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Recovery in Aceh: Towards A Strategy of Emergence

Daniel Curran
Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard

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*Most of us come from liberal democracies … why is it that, when disaster strikes
and we move in to help, we all suddenly become Soviet-style central planners?*
-- dispatch from Banda Aceh, February 2005

When the tsunami struck South Asia on the bright clear morning of December 26, 2004, nothing about it was subtle. It was sudden, without warning, devastating, unprecedented in modern memory, catastrophic. Thousands upon thousands died almost instantly, tens of thousands were displaced, missing, injured. Whole communities were swept away, others left in complete ruins and chaos. And all of that was almost instantly obvious to any observer on the scene, and nearly as obvious even to a remote observer who had access to direct feed video and news commentary from more than one of the affected locations. Within hours of the tragedy, that included nearly everyone in the modern wired world; video of one scene of destruction followed another, continuously, for days on end.

And so the world responded. It opened its heart, and a geyser of help erupted, surging toward the afflicted. A blizzard of organizations geared up; an army of responders mobilized; a torrent of aid flooded toward the region. The experienced organizations knew in advance what they would find: untold thousands of displaced, traumatized people, many with shattered families and devastated community systems, with no visible means of support, severed from sources of food, housing, shelter, medical care, even in some cases clothing. Social infrastructure in ruins; transport and communication nearly impossible in the most severely affected areas. A human tragedy on a grand scale, unfolding in real time, with some very predictable needs – and no time to lose in delivering the solutions.

The experienced organizations had seen it before; they had learned how to cope, and they had well-designed and practiced responses ready to mobilize, defined down to the individual pallets of supplies. They knew how many units of antibiotics and how much food should accompany a pallet of cooking gear, how many tents should be delivered at the same time as a metric ton of rice. The experts knew that refugees would come to (or would be shown or moved to) camps of some form (to facilitate coordination of relief efforts), and knew how to organize those camps where refugees would congregate, looking for food, shelter, medical help, a chance to find relatives separated from them in those frantic moments of invasion from the sea. They knew they needed to create and resource places where the displaced multitudes could start over, from which they could rebuild their families, lives, communities, and livelihoods.

And so organize they did. Agencies – the UN, international NGOs, elements of US and British and other military forces, and dozens of others – descended on the regions of impact. Planeloads of people and supplies materialized. Headquarters were established, supply depots built, fleets of vehicles brought in or assembled to enable local distribution of relief commodities. In the face of an obvious and well-defined need, an organized, commensurate response – experienced, expert people with only a desire to help, providing resources to sustain life and health in the short run, and to provide opportunities for rebuilding over the longer run – arose and began designing and implementing itself.

General Distribution in Meulaboh, Aceh, January 2005

In the very short run – during what might be called the "immediate life safety challenge" period, lasting from something like a few days in mildly affected areas to something like a few weeks in the more devastated areas – this response was well-targeted to the critical needs of affected communities. In areas suddenly devastated and cut off by the destruction of roads, bridges, and communications systems, there were desperate needs for food, clean water, basic health and sanitation, and medical treatment – and few alternative ways to deliver any of than other than by

the intervention of organizations with access to resources and means of delivery (which in some areas meant reliance on military air and sealift).

So the immediate experience of the arriving waves of workers from relief agencies reinforced their sense that what was needed was what they knew how to do, that what they were providing was what was needed, that their repertoire was well-matched to the situation. And so the flow continued to grow – people around the world donated money for the relief effort, and agencies receiving those funds mobilized their reserves and bought materiel and hired workers and created a continuously rising tide of people and supplies toward the affected areas.

And they quickly overran the (remaining) local infrastructure. Airports were almost instantly clogged. Relief supplies – from bags of rice to pallets of bottled water to boxes of antibiotics, tents, and cooking supplies – rapidly began to pile up in depots and warehouses. Relatively quickly, the most immediate needs were met, and – to the great credit of the responding agencies – met well. But the flow of aid continued unabated – and, indeed, continued to increase – for additional weeks thereafter. Stacks of basic supplies continued to pile up.

