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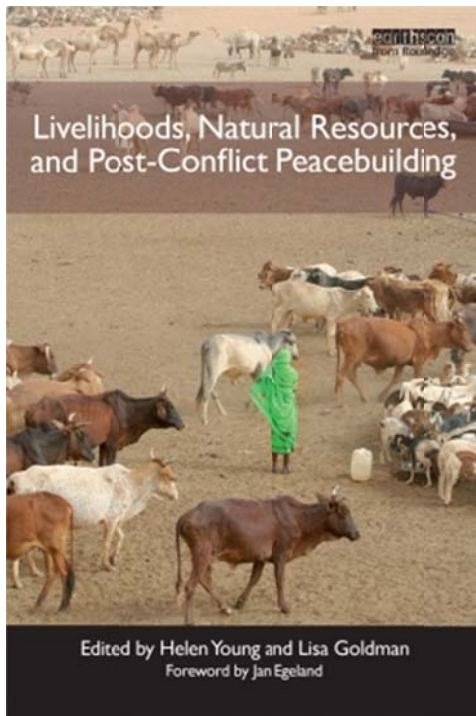
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Post-Tsunami Aceh: Successful Peacemaking, Uncertain Peacebuilding

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Post-tsunami Aceh: Successful peacemaking, uncertain peacebuilding

Michael Renner

In August 2005, the government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that ended the Aceh Province's thirty-year struggle to secede.¹ Unlike several earlier, failed attempts, the MOU addressed key underlying reasons for the conflict, including governance of natural resources. Despite this success, critical tasks lie ahead to ensure that peacebuilding can continue.

The December 2004 tsunami that killed close to 170,000 Acehnese played a catalyzing role in paving the way for the successful peace negotiations and eventual accord (Merikallio 2006). During his election campaign, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who became Indonesia's president in October 2004, had promised to end the Aceh conflict. But it is unclear how successful he would have been absent the toll from the tsunami, for it triggered tremendous acts of humanitarian goodwill by Indonesians across the country, altered the political dynamics underlying the conflict, and drew in unprecedented amounts of international aid and numbers of aid workers, journalists, and peace monitoring personnel (Renner and Chafe 2007). From the beginning, the European Union (EU)-led Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) monitored the response and peace efforts, and its mandate did not change after deployment.

After briefly referencing the origins of the Aceh conflict, including the key role natural resource exploitation has played in Acehnese grievances, this chapter outlines key provisions of the 2005 MOU and discusses the emergence of local conflicts since the signing of the accord. The chapter explores possible factors behind these conflicts, including the ongoing political transformation in Aceh toward democratic governance; disparities in levels of Indonesian and international assistance provided to Acehnese communities adversely affected by conflict

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¹ The MOU is formally known as the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement. It was signed on August 15, 2005, in Helsinki, Finland.

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as well as by the tsunami; difficulties with reintegration of GAM fighters; and challenges in providing assistance to noncombatants, including the displaced. In the years following the peace agreement, worries mounted that high unemployment (slightly above 9 percent in 2009) and the lack of long-term, sustainable livelihood opportunities could undermine the peacebuilding process. The chapter concludes by exploring how these challenges—along with Aceh’s ongoing struggles with resource governance, particularly illegal logging—are being addressed and discusses possible solutions.

BACKGROUND

Indonesia has abundant natural resources and is rich in biodiversity. For centuries, populations with access have exploited the country’s natural resources. The desire to utilize these resources has led to prolonged and violent conflicts such as that between the government of Indonesia and the people of the Aceh region.

Natural resource exploitation and its contribution to the conflict

When Indonesia gained its independence in 1949, the Acehnese people allowed their territory to become part of the new nation but came to regret the decision in light of subsequent, excessive central government control and unfulfilled promises for regional autonomy. In the years to follow, the benefits of exploitation of the province’s vast natural resources (forests and timber, particularly, in the early years) largely failed to accrue to the Acehnese people. Rather, these resources were exploited by companies connected to the regime in Jakarta (the capital of Indonesia, on the island of Java), and this served as an enduring focal point of local resentment against the central government.

Over the course of President Suharto’s thirty-one-year dictatorship (1967–1998), revenues from commercial oil and natural gas exploitation ventures (as well as logging ventures) mostly benefited multinational companies, such as ExxonMobil, and people connected to the Suharto regime. These Javanese elites were resented by the Acehnese as outsiders. For example, in 1971, significant oil and natural gas deposits were discovered in North Aceh (close to Lhokseumawe and Lhoksukon). The national government–owned Pertamina entered into a joint venture with ExxonMobil to construct what was then the world’s largest refinery (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010), yet the central government refused to share more than 5 percent of the profits from this and other oil and natural gas projects with Aceh’s provincial government (McCulloch 2005).

