
CULTURAL HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY RECOVERY IN POST-TSUNAMI ACEH

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Our experiences in Aceh lead us to believe that a surprising amount of the reconstruction and development agenda has failed to address the cultural and historical dimensions of social recovery. In spite of all the meetings, coordinating sessions and public statements about interagency cooperation, it is impossible to find a commonly-accepted definition of what ‘recovery’ entails or should look like. It is difficult to imagine such resources could be allocated and spent¹ without a clearly-defined end-game, but unfortunately this is an endemic problem in many post-disaster situations² (Bennett et al. 2006; Telford and Cosgrave 2006). The evidence from Aceh suggests that this is specially a concern when there are large numbers of external organizations involved in aid and reconstruction processes.

Naomi Klein’s influential book *The Shock Doctrine* draws attention to the cynical and opportunistic behaviour often accompanying post-conflict and post-disaster reconstruction processes. She builds a powerful argument that government and corporate interests exploit the aftermath of large-scale social trauma for political and/or economic gain, and in some cases initiate or encourage trauma (Klein 2007). While there are certainly cases where relief and development aid is manipulated to achieve political, economic or social goals, we want to argue in this chapter that practices which target social transformation that fall outside pre-existing social and cultural contexts can impede the recovery of traumatized communities, even when it is

brought about through the interventions of well-meaning individuals and organizations. Our research focuses upon cultural and social mechanisms for community recovery, and how these are related with the material world. We argue that there are aspects of post-disaster recovery that are contingent upon reconnecting with familiar cultural and social practices, which in turn are intimately connected with the built environment. Aid and reconstruction efforts that further remove people from familiar physical and social contexts run the risk of pulling them away from the basic community infrastructure that is necessary for recovery. We demonstrate that in Aceh this essential reconnection has been circumvented by national and international organizations that have been largely ignorant or dismissive of local cultural and social practices. This is supported by evidence from field surveys conducted in Aceh, and reinforced by literature from a range of social sciences.

FROM 'BUILDING BACK BETTER' TO RECONNECTING WITH THE CULTURAL PAST

We will rebuild Aceh and Nias, and we will build it back better...

— Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, President of Indonesia (2005)

A stated philosophy and widely-branded slogan promoted by the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction for Aceh and Nias (*Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi di Aceh dan Nias* BRR), the Indonesian organization charged with overseeing and coordinating the aid efforts in areas damaged by the Tsunami, is 'Build Back Better'. This phrase is prevalent in government and NGO literature dealing with post-Tsunami reconstruction, and, with few exceptions, has not been challenged.³ At first glance it is difficult to disagree with building back *better*, as it is ostensibly well-intentioned. However, we feel that in the drive to build back better, some factors that are vital for achieving longer-term community recovery are overlooked. In this chapter we don't want to get bogged down evaluating whether or not agencies were able to 'build back better' in a literal case-by-case basis, but rather to critically challenge the usefulness of the concept in post-Tsunami Aceh.⁴ This allows us to more fruitfully discuss the complicated relationship between change and recovery in post-disaster environments, and the importance of cultural practices and historical narratives within this.

Admittedly by most criteria, following decades of conflict, isolation, and troubled economy, Aceh had significant problems at the time of the Tsunami (Reid 2006). Aceh long resisted different waves of European colonization, often involving extensive fighting and periods of occupation by the Portuguese

followed by the Dutch. This strife continued after Indonesian independence when factions in Aceh, most notably *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM), waged a low intensity separatist campaign against Jakarta. Aceh was under a state of marshall law at the time of the tsunami, and hostilities were not formally ended until the signing of the Helsinki Agreement in August 2005 which effectively ended Acehnese aspirations for full independence, and brought a period of peace and stability.

However, Aceh's problems do not exclude it from being endowed with a rich array of social and cultural practices, and a long and proud historical consciousness,⁵ all of which are key elements within processes of community recovery. We see *build back better* not just as a negative statement about Aceh and its cultural and social institutions prior to the Tsunami, but also as part of a globally-accepted justification for imposing an externally-driven top-down reconstruction agenda.⁶ The call for change explicit within this directive does not have its origins within Aceh, and has been widely translated on the ground to include both the physical reconstruction of buildings and communities, and also programmes that focus on social transformation to create 'better' living conditions and social opportunities in Aceh.⁷ This comes despite all the talk within the NGO community about their roles in the process, and the need to pursue 'participatory' and locally-sensitive reconstruction. It has become almost an assumption within the reconstruction industry that 'windows of opportunity' afforded by disasters should be seized to usher in a wide range of economic and social development, clearly seen in the popularization of LRRD — Linking Relief, Reconstruction and Development (Christoplos 2006).

