

Short reflection on the *Playing Between Elephants*' and Post Disaster 'Reconstruction League': When uncertainty becomes norms and steady negotiation is the rule of the game

Jonatan Lassaⁱ

1. Background

This is a personal reflection based on the ['Playing Between Elephants'](#) -- a documentary film about disaster recovery post Indian Ocean Tsunamis in Aceh, Indonesia by [Aryo Danusiri](#).ⁱⁱ Aryo used ethnographic approach to tell particular stories of rebuilding lives after disasters with some universal features of complexity of large scale disaster recovery. The movie won several awards nationally and internationally.ⁱⁱⁱ

The title of the film is based on the old Indonesian parable that when elephants are locked in a fight, the mousedeer (plural) will die in the middle. In this film, the central story is about the mousedeer (singular) – the Pak Geuchik, i.e. the head of East Geunting village of Aceh Jaya district-- who was in charge of implementing a UN-Habitat 'multi-million' reconstruction project post tsunami. Aryo probably intendedly used the bridge in the East Geunting in as one of the central characters in the film. The bridge often swayed and literally unstable as the traffics passed through. And having the bridge as a distinct character indeed strengthens the message of complexity and uncertainty of life after disasters.

The Geuchick had been playing 'bridging role' that connected the people in need in East Geunting village with the UN staff, the translators and building suppliers. But as the bridge was often swayed responding to the loads from the traffics, Geuchick must also deal with different 'powerful' actors that have the power to shape the rebuilding of lives and livelihoods of his villagers. In the words of James Bourk Hoesterey, "this is a story of culture and conflict, of hope and despair. The mousedeer plays between the elephants, but somehow manages to survive."^{iv}

2. Disaster complexity and local uncertainty

The devastating Indian Ocean Tsunamis on the Boxing Day 2004 off the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia killed about 170000 people in Indonesia alone. It has been one of the highest profile natural catastrophe measured by the US\$ aid per capita worldwide humanitarian response. [The IOT triggered the biggest non-governmental response to any disaster, with the public worldwide giving \\$5.5 billion \(\\$375 million from Australia\) for relief and rehabilitation.](#)

The involvement of several hundred state and non-state actors after big catastrophes in Aceh added the complexity to the post disaster coordination. This adds new dynamics to the complexity and uncertainties in rebuilding lives and livelihoods including shelter and infrastructure after the disasters. The existence of pro-longed conflicts/civil war in Aceh add more weight to existing peace uncertainties which affected the progress of post disaster reconstruction. This means a Geuchick must also dealt with ex-combatants too.

I was involved in the ‘reconstruction league’ where in one of the villages in the East Coast of Aceh, we ended up with the fact that at least five international organizations/donors had reached a deal with the multi layered local institutions to build houses for the survivors. Each successful deal means a ticket for a good humanitarian project is secured. What would you do if you were part of a donor/agency/NGO? What could you do to make ensure a fair deal with the survivors/villagers? Would you mind having a deal with the head of the village? Or a direct deal with the head of sub-district? Or with the Aceh Reconstruction Agency? Or Would you mind secure a deal with representative governments? What happened when what is call as ‘representative governments’ turned out to be many and overlapped?

Assuming that each of them have noble interests in reducing the suffering of the survivors amid imperfect information (on who is doing what and where and when?) – and if you were part of the survivors/villagers dealing with more than tens of NGOs/donors/institutions coming and assessing for your village. A village with > 250 households could be a perfect number for small housing project.

How can people take rational decisions (local people - the survivors who lost ‘almost everything’, local governments, reconstruction agencies, donors, etc.) when uncertainty becomes the everyday reality? And when uncertainty becomes norms and negotiation becomes rules of the game, what can institutions (global and local) do to reduce high uncertainty in post disaster contexts?

Global trend in post disaster reconstructions: total international organizations in Aceh: >200; in Myanmar – Nargis > 500; in Haiti > 700?^v This does not include the creation of local organizations and institutions to deal with the associated post disaster context. In Aceh, the total local and international organizations could be more than 800 if not a thousand as of 2007.

If you were Aceh during 2005-2007, you might have heard external aid workers often blame Aceh people as having lack of sense to be *swadaya* (self-help) in their own reconstruction and rehabilitation. These views were grounded on the surface observation that the people did not have the willingness to *fix their own things*. You would hear this from UN staff, INGOs staff and even some Acehnese criticized their own society. Some went even further to call “aid dependency community” and even describe the people as *aid saturated community or spoiled community*. Are/were all these relative construction of Acehnese true? Or a deeper analysis can provide better understanding and fairer argument?