Under Suharto, 75 percent of Aceh’s total land area was given over to logging and plantation concessions (Fan 2006). After first claiming the land as a state “forest zone,” the central government then granted rights to exploit the zone to individuals and companies with close connections to the regime (McCarthy 2002). Extensive logging subsequently reduced forest reserves in certain parts of Aceh by more than 60 percent (Fan 2006).



Even as Aceh's natural resources were contributing to national economic growth, the Acehnese people were not prospering. As John F. McCarthy observed in 2002, local entrepreneurs who lacked political connections found it difficult to procure concessions from the Indonesian Department of Forestry (McCarthy 2002). McCarthy noted that even securing permission locally required procuring a number of permits through a process that could be both lengthy and expensive. At a time when poverty was on the wane elsewhere in Indonesia, in Aceh, it was on the rise and, in fact, rose by 239 percent between 1980 and 2002 (Brown 2005).

Throughout this period, the Indonesian military engaged in legal and illegal businesses in order to supplement its budget, which was widely perceived as inadequate. These businesses included illegal logging in Aceh and other Indonesian provinces, production and sale of drugs, and illicit collection of travel and protection fees (McCulloch 2003, 2005). As Lesley McCulloch explained in 2003,

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under Suharto, the military's business ventures were wide in scope, including "monopolising local production, extraction, transport and processing of some natural resources; price controlling; appropriating land for themselves and on behalf of other parties; and many other commercial activities" (McCulloch 2003, 12). These businesses not only funded military operations but enriched individual officers as well. For this and other reasons, military leaders were long opposed to a negotiated solution to the Aceh conflict (McCulloch 2005; ICG 2001).

In light of these numerous resource exploitation practices—on top of Suharto's generally poor governance—a group of Acehnese founded the GAM in 1976 with the express goal of seceding from Indonesia. As an armed struggle got under way, the severe human rights violations committed by Indonesian security forces further strengthened the Acehnese desire to secede (McCulloch 2005; Schulze 2004).

From conflict to peace

Initially, the Indonesian Military Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI) easily suppressed the GAM, which began as a small guerrilla unit. The TNI then committed numerous human rights abuses, including killings and beatings of Acehnese civilians, which fueled Acehnese nationalist sentiments and galvanized more citizens to join the GAM's forces (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010). Although largely outnumbered by the TNI, the GAM posed a serious threat to government control of Aceh, leading to Aceh's formal designation as a Military Operations Zone from 1989 to 1998 (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010).

President Suharto's resignation in 1998 spurred hopes that the conflict between the GAM and the Indonesian government might be settled. Fighting between the TNI and the GAM was suspended in 2000, but only briefly; it resumed when the new president, Abdurrahman Wahid, withdrew an offer to allow a referendum vote on the matter of independence for Aceh. Wahid's successor, Megawati Sukarnoputri, went on to sign a special autonomy law in 2001 (Law No. 18 of 2001),² which, if implemented, would have given Aceh the right to implement sharia law (Islamic law), as well as realize a greater share of natural resource revenues, among other things (McCulloch 2005). The bill granted Aceh 70 percent of natural resource revenues. Meanwhile, peace negotiations in December 2002 yielded a temporary agreement to cease hostilities, but in May 2003, final negotiations failed, and President Sukarnoputri immediately declared martial law in Aceh (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010).

At this point, the TNI commenced major military operations in Aceh, and the renewal of violence resulted in the deaths of thousands and the displacement of at least 125,000 more Acehnese (NRC 2004). In 2004, the GAM began to run low on weapons, and approximately one-quarter of its soldiers were killed (Nessen

² Special Autonomy Law on Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), Law No. 18 of 2001, www.kbri-canberra.org.au/s_issues/aceh/aceh_specautonomy.htm.

2006). Forced into a defensive position, some GAM commanders began to consider how to end the conflict, particularly after the TNI captured thousands of suspected mid-level GAM officials (Pan 2005).

The election of General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to the presidency in September 2004 made resolution of the conflict seem possible because, while serving as a minister in President Megawati's government, General Yudhoyono had worked directly on the Aceh conflict, and, during his election campaign, had made serious offers of amnesty to the GAM on the condition that it settle for autonomy rather than insist on independence (Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010). Barely two months into his presidency and four days before the tsunami struck, the two sides agreed in secret negotiations to conduct formal peace talks (Merikallio 2006).