Our experiences in Aceh and other traumatized situations, coupled with extensive study of the literature from a number of disciplines dealing with post-disaster recovery lead us to counter 'build back better' with 'reconnecting with the cultural past' as another lens for conceptualizing post-trauma relief and reconstruction projects. This is based upon our understanding of community recovery as re-establishing as best as possible the social trajectory and momentum that existed within a community prior to a disaster, to the point where communities can manage the longer-term affects of devastation and trauma within frameworks of stability and change defined internally. We believe that there is a greater possibility of sustainability if programmes do not exceed the expectations, capacities, and cultural sensibilities of those who have to manage and live with the consequences of such efforts, long after external support systems have left.

It is widely accepted in relevant social science and psychology literature that there are latent capacities within individuals and communities that allow them to deal with stress and trauma (Brickman et al. 1982; Omer and Alon

1994; Rich et al. 1995; Norris and Kaniasty 1996; Oliver-Smith 1996; Gilbert and Silvera 1996; Gist and Lubin 1999; Bonanno 2004; etc.). A review of this literature suggests that people and communities typically are endowed with powers of resilience that enables them to respond to and recover from trauma (Bonanno 2004; Bonanno and Keltner 1997; Cardena et al., 1994) and that outside assistance has to be very mindful of interrupting or co-opting indigenous response mechanisms (Gilbert and Silvera, 1996; Oliver-Smith 1996).⁸ Furthermore, it has been amply demonstrated that coping is a culturally-contingent process, and occurs differently within different social and cultural contexts (Rich et al., 1995; Oliver-Smith 1996; Gist and Lubin 1999). Different societies have culturally specific ways of managing trauma, and this needs to be recognized at the onset of post-disaster aid and reconstruction efforts. Extending from the literature, we argue that recovery processes are also historically- and materially-contingent, as they are part of broader cultural and social trajectories, and carried out in meaningfully constituted environments which are integral to their enactment. This is an important point that we expand upon below.

From a cultural heritage perspective, we are very sympathetic to the issue of continuity, and argue that one of the most important aspects of recovery in the immediate post-trauma period is re-establishing familiarity. This common-sense argument is supported by Omer's 'continuity principle' which 'stipulates that through all stages of disaster, management and treatment should aim at preserving and restoring functional, historical, and interpersonal continuities, at the individual, family, organizational and community levels' (Omer and Alon 1994, p. 274). We agree with this basic premise, and feel that re-engaging with pre-existing social and cultural contexts is fundamental to community recovery, an argument that is also supported by a number of other authors (Omer and Alon 1994; de Vries 1995; Gist and Lubin 1999, etc.).⁹ From this we see the ultimate benchmark of the success of recovery efforts as how well communities are able to continue as cohesive social and cultural entities in the aftermath of reconstruction. Given the scale of relief and reconstruction efforts in many post-disaster situations and the increasing internationalization of involvement, this question is assuming more and more significance.

VERNACULAR LANDSCAPES, SOCIAL PRACTICES AND RECOVERY

Existential space is a constant of production and reproduction through the movements and activities of members of a group. It is a mobile rather than

a passive space for experience. It is experienced and created through life-activity, a sacred, symbolic and mythic space replete with social meanings wrapped around buildings, objects and features of the local topography, providing reference points and planes of emotional orientation for human attachment and involvement. (Tilley 1994, p. 16).

...losing access to places of cultural and social significance, and the resulting loss of connections to people, undermines the community's ability to turn its 'wheels of healing' (de Vries 1995, p. 379).

So far we have made the argument that recovery needs to be conceptualized within social and cultural frameworks in order to more fully understand the complexities of post-trauma community coping processes. We propose that programmes that are sensitive to the cultural and social dimensions of recovery have a higher likelihood of sustainability and success. In this section we make a direct connection between these social and cultural processes and vernacular landscapes.¹⁰ This is especially important because the bulk of what is typically referred to as 'reconstruction' directly involves the built environment, and in the case of Aceh modifying it as part of 'building back better'. There are two major issues that need to be considered when restructuring peoples' environments after a disaster. First, landscapes are culturally understood, meaningfully constituted, and usually the result of long-term accumulative processes. They are places filled with cultural significance that ground communities. Second, the material world is integral to the enactment of most social practices. People need to have the appropriate cultural and physical settings to best carry out practices that are fundamental to social reproduction, and processes potentially relevant for reconstruction and recovery. Building back differently is not only potentially disorientating to communities looking to re-establish connections with familiar physical settings because things look, feel, and seem foreign, but also because many of the latent coping and recovery mechanisms that communities need to draw upon in such times are interrelated with the material world in which they existed. Even in the most heavily-damaged landscape, a conceptual 'familiar' gives a solid framework for community reconstruction processes, providing understood targets, tangible benchmarks of success, and reassurance.