Now what? Having successfully met the critical short run needs and stabilized the life-safety situation (basic food, water, sanitation, shelter, and medical care) for the immediately affected populations – and, in some ways more to the point, having either raised or received funds and other forms of support from individual donors, businesses, agencies, and governments – what were the relief and development agencies now to do? To what should they turn their attention? What should they be trying to accomplish? How should they now be organized?

Let's begin by looking at what they *did* do.

Centralized action and the forces that support it

> *Following the emergency phase (which lasted a very short time), the international community brought in dozens of experts in fisheries, agriculture, and urban planning. We now discuss large-scale economic recovery and logistical capacities to meet the needs of the people. We hold meetings with government officials and expatriate representatives for information gathering, assessments, data analysis, strategic planning and centralized coordination. We are attempting to design a solution that matches the size of the problem.*
>   -- dispatch from Banda Aceh, late January 2005

Some centralized systems work very efficiently and effectively. Firefighting, together with many other forms of immediate responses to accidents and disasters, is almost universally carried out through a centralized organization, and generally for good reasons. The responsible institution develops experts, builds their expertise and skills, relies on their judgment and (trained) instincts. This is a "top-down" strategy, and in many circumstances it is overwhelmingly the best approach. For success, it requires that those at the top be able to understand, with reasonable clarity, the actual situation on the ground, and that the situation be susceptible to centralized reaction. When those in the centralized response apparatus have a way to understand the realities of the situation(s), can form an accurate bigger picture of the

combined situation across affected areas, and have available to them routines and processes and the associated resources (skilled people, equipment, supplies) that are called for – that is, where their expertise and reserves of and access to resources are well tuned to the true circumstances on the ground – centrally-organized and directed action can be efficient, effective, and highly productive.

Photo taken during Aceh Central Planning Meeting, February 2005

Agencies in Banda Aceh, for many good reasons, had deployed in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy largely in centralized organizational forms. First, like most organizations, they are largely organized in centralized ways to start with. Second (at least in the short run) the situation seemed to call for the kind of emergency response that is best directed with centralized command authority. Immediate physical needs could be reasonably quickly and accurately assessed, and what was difficult was not figuring out what to do, but getting it done quickly and effectively – situational characteristics cried out for quick decisions and clean execution, organizational attributes that centralized systems, at their best, can indeed deliver. Third, the deploying agencies were receiving funds and support from donors (of various forms), who wanted assurance that those funds were being spent efficiently and to good effect. Answerable for the handling of (suddenly massive) flows of resources, they naturally sought to control, safeguard, and track their uses of resources. Knowing that it was they who would be held accountable for what happened to the funds extended to them, they instinctively and reflexively sought to control the decisions to make sure that funds were being allocated appropriately (and, in particular, not being stolen).

The forces naturally acting upon these agencies, thus, encouraged them to continue applying a centralized paradigm to organizing their actions. Of course, they all understood that their *raison d'être* was to improve conditions on the ground – that is, to serve their "downstream" clients – but many of the forces in their daily lives oriented them to paying a good deal of attention to their "upstream" constituents – to their donors and supporters, many of them quite remote from the actual situation. Visits of high level dignitaries and officials, coordination meetings with

other agencies, requests for reports about uses of funds from their higher headquarters – these and myriad other daily transactions at the hastily-established local headquarters offices reinforced operation within a centralized command and control structure. The points of delivery of the aid were many, diverse, often difficult to reach, seen by most people working at headquarters only briefly and sporadically. The center of gravity of these organizations was where most of their more senior managers, their equipment, and their supplies were – at their local headquarters. And many of their key relationships were with their higher authorities, and thus a good bit of their attention was devoted to maintaining, servicing, and providing answers, reports, and information within those "upstream" relationships.