With this potential foundation for peace in place, on December 26, 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered a tsunami that killed 167,000 Acehnese and displaced 500,000 more.³ In the wake of such a calamity, on August 15, 2005, the GAM and Indonesia's leaders came to the table to sign the MOU that brought an end to their long conflict.

THE 2005 MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

The 2005 MOU covered a range of critical issues and key Acehnese grievances. These included disarmament and demobilization of GAM fighters, withdrawal of an agreed number of government soldiers and policemen from Aceh, amnesty for GAM members and release of political prisoners, establishment of a Human Rights Court and a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, reintegration of combatants, political reforms to facilitate the formation of local parties and democratic elections for a provincial governor and legislature, and greater local control over Aceh's ample natural resources (see table 1). From September 2005 to December 2006, implementation of the peace agreement was closely supervised by the EU-led AMM (Feith 2006).

The MOU's natural resource-related provisions are not extensive. The section detailing economic agreements (para. 1.3.3) gives Aceh jurisdiction over all "living natural resources" in the sea surrounding Aceh. The most important section detailing natural resource agreements (para. 1.3.4) entitles Aceh to 70 percent of all revenues from its land and territorial sea-based natural resources—present and future—including any hydrocarbon deposits. Finally, another section of the MOU (para. 3.2.5) requires the government to provide suitable farmland, jobs, and other compensation to excombatants, pardoned political prisoners, and civilians significantly affected by the conflict.

³ The 9.1 magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of northern Sumatra, and the resulting tsunami caused the deaths of an estimated 227,898 people in fourteen countries and displaced an additional 1.7 million people (BBC 2005; USGS 2004).

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Table 1. Selected provisions of the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Provision</i>
Disarmament	GAM to demobilize its 3,000 fighters and relinquish 840 weapons.
Demobilization	Government forces to be reduced to 14,700 soldiers and 9,100 policemen.
Amnesty	GAM members to receive amnesty; political prisoners to be released.
Human rights	A Human Rights Court and a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to be established.
Reintegration	Former combatants, pardoned prisoners, and affected civilians to receive farmland, jobs, and other compensation.
Political participation	Free and fair elections to be held for Aceh governor and legislature; government to facilitate the establishment of local political parties by amending the national election law.
Economy	Aceh entitled to 70 percent of its natural resource revenues.

Note: GAM is the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or the Free Aceh Movement.

By the time the violence between the GAM and the central government ended in late 2005, after nearly three decades of conflict and oppression, at least 15,000 people (and possibly twice that number) had died; some 120,000 to 150,000 people had been displaced; and many homes as well as schools, clinics, and other public infrastructure had been destroyed (Merikallio 2006; Eschenbächer 2005; Barron 2008).

Overall, the peacemaking that followed the signing of the MOU was successful, despite a few drawbacks. For example, it took longer than expected to mount gubernatorial elections in Aceh; some of the MOU's provisions were significantly weakened by the Indonesian parliament; and important human rights institutions (specifically, a Human Rights Court and a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation) were not implemented (Perlez 2006). Still, the political and human rights situation in Aceh is incomparably better than during the conflict, and this improvement has bolstered Acehnese confidence against a relapse to conflict.

When the EU withdrew the AMM at the end of 2006, it was too early for the comfort of many Acehnese who felt an international presence protected them against further human rights abuses. The EU simply did not want to get drawn into an open-ended peacebuilding process (and the Indonesian government, concerned about the implications for its sovereignty, would have been reluctant to agree to a longer-term mandate). Yet the question has arisen as to whether a follow-up mission to monitor and assist the longer-term process of peacebuilding, reintegration, political transformation, and natural resource management in Aceh might not be in the mutual interests of the Acehnese, Indonesia, and international partners.

POST-PEACE CONFLICTS

When conflict between the GAM and the central government ended, Aceh nonetheless experienced a flare up of local disputes that began around November 2005. As figure 1 indicates, these disputes peaked in late 2008, and the vast

Wealth inequalities in post-conflict, post-tsunami Aceh

Certain provisions of the MOU, the lack of sufficient implementation funding and unevenness in funding distribution, and the nature of tsunami-driven aid together created a society of haves and have-nots in Aceh. For example, as discussed further below, a number of excombatants and GAM-associated Acehnese remained unemployed and increasingly disillusioned years after the signing of the MOU. Further, the dearth of livelihoods support drove excombatants toward illegal activities, including unlicensed timber harvesting. Despite generous post-tsunami assistance, some Acehnese fared much more poorly than others. Statements by some donors about “building the province back better” also raised expectations that subsequently were not met.