The work of the cultural anthropologist Oliver-Smith has usefully emphasized this relationship between recovery and place.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of place in the construction of individual and community identities, in the encoding and contextualization of time and history, and in the politics of interpersonal, community, and intercultural relations. Such place attachments mean that the loss or removal

of a community from its ground by disaster may be profoundly traumatic.
(Oliver-Smith 1996, p. 308)

We argue that at least in some cases, 'building back better' undermines the functionality, vitality, and cultural importance of local built environments and implicit social mechanisms that are important for both long-term social recovery and comprehensive community participation within relief and reconstruction efforts. As we show, many of the basic 'assets' that were damaged in Aceh by the Tsunami and need to be 'reconstructed' are deeply involved in the enactment of social practices, play powerful roles in people's attachment to places, senses of identity, and are benchmarks for some semblance of 'normalcy'. It is common within externally-driven reconstruction and development programmes that core components within local cultural landscapes are viewed in distant and practical terms, and the deeper importance of such features, spaces and places to the constitution of communities is neglected. This needs to be redressed. We now turn to the results from some of our fieldwork to further explore such issues within the reconstruction of post-Tsunami Aceh. We use a few examples to show the connections between elements of the built environment and social practices important to community recovery.

SURVEY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND RECONSTRUCTION

We have been present in Aceh since the Tsunami, working in various capacities with NGOs, academics, as well as jointly coordinating surveys with the Aceh Heritage Community.¹¹ We have conducted six months of detailed village-level field survey since early 2005 in Tsunami-affected areas focusing upon issues of cultural heritage and reconstituting society. We collected data during three major surveys of over 150 sites in and around Banda Aceh designated to be culturally and/or historically important based on a pre-Tsunami inventory of 'heritage sites' held by the Aceh museum, adjusted by our team to include a wider spectrum of non-monumental and colonial sites. These surveys have been carried out at annual intervals since the Tsunami, allowing us to observe the relationship between reconstruction processes and cultural heritage sites. This serves the practical role of assisting local authorities and international organizations to manage heritage sites as part of post-disaster reconstruction efforts. The data also allow us to test our hypothesis that heritage sites are important for community recovery because they serve as tangible anchors that help communities reorient themselves.

In our fieldwork we talked extensively with inhabitants familiar with local geography to locate sites. Through many informal discussions, which often entailed explaining what we were looking for, and why, we built up a much clearer image of what local inhabitants thought were important components of the built environment that fell outside our more formalized understanding of heritage. People could easily identify sites that were most meaningful to them, and it was often clear that the context was heavily influenced by reconstruction. We found that there are a number of types of structures and places that people in Aceh identify as important within localized conceptions of culture and heritage that have some relevance for community reconstruction.

To gather more systematic qualitative data on the role that this 'vernacular' heritage plays within processes of community recovery, we conducted a detailed field survey in February 2007 in which over 250 respondents were interviewed (the average length of interview was one hour). We visited 12 villages in both affected areas, and outside the damage zone, the latter to establish control variables. The sites are based within an hour of Banda Aceh, which was one of the most heavily-damaged areas, and also the epicentre of the aid efforts. The survey was carried out by teams from the Aceh Heritage Community accompanied by two staff members from the Aceh Museum and the two authors. We held a methodology training session for all staff involved in the survey, and the fieldwork was conducted under the constant field supervision of both authors who co-directed the project. With the exception of Daly all the interviewers are Acehnese, mostly university undergraduates who have backgrounds in architecture, with an interest in cultural heritage. The interviews were conducted in either Bahasa Indonesia or Acehnese, depending on the preferred language of the respondents. All field notes were made in Indonesian, and all recorded interviews transcribed into Indonesian for analysis.

During the course of the interviews, we carried out detailed discussions with respondents about what they identified as important components of vernacular heritage within their communities, and how such places were important to processes of recovery and reconstruction. The main goal of the questions in the survey was to identify the material components that are culturally meaningful within the construction and maintenance of cultural identities and social practices, and which served practical roles in areas pertinent to reconstruction, such as establishing the contexts necessary for meaningful community dialogue.

