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# Women, Community Radio, and Post-Disaster Recovery Process

By Ade Tanesia

*Indonesian people call their country Ibu Pertiwi (Motherland). However, when disasters uninterruptedly come to this country, have we considered the interests of women, especially mothers on whose laps lie the Indonesian land?*

## Introduction

Experts divide disasters into two categories: the first consists of disasters caused by natural phenomena and the second consists of those caused by human behaviour. Indonesia is one country with the most number of these two categories of disasters. Geographically, Indonesia is an archipelago bordering on four tectonic plates: Asian Continent, Australian Continent, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean plates. On the Southern and Eastern parts of Indonesia, a volcanic arc stretches from Sumatra Island, Java Island, Nusa Tenggara Islands to Sulawesi Island, with many ancient volcanoes and lowlands partly dominated by marshes. This condition brings much potential for development but also makes Indonesia vulnerable to disasters like volcano eruption, earthquake, tsunami, flood, and landslide. Indonesia has one of the highest earthquake frequencies in the world, more than ten-fold than that of the United States (Arnold, 1986).

In addition to earthquakes and volcano eruptions, increasing human activities in exploring natural resources have also worsened the damage to Indonesian ecology. It is not surprising, therefore, that we often see media spectacles of floods, landslides, forest fire, and drought that come in swift succession. Moreover, disasters due to technological failure also occur today, with recent transportation accidents like the crash of Adam Air's and Garuda's aircrafts, and industrial accidents like *Lapindo* mud.

Another potential disaster, and as serious, lies in the demographic diversity of Indonesia. The population of Indonesia in 2004 reached 220 million,

with a wide diversity of ethnic groups, religions and customs. This diversity constitutes a valuable asset. However, because the fast population growth is not accompanied by appropriate policies and economic, social and infrastructural developments that are just and satisfactory, discrepancy is created, triggering social resentment. This condition can cause conflicts, which take the forms of social unrest, inter-ethnic, inter-religious and racial conflicts. In turn, these can develop and spiral into a national disaster.

Most disasters in these two categories had occurred in Indonesia in the last few years. While seeking to learn lessons from the occurrences, the government and many social groups have tried to cope with the accompanying risks. Natural disasters since 2004 have given Indonesia a new awareness—that people live in a disaster-prone country. For the Indonesian population, there is no choice but to befriend nature. Every natural phenomenon has a great potential to grow into a disaster when some particular factors like poverty, population density, poor education and gender inequity also intervene. However, we can learn from the emergency response in Aceh and Jogjakarta in 2004 and its disaster management.

In disaster management, the victims are often wrongfully considered a single entity and at times are treated the same with regard to the type of aid they need. In reality, however, the impacts of disaster on women and men are different. Gender analysis therefore is important in aid distribution because victims are mostly women, elderly people, and children.

In earthquake disasters, for example, many women become victims because they usually stay at home with their children. When an earthquake happens, they tend to save their children first and put their own lives in danger. In Aceh, many female dead bodies were found, hugging their children in their arms. In Jogjakarta, many women died and were

male. At that time, most women were staying at home and were not strong enough to run to higher places with children who were yet unable to walk (Oxfam, UNFPA, 2005). Other sources revealed that 170,000 women out of 180,000 died in the tsunami. Women who survived and were in refugee camps were more susceptible to illness than men. They faced risks, especially in reproductive health.

For female refugees who are breastfeeding, their infants face serious problems. Without nutritious food, the production of mother's milk for their infants can decrease significantly and babies get weaker. Women need formula milk. However, often they receive aid in milk that exceeded the time limit for consumption. Female refugees who are pregnant also experience malnutrition, and may hemorrhage and miscarry. If not taken seriously, these conditions can be fatal, as some cases show.

Nuraini (35), a refugee in Meulaboh, Aceh, was pregnant when the tsunami hit her *kampung* (village). It was a miracle that she and her unborn child survived. Waves dragged her several times into the deep, and she went deeper still until at last she grasped a piece of wood that brought her to shore. She gave birth about two weeks after the tsunami, but in the refugee tent, she ate only biscuits, rice, and instant noodles. No additional vitamin, protein, or milk were provided for her to recuperate. The condition inside the tent, which was very stifling and crowding, was not conducive for the child's health either. Many refugees also suffered from diarrhea, influenza, skin diseases, hence also threatening the health of her vulnerable baby. Her suffering was aggravated by the lack of sanitary napkins, diapers, and baby clothes. To keep her baby warm, she



*In refugee camps, women survivors face serious problems as they not only lack nutritious food and clothing for themselves but for their children as well.*

found in the act of covering their children from debris. In Sri Lanka, there were many female victims because they could hardly run in their long *sari* (clothes). It will also be noted that the Sri Lankan culture requires every woman to cover up her mouth with a scarf. It is not surprising that in an emergency situation they automatically reach out for their scarves. Apparently, during the tsunami, this custom had made women slow in saving their own lives.