> *We participate in several key working groups on recovery planning for Aceh– the main ones being the Livelihoods Sectoral Group and the UN Interagency Steering Committee. Most agencies are now in an assessment phase. At a recent livelihoods meeting, the representatives from the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) all reported on their fielding of separate consultant teams in fisheries, farming, shelter, or water systems.*
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> *These assessments will take place over the next four weeks with final reports to be compiled sometime around the end of February. From those reports, we will plan strategies. At the same time, we distribute papers asking partner agencies to report on the locations of their programs to be centrally mapped and shared. We dedicate enormous energy and long discussions towards building the planning capacity of government ministries and their local counterparts.*
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> *The conceptual framework underlying this approach seems to hold that a small group should have perfect information upon which to centrally plan a response. It is a big solution approach to a major problem.*
> -- dispatch from Banda Aceh, early February 2005

Two additional features of this particular disaster appear to have further enhanced the already-strong central tendencies of most of the agencies involved in the relief effort. First, perhaps in part by virtue of its scale and salient visual images, the tsunami and its ongoing relief efforts attracted nearly unprecedented international attention, and therefore galvanized the focus of high-level political leaders, who visited the area in droves. A parade of senior officials – the Secretary General of the UN, the US Secretary of State, and former heads of state given special missions to help raise funds for ongoing relief efforts, to mention but a few – came through the affected areas. Naturally, they visited the headquarters areas, where they could efficiently visit large numbers of the people working with or in their organizations, and could tell assembled workers and managers how important their work was – at least implicitly (and sometimes also explicitly) reinforcing the orientation towards those upstream and outside … for, after all, their very presence reminded people in the headquarters areas that they were being carefully watched by, and were accountable to, people at the most senior levels of their organizations and the international structures that their organizations participated in and were part of.
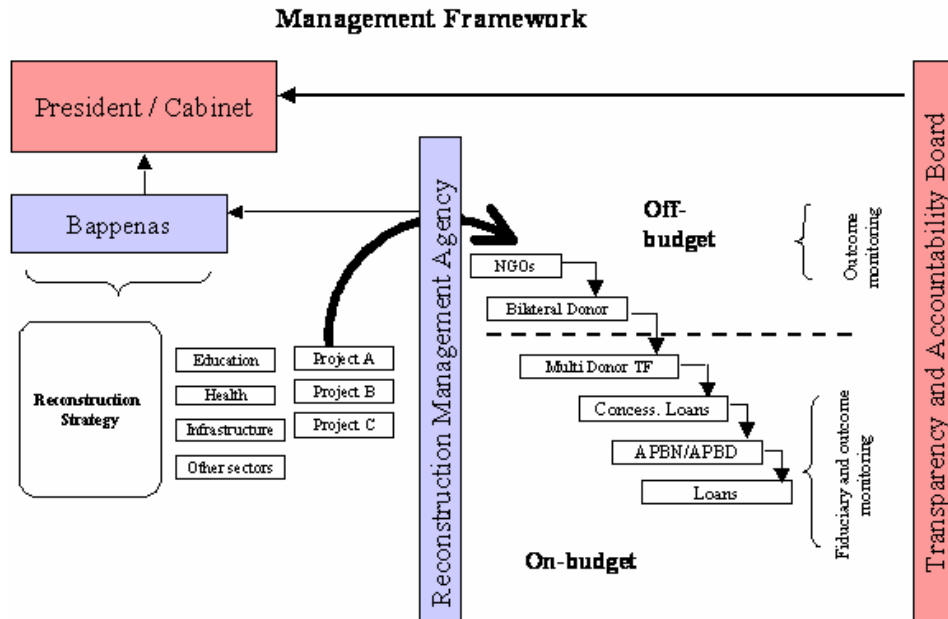
One of 200 slides included in Aceh Master Blueprint Plan for Recovery

Of course, these officials also visited the field sites where relief work was in progress – the camps where relief aid was being distributed, the villages where reconstruction was underway, the road-rebuilding and bridge repair projects that were in the process of reconnecting devastated communities to the outside world. But in doing so, they were affected by a second, even more unusual and distinctive feature of this particular disaster – that the most salient visual images they saw provided in some ways a highly accurate and in other ways a highly misleading impression of the overall situation. The highest level visitors, pressed for time and making appearances at many locations, tended to be shown the same tours, largely by helicopter.

 To see anything useful from a helicopter, one has to fly at a relatively low altitude. The views provided from such tours are thus mid-level overflights interspersed with narrow ground-level views; the perspective offered is thus from relatively narrow to extremely narrow. Typically, visitors were shown the areas of greatest destruction. Viewed from the air, these were indeed impressive – extended wastelands of near-complete destruction, the former foundations of whole villages that had been completely swept away readily visible from a moderate altitude. Flying along the coastline of northwest Sumatra (the most intensely affected area of all those struck by the tsunami) at helicopter altitude, one saw mile after mile of utter devastation, with virtually nothing left standing in the areas that had been inundated. Landing in an affected area, one was literally surrounded by heaps of leveled buildings and infrastructure in all directions, by fishing boats deposited on top of crushed homes, by a mosque left as the only building still standing in an otherwise leveled community.