The survey provided a wealth of information about the elements of vernacular cultural heritage that are recognized as important to village

inhabitants. While the results showed scope for localized variability, many of the *gampongs*¹² shared a similar orientation and possessed the same categories of elements that played clearly-defined roles. Our discussion of the results is framed by three scales of materiality: the village as an entity, structures that service broader community needs, and individual family dwellings. This is not meant to be a comprehensive accounting of all elements of vernacular heritage within Acehnese *gampongs*, but rather to draw on a few examples to illustrate the points raised above.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS

Our data fully support that *gampongs* are not just administrative categories or purely physical entities, but rather well-established and functioning social mechanisms firmly grounded in a blend of cultural and religious traditions. This has been mentioned in a few studies of reconstruction in Aceh (Mahdi this volume), and is commonly understood by the Acehnese and foreigners who have invested significant time in Aceh. The cohesiveness of *gampongs* was brought up in many of our interviews, which emphasized the communal nature of social practices and the deeply-embedded social order of the *gampong*. Many facets of society in Aceh are heavily structured at the *gampong* level, with prescribed hierarchies, leadership, manners of public debate and discussion, and formal decision making, all of which are essential for the realization of 'participatory' reconstruction and development practices. In almost all our discussions, respondents' replies acknowledged this collective. It came across that many of the tools needed for organizing and driving local reconstruction efforts were inherent within *gampongs*, with most of what was lacking being material and financial resources.

It also was made clear that the vital roles that *gampongs* play within Acehnese identity, structuring social networks, decision making, etc. are embodied within the vernacular landscapes of Acehnese villages. The responses show that there are components within *gampong* layouts that are important for the enactment of a wide range of social practices and engagements. People recognize and discuss a *gampong* as a tangible entity, or a collection of such. For example, any discussion about community debate and decision making typically involves the village head (*geuchik*), an assortment of village elders, and occurs within specific places, such as mosques (elaborated upon below) and coffee shops. The fact that it is difficult to find a natural separation between physical elements, people and processes speaks loudly about the interconnectedness of all three. Our data supports that the physicality of *gampongs* serves to reinforce their social efficacy.

Two of the most important examples of this are the mosque and *meunasah*,¹³ which are both standard parts of most Acehnese *gampongs*. Most respondents identified these features as the most important elements of ‘cultural heritage’ in each village, which occurred irrespective of the actual age of the structures. When posed with clarification questions, respondents steadfastly insisted that these were items of Acehnese *heritage*, even in the cases of mosques that were built within the last decade, and in some cases clearly by or with the support of foreign agents.¹⁴ Respondents pointed out that mosques and *meunasahs* play a fundamental role at a number of different levels, as venues for formalized religious and ritual observances, and as spaces for social interaction and discussion. Most people we spoke with about this were not able to conceptualize an Acehnese community in the absence of these features, which further emphasizes their importance.

Respondents discussed the roles of both types of structures within post-disaster recovery and reconstruction efforts. When talking about community-initiated responses, respondents pointedly discussed how such structures were missed, and should have been amongst the first places concentrated on during reconstruction, as it was from these that the rest of the community extends. Furthermore, the absence of such places made it difficult for communities to conduct discussions concerning reconstruction on familiar terms, and placed interaction with external agents outside culturally-suitable confines. This was mentioned by a number of respondents, especially when discussing life in temporary barracks where much of the community ‘consultation’ by NGOs occurred, and which were often lacking much of the physical and cultural infrastructure of Acehnese *gampongs*.

Interestingly, mosques have taken on an added symbolic importance as related to both the reasons for the disaster — which many Acehnese attribute to Allah’s dissatisfaction, and the source of hope for survival and recovery — the strength of faith and Islam.¹⁵ A number of mosques have become iconic due to their better rates of survival compared with other structures in Tsunami-hit areas, with some, such as the mosque at Lampuuk, attaining international fame.¹⁶ When interviewing residents around Lampuuk, it was very common for respondents to stress that the mosque survived whereas everything else was destroyed, attributing this to divine will rather than structural soundness, and that the mosque was a source of strength for people sifting through the wreckage of their lives and communities. Stories about almost dying, but seeing the mosque and persevering have become part of local folklore. Regardless of the veracity of specific accounts along these lines, it is clear that the survival of such structures has become a firmly-established part of local narratives of faith and perseverance, and they seem to be physical

anchors around which both physical and social recovery has coalesced. This is an important example of people relying upon culturally-meaningful parts of their environments to provide emotional and psychological buoyancy. This recourse is clearly not possible outside the confines of a familiar, even if heavily damaged, setting, and supports the idea of not removing inhabitants for too long from their land.

The reconstruction of housing has become emblematic of the post-Tsunami response efforts in Aceh. As housing is both vital for basic human needs and the most intimate material setting for individual and family engagements, it is right to place significant emphasis upon it. However, throughout Aceh, the majority of the housing (re)construction has been driven by NGOs and filtered through a complicated arrangement of construction companies and subcontractors. This has resulted in delays, confusion, and, most importantly, the construction of housing that is often inappropriate within local cultural and social contexts. Furthermore, as many of our respondents pointed out, all phases of the construction were largely carried out by non-locals.¹⁷