The 2004 tsunami triggered one of the world’s most generous humanitarian aid responses to date, yet not everyone benefited equally. Despite a six-fold increase over the past decade in aid flows to Aceh as well as in provincial revenues, more Acehnese live in poverty now than during the conflict, and this could easily imperil the consolidation of peace. When the conflict was under way, the poverty rate rose from approximately 10 percent in 1996 to 20 percent in 1999 and 28.4 percent in 2004 (Sukma 2004; World Bank 2006a; Barron 2008). Aceh was the only Indonesian province where poverty continued to rise after 2000, making it one of the poorest provinces, despite its abundant natural resources. By 2005, rural poverty in Aceh stood at 36.2 percent (Barron 2008). In 2006, with Aceh’s overall unemployment rate at 12 percent, 75 percent of Acehnese polled agreed that such joblessness (and inflation) had made life more difficult since the 2005 signing of the peace agreement (Barron 2008; Diani 2006).

Another key factor in wealth inequalities is that the Indonesian government provided post-conflict assistance (based loosely on the provisions of the MOU) of only US\$230 million—a figure for post-conflict assistance that is dwarfed by post-tsunami assistance of US\$7.7 billion (Barron 2008; Masyrafah and McKeon 2008). Unsurprisingly, due to the limited funds and the amount of devastation caused by such a prolonged conflict and the tsunami, infrastructure rebuilding in post-conflict Aceh proceeded much more slowly, and poverty there has remained much higher. Inequalities in aid led to significant tensions on the ground, with rising numbers of disputes, including violence. Even among conflict-affected groups—former combatants, displaced people, and other civilian victims—aid has been uneven (Barron 2008).

International experts agree that in post-conflict situations, successful reintegration of excombatants is a crucial factor in determining whether peace, once achieved, will be stable (World Bank/DSF 2006). However, in the case of Aceh, limited funding to implement the MOU and weaknesses in some of the MOU’s provisions have resulted in incomplete reintegration of GAM fighters. For example, the MOU provided greater economic peace dividends to former GAM elites than to the average GAM soldier. It also provides reintegration assistance to only 3,000 combatants, when the number of those in need of such aid far

exceeds that level (Bakhtiar 2005). In addition, political disputes, bureaucratic delays, and corruption have slowed distribution of reintegration assistance (ICG 2006).

The combination of such factors has resulted in a large group of former GAM members unable to find work. In 2006 and again in 2007, the World Bank found that nearly 75 percent of GAM members remained unemployed (World Bank/DSF 2006; World Bank 2006b). World Bank surveys also found that 50 percent of all GAM excombatants had experienced damage to or loss of their homes during the conflict, and another 25 percent had experienced such damage or loss due to the tsunami. While excombatants who own land have fared reasonably well in the post-conflict, post-tsunami era, others have no land, no capital, and little access to skills training and jobs (World Bank/DSF 2006; World Bank 2006b).

Some attempts have been made to expand the scope of reintegration assistance. In February 2006, the Aceh Reintegration Agency (Badan Reintegrasi Aceh) agreed to extend eligibility for reintegration assistance to more than 20,000 persons, including GAM members and supporters who did not engage in the fighting, former political prisoners, anti-GAM militias, and others (Beeck 2007). Several other assistance projects are currently under way in the region, including the Strengthening Sustainable Peace and Development in Aceh project led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which seeks to promote peacebuilding by providing sustainable livelihoods assistance to marginalized groups and communities in the province (UNDP 2008). According to that project, unemployment rates among excombatants remain high (UNDP 2008). Many former GAM members, particularly female excombatants, have yet to receive the reintegration assistance for which they are ostensibly eligible.

Illegal and exploitative livelihood strategies on the rise

The lack of employment opportunities for former GAM fighters raised a new set of issues, with respect to Aceh's forest resources. Finding themselves in dire economic straits since the cessation of conflict, some excombatants have taken to armed robbery and extortion (World Bank/DSF 2005–2009), and some have resorted to illegal logging of Aceh's forests—a practice that has generally been on the rise following the tsunami as well as the end of the conflict (Large 2008). According to Greenomics Indonesia, more than 200,000 hectares of forest have been illegally logged in Aceh (Simamora 2009).