### **Gender-Responsive Post-Disaster Rehabilitation**

The earthquake and tsunami in Aceh have resulted in female death rate thirty to forty percent higher than that of the

covered it with anything she could get hold of. Nuraini's condition showed only too well that the abundant aid Aceh received did not sufficiently consider women's needs.

Something elemental but is often considered minor is women's menstruation. In emergency conditions, women need sanitary napkins for their period and when these are unavailable, women just use any cloth they can use. Unhygienic cloth can cause new vaginal diseases. Mirna, a refugee in Blang Bintang, Aceh, for example, said that she had not changed her sanitary napkin for two days. She had tried to find sanitary napkins at the aid camps but failed.

Aceh women who live within a firm religious tradition often face specific problems as well. The refugee barracks often do not have separating screens which makes it difficult for women to have privacy for changing clothes and breastfeeding. Women do not feel comfortable in open spaces which they have to share with men. This is because in such spaces sexual harassment easily happen. Because bathing, washing, and

toilet facilities are very limited, the refugees always have to queue. For an Acehese woman who needs to cover up her whole body, it is very difficult to live within such constraints.

Problems described above show that the impacts of disaster on women are distinct so that they also need distinct kinds of aid. During an emergency response to a disaster, aid given to the victims often does not fit women's special needs. Most materials given to them are instant noodles, rice, and a wide variety of canned food. These things are important, but do not suffice; donors often forget to give female underwear, female clothes that fit the local culture (for instance, long dresses for Acehese culture), children's food, sanitation fabric, and other women's distinct needs.

The other danger is from trafficking agents who look for female teenagers who are still in trauma and have nobody to protect them. Job offers can be very attractive for these girls, even for mothers who have daughters and do not know how to make a living for their families. The social structure dominated by men also decreases women's chances of communicating their needs. Having domestic burdens and waiting for aid, women spend most of their time in the refugee camps. Women who do not have male relatives to fight for aid often are deprived of appropriate aid. This occurred in Jogjakarta, where coordination for aid distribution was slow and people in-need had to wait for a long time at sub-districts' offices. When the aid was distributed, people jostled and struggled, and the strongest got the aid faster.

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*Accurate information on the survivors' needs will enable government and donors to provide appropriate and timely aid.*

losing their husbands in battles. This group is named *Pekka*, which stands for *Perempuan Kepala Keluarga* (Female Family Head). The women have succeeded in organising themselves to fulfill their domestic needs. For example, after the tsunami, these widows' capability to organise proved very helpful in the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation. All members of *Pekka* instantly set up shelters and public kitchens, and organised aid distribution. When this group became the door and conduit for aid, the women exercised more control in managing aid coming into villages and were able to pay attention to all of women's needs.

Women's participation was also seen in Plered Sub-district, Bantul Regency, after a tectonic earthquake hit the region on May 27, 2006. The disaster killed approximately 5,000 people and also destroyed people's livelihoods. Facilitated by *Solidaritas Perempuan Kinasih* (Kinasih Women Solidarity), women in Plered Sub-district established a Women Centre which became a centre for women's activities. The women organised

themselves and made a savings and credit organisation which could provide women with business capital in order to restart their daily economy. As a result, business groups like sewing, lobster farming, and cassava chips home industries were established and proved helpful in obtaining additional income for families.

The importance of women's participation during post-disaster rehabilitation was also underscored in the case of Mitch storm disaster in 1998 in Guatemala and Honduras. Women in these countries immediately built houses, saved water reserves and built shelters even as they faced sexual harassment after the storm. Aply, an NGO ran a campaign that brought the message, "Violence to women is a disaster which men can prevent." The campaign was effective enough to make all social groups realise that reconstruction cannot run well without women's participation.

