

Building back a better community: Transforming disaster into opportunity in Nias

By E Anna Marsiana

A forgotten island

I was sent to the Indonesian province of Sumatra by the HEKS (Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz, based in Zurich, Switzerland), a Protestant Church Aid organization one day after the tsunami of 26 December 2004 struck large parts of Aceh and North Sumatra in Indonesia, as well as parts of Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. I proposed to HEKS that we should pay attention not only to Aceh, but also to the island of Nias. My reasons for this were simple and practical—not only did I have information regarding the destruction in Nias, but also, once I arrived in Medan, North Sumatra it was clear that everyone’s attention was focused on Aceh. This was not surprising, given the tremendous destruction and casualties suffered there. However, the other reason for this was that Nias was not known to many people, internationally or locally.

The island of Nias comprises of the main island, and some small islets to the south and west. The main island of Nias, together with the Batu Islands to the south and the Hinako Islands to the west, houses a population of around 750,000 people. Nias Island, part of the province of North Sumatra, is divided into two districts: Nias and South Nias. Gunungsitoli is the capital of Nias and Telukdalam of South Nias. The size of the main island is 4800 square kilometers, and the total area of all the islands is 5625 square kilometers.

Although working in Nias did not sound as sexy as working in Aceh, HEKS agreed with my proposal and we were able to find a partner organization with whom to work. The people of Nias were still recovering from the tsunami when a second and more devastating tragedy struck the island in March 2005. While the tsunami mainly affected the west, north and south coasts, the earthquake of March 28 affected the entire island. Two villages on the east coast were submerged, whereas large areas of coral rose above sea-level in the north. The earthquake lifted the western side of the island by an average of two metres. More than 850 people were killed, while 6000 people were severely injured. There was extensive damage to homes, schools, infrastructure and economic activities. Over 100,000 people were left homeless and the main coastal towns—the economic centres critical for the survival of the island’s subsistence farming and fishing communities—sustained damage of about 80 per cent.

Together, the tsunami and earthquake had a severe impact on Nias’ economy. The commercial sections of the major towns, schools, clinics, boats, irrigation systems, ports and bridges suffered extensive damage. Moreover, the disasters scared away tourists, seriously disrupting production and the markets. It was estimated that the total income for 2005 dropped more than 20 per cent. Eighty per cent of households were living below the poverty line.

Being a small peripheral island, Nias had been largely neglected prior to these two disasters. The population had a very low level of education and less than 20 per cent spoke Bahasa Indonesia, the national language and the language used in schools. Infrastructure around the islands was dismal. The few roads that existed were in poor conditions. To live in a village of more than 1000 inhabitants with no access to public services or economic means such as markets was considered normal. Such conditions made the effects of the tsunami and earthquake that much worse for the inhabitants of the islands.

‘Build back a better community’

The two disasters finally attracted the attention of the international community to Nias Island. Many organizations contributed support during the emergency phase, although it was obvious that international and national organizations would need a longer time frame to address the complexity of the problems faced by a society already heavily affected by poverty and marginalization.

It was therefore prudent that the BRR for Aceh and Nias (The national Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency for Aceh and Nias) along with all I/NGOs working in Aceh and Nias, decided to centre all rehabilitation work on the premise 'Build back a better community'. Although such a premise is basic to any disaster relief work, it was of great consequence for Aceh and Nias for historical reasons. In Aceh, apart from the tsunami taking more than 130,000 lives, the community has long been torn apart by conflict and civil war. Nias on the other hand, has long been neglected from any development by the government.

With over 25 international groups as well as a large number of national NGOs working on Nias at that time, turning the disaster into opportunity and building back a better community was not just an option, but rather a duty. Otherwise, a huge amount of resources would have been wasted. It was our responsibility to turn the disaster that had taken thousands of lives and nearly destroyed the entire island into an opportunity to develop the island in a holistic and sustainable way. By doing so, not only would we help the survivors to overcome their trauma, but also help them transform threat into challenge and disaster into opportunity, thereby being more resilient in the future.

