

## Christian Warta

### RECONSTRUCTION WITH DRAWBACKS: SMALL NIAS, LARGE CHANGE

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#### *The Setting*

This article emphasizes certain essential parts of disaster response that challenge reconstruction and rebuilding efforts. Embedded in the wider context of humanitarian assistance in disaster relief, reconstruction work is directed towards sustainability and must be seen as a long-term project. Whenever a disaster leads to the physical presence of humanitarian aid workers and other supportive international staff, the affected region will undergo a wide range of changes; this is especially true in the case of a small island like Nias.

On December 26, 2004 the Indian Ocean earthquake (magnitude 9,3) caused the deadliest tsunami ever recorded in history. In Indonesia approximately 170,000 fatalities have been reported. In comparison to massively damaged regions (e.g. *Banda Aceh*), the devastation in Nias was much less severe. However, three months later on March 28, 2005 the Sumatra earthquake (magnitude 8,7) occurred and destroyed virtually the whole island of Nias. According to internal UN figures – released a few days after the Sumatra earthquake – an estimated 2000 people were killed and more than 1000 houses were destroyed<sup>1</sup>.

Aiming to understand the multi-dimensional aspects of such a complex emergency situation, I will try to present a realistic picture from a differentiated point of view. Apart from the humanitarian disaster caused by the immense physical challenges of the Sumatra earthquake, another secondary, social “earthquake” shook Nias, resulting from the massive external interference coming along with the arrival of “aid”. As soon as the international community is alerted after such a natural catastrophe and after the respective government has signaled green light for international humanitarian assistance, a huge number of stakeholders invades immediately. Amongst the various actors are the national governments, national authorities, national partners, the military, the media, donors, the private sector, and countless NGOs<sup>2</sup>, UN-Agencies, Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRCS), as well as the beneficiaries of the host population. The general coordination between the various international organizations falls under the mandate of OCHA<sup>3</sup>, a UN-Body responsible for the coordination of humanitarian affairs. According to OCHA registration forms, about 50 international NGOs were registered after the disaster in Nias.

Although most organizations and societies have established their individual guiding principles and guidelines concerning emergency field operations, two standards are most commonly applied in humanitarian assistance: the Sphere<sup>4</sup> Project and the UNHCR<sup>5</sup> Emergency Handbook.

After the first stage of emergency relief right after a disaster has occurred, a second phase of humanitarian work follows, aiming towards

09.07.2007

sustainable reconstruction. Once the emergency situation allows advancing, the various stakeholders launch their respective long-term reconstruction projects. It is not surprising that reconstruction work is mostly done under time pressure: the time period people spend in tents and temporary accommodations should be short. People want to return to normality as soon as possible. This pressure is particularly severe in the case of IDP-camps<sup>6</sup> and when limited availability of facilities in terms of space, hygiene and medical supply are an issue.

#### *Modern versus traditional architecture*

Taking a closer look at the particular damage after the Nias disaster will clearly show that modern architecture couldn't overcome the earthquake at all, whereas traditional architecture is widely intact. Even though the majority of fatal casualties and severe injuries were de facto the consequence of collapsing buildings, there were significant structural variations that suggest reflecting on the dangerous nature of modern architecture on Nias. Even though the earthquake had not affected all geographical regions on Nias with the same intensity; it remains obvious why some buildings were completely destroyed while others were just slightly damaged. First of all this phenomenon simply reflects the fact that traditional architecture is earthquake resistant, whereas modern architecture is not. From this insight follows that most fatalities cannot be seen as a direct consequence of the so-called “natural disaster”. As a matter of fact, I argue Nias rather faced a human made disaster, the earthquake just being a trigger. There were probably just a few cases when people died while staying outdoors. This also applies to traditional architecture of course. It must be pointed out; however, that traditional knowledge about earthquake resistant architecture was widely neglected within modern architecture, with devastating results. The term “modern” architecture used here means non-traditional architecture and has nothing to do with the term “modern”, as it is understood in contemporary architecture.

