

Aceh, Indonesia, June 2005

Restoring Aceh, brick by brick

By Elizabeth Stevens, Oxfam America

"It looks so much better," said the photographer, as our truck crawled along the rutted road from Banda Aceh to the shore. Disbelief left me speechless. Stretching off into the distance in every direction was a rubble-strewn plain, interrupted here and there by buildings that looked like they'd been pummelled by a giant fist over and over and from every direction. It was a scene from the apocalypse, from Hiroshima or Dresden, and my mind rebelled at the thought that it could have been worse.



Reconstruction is underway in the tsunami devastated village of Alue Deah Baro, in Banda Aceh. Photo: Jim Holmes/Oxfam.

Jim Holmes, the photographer who accompanied me to Indonesia in early June, had last visited Banda Aceh before the bodies and heavy debris had been cleared away, so he had grounds for his cheery perspective. This time we were there to document Oxfam's tsunami relief work six months after the disaster and on our first day together, we travelled to the village of Alue Deah Baro, where reconstruction is underway.

The driver pulled over at a desolate spot, and I didn't immediately grasp that we had arrived. This was no village. There were none of the children, houses, goats, or shady palm trees that define an Acehnese town — just rubble, a few half-constructed buildings, a handful of people laying a foundation.

It was with an effort that Siti, my guide, drew my attention away from the scenes of wreckage in the distance to bring the village site into focus. There was a poultry barn, half-built. A tiny café was selling food and drinks. The community centre was almost complete. The men standing chest-deep in the water were gathering fish with new nets. New boats were on the way, I learned, and over the next few months Oxfam and an Indonesian aid agency will join forces with villagers to construct 140 houses here.

The palm sapling that flapped at my knee turned out to be one of 2,000 planted here by members of the community. Fifty thousand freshly planted mangrove saplings were

scattered about in the tidal muck — a future source of shoreline protection, edible shellfish, and wildlife habitat. Pak Jhon, the village leader, pointed to an added benefit for tsunami survivors: “The mangroves will keep the ocean out of sight”. In one of the many mind-bending shifts of perception I experienced that day, I realised that this sad-looking piece of land was on the verge of becoming a living, breathing village again, with children, houses, goats, palm trees and all.



Ibnu Sakdan takes part in the Oxfam-funded community replanting of mangroves in coastal mudbanks near Alue Beah Baro Village. Photo: Jim Holmes/Oxfam.

There are pressing unmet needs in Aceh, many stemming from the fact that far too many people are still living in tents and emergency housing, prevented from moving to permanent sites by complications around land ownership. The Indonesian government needs to make resolving land issues — in close consultation with the affected communities — its top reconstruction priority.

But in the two weeks that we travelled from village to village, our days were filled with visits to tsunami survivors who, with the help of tools, equipment and other support provided by aid agencies, are reviving their communities and their incomes. Tailors are sewing again, fishers are hauling in catches, and bakeries are up and running with stoves that work. Cash for work programs are helping people restore paddy fields, roads, and bridges.

And with incomes and activity come some benefits that are hard to measure: At a village gathering, a woman told me, “Before you helped us get back to work, we felt like chickens in a cage.” Her companions nodded agreement. “When we stay at home with nothing to do, we just think about the tsunami,” said another.



Oxfam has given seamstress Rewana financial support to get her business up and running again. Photo: Jim Holmes/Oxfam.

Jim’s wide-angle lens can capture the sweep of the destruction, but the recovery is best conveyed in a thousand close-up shots. This stage of the reconstruction is a mosaic of small changes, each appearing insignificant against the backdrop of the devastation, but all contributing to the quiet restoration of Aceh.

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