

Up Close and Personal in Aceh

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Abstract: *The World Bank is the largest development bank in the world, lending over \$650 million to Indonesia alone. Andrew Steer is the Country Director for the Bank in Indonesia. Here he shares firsthand from his recent trip to Aceh Province, the closest geographically to the epicentre of the earthquake and the most devastated by the tsunami.*

We hear much on the news about the number of dead, missing and homeless but in some respects those numbers are so large they defy understanding and don't sink in. The latest death toll is at least 200,000 but that is only part of the story.

One of the criticisms we heard on the news in the first few days of the disaster was about the Indonesian government's lack of speed at responding but it is often not realised what a major challenge it faced on the ground. **Over 900 Provincial officials (nearly half of the total) were lost in the disaster.** It is not surprising then that the relief effort got off to a chaotic start. Likewise the chaotic scenes of boxes of aid at Banda Aceh airport seem to be due to lack of organisation, but the reality is that the airport is tiny, only two cargo planes can be on the ground at the same time. It's only when we get up close and personal that we see the issues that face each country affected by the tsunami.

Andrew visited Aceh province just after the disaster.

"The damage to Banda Aceh itself is shocking. Nearly half the city has been largely destroyed. Houses, roads, power lines, schools, factories, all destroyed or damaged. The major cement plant in Northern Sumatra has been destroyed, while overturned ships lie in its harbor. The west coast of Aceh is exquisitely beautiful, but today tragically empty. We flew 200 kilometers down the coast, past numerous villages that simply no longer exist. The most striking feature is that in most places there is no rubble. So great was the power of the water than all debris has been washed back to sea. Scores (hundreds) of tile floors can be seen in each village, but no walls remain standing.

In the one hour flight along the coast, we saw thousands of destroyed homes, but only three or four people. The tsunami inundated the entire coastal strip (1-2 kilometers deep) along a 300 kilometer stretch of coastline. Almost everything in this strip, except for a few palm trees, has been destroyed. This area is the closest (only 150 kilometers) to the epicenter of the earthquake of any significantly populated area, and seems to have suffered the greatest inundation. We landed at Meulaboh, a port town serving the rich palm oil areas of inland Aceh, and saw more devastation. We spoke to officials and families and saw a mixture of desperation and resilience."

One of the Bank's existing development programmes is bringing hope amidst despair.

"Back in Banda Aceh we met with 20 Facilitators from the Kecamatan Development Program (KDP) program. Throughout the state of emergency in Aceh over the past 18 months the KDP program (operating in 4000 villages in Aceh) has been the only foreign supported program that has continued to operate. Both the Indonesian military and the rebels have supported it.

Almost all these facilitators had lost family members or close friends. One man carried a list with 52 names of his family who were lost. Two-thirds had now been confirmed dead (including his wife and children). Despite this, these facilitators were working together to plan how to help communities. These are part of 270 such facilitators in Aceh (there are hundreds more at the village level). They are now urging the Bank and the Government to let them immediately start work in bringing help to communities. The Bank hopes to negotiate an expanded KDP program for Aceh later this week.”

Andrew was struck by the response of the international community too.

“There was a summit in Jakarta just days after the disaster. It demonstrated an unparalleled international response. Each country which had suffered from the tragedy made a film presentation (quite moving). Then there were statements of support from donor countries - Japan offered \$500 million in grants, Germany \$600 million and then Australia A\$1 billion (\$800 million)!”

Some key principles have been agreed between the Bank and the Government of Indonesia for the rebuilding:

- The process of rebuilding should be country-led. The Bank’s role is to support.
- Citizens and communities of Aceh should be central in driving the planning and implementation of reconstruction.
- The challenge now is less about rebuilding roads and bridges than rebuilding shattered communities and livelihoods.
- Now that the pledges have been made the challenge immediately switches to the much harder one of implementation.
- Transparency in the use of funds is essential. Done wrong, the next year will be a nightmare – socially, politically and even militarily. Done right, Indonesia could use this tragedy to begin to do things in a new way, and build trust in government, and peace in Aceh.

(This is an abridged version of Andrew Steers report. It was abridged by Rob Hay, Editor of Encounters).

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