

Powerless victims or strong survivors

by Ingvild Solvang

Humanitarian agencies must find a balance between acknowledging people's abilities to help themselves and delivering appropriate assistance.

A week after the tsunami, a European aid worker visited the Jesuit Refugee Service office in Banda Aceh. He had been on his first assessment mission to an IDP community and wanted to share with us the conclusions he had drawn from the visit. The meeting with people who had lost their belongings, friends and families had made a deep impression on him. He kept referring to them as 'poor' and when describing how they had told him that they had bought cooking stoves for the camp kitchen, he expressed his disbelief that they had been able to do so.

Displaced people in makeshift shelters look poor but for a humanitarian worker to assume that they do not have any resources to help themselves shows a lack of respect for their dignity. This was brought home to me a few days later when I went to a school building where people had sought refuge. By the entrance, there was a pile of clothing. A man picked up a few pieces and showed them to me. "We would be ashamed to wear these clothes," he said. I had a closer look at the collection of torn and stained clothes. "Although we are in this situation", the man continued, "we still have our pride". Those at fault are not so much the individual donors as the agency that shipped the rags to Aceh, with quan-

tity rather than quality in mind, and without regard to the waste of scarce logistical resources. Agencies have overlooked the fact that many IDPs may prefer to buy stoves for doing their own cooking – and buy familiar food at markets – rather than eat pre-packed instant noodles provided by the government and humanitarian agencies.

The Acehneses have been moved by the world's response to the disaster. At the same time, some are sad that the tsunami is now all their beautiful region is famous for. Hours of terrible footage of the waves crushing everything in their path have led to record fundraising results in Indonesia and elsewhere. Donations have been triggered by the sight of people who have lost all they own, orphaned children, mothers' stories of infants being pulled out of their arms, desperate fathers carrying the pictures of lost sons and daughters. The Acehneses are the victims – and the foreign cameramen and humanitarian workers are presented as the heroes. Foreign media may find it easier to talk to foreigners rather than identifying local spokespersons. This may be a reason why Thailand received the most attention in Western countries; there were many Western tourists who could tell their story, again and again, at the expense of local voices raising local concerns.

To think that people are incapable of helping themselves leads one to conclude that people need help from

the outside but foreign assistance may not match actual needs. Many people outside of Aceh, for example, assumed that children who had lost their primary caregivers should be sent to orphanages or signed up for adoption in Java or abroad. In Aceh, this is culturally inappropriate and caused uproar as the Acehneses demanded that their children be left in the care of local communities rather than taken out of Aceh.

The Acehneses are known for their strength of character and their pride. In general they are embarrassed by admitting needing assistance and for this reason humanitarian agencies may not always be welcomed with open arms. Decades of conflict between government forces and the separatist group GAM have generally made local communities distrustful of people from the outside and taught them to be self-reliant. However, the needs in Aceh now are so large that improvements are hardly noticeable, and the Acehneses are getting impatient waiting for the reconstruction work to begin for real.

Meanwhile, many people are returning to their place of origin, clearing the rubble without any support from the government or the humanitarian community. Many IDPs in camps are determined to return to rebuild their homes. In the villages of Lhoh and Lampuyang on Pulo Aceh island, men took shifts in preparing the island for their community's return.

Within a month of the tsunami a tented camp had been set up and work to raise a *meunasah*, a public house for prayer and community meetings, had begun. From this central building a village can be rebuilt. "We will not wait for support from the government. We will return by ourselves if we have to." Humanitarian agencies need to support such initiatives, while acknowledging – and learning from – the local population's capacity.

Ingvild Solvang is the Jesuit Refugee Service's Indonesia Advocacy Manager. Email: solvang@jrs.or.id. JRS Indonesia website: www.jrs.or.id

Business at the Meulaboh fish market, west coast of Sumatra, is slowly recovering after the tsunami.

