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After the tsunami : the remaking of everyday life in Banda Aceh, Indonesia

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Chapter one

Aceh thanks the world: emerging subjectivities in the post-tsunami reconstruction process

Introduction

On the 23rd of February 2009, with the formal end of the reconstruction process (April 2009) in sight, the Indonesian president visited Aceh to inaugurate several large reconstruction projects. Among them were not only the reconstructed city harbor and the much discussed Tsunami Museum (see chapter four), but also a newly established park on a historical stretch of grass in the middle of Banda Aceh, *Blang Padang*. The park is called the *Aceh Thanks the World Memorial Park*. The entrance is marked by a monument in the form of a wave. The text on the monument gives information about the tsunami and thanks all the social actors that came to rebuild Aceh and Nias. Plaques on the ground in front of the wave are inscribed with numbers reflecting the tsunami's destruction (e.g. "167,000 people dead or missing" and "more than 70,000 Ha agricultural land damaged"). The rest of the park consists of a long jogging track with plaques that are evenly distributed along the track thanking individual countries. Each plaque thanks a different country – in words, saying "thank you and peace" in both Indonesian and the respective country's first language and with the sign of the country's flag. There are too many countries to remember, which is well expressed in the park's name: Aceh does not just thank individual countries, Aceh thanks the world.

Significantly, the park was made not by the Acehnese government but by the national government. Like the rest of the reconstruction process it was directed and implemented by BRR (the Bureau of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, see below). The festive 'thanks the world' park is a political statement; a happy message of bringing reconstruction to an end with the help of all those friendly nations around the world. It hardly reflects the tsunami grief and loss, and neither does it reflect the many problems and inequalities in the reconstruction process or, more generally, the politics of what I refer to as the complex arena of social actors in this process.¹⁸

¹⁸ Like memorials all over the world, the Aceh thanks the world memorial represents the disaster quantitatively through the numbers on the ground in front of the wave. Statistics of mass death, Robert Cribb argues, are highly political and "the very act of treating mass death as an object of statistical analysis implies a dehumanization of the victims, the reduction of a multitude of individual tragedies to a figure which is then subjected to manipulation and analysis." (Cribb 2001: 82). Estimations of mass death, like the estimated number of 167,000 tsunami victims, should be treated with the highest caution. Yet even if they are distancing and dehumanizing, or perhaps just for this reason, these highly uncertain "cold statistics" (*ibid.*) are often used in memorials to represent disasters.

And yet I found a similar ‘Aceh thanks the world’ attitude reflected in the stories of many of my interlocutors in Aceh. Through its very name, the park refers to the kind of subjectivity of many Acehnese that emerged in the post-tsunami climate. For many people in Aceh, rather than building relationships with Indonesia, in the post-tsunami reconstruction process the world really focused on *Aceh*. Having a long history already, the idea of ‘Aceh’ and its “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 2006) was similarly remade again in the process. But, though absent from its name, it was the Indonesian government that commissioned the park and it is significant that the president himself flew to Aceh to open it.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which, through the reconstruction process, people in Aceh reformulated relationships between Aceh and the national government on the one hand and between Aceh and the international community on the other hand. It will do so by looking at some of the on the ground social relations and activities in the process and at the image of ‘Aceh’ and its future which emerged through these relations. While others have focused on the post-conflict and post-tsunami local political transformations (Aspinall 2009b, Barter 2011, Mietzner 2007, Palmer 2009, Törnquist et al. 2010), I will focus my analysis on the imaginings and subjectivities that emerged in the post-tsunami reconstruction process. I will thus explore how the process of reconstruction itself influenced subjectivities in Aceh. To address this issue, I ask what various themes became important in the reconstruction process and why. In addition, I explore how they became important in a changing social and political context. Although, like the members of the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (Telford et al. 2006), I am critical of the way in which ‘reconstruction’ took place, my purpose is initially not to criticize the reconstruction process and the many players who became part of it. Instead, I focus on the kinds of subjectivities that this process fostered. In this chapter I therefore use the concept of subjectivity as explained in the introduction to this dissertation to focus on the ways in which people in Aceh navigated through a complex arena of different players who participated in the reconstruction process and how they, during this period, imagined and remade relationships with both the national state and the international community.