Respondents in many areas were quick to mention the physical problems of the houses, which ranged from leaky roofs, to the lack of kitchens! A number of respondents also mentioned how life was different now because the villages and houses were different.¹⁸ Several respondents talked in detail about the gendered division of spaces within homes, and the various implications of the spatial arrangements of housing within *gampongs*. It was brought up that whereas mosques and *meunasahs* are spaces for male interaction and discussion, domestic settings are critical for female social interaction and dialogue. Traditionally, the areas under the raised Acehnese houses and around the kitchen when the houses were not raised are key spaces for women to gather and talk about community issues. This, coupled with the spatial arrangements of houses within new village layouts, has left women in some villages feeling more isolated. This is something that we witnessed repeatedly during the survey, with women spread out, usually in close proximity to their homes, and by themselves or only in small groups. This contrasted with the natural congregation of males at the coffee shops.¹⁹

One of the villages that we visited, Kampung Jawa, is of especial interest to this discussion as one of the main providers of 'shelter' there, Muslim Aid, made a conscious effort to offer a style of housing that fit within Acehnese traditions. Inhabitants within the village were able to choose between a 'modern' concrete house, built on the ground level, or a raised house modeled on the *rumah Aceh*, the traditional style of Acehnese homes. There was no obvious consensus on style, which is interesting in its own right, but from

our interviews many of the respondents, regardless of which style they chose, were happy that Muslim Aid offered a traditional style of housing — whether they took it or not. People saw this as a respectful gesture, and a clear case in which a reconstruction project was sensitive to local wishes and cultural habits. However, within a year of construction, just about all the respondents complained that while the idea was a good one, the material was of poor quality, they were worried about the use of asbestos,²⁰ and people were ‘kept awake at night by the sound of the termites chewing wood’. Inhabitants grew increasingly frustrated by the fact that the NGO subcontracted the work out and the end result was unsatisfactory housing. It is a great shame that such an initiative failed due to technical issues, as it is one of the few cases that we encountered in Aceh of an NGO specifically replicating traditional housing models.

Overall, housing is an issue that has contributed significant obstacles to recovery, including forcing displaced people to react to very different and unfamiliar spatial parameters which are not sympathetic to pre-existing conditions, both in the temporary barracks, and within the newly constructed housing.²¹ A number of the respondents had just moved back to their villages after having spent almost two years in temporary facilities far removed from their land. People openly questioned why they were moved and kept off their lands for so long while waiting for other people to clear the debris and build housing for them. Furthermore, some of the respondents mentioned that during the period of displacement, the remains of communities were sometimes scattered, and the circumstances that they found themselves in often did not match familiar social conditions.²² This highlights some practical issues, but also suggests connections with *gampongs* and a desire in at least some to return to familiar settings as quickly as possible.

The problems of providing housing have spilled over into related issues of land rights and entitlement, which respondents mentioned in a number of ways. They talked in detail about the mix of different people within reconstructed villages, and the presence of ‘outsiders’ taking up residence within the ‘tsunami houses’.²³ In some cases these were relatives of victims who moved in to claim family land, but it was very common to hear about Javanese workers, or people from elsewhere in Aceh settling in reconstructed villages because of proximity to employment opportunities.

Finally, the basic logic behind large-scale house construction by NGOs is predicated upon concepts of land tenure, titling and ownership that are not consistent with pre-existing practices, in which land ownership was understood within the framework of *adat*, or local cultural tradition. While the RALAS²⁴ project has worked extensively with local communities to

reconcile this through a rigorous programme of community mapping and titling, the entire process of house allocation is fraught with complications, and has become wide open for abuse (Fitzpatrick, this volume). This stems from the failure of NGOs to see housing within a broader Acehnese context of community spatial arrangements and land ownership.

A final point of contention brought up by some of our respondents is the jealousy that has sprung up between — and in some cases even within — *gampongs* because of the differential allocation of resources for housing. Dozens of foreign organizations have been involved in house construction along hundreds of miles of coastal areas, with only limited oversight and coordination. The variety of different blueprints, materials used, and amenities included have created an unequal landscape in which random factors often led to certain areas receiving certain kinds of support. This was discussed by respondents in a number of villages who are acutely aware that some villages have got ‘better’ provisions, and could be a potential source of long-term tension.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While there is value in studying the impact of disaster and reconstruction upon ‘heritage sites’ for the benefit of international heritage management practices, it is tremendously important within the context of post-disaster reconstruction to better understand the constellation of meaningfully constituted places that forms the vernacular cultural heritage within communities. Such sites and places are part of the fabric of everyday social life, and elements of the landscape that people gravitate towards in times of trauma and disorientation. As described above, people in Aceh were very clear about the sites and places that they found significant for enabling and contextualizing their individual- and community-level responses, and allowing them access to their pre-Tsunami lives.

