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Why has transition from relief to rehabilitation been so slow?

Monday, December 26, 2005

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Bogor

Once the word was out about the hundreds of thousands of Acehese lives destroyed in last year's Boxing Day tsunami, the international response was quick in speed, and great in magnitude. Yet despite the obstacle of poor security being removed by the creation of a peace treaty, the transition from relief to rehabilitation of livelihoods has been slower than expected.

Five main reasons for this slow development became apparent during a recent workshop in Meulaboh, where representatives of local government, national and international agencies and NGOs discussed opportunities to better meet the long term needs of the affected communities. There was a call for more critical consideration of local needs, better collaboration between agencies and attention to a "missing middle" layer of coordination in rehabilitation efforts.

First of all, some early expectations of a rapid return to sustainable livelihoods were unrealistic. Livelihood strategies emerge in response to opportunities, not from preconceived master plans or blueprints. The tsunami affected all five types of capital: Natural, human, social, infrastructure and financial, and a new balance between these will emerge. However, we need to anticipate the broad range of people's needs in the recovery of infrastructure and help communities prepare for the future.

Secondly, the public debate on environmental issues has moved in circles, rather than developing negotiated solutions. Preventing another tsunami has probably been too high on the public list and realistic visions of the "coastal protection forest zone" have been slow to emerge. Several kilometres of coastal vegetation would be desirable, but anything beyond 50 metres of trees is probably unrealistic. Furthermore, there is still a great deal of talk about planting mangroves on Aceh's west coast, where there was very little mangrove forest naturally present.

Meanwhile, the debate on legality of timber has remained very purist. The consequence is that after an entire year, many people still live in tents. The questionable source of locally available timber slowed the building of houses,



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so NGOs switched to slower and more costly building with bricks and cement, to avoid being "caught". We need to ask if international concerns about the legality of timber supplies were of such paramount importance, given the enormity of the crisis?

Thirdly, while most relief agencies have adopted the "livelihood" approach in name, many of them have omitted some important aspects of market chains from their considerations. Also, most efforts have been at a "micro" scale only. Back in January, fishing communities indicated that reconstruction of ice factories was their highest priority, as the more valuable fish obtained further from the coast must be chilled. Eleven months later, these fishermen have some new or repaired boats, but still no ice. They say the only available ice must be transported a great distance by road, which costs three times the old price. This makes the rebuilding of their livelihoods very difficult indeed.

Investment in an ice factory is a perfectly valid economic venture. However, this requires credit and collateral. It also requires the identification of a suitable location, close to a local harbour. All NGO-led foreign support is aimed at more micro issues while the large donors want to rebuild roads or harbours. The ice factory is in the "missing middle" zone.

Understandably, the initial focus was on the survivors among the people who lived close to the coast. Yet a large group of rural households have become secondary victims as the roads and market channels have disappeared. The price received by farmers for rubber fell to less than half of what it had been, even though most of the local rubber trees survived the tsunami. Farmers need assistance to "bridge" the time period until local processing and improved accessibility return prices to the levels received by farmers elsewhere in Sumatra.

Fourthly, the lack of baseline data and the support to collect and collate these is leading to a slow process of trial and error in natural resource use. For example, the coastal area around Meulaboh contains a number of peat areas where the "jungle rubber" provided effective coastal protection. But clearing trees to build houses on the unstable peat is risky, as some NGOs are finding out the hard way. The point is not to criticize the efforts of the organizations that have tried to provide much needed housing. However, more collaboration between agencies to share baseline data such as soil maps could have saved time, effort and money.

Finally, the biggest challenge facing all organizations working in the region is coordination. From a chaotic start, the organization of the direct relief activities emerged relatively smoothly. But for the transition to sustainable livelihood programs, more is needed than just continuing at the locations where the various organizations happened to start. Parts of the affected area are over-supplied with agencies. Others parts are still ignored. Representatives of locally-based NGOs who witnessed the arrival of the international agencies tell stories of up to five of them trying to work in the same area with overlapping agendas and without any coordination.

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In spite of the multiple programs attempting to provide boats, a lack of adequate communication has meant that this has also not been as useful an exercise as it might have been. For young fishermen from Samatiga, near Meulaboh, the cost of replacing boats is still prohibitive, both due to the price of the wood, transported over a long distance, and the labour for construction.

There are many more stories about the difficulties the boat building programs have encountered, such as donated boats being sold instead of used, boats being delivered to farmers instead of fishers, boats of the wrong type and in inadequate number. Although there are clearly many difficulties in transaction, the basic problem appears to be one of needs assessment.

Lack of coordination in rebuilding is not only a problem between NGOs. While the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR) that is responsible for managing the government's activities in the area has made valiant efforts, local government has not been sufficiently involved. Current efforts are not building human capacity at this level. Again, the "micro" approach of the NGO's and their hope for "community initiatives" could become tokenism if there is no improvement in the missing middle layer of co-ordination.

Clearly, many of Aceh's problems cannot be solved through short-term measures. Yet at the Meulaboh workshop there was a great deal of goodwill expressed between organizations, and there appeared to be a real desire for greater unity in addressing the problems.

It is time for us to recognise how the available human, natural and financial resources can be best used to re-build not only houses, but to build livelihoods to a standard better than those before the tsunami disaster.

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