Peacebuilding and rebuilding at ground level: Practical constraints and policy objectives in Aceh

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Useful lessons can be drawn from international involvement in development and peacebuilding in Aceh, 2005–2006. Over this period, Aceh emerged from decades of internal conflict through a peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (or GAM). Although political shifts across Indonesia are widely accepted as the main reason why the agreement has held to date, international bodies played valuable supporting roles in brokering talks, monitoring progress, and providing development aid. This paper builds on ground-level experiences of what worked and what did not, finding that the process of devising and implementing international interventions confronted various barriers, including: limited scope for international actors to affect critical, domestic conditions; divergent interests and incentives that international agencies responded to; and institutional limits and constraints on what those international agencies could deliver. The most effective interventions in Aceh built on agencies’ core strengths rather than aiming to implement global ‘best practice’, and forged relationships with domestic interests. It is suggested that understanding of these ground realities is not always evident in international policymaking, and greater recognition would help improve peacebuilding interventions in future.

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Introduction: Conflict and aid provision since the 1990s

In recent years, development and peacebuilding aims have become more closely linked. Whilst decisions on aid provision have always been heavily influenced by political considerations including security and conflict, a technical approach towards designing aid as a peacebuilding tool is a more recent phenomenon. Increasing concern over internal conflicts since the end of the cold war, along with the spread of NGOs and greater emphasis on human rights, have promoted tools of aid machinery designed to build peace, or at least do no harm.¹ In practical terms, this trend has produced dedicated advisers, specific assessment methodologies, training courses, and a range of guidelines adopted by many different agencies.

The practice of peacebuilding itself has adapted over the same period, partly in response to concerns from militaries finding themselves in unfamiliar ‘asymmetric’ roles, dealing with civilian rather than military opponents. The adoption of a human security approach is one policy level response, aiming to place the actual needs of individuals rather than the security interests of states at the centre of decision-making. Adopting a human security approach requires institutions that can fill the wide gap between political-security objectives and longer-term human rights or developmental objectives. A growing literature covers the policy and institutional implications, examining how the UN, and other bodies including the European Union (EU), can turn such rhetoric into practice.²

This paper examines how international organisations were engaged in one specific internal conflict setting, in Aceh, Indonesia, over a period from early 2005 until late 2006. It looks at whether common elements of development and peacebuilding frameworks were applied over that time. The context is one of a successful peace process that ended conflict between government forces and separatists after 30 years of civil war. The onset of peace was not generally predicted at the time, neither by long-term Aceh observers nor by local residents.³ Aceh is better known internationally for the tragedy of the tsunami of 26 December 2004. As well as causing unprecedented loss of life, the natural disaster also put the area under a global media spotlight.

After an initial overview of the situation in Aceh, this paper looks into four different elements of international interventions on the ground. In each case, international agencies’ actions are compared with international policy prescriptions. The first case is the post-tsunami response, looking in particular at how international development bodies
managed to account for conflict in their operations. It considers how common policy recommendations for conflict-aware aid operations were played out in practice. The paper then considers the role of the international body directly engaged in the peace process, the Aceh Monitoring Mission. Their impact is appraised from the perspective of a human security approach. The third case covers how international agencies supported the reintegration of former combatants, and the final case is that of coordination between different international agencies. Throughout, the research uses a range of sources, including published papers, internal reports, interviews, and wider personal experience of international development interventions in conflict environments.

Similar points emerge across the cases assessed in the paper. The core finding is that the practical barriers to policy implementation were of such significance that they largely dictated what international bodies could realistically do. These barriers were a combination of conditions that make implementing external assistance very much the art of the possible, as countless reviews of aid projects have concluded. This general pattern fits many critiques of the failure of top-down policy initiatives and deterministic planning, suggesting that contextually informed approaches with flexible, process-based engagement enable more effective involvement, especially in politically complex environments.

Several key practical challenges emerge including the international institutional context within which aid is provided, and the limits that this places on what most organisations can achieve. In Aceh, the interests of aid bureaucracies and of individuals within them, rarely fitted together coherently, often pulling in different and even contradictory ways. In short, devising policy may be a lot easier than putting it into practice. Additionally, international bodies operated, as ever, within domestic political circumstances, and more specifically had to take into account the space that domestic government authorities gave them to operate. This is especially obvious when looking at a middle-income country like Indonesia.

Two related current trends in the aid and conflict debate are worth mentioning here, in order to place material from Aceh in a global context. First, current donor development and conflict interests are skewed towards post-conflict reconstruction in politically significant ‘fragile states’ (Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan), rather than conflict in states with more functional governments and stronger sovereign control. Second, broad policy reviews of aid and conflict, whatever the background policy motivation, still often tend to miss the practical realities of how international actors can engage domestically; and the need to plan around the possible rather than the desirable. From a practitioner’s perspective, global policies may be so divorced from everyday context that they are of little
relevance except as instructions from headquarters that need to be fended off. This applies as much to the practice of local policymaking and negotiation with government or other donor agency counterparts as it does to actual project implementation. A focus on events as they unfolded on the ground in Aceh, where the state was still strong and agencies were limited by their own abilities as much as any local deficiencies, may help act as a useful counterbalance to these trends.