The chapter starts by looking at what reconstruction meant for tsunami survivors during the first weeks, months and years after the disaster and by sketching the arena of different social actors that came to play a role in the process. This first part asks what, when using the phrase ‘starting from zero’ to describe the post-tsunami situation, people meant by ‘starting’. What did this ‘starting’ look like and how did it develop? By addressing the vagueness, hope, and disappointment experienced in the process of what is widely known as making a ‘proposal’ (for reconstruction assistance) I intend to give an impression of the complexity of the relations in the reconstruction process. I then continue by asking how and why housing became the major issue in the process and argue subsequently that the

answers to this question are instructive with regard to the politics of reconstruction. This discussion brings me to the final part of this chapter in which I show how a particular group of citizens, 'tsunami victims', came to claim entitlement to aid from the national state, while glossing all assistance coming from abroad in terms of 'gifts.' I explore how the gift is tied to recognition (Robbins 2009) and how by understanding foreign aid as a gift rather than a universal right people in Aceh implicitly related this aid to the idea that Aceh was finally 'seen' and recognized by the world. Building on Mauss's insights on the gift and reciprocity, I suggest that by thanking the world, people in Aceh reciprocated this recognition, thereby creating a place-in-the-world for Aceh that they hoped would continue in the future. The relations with the Indonesian state, however, were characterized by a sense of entitlement to reconstruction assistance. The government promised houses to all people who lost their home because of the tsunami and tsunami survivors indeed felt entitled to this aid from the Indonesian government; they felt that being assisted by the government was their right. As a consequence, they also held the Indonesian government accountable for failures of the reconstruction process. I suggest that they thereby increased the tenuous post-conflict legitimacy of the Indonesian government. Finally, I will argue that the ways in which people in Aceh positioned themselves in relation to aid entitlements (from the government) and aid 'gifts' (from international organizations) illuminate their emerging post-tsunami subjectivities that are part of an ongoing process of making 'Aceh' and its place-in-the-world.

Starting from zero

No society starts from 'zero' after a disaster. Anthropologists have elaborately shown how reconstruction relies on pre-disaster structures and knowledge and that there is always a certain extent of social continuity between pre- and post-disaster contexts (Bankoff 2003, Hastrup 2011, Jackson 2006, Oliver-Smith 1992, 1996). Continuity is also spatial. The flattened landscape of Banda Aceh's neighborhoods was full of history and many survivors wanted to return to their own land as soon as possible. Yet these survivors almost unanimously claimed that they had to 'start from zero' (*mulai dari nol*), meaning that all their possessions as well as many of their neighbors, friends and family members were gone.¹⁹ Taking the presence and necessity of building on pre-tsunami social structures as a

¹⁹ As Nygaard-Christensen points out, the portrayal of the post-disaster landscape as a 'blank slate' and a 'ground zero' from which one can 'start from scratch' is often used by governments and international organizations to imagine post-disaster landscapes as "unique canvases upon which an entirely new socio-political order may be drawn." (Nygaard-Christensen 2011: 9). Dreams of the 'blank slate' presenting a unique opportunity for change make way for disappointment when old social structures turn out to prevail (*ibid.*). In chapter five I will indeed discuss the way in which the devastation brought by the tsunami came to be viewed as an opportunity for change and for 'building back better'. Here, I want to emphasize that it is my understanding that the phrase 'starting from zero' as used by the tsunami survivors points at loss rather than opportunity.

given, this dissertation aims to take the phrase ‘starting from zero’ seriously by asking what starting from zero looks like. How is ‘starting from zero’ related to ‘getting back to normal (*biasa*)’? What does this kind of normality or everydayness entail, how does it relate to ‘zero’, and how does it differ from what the everyday used to be? Beginning to answer these questions, this chapter opens with a look at the post-tsunami days, weeks and months and at the complex arena of social relations which formed the reconstruction process.²⁰