With few exceptions, on Nias modern architecture is primarily found in *Gunung Sitoli*, the capital city of Nias, and in some other towns, whereas traditional architecture is prevailing in the countryside. *Gunung Sitoli* – for instance – was massively destroyed. While most of the city's centre collapsed, several higher quality buildings remained stable; amongst them were some German made church facilities, which appeared nearly untouched<sup>7</sup>.

When considering the design for houses to be reconstructed, one clearly wants to go for either high quality houses or/and traditional architecture. Given the difficulties of identifying a type of house, which both meets the beneficiaries' needs and complies with international standards, the final product is often far from the beneficiary's initial idea of a proper house.

#### *Sorting out Partners*

The probably most important aspect of successful reconstruction work is finding the right partnerships. Identifying partners, implementing partners and

business partners alike, is a difficult task. It requires a good sense for networking along with the ability to meet the "right" people. Considering the big number of organizations dealing with reconstruction and rebuilding issues, the number of potential and trustful implementing partners is rather limited. Therefore it does not surprise that the organizations compete to some extent. Apart from most humanitarians' idealistic motivations and strong will to help the people in need; humanitarian assistance itself is a tough business. Market principles apply here as elsewhere and ultimately the overall performance (and success) of each organization will define the future within the relief business.

The right selection of implementation partners – in order to facilitate the reconstruction project – but also the right selection of project related suppliers, contractors, qualified personnel, construction workers, specialists, and, last but not least, the delegates and international staff themselves will finally determine the success of the project, i.e. the field mission. Most problems occur because of unqualified staff and incompetent implementing partners. Usually everybody is aware of the fact that there is a lot of money around; money which has to be spent but which is also carefully watched by the donors. As a matter of fact, disasters are always paving the way for new business opportunities, not to say that the disaster is the business. Next to serious and reputable business partners, the new situation also attracts certain dubious companies and individuals.

Finally, the selection of partners must consider local resources and local economy. Although the international humanitarian guidelines recommend the participation of local players to the highest degree possible, this certainly is not always the case.

### **Human Resources**

As soon as partners are identified and contracts signed, the actual construction work starts. Whom to hire for which job is a decisive question. In the case of Nias the personnel issue already came up during the early phases of emergency relief and reconstruction work. Actually the question led to a pretty intense discussion, when some Javanese volunteers got into trouble with the local youth. The conflict arose because the Javanese architecture students were supposed to sign a 6 months contract. For them this would have been a progress, shifting from unpaid volunteers to contracted professionals. Although they had already done a hard job for almost two months, without receiving any payment, the prospect of being contracted caused serious dissonance and jealousy amongst them and the local youth.

Besides relational difficulties that emerged as in this specific case example, there were also quite many prejudices against the local population. Whereas the locals claimed that potential jobs were given to foreigners on purpose, instead of recruiting out of the local human capacities, some decision makers countered that the locals were unable and lazy indeed. A common argument against local hiring hence questions indigenous competence, expertise and professionalism, suggesting the need to import

such in order to safeguard the good quality of the job.

Another big issue on Nias was the lack of working opportunities in general. Except of "daily-needs-jobs" in agriculture and fishery, there are barely any jobs available. The economic development of the island is approaching zero every year and the government in Jakarta is often criticized for neglecting Nias. Anger and frustration is self-explanatory here. After the disaster, Nias was confronted with plenty of job opportunities, while the access to real jobs remained limited for the locals.

### **Affected local communities**

As a principle, reconstruction and rebuilding work should always happen in relation and cooperation with the local communities. It is of great importance that the local community gets involved as much as possible in the reconstruction project cycle, including the phases of analysis, planning and design, implementation and evaluation, i.e. long term monitoring.

Reconstruction and rebuilding work is always carried out by many different organizations and stakeholders. The complexity of the emergency situation calls for cooperation, but it is often not possible. The selection of beneficiaries often becomes a crucial point. As a matter of fact, not everybody will receive the same attention and treatment and also not everybody gets recognized as being eligible to become a beneficiary. Jealousy and the feeling of unequal treatment can lead towards conflicts within the community. In some cases this conflict potential even bursts into violence between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Of course it is impossible to satisfy everybody, but humanitarians are doing what they can and interact with the local community trying to get some deeper understanding of such contradictory situations.