**Aceh—the context**

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 devastated coastal regions of several countries, and it was Aceh, the northernmost point of Indonesia at the tip of Sumatra Island, that took the brunt of the force. With a population of about 4.2 million, Aceh is Indonesia’s westernmost province and the nearest major land mass to the epicentre of the earthquake that caused the tsunami. In the ensuing catastrophe, somewhere around 164,000 people died, buildings along hundreds of kilometres of coastline were destroyed, and half a million people made homeless. The unprecedented humanitarian response began with international military assistance and competitive pledging that saw Europe, Japan, Australia and the USA offer billions of dollars of aid. Aid organisations rushed to Aceh from across the world.

Away from the emergency zone of the devastated coastal strip, Aceh must have seemed blissfully calm to most of the harassed international aid workers who arrived *en masse* in the months following the tsunami. Across much of the region, tranquil green paddy fields are flanked by serene forest-covered hills, rising up to higher peaks inland. Aceh’s villages and towns may not be affluent, but display few signs of serious poverty and still fewer signs of conflict. In much of the principal city, Banda Aceh, coffee shops, internet cafes and markets were working as normal only shortly after the tsunami.

Yet Aceh has been the site of one of Asia’s longest-running internal conflicts. From 1976, Indonesian sovereignty over the territory was contested by an armed insurgency led by the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM). The roots of the violence are often presented as being historically grounded, many Acehnese stressing a long pattern of resistance to external authority, first against the Dutch colonial power and subsequently against a centralised Indonesian state dominated by the island of Java. Late Twentieth Century grievances rest largely on broken promises over political and cultural autonomy following Indonesian independence in 1946. Conflict escalated in 1989, when the
Indonesian Government launched what turned out to be a ten-year campaign that led to thousands of deaths. 

Rebels used on a variety of tactics over time, including popular mobilisation, guerrilla warfare, occasional bombings, assassinations, and attacks on state infrastructure. Heavy-handed and poorly disciplined military responses alienated many local people, bolstered support for GAM, and led to allegations of human rights abuses for disappearances, torture, and the use of local militia.

The conflict in Aceh was always relatively low-level when compared for example with the mass violence and repression seen in East Timor. Nevertheless, over time, its impact has been significant. The limited number of studies conducted in the years before the tsunami struggle to show the effect on people’s lives: an Indonesian government report estimates that 48,262 people were displaced because of armed conflict in Aceh as of June 2003, and many more were forced to move before and after that time. Levels of human rights abuses are impossible to quantify accurately, but civilians were undoubtedly targeted on a regular basis. In most of the villages from which people had been displaced, and many others, health posts and schools were damaged. 

More broadly, conflict affected the development of Aceh as a whole. The province, by no means the poorest part of Indonesia according to most indicators, has high levels of corruption even when compared with the Indonesian average, and general public confidence in government is still lower than elsewhere in the country.

Following the fall of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998, the situation in Aceh changed. Faced with potential conflict across much of Indonesia, more prone to international pressure, and more willing to consider political rather than military solutions, the Government began to negotiate with GAM. Mass, peaceful popular protest in Aceh also supported the case for compromise, and protracted negotiations between the Government and GAM produced two ceasefires, in June 2000 and December 2002.

However, neither ceasefire held, the political distance between the two parties remaining too great. GAM was interested in pushing for a deal that went as close to independence as possible, having seen East Timor’s recent secession. The Government was concerned that major concessions would promote further tension elsewhere in the country, and it is likely that the civilian, democratically elected politicians in charge did not in any case fully control the military. In the event, both sides used internationally monitored ceasefires as an opportunity to re-arm and build. As the peace process collapsed in 2003, most international parties involved left. Subsequent military operations pushed GAM back into
smaller areas of Aceh. During this time, Aceh was in effect closed off to internationals and largely closed to international aid, with only a few programs operating in the province run by national staff.10

By 2004, recently elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono changed the Government’s direction once more and began to promote quiet negotiations with GAM. When the tsunami struck at the end of that year, a mutual amnesty was declared by both the military and GAM, and the President seized the opportunity to start a new round of peace talks. After several rounds of negotiations in Helsinki under the auspices of Martti Ahtisaari’s Crisis Management Institute, a Memorandum of Understanding between the two parties was signed on 15 August 2005. It included the following key points:

- Phased withdrawal by end 2005 of all government forces not ordinarily stationed in Aceh, down to a maximum of 14,700 military and 9,100 police.
- Parallel destruction of GAM arms, and demobilisation of its rebel army.
- A new law on governing Aceh, to include considerable devolved authority, local elections, and local ownership of 70% of state revenues from natural resources (notably the lucrative offshore gas fields).
- Recognition that Aceh, whilst semi-autonomous, remains an integral part of Indonesia.
- Unconditional release of all GAM prisoners and amnesty for all GAM related offences.
- Other measures including reintegration support for former combatants, and the establishment of a Human Rights Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- An international mission to monitor the process, established by the EU and five contributing ASEAN countries.