In accordance with HEKS policy to work with local organizations, we found a very capable local group to work with, HOLI'ANA'A. This policy helps to empower local capacity, which is crucial as ultimately, they are the ones who will stay behind. International and other NGOs usually stay for 1-3 years, before moving on to other disaster areas. Furthermore, local groups are aware of local conditions and customs. In our case, working with a local group helped in gaining people's trust. As in other isolated communities throughout the world, residents in the villages we worked in shared the traits of being suspicious, narrow minded and ignorant to information from outside. It was not easy to gain their trust even after some months of staying with them; even when they knew that they needed help and that these people were there to help. Working with a local organization was therefore a wise decision, and in the long term, it helped the community to open up. Clan-based conflicts are another challenge we had to deal with.

HOLI'ANA'A is a term for heaven found in Nias folk religion. Literally, it means a place full of gold, or a place where people's welfare—in its holistic meaning—is met. HOLIANA'A came to us with a village-based approach instead of the usual (sporadic) activities approach. The village-based approach focuses on certain villages, involving an integrated project covering various activities with long term targets. While this was not a new approach for someone working in the development field, it was not easy to convince HEKS and its donors that the approach would work effectively for rehabilitation projects. In the end, my superior in Switzerland supported me; we decided to proceed slowly and not let ourselves be driven by the considerable funding pressure.

Remote and devastated: Survival against the odds

HEKS began working with HOLI'ANA'A in six villages of three different sub-districts: Hiligawöni, Bitaya, O.Tumula, in Alasa sub-district, Muzöi in East Lahewa sub-district, and Sifaoro'asi and Faekhuna'a in Afulu sub-district. Two more villages, Banua Sibohou in Alasa sub-district and Luru Fadoro in Afulu sub-district were subsequently included. HEKS also decided to work with another local group, PESADA, focusing on developing women's groups in 11 villages spread out in 10 sub-districts in Nias and South Nias. Some of these villages were affected by both the tsunami and the second earthquake that devastated almost 80 per cent of the island.

Many of the villages were severely isolated. To reach Muzöi for instance, you have to first go by motorbike for two hours, wait for another 1-2 hours until it is low tide so you can cross two wide rivers with the bike, continue on the bike for another half an hour, before leaving the bike to continue the journey in a small canoe for 1-1.5 hours—depending on the season. This requires you to arrange for locals to lend you their canoe some days in advance, keeping in mind that there existed no means of communications until three years after the project

began. To get to O Tumula, you have to spend four hours on a motorbike and then continue on foot for 1-3 hrs crossing a thigh-high swamp. [photo 1]

The remoteness of the villages was difficult for a Swiss colleague to comprehend until he experienced it himself when he visited Nias early last year: “My dear, I have read many times of how remote the areas were, but definitely I had no idea of how remote it was, I never expected that it was **this** remote...”

As a result of the remoteness, even BRR failed to resolve how the rehousing project could be done. However, this was also because the project failed to recognize and make maximum use of the local resources in participatory ways.

Happily, after some negotiations, BRR agreed to finance an access road to the villages. Although construction was interrupted a few times due to the remote location, there is hope that work will begin again in 2009. The BRR and its new funding partner will also build a permanent bridge over the Tumula River, linking O Tumula to the town where the main market and public services are located.

