Aceh, therefore, would overlook an important aspect of community life, and this would affect significantly the outcome of the hard work of so many.

It is probably true that reconstructing physical destruction is an easier problem to deal with than reconstructing damaged psyches. Physical destruction can be quantified more easily. It is possible to calculate how many square kilometres of area require cleaning up, how many kilometres of road and how many bridges have been destroyed, how many houses, schools, and mosques have been washed away, and how many stores, fishing boats and other businesses damaged. These all received urgent attention, the availability of money, manpower, and expertise being virtually all that was required to restore the environment.

A natural disaster is only a disaster because it affects the life of human beings. A landslide, for example, is not a disaster when it occurs in an

unpopulated area, no matter how large the slide is. But if it buries houses and causes material damage and loss of life, it becomes a disaster. This, of course, is the reason why the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is considered one of the worst natural disasters in history. The number of people who lost their lives was among the highest on record. This tsunami also has the distinction of being the single natural disaster that affected more countries than any other.

If the affect on human beings is the determinant of whether a phenomenon is a disaster or not, it follows that the second type of destruction discussed above, the destruction of the psyche, should also receive equal attention. While the loss of life and damage to property contribute significantly to psychological devastation, other factors play a role as well. The belief system of the victims, for example, might contribute. Their world view may not take into account the possibility of a happening of the magnitude experienced in Aceh and they may be poorly equipped to imagine, much less deal with, the result. If physical safety is associated with moral conduct, as it was for some of the victims of the tsunami in Aceh, the absence of that security might completely undermine the most basic of their beliefs.

Understandably and predictably, the reconstruction work in Aceh has largely addressed the first type of destruction rather than the second. Reports of the reconstruction are full of statistics about what had to be built, repaired or replaced, and to what extent this was completed during the period of time in question. Success has generally been measured in terms of the rebuilding of physical structures. It is understandable that many donors and organizations prefer to participate in this kind of reconstruction. They are required to report to those who provide their funding, and their terms of operation are usually limited. They expect to achieve concrete results in a limited period of time.

The second type of reconstruction does not lend itself to tight scheduling and clear reporting. For this reason, while it is obvious that the victims of the tsunami in Aceh require more than reconstruction of the physical environment, only the replacement of tangible items is measurable. It was understood, for example, that facilitating religious networking would provide emotional and spiritual support, and efforts in this area were measured, among other things, by the rebuilding of mosques. The mosque, however, is only a small part of religious infrastructure. The loss of the individuals who managed and ran activities at mosques is more important. These people possessed the religious knowledge and insight to offer spiritual guidance and emotional structure to survivors who would have to build new lives. They would have been able to provide this help without a mosque or any other items, if required. A mosque without them, however,

is of limited use. Religious knowledge and the ability to provide meaningful counsel cannot be quantified.

The reconstruction and rehabilitation work in post-tsunami Aceh has taught the world many things. They have been a reminder of how devastating natural disasters can be. They have pointed up the aspects of natural disaster that are easily dealt with. But they also suggest that we know little about psychological reconstruction, especially how to accomplish this in ways that will conform to and be accepted within the particular world view of the victims. In this, every community is unique, and we must be aware that what has been lost represents generations of accumulated sociocultural wisdom. Money and goodwill, no matter how well intentioned, cannot quickly restore a culture; perhaps only time can do that. Moreover, we have also learned that reconstruction means different things to different people.

Ahmad Suaedy

Notes

- 1 The editors would like to thank Dr Rebecca Fanany for her assistance in the translation of this chapter, which was submitted in Indonesian.

List of Acronyms

ACARP	Aceh Community Assistance Research Project
AGAM	Angkatan GAM (GAM Forces)
AMM	Aceh Monitoring Mission
ASNLF	Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front
ATRT	Asian Tsunami Response Team
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
Bappenas	<i>Badan Perencanaan dan Pembangunan Nasional</i> (National Development Planning Agency)
BPK	<i>Badan Pemeriksaan Keuangan</i> (Financial Auditing Agency)
BPP	<i>Biro Pemberdayaan Perempuan</i> (Bureau for Women's Empowerment)
BRA	<i>Badan Reintegrasi-Damai Aceh</i> (Aceh Reintegration-Peace Agency)
BRR	<i>Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi</i> (Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency)
CE	Common Era (AD)
CGI	Consultative Group on Indonesia
CIGS	Community Infrastructure Grants Scheme
CoHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
DII	Darul Islam Indonesia rebellion
DIPA	<i>Daftar Isian Proyek Anggaran</i> (List of Budgeted Projects)
DOM	<i>Daerah Operasi Militer</i> (Military Operations Area)
DPR	Indonesian legislature
FPI	<i>Front Pembela Islam</i> (Islamic Defenders Front)
GAM	<i>Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i> (Free Aceh Movement)
IFEES	Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences
IICORR	International Islamic Christian Organization for Reconciliation and Reconstruction
IIRO	International Islamic Relief Organization

IMF	International Monetary Fund
KDP	World Bank-Government of Indonesia <i>Kecamatan</i> Development Programme
KHI	<i>Kompilasi Hukum Islam</i> (Compendium of Islamic Law)
KPA	<i>Komite Peralihan Aceh</i> (Aceh Transition Authority)
KPK	<i>Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi</i> (Commission for the Elimination of Corruption)
KSK	<i>kepala satuan kerja</i> (heads of work units)
LAPIS	Learning Assistance Programme for Islamic Schools (AusAid programme)
LKMD	<i>Lembaga Ketahanan Masyarakat Desa</i> (Village Community Resilience Council)
LMD	<i>Lembaga Musyawarah Desa</i> (Village Assembly)
LNG	liquid natural gas
LoGA	Law on Governing Aceh (Law no 11/2006)
LRC	Lampuuk Recovery Centre
MER-C	Medical Emergency Relief Charity, Saudi-funded charitable organization in Aceh
MMI	<i>Majelis Mujahadin Indonesia</i> (Indonesian Mujahidin Council)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPR	People's Consultative Assembly
MPU	<i>Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama</i> (Consultative Council of Ulama)
MUI	<i>Majelis Ulama Indonesia</i> (Indonesia Ulama Council)
Musrembang	<i>Musyawarah Rencana Pembangunan</i> (Consultative Meeting on Development Planning)
NAD	<i>Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam</i> (Peaceful State of Aceh)
NBA	<i>Negara Bahagian Aceh</i> (Federated State of Aceh)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PBP	Bakornas (National Coordinating Board for Disaster Management)
PPP	United Development Party
PRRI	Permesta rebellion
SAK	<i>Satuan Anti Korupsi</i> (Anti-Corruption Unit)
Satkorlak	<i>Satuan Koordinasi Pelaksana</i> (Operational Coordinating Units)
SBY	(President) Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono
SIRA	<i>Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh</i> (university student-led referendum movement, Aceh Referendum Information Centre)
TDF	The Development Forum

TNA	<i>Tentera Nasional Aceh</i> (Aceh National Army – more commonly known as AGAM)
TNI	<i>Tentara Nasional Indonesia</i> (Indonesian military)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WH	<i>Wilayatul Hisbah</i> (Vice Squad/moral police)
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

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