This time the peace process held, beyond the initial phases and through to achieving a level of peace not witnessed in Aceh for over a generation. International and domestic factors combined to make it work. Political changes inside Indonesia were most significant. With fear of secession receding, civilian control strengthening, and the national economy picking up again, hardliners in Jakarta were becoming less influential. President Susilo, from a military background himself, had been a key promoter of peace talks in the past and appeared able to control the armed forces. In Aceh, GAM was hit hard by the military offensive in 2003–2004, and it was not negotiating from a position of strength. The older generation of more hard-line GAM leaders was also becoming less influential over time.11

A changing international context included the effects of the tsunami. It led to increased global concern and what amounted to unofficial monitoring on the ground by hundreds
of NGOs, journalists, and aid officials from early 2005 onwards. This concern was channelled productively, as internationally chaired negotiations and subsequent implementation of the peace agreement moved ahead rapidly, building on early successes and generating confidence. International support for a peaceful solution hit a receptive domestic audience: the Indonesian Government, especially the military, was keen on restoring a good relationship with the USA in particular; and post-9/11 changes in US foreign policy meant that GAM was receiving little sympathy as a rebel movement.

Although it is important to recognise that foreigners did not bring peace to Aceh, the role of international actors working on tsunami relief or directly on the conflict does warrant further attention. One key report written by International Crisis Group at the time of the peace agreement concludes with a section on ‘how donors can help’, presenting a long list of proposed fields of engagement. It recommends that tsunami reconstruction work consider conflict issues, and proposes improved coordination between various aid agencies involved in different aspects of the peace agreement.12

Post-tsunami rebuilding—mainstreaming or ignoring peacebuilding concerns

The tsunami response brought most elements of global disaster response and aid delivery to Aceh. Foreign military assistance departed as in March 2005, leaving a circus of UN agencies, donors, diplomatic field missions, consultants, and international and national NGOs. International NGOs had an unusually prominent role: the largest ones wielded budgets of well over US$100 Million each, making them highly independent.

As the initial emergency phase following the tsunami passed into longer-term reconstruction, some agencies began to focus more directly on the conflict context within which they were working. However, research undertaken in mid-2005 (after the tsunami, but before the peace agreement) found a major gulf between local Acehnese perceptions of the importance of the conflict, and the perceptions of international actors. Many of the Acehnese civil society figures interviewed felt that post-tsunami reconstruction should focus on peacebuilding concerns in order to have any long-lasting impact.13 This local emphasis on conflict concerns is echoed in international aid policy, but, as is explained below, was not so evident in the field. Globally, bodies such as UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), DfID (the UK Department for International Development),
and The OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) have spent considerable resources on developing guidance and skills on how to operate in conflict areas. Emphasis is often placed on ensuring conflict sensitivity across aid programmes, on appraising impact or understanding conflict contexts, and on evaluating findings.\textsuperscript{14}

However, despite concerted efforts from within aid organisations to promote conflict awareness, policy implementation in Aceh hit practical barriers on the ground. Few international actors grasped the reasons behind longstanding and deep antipathy between many Acehnese citizens and the state. According to responses given in mid-2005, the majority of international NGO interviewees in particular had little knowledge of politics, society or conflict in Aceh. Donors came across as more policy competent than NGOs, especially those that operated at a policy level in the national capital, Jakarta. However, implementation is a different matter, and donor policy competence rarely extended to practice. For example, one United Nations agency representative mentioned that whilst conflict issues were formally part of their international policy, he could not see how it had not been taken into account in any way in planning their post-tsunami reconstruction assistance in Aceh.\textsuperscript{15}

For most organisations working on post-tsunami reconstruction, institutional imperatives appeared to work against considering the conflict environment in any depth. At a practical level, agencies had to build up huge operations in a very short space of time, usually from scratch. For many international staff, Aceh was an unknown environment. This management challenge tended to consume the time of agency managers, who were, as a result, unwilling to take on any new problems. Project managers typically came from management or engineering backgrounds; their remit and experience did not cover complex political problems. Whilst field workers in rural districts rapidly had to associate themselves with the everyday realities of local military and rebel activity, more influential managers in the provincial capital did not need to unless their staff or programmes were under threat.

Head offices overseas or in Jakarta were preoccupied with ensuring accountable and timely tsunami reconstruction assistance rather than other tasks. For NGOs in particular, with huge amounts of public donations to spend, the biggest fear was failure to deliver programmes, rather than worrying about how aid flows would affect the dynamics of conflict.\textsuperscript{16} Risks of engagement in any element of the conflict were also heightened by Indonesian Government efforts to manage international agencies. Wary of international involvement in domestic concerns given the huge foreign presence in a sensitive area, the military and other bodies within the Government worked to keep conflict issues out of the aid arena.
The scope for encouraging conflict sensitivity of the main reconstruction aid effort was, at least in the early stages, slim. Several major donors—including USAID (the official US Agency for International Development) and the EU—were in fact supporting in parallel a range of smaller civil society support programmes concerned with the conflict, but they were mostly separated in the field from the far higher levels of support being provided for reconstruction. For some organisations, any efforts to address or link reconstruction assistance with conflict aims hit a barrier when funding regulations were interpreted narrowly. Oxfam field staff found their head office stipulating that no funds pledged for tsunami reconstruction could be used on anything related primarily to conflict, even though field staff felt that failures to address conflict issues might undermine reconstruction work. This stopped efforts to redress inequalities by supporting communities beyond the tsunami-affected area who had received no aid, as well as limiting funding for peace promotion activities or local level conflict reduction measures.