Restoring livelihoods and local capacities

Given the conditions of these communities, it was clear that a medium-long term project with a timeframe of 2-3 years was essential in achieving sustainable goals. For this reason, all projects undertaken by HEKS were of a period of 2.5-3 years, expandable for several more months or even years, based on the end evaluation. Unfortunately, this is not shared by all NGOs, many of whom were working in Nias on a short term basis. Many more work on a ‘fund available basis’. One NGO planned a medium term project but ended it after only a year of implementation. Another NGO set up a nine-month project, but then extended it for three months and then three more months, and another three months, simply because new funds were available. Perhaps one of the stranger incidents was when an international organization told local groups to write false reports of their projects because its office was closing due to a lack of funds. Two months later, new funds allowed the office to reopen; they had to build a new office and buy new cars as the old ones had been donated to government offices. As a grassroots activist, I was dismayed by such methodology in running rehabilitation projects. The few NGOs that tried hard to think and work on medium-long term rehabilitation projects were thus doubly important in building back a better Nias.

Through its 2.5-3 year project, HEKS and its partners aimed to ensure economic recovery and livelihood rehabilitation for over 3500 families in 19 villages, and contribute to better disaster preparedness. As most villagers had lost their homes, HEKS and its partners made sure their housing needs would be met by other organizations or by the BRR. This has not been completely successful however; as mentioned earlier, due to the remoteness of one of the villages, no house there has been rebuilt, either by the BRR or other NGOs.

In each village, the project was quite wide-ranging. It involved replacing lost livelihood instruments such as boats, fishing gear and farming equipment, to repairing and constructing clean water sources, latrines and related sanitation facilities, to building simple roads that allowed economic access and evacuation, to providing support and organization for socio-economic activities. Women for instance, were encouraged to begin income generating projects; they were provided with start-up capital and relevant business course training, including business and market management for small-scale business. Courses on sustainable fishery and agriculture, as well as market networking were organized for the men. After the various businesses were up and running, Credit and Saving Unions were formed to sustain them. Training courses on other socially relevant issues were also provided, such as gender awareness for men and women, community organization, gender and conflict sensitive leadership training. These were seen as important for social change and long term development. [photos 2, 3,4 big size]

The participatory approach of the project was at first difficult for the islanders to accept. This was not because they were incapable of valuable contributions, but because they had learned the wrong way of what constitutes a rehabilitation project. The immense international generosity and concern towards the tsunami survivors translated into huge amounts of money collected by I/NGOs, which put them under considerable pressure to spend the funds. Given the amount of money as well as the time frame in which it had to be used, many NGOs were forced to spend the money as quickly and easily as possible. Suddenly, there were numerous grants available through different NGOs. Emergency and rehabilitation projects were understood to mean NGOs distributing money to the people—as grants without much effort from the people’s side; as start-up capital to set up businesses without having to account for any business development (because in many cases after just one year the NGOs had left the island or even the country), or as income generating projects without guidance from the NGOs. In fact, many people initially refused to attend meetings organized by HOLI’ANA’A or PESADA when they learned they would not be paid for doing so, contrary to their experiences with other organizations. Not only was all this misleading, but it also worked against local capacity and wisdom.

In time, the villagers were convinced that a participatory approach is the best way to guarantee the sustainability of the project goals. Also, being consulted in all activities helped people, especially the women, to gain confidence and self esteem. Credit for this must be given to the local partner organizations, whose patience and efforts were able to assure people that they have the capacity to rebuild their lives; they must begin with what they have; only they can decide what they want and change their condition; and finally, that the role of an NGO is but to support their efforts.

Four years later...

Four years have today passed since the tsunami and subsequent earthquake. The BRR is winding up, and its office will be closed by the end of April 2009. A larger number of NGOs have left both Aceh and Nias. At the time of writing, there are 10 international organizations, including UN bodies, hoping to finish their projects by mid 2009 or 2010 at the latest, leaving 10 local organizations working on Nias.