The people's readiness to resettle is another community related important issue. Protraction or even refusal to resettle is often caused by fear. Some people might fear following earthquakes, others are afraid about being left alone without anything, whereas some other IDPs feel incapable to deal with the traumatic situation in order to build up a new life. One basic question to consider before starting reconstruction is the communities' will to come back and resettle after all; needless to mention the pointlessness of new but empty houses. In the village of *Sirumbu* quite a number of people were afraid of new Tsunamis. Considering the countless aftershocks – some of them reached magnitude 5,0 – their fear was not unrealistic. Therefore they wanted to resettle in a much wider distance, off the coast. In the South of Nias, next to the village of *Teluk Dalam*, a rather big camp for IDPs was located on the slopes of a hill, a property which actually belongs to the local church. People wanted to stay there, on this higher altitude place, because they feared to die in a following disaster sweeping the coastline. Of course the living conditions in the camp never reached the comfort of their own homes, but the fear exceeded the wish to resettle and rebuild. A communal feeling of safety and security contributes to this wish to stay in the refuge area, basic food supply and met basic

human needs make a difference understandably enough. Leaving the camp would mean for these people to give up this essential feeling of being safe, so essential after the turmoil they went through.

### *The reconstruction of single-family-houses at Nias*

In general, reconstruction must be in accordance with safe local building practices. Like already mentioned, Sphere is widely seen as the leading standard in regard to humanitarian relief; it also applies to reconstruction. Although some organizations (including the UNHCR) slightly differ from the Sphere standard in their approach, the guiding principles are basically identical.

Key spheres for good reconstruction are, according to these standards, the sourcing of local materials and labour, without adversely affecting the local economy or environment. Locally derived standards of workmanship and materials must be met, whereas construction and material specifications should also resist against future disasters. Construction types and materials should be used that enable the maintenance and upgrading of individual household shelters by using locally available tools and resources. The whole construction process must be transparent, accountable and in accordance with internationally accepted bidding, purchasing and construction administration practices<sup>8</sup>.

The medium-term and long-term strategy of Caritas – one example of NGO engagement in the disaster on Nias – concentrated on emergency relief (e.g. food distribution), the reconstruction and monitoring of orphanages, various infrastructure related projects (e.g. fisher boats, schools), the structural development and improvement of associate organizations, and the reconstruction of single-family-houses. The mandate of Caritas excludes the implementation of any projects, however. Local partners must do the project implementation. The entire reconstruction process is planned to be completed within a two years period.

Contrary to reconstruction projects within the public sphere, the rebuilding of individual homes can sometimes cause many more difficulties. There are many aspects to consider, before, during and after the project. Sometimes discrepancies between the concerned families and the financing organizations, the NGOs, occur, particularly when it comes to the design of the house or its location. Also, the access to new land can be limited; this can turn into a problem if the former land is not good for settlement any longer. Is there alternative land and is it suitable and safe for the establishment of a new settlement? Are there any unsolved land right issues? How will the new settlement affect the environment? Is the location easy accessible? Can people access public services, e.g. schools, medical services etc.? Those are just some of the countless questions to consider. Once the location of the building sites is specified, the reconstruction project should enter its active phase. Actually, before reconstruction can start the parties must agree on a certain type of house. Regarding the design there are international standards to observe as well. It is often a challenge in this phase

to find a solution which satisfies the beneficiaries, while still fulfilling the requirements of organization and donors. After agreement on the design of the house construction work can start. Then practical matters dominate the project, like the procurement of the building materials or logistical and security related issues.

Concerning the building materials, it is wise to control everything carefully. Given the relatively small size of Nias, the major part of the material must be imported from neighboring Sumatra, Kalimantan or Java. Apart from obligatory quality controls, one should make an effort and assure that the timber used in the reconstruction project is not shipped from illegal logging sites.

Finally there are a few logistical challenges. How can the materials be transported to the construction site? Are the roads accessible or is there a need to fix broken roads first? Can trucks access the roads? Where to store the material? Is there a need for additional facilities to protect the material from weather? Are additional security measures needed to ensure a safe storage? All in all, reconstruction, not only in Nias, remains a difficult task and a long lasting process.