For the World Bank, a similar rift existed between the tsunami response and the conflict. Whilst their in-house social development group had been supporting work on conflict-sensitive development in Aceh and more widely across Indonesia for several years, their post-disaster projects did not often tap into this experience. Rapidly developed sector-based initiatives were not designed to be conflict-sensitive, with World Bank sector task managers and short-term consultants having little to gain from tackling difficult political issues that could be avoided. One senior World Bank specialist with decades of experience in Indonesia stated in confidence that, given the way in which the organisation was structured, it was almost impossible to cross-fertilise conflict reduction experience into the bulk of the initial post-tsunami reconstruction programmes.

By 2006, some larger agencies (notably the EU, given their higher level political and financial support for the peace process) had found ways round earmarking funds for tsunami damage alone, and were able link reconstruction and the conflict when working on issues of sustainability and governance in particular. It is also significant that a small number of bodies, ranging from the NGO Medecins Sans Frontieres to official donors like the Canadian Government, had managed to do so even at an early stage following the tsunami. Measures included: specific initiatives, such as funding support for civil society organisations that explicitly aimed at promoting peace, or assistance to conflict-affected as well as tsunami-affected displaced people; adapting programmes to take conflict into account—for example, by extra safeguards to ensure against corruption given the risk of resources falling into the hands of conflict actors; and revised management practices,
such as ensuring employment opportunities were given first to local Acehnese staff rather than workers from elsewhere in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{18}

The organisations able to take these steps all had a track record of having worked on conflict issues in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia. These positive examples suggest that the barriers confronted came as much from within international organisations themselves as they did from the context of Aceh. In Aceh’s post-tsunami reconstruction effort, international organisations rarely lived up to the promises of their bold policy statements on human security and conflict awareness.

The Aceh monitoring mission: A narrow but broadly successful approach

The collapse of earlier peace processes in Aceh led the Government and GAM to believe that stronger diplomatic backing would be required in 2005. This was discussed during talks held in Helsinki through the first half of the year. GAM pushed for far greater international peacekeeping responsibilities, whereas the Government of Indonesia refused to accept armed foreign forces on their soil. The Government of Indonesia may have originally wanted a mission consisting only of neighbouring ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) states, but GAM insisted on EU involvement in addition. In the end, the Aceh Monitoring Mission was set up, managed chiefly by the EU; monitors were from EU member states, Norway, Switzerland, and five ASEAN countries (Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia).\textsuperscript{19}

AMM was designed as a small, short-term mechanism with a realisable mandate focusing primarily on monitoring security during the initial, critical elements of the peace process when many Government forces were withdrawn and GAM weapons handed over. Concern over ‘mission creep’ into unforeseen fields exercised AMM’s planners from its inception. This suited the Government, who did not want to see a long-term international presence, and the EU, who hoped to avoid drawn-out foreign commitments (having learnt from experience in the Balkans) and wished to develop new, flexible ways of engaging in peace processes.

AMM covered Aceh from around ten field offices, with a main office in the provincial capital, Banda Aceh.\textsuperscript{20} Although AMM included some serving military personnel, all monitors operated on a civilian basis. For an initial six months, from September 2005
to March 2006, AMM deployed over 200 monitors, with numbers gradually decreasing until a remaining small group departed following elections in December 2006. The mixed Asian and European teams of ten monitors in each field office reported to the headquarters based in the capital Banda Aceh, from where ongoing top-level negotiations between GAM and the Government of Indonesia were chaired.

AMM was able to establish itself rapidly by focusing on narrow operational needs, utilising military-style vertical communications and command structures. Monitors focused on key tasks including reporting on violent incidents, and observing the redeployment of military forces and decommissioning of GAM weapons. Internal and external evaluations agree that AMM accomplished these tasks successfully, and that both GAM and the Government maintained sufficient confidence in the mission’s neutrality.21

The initial mandate for AMM lasted six months, until March 2006.22 With decommissioning and redeployment completed on schedule by mid-December 2005, AMM’s role became slightly unclear. Continued monitoring of the situation on the ground, and chairing the high-level negotiating meetings, kept the mission busy. Yet the interest in maintaining a narrow focus and early exit-date meant that AMM did not engage in the wider set of issues that emerged once the initial stage of the peace process was accomplished.

The peace agreement includes a range of issues stretching far beyond AMM’s initial involvement in redeployment, decommissioning, and security. Once the critical decommissioning of arms and troop withdrawals were achieved, it was inevitable that this wider range of issues would rise up the agenda. By March-April 2006, whilst both sides were abiding by the overall commitment to peace, most of the other elements were delayed or had not even been started. The Law on Governing Aceh was delayed (although it was progressing), 60 or more prisoners were still detained with their cases under dispute, reintegration processes had stalled under a mass of problems, and the promised commissions on human rights and related issues were being sidelined. AMM’s mission was extended, eventually until the end of 2006.

Low initial levels of attention to a range of ‘softer’ human security issues left AMM open to critical lobbying from pressure groups and member states of the EU on the need to address universal concerns such as human rights and gender equality.23 Observers pointed to the failed Aceh peace process in 2000–2003, in which the international body involved, HDC (or Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue), was criticised for failing to engage civil bodies more widely.24 When compared with the broader recommendations of a human security approach, AMM’s role could be criticised for being overly concerned with short-term
political agreement and conventional security issues, and failing to build on experience of what works in Aceh. Global analysis of peace-building policy often stresses the need to bring all actors into a common process, yet a civil movement that had been active in Aceh prior to a government crackdown in 2003 was not involved meaningfully. Although AMM did organise meetings for civil bodies from its headquarters and field offices, they were marginal, even tokenistic, and not relevant to the core negotiating process or other measures. Additionally, AMM field staff were not always equipped with the training, knowledge, or background to enable them to engage with a wide range of local actors.