These views are, of course, completely accurate in the sense that all real direct observations are accurate: from the perspective we are offered, we see what can be seen from that perspective. There was indeed widespread, intense destruction, and that impression was accurately conveyed to each visitor in turn. Many spoke movingly of the unprecedented scale of destruction.

But there is another sense in which these observations were highly *mis*leading. From a wider angle view – from a higher altitude than most helicopters will fly – one is struck not so much by how much was destroyed, but instead by what a small fraction of the area was actually affected. The peculiar nature of a tsunami is that it is exclusively a shoreline phenomenon. It has an edge – often a very sharp edge. On one side of the street, utter destruction – buildings leveled, all useful man-made objects swept completely away. On the other side of the street, completely untouched houses, businesses, a still-functioning and capable community, with deep reserves both physical and emotional, and a substantial accumulation of social and human capital – relationships and knowledge on which communities and livelihoods are built … and with the help of which neighboring devastated areas can be rebuilt.

Photo taken from USAID helicopter in Aceh, February 2005

To be sure, some whole communities were destroyed. Villages on narrow flat areas against the mountainside by the sea in some cases simply had ceased to exist. Other areas – mainly wide and flat deltas built at the foot of mountains next to the sea by rivers meandering out of the hills – were affected quite far inland, in some cases as far as several miles inland. Much critical infrastructure – roads, especially, but also other forms of communication – was concentrated along the shore, and thus differentially affected. But as we turn the lens to a wider angle, or look at the scene from a higher altitude, what comes into view is how much area, how many people, what rich resources, what a large fraction of the total of the society was *un*touched by the waves.

The affected communities were devastated, to be sure. But the survivors stood not, as commonly seen, in the center of a wasteland, with destruction as far as the eye can see in all directions – but, instead, in the midst of a narrow strip of destruction located immediately adjacent to a sizeable, vibrant, remaining society with substantial resources and resilience. To see only the destruction, one has to have one's gaze focused in the "right" direction – *along* the axis of

destruction, along the narrow strip of devastated coastline. Turning 90 degrees – facing away from the ocean, looking at what was generally left unphotographed immediately behind the camera, one often sees the social infrastructure from which the true recovery will inevitably actually be built.

Photo taken from helicopter in Tsunami zone in Northern Aceh, February 2005

Something was thus missing from most of the pictures, and from the main visual perspective offered to most of the visitors. They came to see the destruction, and that is what they saw. One of the most powerful biases to which people are subject is that we tend to overweight our own direct experience. A parade of senior level visitors expected to see destruction, came to see destruction, was flown along the thin strip of destruction -- and saw almost nothing but devastating destruction.

Reinforced in their understanding of the nature of the challenge, they then returned to headquarters and re-emphasized the need for external, centrally-organized and coordinated relief and aid – processes that emphasized the lack of local resources of all kinds and that thus missed an essential and abiding truth … that, in the end, most of the work would be done by, and most of the resources would come from within, the local communities themselves.

Supporting decentralized action: the strategy of "emergence"

> *Meanwhile, the fishermen and farmers of Banda Aceh are moving ahead. They are returning to their homes and restarting their lives, with or without our help. As we conduct assessments to familiarize ourselves with what they already know and try to consolidate information to devise a central strategy, they move on with their lives. They do not want to live in camps. And they do not want to wait.*

Layueng is a coastal village south of Banda Aceh. Prior to the disaster, the village supported 3,500 fishermen and farmers. Following the tsunami, the 400 surviving villagers, mostly men, spent two days in the hills and then walked over mountains to arrive in a displacement camp. After two weeks of shock and rest, they wanted to go home. Most of them have returned, walking 20 kilometers and fording 11 rivers where bridges previously stood, bringing food and their meager belongings with them.