Second, many sites within the vernacular landscape actively serve important roles within the day-to-day enactment of important social functions, such as providing spaces for community deliberation, conflict resolution, and decision making, all of which are fundamental for recovery. Many of the processes through which meaningful discussions about the past, present and future of traumatized people are facilitated not by foreign intervention, but rather by access of the population to the basic culturally-appropriate venues and contexts in which different forms of discussion occur. This not only involves community leadership, social networks and hierarchies, but also the material settings within which communities know how to interact.

In the absence of all the above, meaningful and comprehensive community participation is not possible.

Interestingly, it was immediately clear that within Acehnese understandings of vernacular cultural heritage there is a tremendous conflation of the cultural, the historical and the religious. This is not a surprise given the level of religious observance within Aceh which has both become more formalized by the implementation of sharia, and reinforced by a religious revival as part of the overall response to the trauma (Miller 2010). However, it is important to consider this within the context of understanding how cultural and religious sites and places serve as venues for a wide range of social functions ranging from everyday interaction to special ceremonies. Our discussions with respondents show that such sites play a simultaneous role as integral to religious identities, and as spaces where discussions necessary for all phases of relief, reconstruction and development are carried out. This was often an issue for international organizations which either have specific rules against contributing towards religious structures, and/or are staffed by people with a limited real appreciation for the role of faith within communities.²⁵

Our experiences in Aceh show that there is great value in carefully considering pre-existing social and cultural conditions, and appreciating that these are part of the complexities of community-level coping and recovery processes. The prevailing 'build back better' attitude on behalf of the reconstruction and development industries, coupled with significant levels of disconnect between the givers and receivers of aid and ignorance of Acehnese cultural and social practices has undermined important mechanisms for internally-driven social rehabilitation, and effective and useful distribution of aid resources. Clearly, there is much room for outside agents to assist in processes of recovery, but as we argue vigorously, any such efforts that impede exercising latent coping mechanisms, or a community's creation of new methods for responding to extraordinary circumstances can be detrimental, and contradict the basic logic behind relief and reconstruction interventions. Steering away from culturally-familiar settings and practices not only provides further disruption and disorientation, but also poses serious obstacles that make it difficult for communities to find their own intuitive paths to recovery. We caution that explicit external agendas in which relief and aid is contingent upon or targets social transformation can contribute towards further disorientation, and loss of involvement in key phases of recovery.²⁶

...the indifference towards local wisdom will bury the home and dream of a new Aceh from the first ground broken for reconstruction (YAKKUM Emergency Unit website <http://www.yeu.or.id/about_us.php>).

Simply put, when operating in foreign environments it should be conventional practice to be familiar with and respect local wisdom. Unfortunately, this was not the standard operating procedure for the reconstruction work in Aceh in spite of the rhetoric. In the urgency for bureaucrats and aid agencies to obtain tangible statistics of success to parade before their constituents and donors, to placate the population within Aceh, and to achieve their mandate of 'building back better', there has been widespread and systematic neglect of local wisdom. Whether born from ignorance or arrogance, the vast majority of the NGOs and governmental organizations effectively pursued community-level reconstruction from a top-down perspective, and allowed much of the process to be determined by contractors and outside consultants. Furthermore, the processes of community consultation by NGOs and other development agencies during the main period of needs assessment and reconstruction planning were deeply flawed. Our research makes it clear that processes are contingent upon sets of both physical institutional infrastructure and social apparatuses that create *gampong* identity and support community discourse. The wide-scale absence of both effectively reduced — if not crippled — many of the efforts to 'involve' local community leadership and members in reconstruction planning. Realizing the ideal of 'participatory' reconstruction and development practices cannot be achieved without understanding the local cultural landscape and appreciating the social nuances embodied within it. It is of the outmost importance to understanding how reconstructing the built environment could have been better synchronized with easing social trauma, and allowing the inhabitants of these regions to have the maximum (albeit under heavily-distressed circumstances) opportunity to re-orientate themselves in a shattered landscape.

Notes

1. Estimates have put the total post-tsunami expenditure at over 12 billion USD while the 'Master Plan for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction for the Regions and People of the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam and Nias Islands of the Province of North Sumatra', the main and official guide for rehabilitation and reconstruction from the Indonesian government, puts the proposed funding needed for rehabilitation and reconstruction submitted by ministries/institutions until 2009 at Rp58.3 trillion. The funds to support this comes from 1) the Indonesian government which has pledged Rp5.9 trillion (including the Rp3.9 trillion moratorium from Paris Club but apart from funds coming from Departments and Institutions within NAD province and Nias in the form of decentralization funds, assistance duties, and central institutions funds, the

judicial sector and the financial sector) and 2) foreign grants of Rp15.7 trillion from bilateral sources and Rp7.7 trillion from multilateral sources. There was also a US\$300 million Asia Development Bank grant. The estimated total funds pledged by the private and public sectors amounts to Rp13.5 trillion. The Joint Evaluation of International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami synthesis report put the total of international flows of funding at US\$13,503 million (Telford & Cosgrave 2006, p. 81).