However, it is argued here that whilst AMM’s approach did not follow generic human security guidance, and might have been improved, it was nonetheless broadly appropriate to the context. There are reasons why AMM did not take a more comprehensive approach from an early date. First, although the slow progress on these issues presented some risks to stability, the overall situation was positive. AMM-verified incidents, most of which were minor, declined from a monthly high of 107 in October 2005 to 20 in February 2006. General confidence grew, as seen in the capital Banda Aceh where people were happy to go out after dark once more. This positive mood, and AMM’s role in brokering continued negotiations between the two sides, meant that AMM rarely pro-actively pushed issues onto the top-level negotiating forum (The Commission on Security Arrangements) that met every two weeks or so, unless it was necessary to maintain commitment to the overall peace process. If neither side raised an issue as a problem, it was not usually addressed. This meant that a wide range of points were marginalised until they were brought closer to the centre of the operation at a later date, but it may have been a price worth paying for political commitment.

Second, AMM focused closely on building relationships with the most critical actors. In particular, good relations with Government of Indonesia were prioritised from the start. It has been suggested that, in comparison, HDC had not grasped the asymmetrical relationship between the two parties to the conflict during earlier failed peace talks. Perhaps because of its own governmental roots, AMM was very conscious of this asymmetry; staff were lectured on the importance of recognising the primacy of the Indonesian Government on several occasions including during initial trainings in Medan in September 2005. Senior AMM staff regularly visited the Government delegation appointed to liaise with AMM; by contrast, a focal point to GAM was only officially recognised in April 2006. As a result, AMM tended to avoid issues, most notably a legacy of human rights allegations that were threatening to some in the Government (notably in the armed forces) whose continued support for the process was critical.
Third, AMM worked to its strengths. Several elements of AMM’s structure limited the scope for a broader approach to human security. Staffing, orientation, lines of instruction, training, and other elements were chiefly geared to core monitoring functions. This could have been addressed through setting up AMM along different, more diverse lines, perhaps promoting negotiating sub-committees on specific issues. However, with an emphasis on keeping up the momentum of the peace initiative, and a need to deploy very rapidly at the offset, it is not clear how much would have been possible.

Dialogue between GAM and the Government of Indonesia that started in Helsinki early in 2005 had been still more limited in scope and in its participants. It was designed to ensure that both parties remained confident and became increasingly committed to a process that unfolded in a matter of months, giving little chance for blockages to arise and seizing the initial moments when sufficient common ground between the two key parties emerged. Slow, deliberate engagement of a wide range of stakeholders was intentionally avoided.27

Over time, AMM did respond to the need to focus on wider elements of the process, giving more staff time at all levels over to their resolution. This occurred once AMM senior management, including Head of Mission Pieter Feith, realised that a rapid departure early in 2006 was not appropriate, given the number and seriousness of outstanding unresolved issues. An international lawyer was brought from Sweden to help solve remaining cases of disputed prisoners, and monitors dealing with reintegration issues were given more responsibility. Monitors made more field visits to villages across the province, and senior staff spent more high-level negotiating time dealing with the broader range of issues outlined in the peace agreement.

Reintegration, monitors and donors: the push for 3,000 names

Given a gap between the principles of all-embracing human security frameworks and the narrower role of AMM, other international bodies also looked for a role in peacebuilding. The EU in particular was interested in using development assistance in addition to funding AMM from an early stage. Once the peace process started and appeared to be holding, more donors saw value in participating, including the World Bank, UNDP, and USAID. Some of the initial fears about touching conflict issues receded, as the Government of Indonesia encouraged involvement and agencies saw opportunities for themselves rather than risks.
One field in which the Government of Indonesia encouraged assistance was reintegration. Typically, reintegration involves the return of ex-combatants to civilian life, generally following cessation of conflict. It is a common element of peace agreements, and can include a range of programmes to aid the return process, including financial support, job training, medical assistance, and so on. The peace agreement between GAM and the Government of Indonesia gave detail on reintegration assistance, including commitments to provide amnestied prisoners, former GAM combatants, and civilians affected by conflict, with financial assistance, farming land, and employment. As with various sections of the text, wording was left general, enabling agreement to be found between the negotiating parties within the desired negotiating timeframe.

One of the first confidence-building measures under the peace agreement involved the release of some 1,406 prisoners under a general amnesty. Released prisoners were met on departure from prisons by officials from the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), who provided short-term funds, transportation and a medical check. IOM had been provided with funds from the European Union for reintegration programming from the start of the peace process. An intergovernmental organisation established in 1951, IOM was particularly well positioned to respond in Aceh, being one of the few international bodies able to conduct work there in the years before the tsunami. Its good relations with the Government of Indonesia were maintained by personal contacts in Jakarta.

Whilst the return of prisoners went smoothly, this was not the case for former combatants. Programmes for the reintegration of combatants tend to assume that rebel fighters will return to their home communities, and that this process may cause potentially destabilising friction. Yet this assumption is based on the premise that former combatants were somehow isolated from their home areas—the classic image of the guerrilla in jungle-covered hills. In reality, many rebels in Aceh moved in and out of villages over time.