They are well organized. Communal decision-making seems to come naturally. With astonishing rapidity, they have hurled themselves into the tasks of recovery. Together they have worked to clean and clear the land and bury the dead. They have built two large log houses with salvaged wood and materials. They received shovels from our organization and have dug a new well. They have outlined plans for latrines and are talking about ways to get a few boats out on the water.
        -- dispatch from Banda Aceh, mid-February 2005

The main feature of the centralized action approach could be characterized as "intelligent design." The basic idea is that experts can survey the situation, understand its contours and the needs within it, create coherent and comprehensive plans to address those needs, mobilize the relevant resources, and direct the efficient execution of the planned programs. Omniscience – or, at least, superior perspective, grasp, and capacity – is an implicit underlying assumption of this approach. It imagines that a high performance in aiding the afflicted can be constructed through an intelligently operated design and execution process. It sees high performance as something that can be directly produced, something an organization can be driven to create.

Fishermen in Layueng building their bunkhouse, January 2005

Some social activities are indeed best created in this way. As we described earlier, the critical life-safety rescue period at the beginning of a disaster is probably best organized through intelligent centralized design and action. But many other social activities cannot be effectively

produced this way. In many cases, central observers will not be able to perceive, collect, organize, and/or analyze the relevant features of the situation sufficiently well to provide a reliable approach to action … or will not be able to organize themselves to produce the required actions. The situation may be too complicated, or the data too hard to observe or collect, the analysis too difficult, or the response too complex or organize and execute.

If centralized action isn't going to be effective, or can't be organized, what then will happen instead? And what, if anything, can we do that might positively affect the outcomes? The actions of the fishermen of Layueng provide a suggestion of an alternative approach. They are acting as *de*centralized agents, making their own way as they see best with what is available to them. Results will certainly flow from what they do.

Viewed more broadly – taking them together with the myriad others in other villages making their own decisions, developing their own designs, and taking their own actions within what is feasibly under their control (or influence) – we can see the fishermen of Layueng as part of a *system* – a setting within which outcomes, good or bad, will be generated, and within which the outcomes that will be produced can and will be affected by the conditions and characteristics of the system. By virtue of the fact that it is inhabited by people with "agency" – interests and resources and, therefore, choices that they can and will make – this system will intrinsically be *adaptive*. It will be driven by the self- and collectively-perceived interests of the agents within it, as they seek intelligently to navigate the waters available to them. Thus, a key feature of this system is that it will evolve through *decentralized, intelligent adaptation*.

This basic general character of the system, together with its more specific parameters and "rules" – who has what authority or resources or property rights or capabilities – will drive the results that flow from it. To put it the other way, the results that flow from this system will "emerge" from its conditions and features. A relatively new and still rapidly developing branch of organizational theory, the theory of "emergence," focuses on this form of description of systems and seeks to deduce the relationship between the conditions, features, rules of operation, and other characteristics of the system and the results that it will produce.[1]

What would a "strategy" based on the notion of emergence look like? Such a strategy would recognize that results will be driven by the prevailing conditions – which agents, with what information and interests, will have access to what resources and capacities and will have what authority to make decisions and carry out actions? The strategy would thus be to affect these *conditions* – the basic operating rules and parameters of the system – in ways that will tend to push the results in a positive direction.

For example, if one of the challenges preventing the success of centralized action is that it is difficult to understand the myriad of details about the many different locations in which actions need to be taken, a strategy of emergence allows the results to be driven by the decentralized individual actors in those many locations, who may be in a better position to know and naturally

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[1] For example, the social welfare and economic growth experienced in societies with free market economic systems can be viewed as "emerging" from the rules of the market system of organization – free agents seeking individual welfare and profits under rules designed to produce competition. Similarly, the phenomenon of evolution can be understood as "emergent:" species can be seen as "emerging" from the conditions of ecological systems that favor the population expansion of better-adapted individuals.

to understand the implications of the local details that will affect results and may therefore be in a better position to choose which actions are most likely to succeed. If that is so, then providing those local agents with more authority and more resources with which they can choose and then act may be a better approach than trying to carry out (or impose) centralized decision-making and planning.

