

10. Social recovery

Rural communities faced significant challenges after the tsunami. The tsunami killed many villagers, destroying village social structures and leadership, leading to loss of coordination and motivation among remaining villagers. People were severely traumatised by the loss of family members, villages and way of life. There were fewer people to work on the land, and initially, agricultural workers preferred to work in higher-paid reconstruction work than in agriculture. Many farmers were housed in emergency shelters and temporary housing often far from their farms, so it was difficult for them to get to their land. Loss of agricultural staff made it difficult for farming to resume. It is reported that as many as 30% of Dinas Pertanian staff in Aceh's west coast centres died during the tsunami.

The emergency aid provided after the tsunami created aid dependency, with survivors expecting payment to return to farming. NGOs reported that the biggest hurdle was the lack of motivation for some farmers to get back into farming, exacerbated by their personal trauma and the availability of food packages. One solution to this is for the aid organisations to work with the pre-existing agricultural research and extension system and with farmers who have already taken the initiative to re-start cropping.

Social disruption resulted in many crops not being sown at optimum times leading to additional problems with pests, irrigation water availability and waterlogging. In some areas farmers were ready to go back to farming but were prevented by the thick layer of tsunami sediment on their fields. Overall, farm production suffered due to lack of capital which was spent on other things.

Farmer groups

In Aceh farmers work in groups, so helping re-establish these groups after the tsunami provided personal support, built relationships and networks, and shared the considerable workload involved in preparing land for cropping.

Women's farming groups are also important as they offer opportunities for networking, interaction, learning new skills, growing food and making money. Before the tsunami there were many such groups; afterwards very few due to collapse of village structures. A dynamic extension officer at Meulaboh, taught women organic farming, including compost-making and organic pest control. The women made products such as sauces and preserves which they sold locally and earned an income. One third of the profit was kept in the group's account, one third purchased inputs for the next crop, and the remaining third was shared equally between

members. Other women asked for similar groups to be formed, as their only activity outside the house is helping their husbands in the fields.

Need for activity

Farmer workshops two years after the tsunami identified that activities such as restoring drainage and irrigation channels, removing debris and replanting crops were important for farmers to regain a sense of control and purpose. Other possible activities could be salinity surveys by farmer groups to assess where to begin planting crops.

Farmers in Aceh stated that being active and focussed on their work helped distract them from trauma, and that it was important to stay optimistic and work together. They also asked for agricultural knowledge and expertise to help them keep farming, not just one-off inputs.