Few had considered quite how the reintegration process for former combatants would occur, a reflection in part of the narrow nature of the negotiating process. It was assumed that former combatants would emerge out of hiding at the same time as GAM handed over weapons in a series of staged and monitored events, as defined in the peace agreement. In the event, weapons were handed over by GAM on time, but ex-combatants did not emerge from hiding. IOM, with funds earmarked for former combatants, were left without a beneficiary group to assist. Senior GAM leadership had decided that their cadres would formally return to communities when they felt that it was safe and in a manner that they, rather than the Government, would decide.
Government and international agencies then began to seek a 'list of names', the idea being that once equipped with the details of the stipulated number of 3,000 ex-combatants, assistance could be provided. Unfortunately, GAM saw the situation differently. They had no intention of providing a list of names, or even of approving an anonymous, photo-based scheme, for several reasons. These included a concern for the safety of their cadres, as well as the thorny problem that in reality there were far more than the 3,000 of them originally declared. These different perspectives, with GAM wanting to retain its control and security, the Government wanting to neutralise GAM’s networks, and international agencies wanting something that conformed to their notion of best practice, meant that the reintegration process became a political bargaining point rather than a technical exercise.

For IOM, as well as those in the European Union’s aid provision bureaucracy concerned with accountability, there was an incentive to push for a list of names of ex-combatants. AMM leadership supported this. Such a list would enable technically proficient programming in a difficult, corruption-prone environment, and give IOM the scope to demonstrate to their donor that they were not duplicating existing government funds. This fitted global ‘best practice’ expectations, and the aims of the Government of Indonesia. However, these interests did not fit so easily into the fragile post-conflict context. The technical needs of international assistance served to slow down progress, strengthening the Government’s insistence on a list of names and turning it into a negotiating tool, even though it was not in itself an element of the peace agreement.34

By early 2006, little real progress had been made on finding channels for providing reintegration assistance. The Government then established a body that became known as BRA (Badan Reintegrasi Aceh or Aceh Reintegration Agency) to decide collaboratively how the Government should spend its own budget for reintegration. It kept the international community at a distance, as observers but not as direct participants. With a growing body of international agencies interested in supporting reintegration, central Government wanted to ensure its control of the process. Meanwhile, former combatants in villages across Aceh were receiving little in the way of assistance, leading to fears that they would step up extortion and theft in order to pay their keep.

By April 2006, the peace process had gained ground. Tensions between GAM and the Government had receded enough to broker an agreement on reintegration, with minimal external facilitation. The Government gradually dropped its insistence on a list of names of former combatants, agreeing instead to let former GAM leaders set up micro-projects for...
groups of their former cadres. Project proposals were to be vetted by a joint committee, ensuring some accountability. Most international donors derided this process. It was not transparent, did not adhere to international expectations of best practice, and did not achieve the goal of disbanding former rebel units. More directly, international agencies could not engage with it, since it did not meet their operational requirements.

At this point, two international agencies promoted their own mechanisms instead. IOM still wanted full registration of ex-combatants, and the World Bank preferred to employ an existing village-level grant system it had previously helped set up successfully across Indonesia (known as the Kecamatan Development Programme or KDP). The third major agency involved, UNDP, offered to provide technical assistance rather than promoting specific models. Specialist consultants were drafted in to support the work of these agencies. However, with no common framework, the result was a range of parallel programmes that largely failed either to address technical problems or broker solutions with Government agencies.

In the event, some of the mechanisms proposed by the Government and GAM with little outside intervention worked, whilst others failed and were quietly dropped. Errors were made and some funds were ‘mis-allocated’. There is little doubt that some elements of international best practice, including stronger accountability procedures, further community participation, training, and exchanges of experience, would have helped improve this process and reduce local level tensions in areas where GAM ex-combatants were returning to civilian lives. However, barriers on the ground, coming both from the donor community itself and domestic actors including the Government as well as GAM, made it impossible to find common agreement.

**Coordination between international bodies**

Coordination is a perennial issue of concern to aid donors at the policy level. Common donor statements and declarations, including commitments made in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, are reflected by some agencies that employ staff in country offices with the specific task of promoting ‘harmonisation and alignment’.

However, practice on the ground is often less collegiate than statements in conferences, and is generally unlikely to change as a direct consequence of policy declarations. Unless there is clear incentive or instruction to work collaboratively, different agencies tend in many contexts to operate in parallel ‘silos’, maintaining sufficient relationships only to ensure the
achievement of internally defined aims and targets. Peace processes or ongoing conflicts also tend to be more politicised environments than standard development work, perhaps making common approaches still less likely given the range of other interests at play.

The peace process in Aceh was characterised by a lack of structured international coordination. Donor officials admitted that different agencies were often operating in competition, aiming to ensure that their funds could be spent or their technical ideas implemented. Wider institutional relations between donors on the ground including the EU, IOM, UNDP, USAID and the World Bank—who by mid-2006 were all involved in different element of support for the peace process such as information campaigns, dialogue promotion, reintegration assistance, and livelihood projects in conflict-affected villages—depended on voluntary relationships at field level. There remained a gap between the broadly political aims and discussions that AMM was involved in, and donor-related involvement with other elements of the peace process. The dominance of NGOs in the reconstruction effort, often aiming to avoid all political issues, probably contributed to this.