Community boat recovery near Meulaboh, Aceh, February 2005

This approach views outcomes as generated by underlying conditions and the intelligent actions of the many (rather than the intelligent centralized design and direction of the few). It sees outcomes and high performance not as driven from an organization by intelligent design and leadership, but as emerging from, and thus *enabled* by the creation of conditions that favor better results.

Viewed from this perspective, the question for international relief operations is this: how can we best support the decentralized intelligent adaptive responses of the people whose lives have been affected by this tragedy? What resources – funds, equipment, supplies, information – can we provide that will enable them to build better-adapted actions?

Emergence is an argument against centralized design. It holds that, given the right conditions, complex and organized – and effective – societies can and will emerge spontaneously from a disaster. In a functioning society such as Aceh; general well-being, growth, and recovery develop from an accumulation of actions by individuals. Emergence defines the task of outside relief agencies as giving the affected people the opportunities and resources to interact on their own and a village will soon emerge.

Faith and trust in the individual is central to the concept of emergence. It holds that, within each fisherman, is the ability – the knowledge, skill, and motivation – to fish again. Within each farmer is the ability to farm, honed over the centuries, and handed down by his or her ancestors. Each individual has the innate desire to return home. And each has the intelligence, capability and, most importantly, the right, to determine how to work towards his or her own prosperity.

Improvised river crossing near Banda Aceh, January 2005

The task of relief agencies then becomes the task of supporting intelligent and motivated action at the village level. If agencies quickly provide the conditions (resources and decision-making powers) to the people of Layeung; a fishing village and economy will soon emerge. By contrast, a planned fishing economy that would be designed, constructed, and imposed from above is much less likely to succeed. The form of the recovery will be unpredictable because the knowledge and choices are imbedded within the people. But life itself is an emergent phenomenon. Regardless of what we attempt to plan, emergence will happen.

Obviously, emergence will not always work, and will not always be the best approach. In what circumstances is emergence most likely to succeed? First, when local agents have good information about conditions or about actions that are likely to address those conditions effectively. For example, if outcomes will depend on careful customization to take account of highly variable local mores and customs that would be difficult for central agents to understand or to successfully adapt to, then a decentralized strategy is likely to be more successful than central control. Second, locally-driven action is likely to work best when understanding the bigger picture is not essential to determining what to do locally. By contrast, if the usefulness of local investments is contingent on their fitting seamlessly into a frame constructed by others – for example, in building a communications system, in which interoperability is essential – independent local decision-making without central coordination is likely to be problematic.

Finally, emergence is likely to provide better results than central action as viewed by the central actors themselves only when there is a high degree of alignment between the goals of the central actors and the goals of the individual decentralized agents. If, in the view of the central authorities, the goals of local agents will not serve the collective interests well, then, obviously,

providing them with greater autonomy will not advance the social purposes (at least, the social purposes as seen by the central authorities).

The tribal response

Major components of the typical centralized approach to disaster relief appears to be driven by the mores and customs of the relief and development tribe. The UN and many relief agencies have developed a series of steadily improving "relief approaches" that have been honed over the past few decades in experiences such as Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia, Liberia, and Sudan. These approaches include better coordination among agencies during the emergency response; early commitment towards involving people in decision-making; and an early effort to build the capacity of government to plan and coordinate.

Some of these approaches have been further honed in non-emergency development experiences across the world, including working to build the capacity of the government to plan and coordinate; helping to organize and support local NGOs and other civil society actors; bringing the vulnerable and marginalized into the market by providing training in money management and business growth; and providing training in more efficient and sustainable methods of farming and fishing.

With these centralized approaches, agencies have developed strong arguments against simply providing resources to villagers for their own development. The most common include: (a) they lack the concepts of saving and investment; (b) it exposes them to predation by the powerful or demands from family; and, finally, (c) it is difficult to equitably determine whom to support and with how much.

A further reason offered by some within traditional relief agencies for hesitation and centralized planning, coordination, and control is that the crisis is an opportunity to rectify many other things that were wrong before. For example, fisheries experts believed that the Aceh fishery was overfished and in the process of depletion before the tsunami, and many wanted to take the crisis as an opportunity to fundamentally reconstruct fishery practices into a more sustainable form. Fixing what was broken before the disaster, however, was directly at odds with getting people quickly back to work at livelihoods as they understood them, using skills that they already had.