When Earthquake hit Jogjakarta in 2006, and we witnessed the collapsed of hundred thousand buildings.^{vi} Later on, people especially some humanitarian workers started to compare these two societies. The dominant views suggested that *self-help* behavior from Jogjakarta people should be a model learnt by Aceh people. The disaster in Jogjakarta suddenly became a case where there is shifting narrative – a kind of temptation to exercise Javanese cultural domination over Aceh? Some might believe so – some think this is too far?^{vii}

I strongly oppose to the temptation to compare Acehnese and Javanese as I am maintaining that the situation in Aceh 2005-2007 were a kind of situation where “uncertainty becomes norms.” In this kind of complex context, local agents (the survivors including their community leaders) (un)consciously developed a pattern to deepen their tactic of negotiations as the rule of the game – they try to deal with many organizations as possible; Steady negotiations manifested in many ways. In doing such, the villagers (often their leaders) become the real reconstruction entrepreneurs. I sometimes wonder how the people couldnot develop such a pattern? I had a

feeling that Acehnese do have some sort of “Argumentative culture” (a kind of Sen’s “Argumentative Indian”)^{viii} which is actually a blessing. Therefore, in that context, village leaders could be someone who owns certain skills such as argumentative skill, in order to deal with their peers, community members and the outsiders. With the help of information technology such as mobile phones, they can effectively manage their move and search for help from outside.

3. My Experience

I led Hivos Netherland’s mission in Aceh during 2005-2007 as both Head of Aceh Office and HIVOS SEA’s Program Coordinator for Disaster Management. I often made regular decision on what to do and what to supports. Since Hivos is mandated to work via local NGOs, our mission to ensure that local NGOs/CSOs are strengthen to deal with local problems including the need to response to restore local livelihoods. We trained more than 100 NGOs from the West Coast to East Coasts and some of the NGOs in the conflict affected areas.

I remembered one of the local entrepreneurs who lost literally everything. Prior to the tsunamis, he had a small scale handcrafts business where he was able to export to Malaysia – according to some of the interviewed people as we validated his claims. He came to my office in Banda Aceh probably more than 6 times since my arrival. He knocked the doors of several NGOs in Aceh. I remembered I used to get information from the other folks from the other INGOs. So after almost 14 months, I managed to conduct an assessment together with our local NGO partner. Our NGO partner has been a local champion in empowering local male and female entrepreneurs and had a strong control mechanism to ensure that funds are not transferred to personal pockets of community members but to the collective accounts. An accountable mechanism was created and controlled prior to disbursement of aid via our local partner.

We received an additional funds from a US NGO based in Boston so we intended to invest in local business in early 2007. After some deliberative assessments and validation we decided to support the handcraft cooperative that he has formed.

He has been successful in getting the supports probably more than what he needed to restore his business. I resigned a month after we managed to support his cooperative. Unfortunately I could not manage to check his progress but I was informed, a few months later that his cooperative also received some supports from other INGOs a few months after we supported him. It seems that he keep selling the ideas and as it has been polished and strengthen by our local partner, the concept has been attractive to other funders.

His passion to knocked our doors reminds me of the one of the verses in Bible “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

And watching the *Playing Between Elephants*’ suggests the fact that survivors should have to deal with their livelihoods uncertainty by playing their own rules of games. Sometimes I felt being fooled by the man. If the big international donors are constructed as big elephants, my agency could be called a small elephant.

Am I an elephant crying victim? Elephants must not be afraid of mousedeaders but must be terrified by ants! And when the survivors are constructed as ants, we might have lost our soul as we have actually ended up in inconvenient stories of power game.

4. Some thoughts

- Some of the issues faced by local leaders in the context like Aceh – could not even fix the data on the real needs for housing. During the first year, some ex-combatants that experienced losses during Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004 had been delisted by *Keuchick* because they were afraid of being accused to be pro-GAM by some apparatus. The problem emerged when the Helsinki Peace Accord ‘restored’ some existence and rights of the ex-combatant to be a truly tsunami victims. This is probably not a big problem in scale but at the local realities, local *Keuchick* needed to deal with this issue – indeed a challenge to personal security for *Keuchick* among existing conflicted interests.
- Reconstruction is not simply building the houses but can simply be one way of reducing some degree of livelihoods uncertainties. Reconstruction creates some degree of livelihoods capital for the people. Understanding uncertainty at the everyday localities in disaster affected areas is therefore imperative for agencies committed to fulfill the rights of the disaster affected populations
- In a nutshell, reconstruction uncertainties embedded not only in the whole chains of material supplies but also depend on a complex multi-layered decision making from donors to local structures.
- The concern is that political institutions and formal institutions (such as governments) at different levels often not intendedly exacerbate the uncertainty during reconstruction because they simply cannot made strategic decision amid complex and tense situation.
- Profit seeking behavior in each stages of reconstruction can be reduced when people with agency are creative enough to be able to occupy social spaces after disasters with adequate information, transparency, coordination and accountability. Unfortunately, these norms of good aid governance became a set of rhetoric principles that ignite more tension, conflict, and mistrust between disaster survivors and the workers of aid industry – as we often see in other types of industry. So James Hoesterey noted:

"The Pak Geuchik from the first brick to the final roof, from UN meetings in city offices to community deliberations in the village mosque. In the process, we get an insider's view into the cultural politics of post-tsunami reconstruction. Danusiri does not just follow people, but also the money -- from the initial disbursement to the climactic, heated budget argument between villagers and UN-Habitat officials. The film explores the political economy of foreign donor projects which come with cultural strings attached. UN donations -- accompanied by rhetoric of transparency, accountability and participation - -become a primary source of tension, conflict, and mistrust between villagers and those supervising the funds. We learn that everyone is playing between the elephants -- the foreign UN workers, the Indonesian aid workers, the local suppliers, villagers and Pak Geuchik. The limits of idealized values of gotong-royong (community cooperation) are tested by the creation of new power brokers and the Indonesian culture of the envelope. In this dance of and between elephants, there is no clear protagonist or antagonist. UN workers, building suppliers, and villagers all vent their frustrations toward Pak Geuchik. One day, he has had enough. Sitting alone, staring out at the unfinished houses, Pak Geuchik expresses his despair in song: ..."my life has become a mess; Being in charge of people is a tricky business; No longer can I take this ordeal."^{nix}

- When workers from aid industry ‘suspect’ some irregularities at village level reconstruction and code the local actors’ such as the Geuchik as ‘profit seeking’ behavior, I often ask myself whether I am also a profit seeker (at different level) as I charged and negotiated higher salary with my employer given the fact that I got the skills back up by a UK postgrad certificate? At surface, things could be seen normal. But at deeper layered of reality, I could be worse as a ‘blood sucker’ as I paid my bills using ‘blood money’^x that has been collected after the deaths of 230000 who died in at last 12 countries from the Indian Ocean Tsunamis.

ⁱ The author used to live and work as an humanitarian aid professional in Aceh during the first phase of reconstruction period 2005-2007. He is now based at CDU in Darwin.

ⁱⁱ This is an updated draft from a draft for discussion on “Youth, Politics and Reconstruction in an Indonesian Conflict Zone” on March 29, 2011 at the Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, USA. It discusses the “Playing between Elephants” (2007) by Aryo Danusiri. The event is organized by the Harvard Kennedy School Indonesia Program / TheAsh Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. This is a personal reflection and does not represent any associate organisations.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is the best documentary film Brussels Independent Film Festival 2008, produced by Aryo Danusiri. See: http://www.ragam.org/pb/wp_2200cdfa.html?0.4150749382202139

^{iv} See positive review from James Bourk Hoesterey 'Playing Between Elephants': The UN and Acehese reconstruction. Jakarta Post, Thursday, December 13, 2007

^v Please treat with care this figure as the data varies from day 1 to day 365 and afterwards.

^{vi} In the 2006 earthquake in Jogjakarta, the total 50% of the total housing were either damage/completely destroyed (estimated 154,000) or suffered some damage (260,000 houses). Source: Bappenas and World Bank (2006) Preliminary Damage and Loss Assessment. Yogyakarta and Central Java Natural Disaster. A Report of BAPPENAS, the Provincial and Local Governments of D.I. Yogyakarta, the Provincial and Local Governments of Central Java, and international partners, June 2006.

^{vii} See the opposite views from the ground: MacRae, G. and Hodgkin, D. (2011), Half full or half empty? Shelter after the Jogjakarta earthquake. *Disasters*, 35: 243–267. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01202.x

^{viii} See Amartya Sen’s book review at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jul/03/historybooks.features>

^{ix} Hoesterey 2007. 'Playing Between Elephants': The UN and Acehese reconstruction. Jakarta Post, Thursday, December 13, 2007.

^x I am often tempted to call “Post disaster charity funds” as ‘blood money’ in the sense that such supports have been often made ex-post rather than ex-ante, reflecting the reality of international disaster aid that often focus on reactive response (despite its noble humanitarian purposes). Higher investment in prevention or risk reduction is always necessary but the soul of the charity and ‘humanitarian imperative’ are often moved by deaths and not necessarily by life.