2. This can be seen very acutely in the heated debate that has slowed down the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site following the September 11th, 2001 attacks (Vale & Campanella 2005). This case highlights the complicated and often contentious competing voices vying to shape post-disaster reconstruction.
3. A perusal of the websites as well as documents of major donor organizations and implementing agencies show the adoption of the “build back better” framework by organizations such as the UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, World Vision, the Human Rights Watch, and the BRR, to name just a few.
4. At this point it is important to make a clear statement of support for the vast majority of talented and well meaning individuals and organizations (both local and international) who worked extremely hard to improve the situation in Aceh and other tsunami affected areas. In many ways a lot of our findings resonate with the complaints and frustrations experienced and expressed by many of the aid workers who have committed huge amounts of time and energy to the reconstruction processes.
5. There are a number of sources on historical and cultural information about Aceh, for example: Snouck 1906; Bowden 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Reid 1969, 2004, 2006; Feener et al. 2011, etc.
6. The broad political and social implications touched on here will be explored fully in future publications.
7. One ready example is the massive emphasis placed upon ‘gender’ programs. None of the major aid and reconstruction organizations would have had the kind of access that they were granted if they had come specifically to recast gender roles within Acehnese society. This has the potential to confuse very different issues: aiding a society recovery *and* instigating major social transformation. Furthermore, such attempts usually lack a sophisticated understanding of pre-existing gender roles in Aceh, and frames things within overt stereotypes of how Muslim and Indonesian — read developing world — women are treated. Discussions with people in Aceh already suggest that even people sympathetic with the broader ideas of changing the gender dynamics in Aceh are weary of all of the focus on gender.
8. In a fascinating discussion of urban destruction and reconstruction Vale & Campanella build a well supported case that it is the historical exception for heavily damaged cities NOT to recover, drawing almost exclusively upon case

- studies that pre-date the recent internationalization of relief and reconstruction processes (2005).
9. There is extensive literature focusing upon how disasters and subsequent responses expose or even reinforce pre-existing social inequalities (see for a summary Gist and Lubin 1999, p. 49). In recent years this has become a major issue for donors and aid agencies who are rightly cautious about serving the interests of structures that further disadvantage segments of society on the basis of gender, class, age, race, political affiliation, etc. While perhaps laudable at one level, this is used as a justification for programs that intentionally work outside of culturally understood contexts. This raises critical questions about passing moral judgments in the absence of clear moral authority, and determining the basic aim of relief and reconstruction processes. Given that some matter of injustices and inequalities exist in all societies, it is strange and perhaps hypocritical for donor countries to make such distinctions: a point that is not lost on most locals within reconstruction and development situations. More importantly, we believe that decision-making needs to be confined within a strict framework of aiding recovery in traumatized communities, and initiating social transformation as part of aid interventions should be the exception rather than the rule for external organizations. We are inclined to agree with Vale and Campanella's statement that "recovery must also entail some sort of return to normalcy in the human terms of social and economic relations, even if that so called normalcy merely replicates and extends the inequities of the pre-disaster past" (Vale & Campanella 2005), and accept the consequences of pre-existing inequities persisting. We remain unconvinced by the long-term success rate of programs that insist on meddling with existing social realities. Furthermore, there is support in the literature that disasters can bring about opportunities for the entrance of new groups into community power structures that is the result of local dynamics (Aronoff & Gunter 1992; Bolin & Stanford 1989; Couto 1989; Gibbs 1982; Oliver-Smith 1996; Rich et al. 1995). If real change is going to occur, it is preferable that local inhabitants have authorship of it, ownership of their successes, and responsibility for their failures.
 10. We are referring to the everyday lived-in environment, which includes human constructed features, as well as places and spaces that are culturally meaningful. There is extensive empirically grounded research within human geography, anthropology, archaeology and architecture dealing with meaningfully constituted spaces and places (For some relevant examples refer to Gregory & Urry 1985; Hough 1990; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Bender 1993; Ingold 1993; Crumley 1994; Barrett 1994; Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995; Appleton 1996; Feld & Basso 1996; Bradley 1998; Ashmore & Knapp 1999; Joyce & Gillespie 2000; Ashmore 2002; King 2003; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Forbes 2007).
 11. The Aceh Heritage Foundation, founded by one of the authors, works to preserve cultural heritage in Aceh and to raise awareness about the history of Aceh.