For international bodies looking to work collaboratively, this left a sizeable void. In Jakarta, regular higher-level discussions enabled and supported Government efforts to direct agencies towards specific areas, and pool some funding. Nevertheless, on the ground, efforts to link shorter-term security-related interventions (notably AMM) with longer-term international involvement were not formalised. When AMM left, there was no solid follow-up strategy involving internationals, but rather a variety of small donor and NGO initiatives were supporting different parts of peacebuilding: some donors working on reintegration, others were promoting local reconciliation committees, and so on.

Given the success of the peace process to date, it seems mean-spirited to criticise directly international bodies for allowing such a situation to develop. There is no proof that more collaborative measures would have been effective overall. Strong international leadership in some cases may reduce the essential involvement of domestic bodies, supplanting it with an internationally led process that is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run. In the context of a middle-income country like Indonesia, the Government is likely in any case to restrict such close cooperation between foreign agencies on grounds of sovereignty.

However, within specific fields such as reintegration, or efforts to promote conflict-sensitive tsunami reconstruction, there are clear instances where collaboration would have helped support rather than undermine international assistance. Lack of linkages between donor agencies frustrated some government representatives too, such as Islahuddin, a senior coordinator in the Government’s reintegration agency in Aceh, who stated that he had
hoped to see collective engagement and support from donors rather than criticism from afar and yet was frustrated at the inability of many donors to provide the basic help he needed.38

**Drawing lessons: The overall context of aid**

A political economy of international peacebuilding and aid interventions is just as varied and context-driven as the local political economy that receives them. Conflict in Aceh was a significant issue for many international actors: for the UN it was an opportunity to re-establish good relations with the Government of Indonesia; for the EU, it was a major opportunity to build a significant policy success, underlining its capability to act internationally in an area traditionally the USA’s backyard, and offering an alternative peacebuilding methodology to a Muslim region; for the World Bank, it represented another chance to restore its reputation in Indonesia, to demonstrate internationally its broad socially concerned approach, and to build a basis for future lending programmes to a decentralised authority.

These macro-political interests combined with lower order practical challenges to create a complex playing field. International agencies needed to consider the trade-offs involved in working on conflict issues. Even where opportunities to become involved existed, a fear that they might threaten agencies’ other interests in Indonesia predominated in early phases. Issues including a concern for good relations with Government, and the pressure to disburse funds, supplanted bold international rhetoric on conflict sensitivity.

For international agencies attempting to engage in peacebuilding, practical difficulties began internally. Setting up operations in Aceh is not simple. Even with the benefit of an institutional base established since the tsunami, agencies were still working hard to place staff and resources in Banda Aceh well into 2006. Practical issues of recruitment and deployment are especially difficult in an ambiguous political environment and a remote location, given competition for staff postings and contracts with operations elsewhere around the world. Further barriers through cultural misunderstandings and general differences in expectations add additional, substantial layers of difficulty.

For international agencies, local political context and specificity are usually secondary to technical models, internal needs, and universal practice. Finding the ‘overlap’ between global norms and locally appropriate action is not easy. Competition between agencies
adds a further complication, as jostling for influence and access to government (or former rebel) leaders pits one body against another despite ostensibly similar aims. Different timeframes, working practices and professional opinions make it hard for aid agency staff on the ground to collaborate. An effective government can take advantage of the failure to present a coherent international perspective, picking and choosing what advice to take, and playing agencies off against each other.

For the Government of Indonesia too, the process of managing relations with a range of aid agencies as well as a peace monitoring body like AMM was challenging. Whereas the Government had set up administrative machinery to liaise with AMM, this focused chiefly on security-related issues and had little scope to become involved in reintegration or other complex socio-economic processes, even if they were part of the peace process. Unlike the smooth plans and idealised models of post-conflict planning, the result on the ground was a sub-optimal consequence of the interface between international agency limitations and interests on the one hand, and domestic limitations, especially within the Government, on the other.

Yet given a positive peace process, some international agencies were able overall to contribute usefully. Staff on the ground were able to respond to shifting circumstances despite institutional constraints and political complications. With international agencies involved in reintegration kept away from high-level political processes (except for AMM in a monitoring capacity), the solutions to political blockages emanated from the two parties to the conflict themselves, rather than being been internationally imposed. In the context of Aceh, where both parties remained strong and the background conditions were favourable, this approach ensured in the event that a sustainable, locally run process continued.

Some practical conclusions

Two common misconceptions over recent events in Aceh hold that the tsunami somehow ended civil war, and that the international community was the key factor in making sure that the peace agreement was implemented. Whilst both the reaction to the tsunami, and the presence of international aid and peacebuilding actors, were significant factors, the key reason for the success of the peace process in 2005–2006 when compared with previous efforts is the shift in stance of GAM and the Government of Indonesia. This created common ground for signing and upholding a meaningful agreement. International
involvement helped, but the process was not an externally imposed one, and has more chance of succeeding in the long run as a result.

If the impact of international involvement is indirect and complex, then the interactions between aid and peacebuilding are still more so. This has implications for planning development and peacebuilding operations. ‘Mainstreaming’ conflict issues into aid operations, for example, is more easily said than done. Despite some positive examples, incentives within aid actors on the ground, and at higher levels, as well as the sheer difficulties of undertaking reconstruction work in Aceh on an unprecedented scale, limited conflict sensitivity. For peace monitoring operations, the scope to engage with a range of local actors is limited by practical barriers of communications structures and personnel. AMM, for its part, managed to counter some—but not all—of its own limitations by adapting over time, shifting and improving as the peace process evolved.