The earthquake of 6.4 on the Richter scale that hit Maharashtra, India, in 1993 is another example of women's positive role in disasters. The quake had destroyed more than 2,000 villages. In the Maharashtra district, women's groups played important roles in many fields as well as in supporting the government in planning the reconstruction. They were trained to build safe settlements, and to redesign their homes in ways that addressed the needs of women and children. They also successfully initiated a women savings programme.

### **Communication Access for Victims**

In Indonesia, coordination and information networks that donor institutions needed were scarce. Several

weaknesses in disaster management include the following:

- No accurate information flows existed on the condition of disaster zones, such as the number of casualties, damage, victims' needs, etc.
- There was weak coordination among governmental institutions, between the government and donor institutions, and among the donor institutions themselves. For example, most donor institutions do assessment on the victims' needs. In

- The need for sustainable information for people in disaster zones.

Information is crucial so that the infrastructure for accessing communication is built. Victims, especially the women, need to voice out their needs and opinions during the emergency response, the reconstruction and the rehabilitation phases. Community radio is one form of media that is effective as information and communication channel.

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### **The Community Radio's Role in Handling Disaster**

Community radio plays an important role in all disaster mitigation stages: early disaster warning, emergency response, recovery and reconstruction. In Indonesia, community radios have been used in all these three stages. People in Central Kalimantan, for example, have used radios to anticipate forest fire and as an early warning system. In the emergency response stage, community radios help in communicating conditions at disaster zones. Finally, in the stage of recovery, community radios function to support trauma healing processes, provide entertainment, monitor aid distribution and reconstruction in a village.

the process, victims get confused because they are questioned too many times but the aid does not come. A particular design of information system is needed so that donor institutions do not duplicate programmes and can use one database centre as reference.

- The lack of research on disaster zones for rehabilitation process.
- The lack of access to information and communication for victims, both on how to receive the aid and how to communicate refugees' needs.

### **Community Radio in Emergency Response Stage**

A month after the tsunami in Aceh, Combine Resource Institution built a community-based information system, an emergency response stage called Atjeh Emergency Radio Network (AERNET). As a community information and communication network, it facilitated the establishment

of communication media in some areas, including the community radio. The network had five community radios functioning as its nodes in these areas; *Swara Meulaboh FM* in Meulaboh, West Aceh, *Suara Sinabang FM* in Sinabang, Simelue, *Seba FM* in Jantho, Aceh Besar, *Al Jumbur FM* in Simpang Mamplam, Bireun, and *Samudera FM* in Geudong, North Aceh. These had brought significant changes to Acehnese people living in areas with community radios.

Regency, with a limited number of personnel, some of whom were refugee barrack dwellers, had been able to produce creative programmes. For example, they had produced a programme of religious proselytising by airing religious speeches or *pantun* (traditional poetry), and *Nazam* (Aceh folktales). Radios kept broadcasting, for entertainment, Islamic songs and songs sung by Acehnese artists.

*Swara Meulaboh FM* produced an information package concerning aid monitoring activities in Meulaboh, West Aceh. This community radio broadcasted much information around recovery in Aceh. It often broadcasted both live and delayed field reporting.

Community radio had also played an important role after a flash flood which killed hundreds and caused great material loss and hit four regencies in South Sulawesi. To cope with this situation, community radios in South Sulawesi played vital roles by setting up information and communication networks, which worked to provide the public with information on floods in Jenepono, Bantaeng, Bulukumba, and Sinjai Regencies.

Two community radios in Bantaeng Regency and Bulukumba Regency broadcast information through other community radios scattered in several regencies outside the flood zones, among them Makasar, Takalar, Bone, Pangkep, Parepare, Tana Toraja, Mamuju, and Palopo. The radios in these regencies obtained and shared information through several ways, like doing live report, sharing information through short message service (SMS), searching the Internet, and quoting articles from the print mass media. Muhammad Amir from MBS FM in



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“...community radio broadcasted much information around recovery in Aceh.”

Through these radios, information on aid, health, and missing persons, information on survivors, education, and trauma healing were packed in simple programmes and were widely broadcast. Although the programmes seemed to be whatever the radios were able to come up with, people enthusiastically welcomed them. The programmes attracted a high level of participation. *Samudera FM*, which was situated in Mancang hamlet, Geudong Village, Samudera Sub-district, North Aceh



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Many women participated in running the radios of ARRNET, without necessarily influencing the radio programmes on reproductive health, education, and livelihood activities.