12. *Gampung* is the Acehnese word for village, but as discussed below, it is an important concept that far transcends a generic definition of village.
13. A meunasah is a combination of prayer room and community space. Its importance is summed up in the following statement: “the concept of the meunasah in Aceh’s societal structure is that of a village mushalla. And yet, a meunasah is not just a place for worshipping. It also fulfills the function of community... almost every aspect of village life in Aceh is centered in the meunasah. All kinds of cultural products grew out of the meunasah...” (*YAKKUM Emergency Unit* website <http://www.yeu.or.id/about_us.php>) The meunasah plays a critical role as an intermediary between locals and wider levels of government and jurisprudence. For example, it is common for legal cases to be less formally resolved within the meunasah, avoiding the much more complicated and expensive process of taking matters to high courts. This is just one of the roles it plays to mitigate social tension (M. Feener *pers com*).
14. It is common to have mosques, even prior to the tsunami, which were built with outside support. In particular, funds from Persian Gulf states have contributed prominently to the construction of religious structures. It is interesting to note that there is a long history of external influence on Mosque construction in Aceh, including Ottoman, and far less obviously Dutch efforts. Yet, regardless of the source of funding, or architectural blueprints, mosques are seen as being Acehnese, seemingly following the rather faulty logic of mosques are Muslim, Acehnese are Muslim, therefore the mosques are Acehnese!
15. There is an established body of literature discussing faith and piety following disasters. It is a common phenomenon for people to attribute natural disasters to higher powers, and for communities to seek solace within faith (Bushnell 1969; Pargament & Hahn 1986; Ahler & Tamney 1964; Bradfield, Wylie & Echterling 1989; Smith 1978; Gist and Lubin 1999; Oliver-Smith 1996; etc.).
16. The mosque at Lampuuk became a symbol of the strength of Allah all throughout the Muslim world, greatly aided by the staggering aerial photos taken immediately after the tsunami showing the mosque standing alone amidst vast devastation. In the months following the tsunami, Lampuuk became a common destination for visiting delegations, politicians and even tourists, including former US presidents Bush and Clinton. Informal discussion during the course of our field work suggests that the presence of such sites, and the ‘prestige’ associated with them, has influenced the geography of aid distribution, with governments and organizations gravitating in some cases towards the better ‘photo opportunities.’
17. It was common practice to import both specialists and manual laborers for large-scale reconstruction processes. This further ensured that both local input and involvement was limited. An interesting study on housing following the earthquake in Gujarat demonstrated that on a number of levels the most effective solution to house reconstruction was to simply provide material and financial assistance, and allow local inhabitants to deal with the design and construction

by themselves. The study shows that this approach was more efficient, cost-effective, and there were far higher levels of satisfaction with the end products than in Aceh (Barenstein 2006). It is a shame that such 'user-driven' models were not more widely employed in Aceh for a number of reasons, and it is much more likely that such an approach would have contributed towards far more culturally suitable homes being built, and created a focal point for direct involvement: people literally rebuilding their homes and communities.

18. Unfortunately our data did not get to a level of nuance needed to really tell the full story with regards to housing, as there is both a tremendous variation of housing styles built by many organizations, and set limits based upon the methodology employed. Therefore we are not able to provide a more sophisticated model here.
19. Coffee shops play very important roles within the social life of males in Aceh, and this is one feature that we found reconstructed in some form in all villages we visited. This is just one of a number of other features within Acehnese landscapes that registered of interest within our study, but we lack the space to elaborate on all elements of the built environment in this chapter.
20. This is one of the prevalent rumors going around the village, but we were not able to confirm that there was actually asbestos within the houses.
21. However, there are examples in which people seem happy with 'new' housing that is very different from their previous homes. In particular, many residents of Lampuuk village, which was reconstructed by the Turkish Red Crescent, reported that they were satisfied with their new 'modern' housing. While this is most likely related to how well constructed and furnished the houses were, respondents also noted that they had felt very involved in the reconstruction process in their village. This supports the idea mentioned above that there are differences when inhabitants feel that they are behind the changes brought about, rather than the recipients of externally imposed change.
22. This closely echoes Gist and Lubin's point that "Following large-scale disasters, people in charge of relocation efforts may, out of ignorance or simple expediency, disregard natural groupings traditionally existing within communities, and many victims must rely on temporary housing that seldom reflects pre-disaster personal relationships and neighborhood patterns" (Gist and Lubin 1999, p. 41).
23. We had to begin all interviews by establishing if the potential respondent was originally from the *gampung* in question. We were initially very surprised by the number of people who had not lived in these areas until after the tsunami.
24. See Fitzpatrick 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, & 2008d for more detailed information on the RALAS programme, as well as Fitzpatrick in this volume.
25. This is typical of the skepticism about local religious and cultural beliefs and practices that is widespread within the ranks of international NGO workers in Aceh, and other aid situations.
26. This is a much broader critique of the relief, reconstruction and development processes than can be dealt with in this chapter. A more comprehensive discussion

will be presented within a monograph on post-disaster social transformation (Daly Forthcoming).

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