In terms of building common human security approaches, emerging lessons from this field-level review suggest that attention be paid to practical issues of implementation. As many development practitioners have long known, well-intentioned policy directives can be their own worst enemy if they reduce the scope for field operations to build flexible, context-driven responses. The specific context is formed not only by conditions on the ground, but those driving and defining the interest of international actors, which are never the same in any two scenarios.

In summary, global international policies on the issues covered in this paper (conflict sensitivity, human security, reintegration assistance, and coordination) appear distant from implementation nearer the field. The positive ways of supporting peace that some agencies managed to find came through understanding and working within the limitations provided by an inevitably complex local context, and the limitations of what international agencies can in reality achieve.

Two concluding points follow these sets of limitations. First, international actors should of course consider the local context before engaging, and build systems that enable them to engage appropriately. Since this cannot be done from afar, it involves placing specialists in-country or employing existing specialists, as well as a strong emphasis on learning and flexibility in early programme development. Donors should not expect such intelligence to enable them to carry out international best practice: in all likelihood, it will promote different, less uniform approaches. Whilst there were various deficiencies on the part of actions undertaken by peacebuilding and aid actors in Aceh, they might have been addressed with ‘softer’ measures more effectively than with tighter policy frameworks.
These include paying attention to appropriate delegated authority, to communications mechanisms that allow bottom-up flows of knowledge, and to careful recruitment within projects or institutions. Mechanisms that improve institutional recognition of the centrality of local actors and political process may be more likely to increase effectiveness than all-embracing policies or technical fixes.

Second, understanding of what international actors can realistically achieve in practice can limit unrealistic applications of global policy. International bodies generally face considerable internal limitations, respond to skewed incentives, and suffer from a general failure to coordinate rationally. The need to recognise the primacy of relations with government and domestic politics more widely, as well as the inability of most agencies to achieve more than fairly basic forms of engagement unless already carrying them out, limit still further what international bodies can do. In all, smaller, focused and appropriate inputs that can be carried out competently may achieve more than grand-sounding strategies that please policymakers but are impossible to implement.

**Endnotes**

1. For a clear overview see Uvin, 'The Development/Peacebuilding Nexus.
3. Interviews with different Indonesian and international specialists in Aceh and Jakarta between April and June 2005 presented a uniform perspective that peace was unlikely in the short or medium term.
4. The author arrived in Aceh in March 2005, to assume a post with the British Department for International Development (DFID) looking at conflict and reconstruction in Aceh. He later took an advisory position in the headquarters of the Aceh Monitoring Mission. These posts provided great access to information and individuals. Efforts have been made to remove bias throughout this paper, but his roles in Aceh should be acknowledged. Thanks should also be given to various people who supported this work, in particular Patrick Barron.
5. Amongst many sources, see for example, Hulme, 'Projects, Politics and Professionals'.
6. See Moreno Torres and Anderson, Fragile States.
7. See for example, the field-based work of David Mosse, who covers in detail how policy is reinterpreted to fit around aid agency interests at the local level: Mosse, Cultivating Development.
8. See Reid, 'War, Peace and the Burden of History', 306–309; and Miller, What's Special.
11. See Schulze, Mission not so Impossible. The perspective on changes within GAM leadership comes from AMM staff working with GAM representatives on a daily basis. See also Schulze, The Free Aceh Movement.
14. See for example, OECD DAC, Harmonising Donor Practices; DFID, Preventing Violent Conflict; and further material from UNDP, The World Bank, and others. Particular challenges arise over attribution of aid impact on conflict, on which see Esman and Herring, Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict.
16. Information from personal interviews with senior aid managers from NGOs including the British Red Cross and Oxfam, June 2005.
17. This situation stemmed from guidelines issued by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DFC), an umbrella organisation for 15 humanitarian aid agencies in the UK. The issue continued into 2007, according to Oxfam staff.


20. AMM opened and closed field offices over time, depending on perceived risk and on available resources.


22. There was, apparently, an implicit informal agreement with the Government that the mandate would be extended for a further six months should all parties be willing.


25. Barakat et al., *'Winning and Losing in Aceh'*

26. Huber comments that HDC struggled to access local knowledge during the previous peace process (Huber, *The HDC in Aceh, 44–45*). AMM shielded itself from similar criticism as much by keeping a tight focus on core areas as by increasing understanding of local context.

27. Typically, reintegration is approached within DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration), as a core element of peacebuilding.

28. For more detail, see Kingsbury, *Peace in Aceh*.

29. AMM special report 001: GAM amnesty and prisoner release. 31 August 2005.

30. See for example, the UN IDDRS framework: http://www.unidr.org/iddrs/framework.php


33. The author was involved in regular meetings with officials from all the key parties throughout this period. See also AMM Special Reports 041 and 058 (both 2006).

34. OECD, *Harmonising Donor Practices*.


37. Interview with Ishahuddin, senior coordinator to Badan Reintegrasi Aceh (BRA), Banda Aceh, 6 May 2007.

38. See Crawford, ‘Partnership or Power’; for a critique of donor partnership in Indonesia.

**References**


