

Local versus international response: call for humility

by Bambang A Sipayung

In Indonesia it is easy to tell who works for an international NGO for they stand out with their organisational tags and memory sticks. Many Indonesians crave jobs with international NGOs (INGOs) but do these organisations transfer knowledge and skills to local NGOs? Or do they simply poach their staff and undermine voluntarism?

The tsunami which hit Aceh in December 2004 and the earthquake which struck near the Java city of Yogyakarta in May 2006 were not just tragedies and opportunities to display solidarity. For Indonesians with knowledge of English and technical capacity they were job opportunities. The dramatic influx of INGOs has transformed the landscape for NGOs and social activism in Indonesia. In the process, humanitarianism is in danger of becoming just another industry.

In Aceh and Yogya the influx of INGOs has been unprecedented. In the first six months of the tsunami response, over 600 were registered in the province of Aceh. It was, a friend noted, a veritable supermarket of NGOs, each with their own mandates and procedures. The first thing they each did was to search for accommodation, warehousing and local staff. Rental costs in Banda Aceh rose ten-fold. English-speaking Indonesians found themselves sought after and head-hunted. Many left NGOs and the civil service to work with INGOs. Some who got jobs with international agencies had no experience of social activism nor ever been employed by an NGO.

Coordination meetings were all the rage. As they were invariably

conducted in English, and used the terminology of disaster response with which local people were unfamiliar, it was hardly surprising that local NGOs soon lost interest. Most stopped attending and developed their own links with particular INGOs from whom they sought funding.



Mike DuBose, UMMS/ACT International

Relief supplies from around the world pour into the airport at Banda Aceh, Indonesia, following the December 2004 tsunami.

Local NGOs found themselves amidst giants – UN and government agencies, the Red Cross and massive international and national NGOs. Unable to compete, they were powerless to prevent haemorrhage of their staff. When experienced local NGO staff saw people getting jobs with international agencies who had no experience of development, humanitarian response or engagement in the civil struggle for democracy and human rights they wondered whether the outsiders had any interest in local knowledge and experience.

Old-guard social activists are in despair that many Indonesians now see working for an NGO as just another business activity, a way to earn money and support a family but without asking questions. They are appalled at the insensitivity displayed by the staff of some agencies, simply interviewing tsunami victims about their needs and then leaving without offering any material assistance.

Most local and national NGOs lack experience in disaster management and staff capacity building. They realise that heroism, courage and critical thinking have to be complemented by practical managerial skills. Sadly, the international community has shown no interest in sharing them. INGOs need to develop cultural sensitivity. Instead of undermining local NGOs by taking their staff, they need to work with them and exchange experience and skills. Instead of patting themselves on the backs for their managerial competence, international

NGOs should be more humble. It is a humility that recognises the strength and wisdom of the local community and learns from them while complementing their capacity with further skills for the service of those in need. They could learn much from the enthusiasm and voluntary spirit (self-sacrifice as opposed to the commodification of humanitarian services) which has characterised the emergence of Indonesian civil society.

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