> *I continue to hear arguments from experts about the wonderful opportunities to "…produce better managed fisheries…" and "….teach micro-credit…" and "…build civil society.." All of these may be true, but at what cost in time and energy? And is it fair to make them wait?*
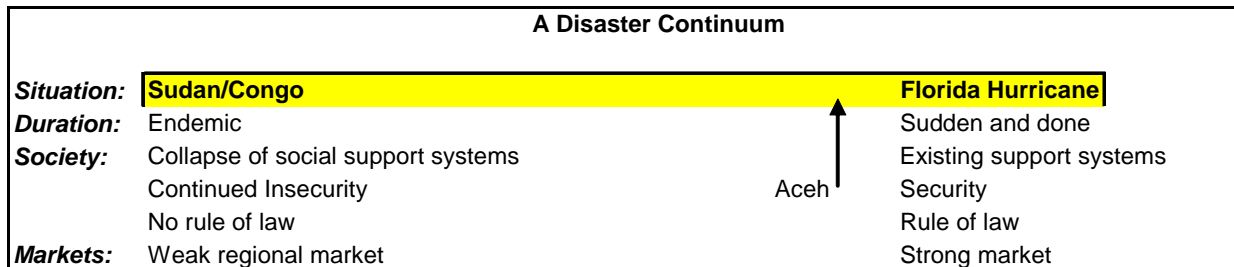> -- dispatch from Banda Aceh, mid-February 2005

Those within the relief "tribe" hold worries and doubts that hinder adopting a strategy of emergence. The strongest among these are an unwillingness to accept risk, a fear of failure and exposure, and criticism from within.

The Right Analogy

On a continuum of disasters, one can imagine on the one end is a dire and endemic situation in which people are caught in a cycle of violence and insecurity with few supports and little hope for localized recovery without wider and broader political changes, and where long-term violence has depleted social capital and human capital so that indigenous capacity for resilience and adaptation has been eroded. (Sudan may be a good example.). In such a situation, there may be little alternative to central planning, political advocacy, and careful development programs. The motivation for recovery of individuals may be low because a displacement camp is frequently a step up from their previous existence.

On the other end of the spectrum is a well-functioning society, with existing supports, strong markets, and relative security and prosperity, which is hit by a natural disaster. (Florida after a bad hurricane season would be an example). Responders can work most successfully by providing short term, emergency services and supports to get people quickly back on their feet and re-engaged in society and economy. The motivation of individuals to return and rebuild is high, and the intrinsic capacity in the community – the relationships, social and human capital, knowledge of how to do things, organize things, make things work – is high. Displacement camps, if necessary at all, are temporary and a big step down from their inhabitants' previous existence, and therefore a place that people will want to leave as quickly as possible.

A Disaster Continuum		
Situation: Sudan/Congo		Florida Hurricane
Duration: Endemic		Sudden and done
Society: Collapse of social support systems		Existing support systems
Continued Insecurity	Aceh	Security
No rule of law		Rule of law
Markets: Weak regional market		Strong market

Where does Aceh after the tsunami fit in this continuum? It more closely resembles Florida than the Sudan for several reasons:

A prosperous economy: Prior to the tsunami, Aceh had a relatively self-contained and prosperous economy. Fisherman plied the waters and sold their catches locally or to regional fish buyers. Farmers provided rice and other foods to a largely self-sufficient province. A vibrant market for goods and services functioned between the major cities and small towns.

Rule of law and strong infrastructure and support systems: Despite an on-going low-intensity conflict, the province had a rule of law, good infrastructure, working transport systems, decent rural health systems, and cohesive communities with functioning schools and mosques.

All of it still exists: Despite the widespread devastation along the coasts; supports for survivors (shelter, water, working markets, existing roads, and hospitable communities) are available within a few kilometers. International assessment reports to the contrary, the economy of Aceh is not devastated. Those affected by the disaster have merely become disconnected from their livelihoods. Moreover, the tsunami has strengthened the connections in society, bringing people closer together in common cause.