After the tsunami, many survivors found that the only thing that remained from their houses was the floor – and even this was often difficult to discover in the midst of the devastated landscape. Daly et al.’s “From the ground up” (2012) can be taken literally as the phrase most often used in conversations about the immediate post-disaster situation was *habis semua*, ‘everything was gone’. While some people stayed on the rooftop or second floor of the house from which they had witnessed the tsunami for several days, others made their way to other parts of the city only a few hours after the disaster. Indeed, as several disaster scholars have noted, in the midst of chaos and crisis people do not behave chaotically (see for example Fisher 2008). On the contrary, they often make sensible decisions about what to do and where to go. Some survivors walked for hours without food and water to reach the house of a family member. Others made their way to hospitals and mosques. Significantly, many people, especially women, emphasize their agency, their determination in the decisions they made both in those first few days and later on in the reconstruction process. Take for example the story of Ibu Nazlah, a woman who lost her small children, husband, house and neighbors in the tsunami.²¹ She herself was taken several kilometers inland by the water, after which people who she had not known before picked her up from the water and carried her to the second floor of a house. She told me how she was severely wounded, unable to go anywhere for two days. During those two days, the only thing she did (and could do) was pray. She said:

I was there for two days. And then I said to the people there, ‘please bring me to [the neighborhood of] *Ulee Kareng*, I want to go to the *Ulee Kareng* hospital’. So there was someone who took me downstairs, they carried me and helped me onto a motorcycle. They brought me to the *Ulee Kareng* hospital. It was very crowded there. They helped many people, but they did not help me. Only when I became angry they came to help

²⁰ See Eye on Aceh (2005) for another detailed account of the first forty days after the tsunami.

²¹ I use *Ibu* (mrs.) and *Pak/Bapak* (mr.) in the text where I would usually also use these ways of addressing people in everyday life in Aceh.

me. After that I met someone I knew and asked him to bring me to the house of my brother in law, which was nearby.²²

I found that many of people's actions during those first days, as they narrated them afterwards, involved informed and practical decisions on where to go and what to do. Those actions and decisions, rather than an overall sense of total chaos, structure their stories. Nevertheless, these actions are of course related to the very difficult and anxious conditions of those first days. Ibu Munia, who together with her husband and child witnessed the destruction from a rooftop, stayed in one of Banda Aceh's main mosques for a week after the tsunami before making her way to her family in Sigli, a town on the east coast:

We stayed at the mosque for a week. My baby was sick, there were no medicines. Often there was no food. During those first days there was no aid. After that, some assistance arrived: some people received aid, some did not. (...) first of all we needed medicine. There were noodles; sometimes we got them, sometimes we did not. Only after a couple of weeks there was a lot of aid; from England, from Turkey.

They searched for their lost family members amongst the dead bodies. At night they slept near the mosque on the ground, not far from where the bodies were gathered. She had no cloth to cover her baby at night.

After a week I could not stand it anymore. I said to my husband, 'let's go to Sigli now.' He replied: 'How will we do that? We have no money at all!' 'We will just try,' I answered.

Finally, relying on small lies (that they actually had some money) and different modes of transportation, they found their way to her home village. It was only after a couple of weeks that they returned to Banda Aceh and lived in a nearby village until they received one of the temporary barracks to live in. When I asked her why she returned to Banda Aceh instead of living with her family in Sigli, she answered that she remembered her family members in Banda Aceh, none of whom was ever found. Like many others who said they preferred living in a refugee camp to living far away with their family members, she mentioned that it was a way to share in the sorrow (*biar aja saya di situ sama sama*

²² Unless indicated differently, the quotes from conversations with tsunami survivors as well as the ones from Indonesian language newspapers and magazines that I present in this dissertation are my translation of the original Indonesian text.

menderita). Moreover, in this way her husband could earn money by cleaning up the neighborhoods in Banda Aceh.

Unsurprisingly, the experience of loss is central to people's stories of those first weeks. Not only the loss of family members, but also the loss of a place to live, of money and gold, of everything people had worked for for years were harrowing experiences. Some upper middle class people told me how this felt like falling down (*jatuh*); down from everything they had established. Many of these people, especially when they held jobs in civil service or had invested their money in land, quickly recovered economically in the following years. Many others, however, saw all their savings (especially gold) gone and would face a much more difficult process of economic recovery. In general people specifically commented on the hardships of a total lack of money (or any other possessions), which made them fully dependent on assistance from family members or strangers.²³

During those first days survivors looked for lost family members, found places to live in refugee sites, with family or out of town, and searched for food and medicines. Many people relied on assistance from the (unaffected) local Acehnese population. While some people said that everybody seemed to care only for him or herself, others commented on the ways in which they gathered with neighbors or on how people they had never met became like family (*saudara*). It was only after two days that the Indonesian president Yudhoyono opened up the province for foreign aid, which formed the start of the largest post-disaster aid operation in history.