Talking about the reconstruction of Nias means more than addressing reconstruction in a common sense. To some extent Nias is receiving a new face in the process. It wasn't just the Sumatra earthquake on March 28, 2005 which dramatically changed Nias; there is also the massive interference of stakeholders from all over the world since then. Virtually, one gets the impression that Nias is being changed all over again, far beyond the effects of the natural disaster. It seems the children of this island cannot do more than watch how others are changing their homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> At Nias island the total population is approximately 700000.

<sup>2</sup> Non Governmental Organizations.

<sup>3</sup> Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

<sup>4</sup> "The initiative was launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, who framed a Humanitarian Charter and identified Minimum Standards to be attained in disaster assistance, in each of five key sectors (water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and health services). This process led to the publication of the first Sphere handbook in 2000. Taken together, the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards contribute to an operational framework for accountability in disaster assistance efforts. The cornerstone of the handbook is the Humanitarian Charter, which is based on the principles and provisions of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief. The Charter describes the core principles that govern humanitarian action and reasserts the right of populations affected by disaster, whether natural or man-made (including armed conflict), to protection and assistance. It also reasserts the right of disaster-affected populations to life with dignity." (The Sphere Project. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, Pp 4, 2004, Oxfam Publishing, Oxford).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>6</sup> Internally Displaced Persons.

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<sup>7</sup> According to local German missionaries and priests only the best materials have been used. "The construction work was done with German preciseness", they told proudly.

<sup>8</sup> **Guidance notes:**

**1. Sourcing of shelter materials and labour:** livelihood support should be promoted through the local procurement of building materials, specialist building skills and manual labour. Multiple sources, alternative materials and production processes, or the provision of regionally or internationally sourced materials or proprietary shelter systems are required if the local harvesting and supply of materials is likely to have a significant adverse impact on the local economy or the environment. The re-use of materials salvaged from damaged buildings should be promoted where feasible, either as primary construction materials (bricks or stone masonry, roof timber, roof tiles, etc.) or as secondary material (rubble for foundations or levelling roads, etc.). Ownership of or the rights to such material should be identified and agreed.

**2. Participation of affected households:** skills training programmes and apprenticeship schemes can maximise opportunities for participation during construction, particularly for individuals lacking the required building skills or experience. Complementary contributions from those less able to undertake physically or technically demanding tasks can include site monitoring and inventory control, the provision of child care or temporary accommodation and catering for those engaged in construction works, and administrative support. Consideration should be given to the other demands on the time and labour resources of the affected population. The inclusion of food-for-work initiatives can provide the necessary food security to enable affected households to actively participate. Single women, female-headed households and women with disabilities are particularly at risk from sexual exploitation in seeking assistance for the construction of their shelter. The provision of assistance from volunteer community labour teams or contracted labour could complement any beneficiary contributions.

**3. Construction standards:** standards of good practice should be agreed with the relevant authorities to ensure that key safety and performance requirements are met. In locations where applicable local or national building codes have not been customarily adhered to or enforced, incremental compliance should be agreed.

**4. Disaster prevention and mitigation:** the design should be consistent with known climatic conditions, be capable of withstanding appropriate wind-loading, and accommodate snow-loading in cold climates. Earthquake resistance and ground bearing conditions should be assessed. Recommended or actual changes to building standards or common building practices as a result of the disaster should be applied in consultation with local authorities and the disaster-affected population.

**5. Upgrading and maintenance:** as emergency shelter responses typically provide only a minimum level of enclosed space and material assistance, affected families will need to seek alternative means of increasing the extent or quality of the enclosed space provided. The form of construction and the materials used should enable individual households to incrementally adapt or upgrade the shelter or aspects of the design to meet their longer term needs and to undertake repairs using locally available tools and materials.

**6. Procurement and construction management:** a responsive, efficient and accountable supply chain and construction management system for materials; labour and site supervision should be established that includes sourcing, procurement, transportation, handling and administration, from point of origin to the respective site as required. (Oxfam 2004. The Sphere Project. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. Oxfam Publishing. Oxford. pp. 25-26)