So here is a revolutionary idea: Let's trust the people with the money. Why do we need all of these fisheries assessments? Why not give direct cash grants to all of the fishermen in a village that lost their boats? They were previously part of the economy and they certainly do not need to be taught how to fish. The normal arguments – the men will drink it away, government officials will steal it, and extended families will drain it away – are unlikely risks. It should be up to them what they do with the money the world gave them. If we provide grants, won't boat builders and construction contractors, who also suffered, find a way to meet the demand?

Our Ethical and Fiduciary Responsibilities
I believe that we have responsibilities that demand pursuing a strategy of emergence. Together, we hold approximately $1 billion in funds that were donated by private individuals from around the world. They want us to use it quickly and effectively. This is different from other crises where many of our funds flow from government or intergovernmental entities that lay out careful and slow development practices to follow.

These donors gave us money on behalf of survivors with a clear expectation that we will help them rebuild and recover in a swift, equitable, and efficient manner. It is not for us to determine how they use the funds. Nor, should we wait to let the government determine their fate or the proper use of funds.

A Brilliant Opportunity
The Tsunami disaster recovery is a brilliant opportunity to test the theory of emergence. The most effective way to address the enormity of the problem should be through an accumulation of localized answers. Let us use the village as the unit of analysis and support villagers with a variety of cash grants. Let us see if the village rises again on its own. We will surely fail with some. But at least we will learn why they failed and can address them individually while the others continue.

But we need to act quickly. Some are already arguing against it, claiming that we will engender dependence or that corrupt local officials will take the money away. Those are designing proper interventions for community and government-led reconstruction. These interventions can be logistically complex. They require us to collect rosters and locations of individual families. We then must design houses; purchase, transport, and store supplies; and deliver them to urban and remote sites.

Centralized planning and delivery not only delays public good, but it hinders private recovery. In Aceh, we simply need to follow the people and give them the money to reconstruct their houses, build their boats, drain their fields, and restock their shops. If necessary, we can address major impediments through public works projects to reinstall electricity and repave roads.

Otherwise, we simply need to get out of the way and let the laws of supply and demand take care of the rest. We do not need to set up sophisticated logistical supply chains or aid programs. A metal roofing sheet delivered by my agency will cost a great deal more

(including portions of shipping, salaries, and storage) then they can buy for themselves in the local market. In the streets now, daily papers are for sale and market stalls are selling a myriad of products. Two weeks ago you could not buy mattresses or shovels or lamps. Now they are there in great supply. It is a complex system that emerged on its own.

        -- dispatch from Banda Aceh, late February 2005

Implementing a strategy of emergence

If we are able to depart from the centrally planned approach, the challenge is then to figure out how to properly support emergence. Irresponsibly spreading cash around the countryside would hardly be an effective component of such a strategy. But if a number of reputable agencies were to work together to select representative villages and test a variety of cash distribution methods, progress on figuring out which methods seem to work best could be rapid. Alternative cash distribution schemes include community grants, grants to individual households, targeted supports to key industries, grants to cooperatives, village endowments, and revolving loan programs – all of which might be tried, in different locations, to see which seem best able to support the emergent reconstruction of lives, livelihoods, and communities.

Community boat recovery in Meulaboh, Aceh, January 2005

Coordination meetings will still need to continue, but instead of discussing data collection and strategic planning, they would become forums for sharing lessons learned and improving methods. Program directors can compare areas that seem to be revitalizing and rebuilding more quickly than others. The learning opportunities generated by such systematic comparisons could be invaluable. The interface between relief organizations and the government would also

change. Coordination to the point of insuring reasonable alignment of actions by different organizations and agents – but not to the point of imposing a specific plan or micromanaging local projects – would become the order of the day. Government would be encouraged to provide clarity on the extent and timing of city planning, road and bridge construction, and construction codes, and to enforce transparency in financial and other arrangements.

The results of a strategy of emergence are, by definition, difficult to predict. Both emergence and central planning have risks – but they have different risks. Some local choices will be ill-advised, and will not work out well. A tolerance for some failures is essential. But there has rarely been a better opportunity. The Acehnese people are motivated, industrious and resourceful. On the world scale of development, Aceh is a proud, capable and functioning society. It will fully emerge again. Life itself is emergence. The rest is just talk and reports.

Village meeting following cash disbursement for recovery, February 2005

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