

Tsunami Recovery One Year Later: Development Practitioner Reflects

World Bank Country Director for Indonesia Andrew Steer reflected on the past year of reconstruction and recovery in Aceh, Indonesia, which was hardest hit by the tsunami:

"There's good news and bad news.

Reconstruction after disasters is almost always much slower than expectations, mainly because we fail to grasp how difficulties interact and multiply. We tend to plan our programs as if land titles, ports, roads and power supply still exist, and as if public officials suddenly learn to cooperate in a manner never seen before.

60,000 people are still living in tents. This failure isn't due to a slow program of permanent housing construction: the initial plan of 30,000 in the first year is close to being achieved. It is rather due to an error in judgment regarding temporary housing. Nobody wanted to divert resources away from the job of permanent housing, so almost no agencies invested in temporary housing that would last for the two years until the permanent housing was ready. Perhaps the silver lining to this mistake is that permanent housing is now likely to be completed earlier than planned. With 5000 houses per month being started, it is realistically hoped that everybody will be in permanent homes by mid-2007.



The Acehian shoreline before the tsunami.

The Government made two decisions early on which slowed down the start-up of visible reconstruction, but which we believe will have a high pay-off in quality and even speed as we enter 2006.

The first was to reject a top-down Jakarta-led reconstruction strategy in favor of one led firmly by the affected communities themselves.

The second decision was to establish a new Government Agency, the Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi (BRR), charged with leading the entire effort. Starting an agency from scratch is not cheap, easy or quick, and it was after mid-year before the agency was capable of adding real value.

A year on, what have we learned?

Bureaucracy: Doing things at normal speed would leave people in

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tents for years. Strong measures may be needed to cut through red tape.

Passion: Reconstruction in a devastated environment is for the strong-hearted. It is messy, frustrating and extremely difficult. Visit the Multi-donor office in Banda Aceh (or the BRR Office or NGO offices) at 10 pm on any evening, and you will be inspired. Never in my career have I seen greater commitment to get the job done, month after month.

Resilience: We are mere guests in Aceh. The main players are those whose home it is. We have staff members who lost spouses, children, and homes, yet insisted in getting back to work immediately. Of the 500,000 who were displaced in Aceh, 320,000 of them no longer count themselves as displaced. They received help to be sure, but it was with their own initiative that they have picked up their lives.



The Acehian shoreline after the tsunami.

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The Year Ahead

About \$1 billion was spent on relief in the first half of 2005, and nearly \$1 billion on reconstruction in the second half. The real work of reconstruction - perhaps \$2-3 billion worth -- will take place in 2006, and an equivalent amount in 2007."