It is easy to see that Nias today is far more developed, not only compared to the beginning of the post-tsunami work, but also compared to the conditions prior to the tsunami. The island’s infrastructure as well as social organization has come a long way in the last four years. As noted before, there were few accessible roads on the island when we began working there. Only one simple 5km road, 1.5m wide, could be found in the city of Gunungsitoli. Outside Gunungsitoli however, nothing existed that could be called a road. To date, 6-8m wide roads measuring hundreds of kilometers in length have been built circling the island and connecting the city to major towns in the sub-district level. More than 60 per cent of the island’s villages now have at least a primary school guaranteeing elementary education for children, while prior to the tsunami, there were few schools at the village level. Many sub-districts today also have a number of well equipped health clinics and Gunungsitoli’s main hospital has been renovated and refurbished with modern equipments and facilities—through donations—meeting international standards. The list of infrastructural developments does not end here; in short, it is fair to say that Nias is an example of how a disaster can be turned into an opportunity to build a better community.

As infrastructure on the island grew, so did the villages and sub-districts. In fact, many large areas were divided into two or three smaller villages or sub-districts, to enhance and quicken the development process. There is even an agreement that Nias district would be split into two new districts: West Nias and North Nias.

The socioeconomic status of the island has also improved considerably. Having just ended our first medium-term project in four villages, it can be said that despite difficulties and delays in some activities, the impact of the project is tremendous. This can be seen in Bitaya, one of the four villages. In fact, Bitaya was the most remote village, where the BRR failed to execute the housing project. In the course of the four years, HOLI’ANA’A had no choice but to twice stop the project due to clan-based conflicts or due its remoteness. Today however, Bitaya is a different story. A rice farm of over 50 hectares is being maintained by a women’s community based organization (CBO) formed by HOLI’ANA’A, with a production increase of 25 per cent. This has allowed the village to become self-reliant in their staple food. Moreover, with a rice mill operated by another CBO, Bitaya is even able to supply rice to neighbouring villages. Eighty per cent of Bitaya’s households

now have easy access to clean water and sanitation facilities. Reducing the burden on women, this leaves them with more time for other social and economic activities. [photo 5]

Similar stories of economic activities can be found in the three other villages of O.Tumula, Hiligawoni, and Muzöi. A comparison of the number of pigs in the four villages before and after the project period shows an average increase of 300 per cent. Each village has 2-3 credit and saving unions. Although the intensive rehabilitation project is over, HEKS is still providing support to strengthen the management of these unions. Social conflicts have decreased significantly, while gender awareness and sensitivity training is proving influential. The women's CBOs in particular, have been a great influence in the community's social dynamic. Women have generally become more confident and have started to take part in almost every public meeting at the village level. One woman, a former village community organizer, even ran in the village head elections in Tumula. Although she lost, it was a new and positive experience for the community. The CBOs in Hiligawoni caught the attention of the government and now receive grants from a central government programme.

While Nias can certainly be cited as a model for different actors to work together and turn a disaster into an opportunity for significant change, it would not do to ignore the fact that there are over 400 villages within Nias district only, the majority of which did not experience rehabilitation in the way of Bitaya, O.Tumula, Hiligawoni, and Muzöi. Some villages experienced recovery and rehabilitation projects as sporadic activities, while others experienced none, due to their remoteness. In other words, when the BRR is completely closed and major NGOs finally leave the island, there will still be much work to be done.

Additionally, if a close look is taken at the amount of money spent in the past four years, perhaps we would expect to see more results. At a press conference on 16 April 2009, BRR noted that the total funds collected for the rehabilitation of Aceh and Nias come to around IDR 35 trillion (USD 3.25 billion). For Nias, over IDR 5.8 trillion (USD 538 million) is estimated to be spent through the regional government, UN agencies and I/NGOs. By the end of 2008, about USD 390 million was disbursed and implemented (see www.e-aceh-nias.org). Such large sums of money should surely result in greater developments than have occurred in the past four years. Alas, this is a topic for another article.

Anna Marsiana is the former national coordinator of HEKS, responsible for the Swiss organization's tsunami responses in Indonesia (December 2004–April 2009). She is currently the coordinator of the Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) for Culture and Theology, formerly in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and now in the process of moving to Jogjakarta, Indonesia.