Illegal logging in Aceh offers a means of quick financial gain to anyone able to engage in it, including unemployed excombatants. Post-tsunami reconstruction created a substantial demand for timber, one that far exceeded the allowable cut in Aceh (ICG 2007). Also, areas once off limits due to pervasive violence are now more accessible. As a province with vast forest resources, high demand for timber, high unemployment, systemic corruption, and weak governance, Aceh has proven to be an ideal location for extensive illegal logging (ICG

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2007). Soon after the MOU was signed, leaders of the Komite Peralihan Aceh, which grew informally out of GAM to represent GAM excombatants, claimed they could do little to prevent their men from engaging in illegal logging until reintegration efforts could provide viable livelihoods (ICG 2007).

ADDRESSING ONGOING CHALLENGES

A key driver in Aceh's quest for independence was its desire for control over revenues derived from its natural resources. The MOU addressed a number of Aceh's natural resource-based concerns, but as Judith Large observed in 2008, in the post-conflict years and as a result of decentralization and special autonomy, Aceh started to become "one of the most corrupt rather than one of the richest provinces in Indonesia" (Large 2008, 65). Greater governmental accountability and transparency and better law enforcement is viewed as critical to long-term peace and stability.

Another challenge is how to reduce the lure of illegal exploitation of lucrative natural resources. One approach is to develop Aceh's economy more broadly to provide other jobs and incomes. By and large, however, donors and aid groups have not yet taken their assistance in this direction (Barron 2008).

The Aceh peace agreement succeeded in ending the conflict between the province and the central government. But in some ways, the issues still at stake have simply been transferred to a new level within the province. This has partly resulted from a less-than-complete peacemaking process, as new grievances emerge and the larger problem of illegal resource exploitation generally characteristic of Indonesia continues.

In the end, lingering economic problems, including unemployment and illegal logging, are generating new dynamics that could threaten the peacebuilding process if left unaddressed. In addition, despite a 2007 provincial ban against illegal logging, such activity has increasingly contributed to flooding, landslides, and biodiversity loss, all of which only further undermine legitimate livelihoods, especially in agriculture (Renner 2007).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Efforts to improve natural resource management might be pursued in the context of the cooperative EU-Indonesia Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Support Project, which is designed to help government, civil society, and the Indonesian timber industry tackle illegal logging through sustainable forest management principles, good governance, capacity building, harmonization and enforcement of relevant laws, and timber certification (EU 2009).

Another potential pathway to resolving forest management issues may lie within a concept intended to combat climate change commonly known as REDD—Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. In principle, REDD could be a partial solution to forest degradation and a way to promote climate

stabilization in Aceh (with proper governance and monitoring). Aceh Governor Yusuf has been at the forefront of efforts to sell forest carbon credits to investors under REDD, as a portion of the funds would flow to local communities and encourage them to develop livelihoods other than illegal logging.

However, in Aceh and elsewhere in the world, questions about REDD schemes, such as how to ensure proper accounting for carbon storage and how to guarantee that forests are indeed preserved, still abound. Of equal concern is that potentially large inflows of money could encourage corrupt practices instead of benefiting local communities, especially if local land tenure is insecure, as is often the case in Aceh (IDLO 2009).

These concerns point to a conclusion that is as relevant to REDD schemes as to the ongoing political evolution and stabilization of Aceh: it is necessary to build state institutions that are capable of providing services in an even-handed, competent manner; that are efficient and transparent in their workings; and that are accountable to the public in terms of decisions and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

It is always tempting to draw from specific cases broader lessons that may apply to other countries or regions emerging from conflict. On the one hand, Aceh's experience is tragically unique, for the province has suffered through a rare combination of violent conflict and a major natural disaster. While this particular combination played a key role in helping to bring about the goodwill and political conditions needed to end the conflict, Aceh's emerging lessons can still be applied to other post-conflict situations.

Aceh's peace agreement directly addressed the political arrangements needed to bring about a transition to peace for Aceh Province, beyond the decommissioning of weapons and the withdrawal of government troops. For the Acehnese, the agreement opened the door to a new political system that promised much greater self-determination and the expectation that inequitable exploitation of their resources by outsiders would come to an end. For Indonesia, it provided assurance that Aceh would not break away as possibly the first in a series of provincial dominoes.

Massive post-tsunami aid certainly facilitated this transition by providing new economic opportunities for at least some Acehnese. The different degrees to which aid has been provided for post-disaster purposes on the one hand, and for post-conflict needs on the other, has raised the risk of creating longer-term schisms and grievances among different population groups, communities, and others that might contain the seeds of future conflict. This is particularly true when discrepancies in short-term humanitarian aid are not remedied through longer-term reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts. The way to avoid or minimize such difficulties is to ensure strong local participation in reconstruction activities from the very beginning; something that—across the world—is often merely an afterthought.

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