Bantaeng and Adji Mamat from Champuss FM in Bulukumba shared information with others through SMS. Unfortunately, these still prove inadequate.

The radios used telephones to do live reports from Bantaeng and Bulukumba. Some also used SMS to share information, accessed online media and quoted articles from print. All these community radios helped one another in spreading information about the disaster, and in raising aid for their respective areas. This significant role was intensely felt in Bantaeng Regency. MBS FM gave information once in two hours according to the pattern of information released through the shortwave band from Bantaeng Information Centre run by Organisasi Amatir Radio Indonesia (ORARI) of Bantaeng. Muhammad Amir of MBS FM himself controlled the information in ORARI's Information Centre, and transmitted it to MBS FM. This was then relayed through FM to the public of Bantaeng. Bantaeng made MBS FM an information centre where they could

obtain information around the flood disaster. Seven days after the flood, MBS broadcast flood information three times a day—morning, noon, and night.

When an earthquake hit Jogjakarta and Klaten on 27 May 2006, community radios also provided the public with much-needed information. *Pamor* Community Radio, for example, informed its audience about the money the government had promised to give as subsidy for financing the reconstruction of their houses. *Angkringan* Radio immediately moved the operation in one of personnel's house because its studio was badly damaged. In that house, the radio set up an emergency studio and kept broadcasting songs to entertain the refugees in tents and raise their spirits.

### **Community Radio in the Stage of Post-Disaster Recovery**

After the stage of emergency response, AERNET programme was continued with Aceh Nias Reconstruction Radio Network (ARRNET). This programme had established 20 community radios in various Aceh region which were hit by the tsunami. Community radios which were integrated in ARRNET were directed to become bull horns for the people's voice in their post-disaster recovery. Many women participated in running the radios of ARRNET, without necessarily influencing the radio programmes. *Sukma FM* in Aceh Besar was one of the radios which collaborated with *Pekka* organisation. Through this radio, the organisation ran a talk show to discuss their savings and credit activity, and sought to promote their social programmes.



According to Yunidar from *Pekka*, previously they had to go around announcing their invitation for meetings, but this time, they could do so through radio. They could share knowledge on reproductive health and education as well. In *Pekka* itself, mothers had a variety of businesses, like duck husbandry, Aceh-motif embroidery, and cake home industry. At times, *Pekka* shared extra knowledge about business enterprises. Mrs. Yunidar emphasised that the radio had really helped the women in her village. Although they had not been fully active because they were also busy taking care of their homes, they were also supportive of *Pekka*'s programmes, such as providing scholarship and nutritious food for children, among others.

Irmawati, a personnel of Raja Community Radio in Pidie, Aceh, says that community radio has a great potential as communication channel for women. All this time, women did not have enough access to decision making on issues that are important to their lives. Through radio, they can speak out their ideas. In fact, the Raja Community Radio, established as a response to recovery in Aceh, had a programme titled *Keluarga Harmoni* (Harmonious Family), in which women tackled issues on health, children, education, and handicraft.

## Conclusion

Women's participation in community radio in Indonesia leaves much to be desired. In a community radio, women usually become announcers, but it does not guarantee they are able to bring women's interests into the programmes.

With regard to the natural disasters in Indonesia, community radios proved effective in supporting the aid distribution coordination, spreading information about the disasters, entertaining the victims who stayed in tents and barracks, as well as becoming learning tools for students unable to go to damaged schools. However, women particular, had not used community radios thoroughly in their struggle for their interests. Nevertheless, Sukma FM in Aceh had become a bull horn for *Pekka* to popularise their social programmes, and Raja Community Radio's *Keluarga Harmoni*, tried to raise women and family issues.

Gender analysis has not figured much in the process of disaster mitigation in Indonesia. Community-based media, like radio, have not systematically incorporated women's issues into their programme. As stated by Irmawati from Aceh, she has so many dreams to raise women issues in his region through community radios, but it needs time to realise. For sure, community radio constitutes a medium with great potential for women in their struggle for their interests. ■

**Ade Tanesia** works in Combine Resource Institution, a non-profit institution which has as its focus the development of community-based information networks. She graduated from the Anthropology Department, University of Indonesia. She used to manage *Aikon!*, an Alternative magazine, and *Latitudes* magazine. Presently, she manages *Kombinasi*, a Combine Resource Institution magazine on community-based information system.

*This paper, originally in Indonesian, was translated to English by Thomas Widiyanto.*