Interestingly, many tsunami survivors, like Ibu Munia, listed countries or international NGOs which came to help, rather than mentioning assistance from the local Acehnese, Indonesians, and (Indonesian and foreign) military forces. In the second part of this chapter I will reflect on this emphasis on foreign assistance. But first we will have a look at the complex arena of social actors who came with the massive organization of recovery and reconstruction as it developed over the following months and years.

Actors in reconstruction

In the first months after the disaster, the national development planning agency (BAPPENAS, *Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional*), in consultation with experts from different fields, developed a Master Plan for the reconstruction of Aceh. The plan advised on the installation of the governmental agency for reconstruction and

²³ Hilhorst and Bankoff (2004: 3) point out that vulnerability to disaster (and in the post-disaster recovery process) can be understood in terms of power relations as well as in terms of people's agency. Indeed, as we will see, power relations (for example based on income, origin, or expertise) did play a major role in the reconstruction process. At the same time agency significantly contributes to people's resilience, which for example became clear from Ibu Munia's case.

rehabilitation of Aceh and Nias (BRR NAD-Nias, *Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi NAD-Nias*), which happened in April 2005.²⁴ The plan put a lot of emphasis on the interconnections of different dimensions of reconstruction including the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual healing of individuals, as well as the remaking of social and cultural relations in communities and the reconstruction of public services such as health and education, economic recovery, and legal certainty and security. However, even though all these fields have been addressed to some extent by some aid agencies involved, over the course of the reconstruction process it was housing that not only became the main focus of most agencies but also the determining factor of the process' 'success' or 'failure', as I will explain later in this chapter.

BRR came to function like a special ministry, with its director Kuntoro Mangkusubroto reporting directly to the president. The agency not only had the task of coordinating all reconstruction efforts in the province, but also organized and implemented projects itself. It had a four year mandate: in April 2009 the reconstruction of Aceh and Nias would have to be completed. In its one year report of April 2006 (called 'Building a land of hope') BRR focuses heavily on 'building' and 'rebuilding'. For BRR, these concepts include not only physical reconstruction but also the rebuilding of the economy and the government (BRR 2006: 41). In the report, BRR divides its tasks over different time periods within the four years of its mandate, rather than taking an approach that would interconnect the different dimensions of reconstruction from the beginning. For example, housing would be the priority in 2006-2007, while infrastructure, the development of institutional capacity and economic reconstruction would gain priority in 2008-2009 (*op. cit.*: 44, 46-49). Unfortunately, the reconstruction of more than 100,000 houses turned out to take much longer. While BRR directed most of its efforts, even in the last two years, towards housing, at the end of its mandate in 2009 there were many problems left. A number of families still did not receive a house and many people complained about the poor quality of the tsunami aid houses.

During the first months after the tsunami, hundreds of national and international aid agencies settled in Aceh in order to help with the emergency aid and reconstruction.²⁵ Billions of US dollars were pledged, and mostly eventually also given, to reconstruct the countries around the Indian Ocean (see introduction). A large part of these donations went to Aceh. BRR worked together with international donors; both multilateral donors such as UN organizations, the EU and the World Bank, and bilateral donors, some of which gathered in the Multi Donor Fund. It is important to realize that, since different levels of

²⁴ NAD means Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, which was the name of the province between 2001 and 2009. In 2009 the name of the province was changed to Aceh.

²⁵ Based on different reports Telford et al. estimate the number of international NGOs in Banda Aceh at its peak in mid-2005 at 180 (2006: 56, 155). Unregistered and very small international NGOs as well as the many governmental international organizations are not included in this number.

government, NGOs and other international organizations worked together in many ways, it is difficult to keep a neat separation between them. Moreover, there are major differences within a 'category' of actors (e.g. between different NGOs). However, as we will see below, in the perception of many people in Aceh the separation between international organizations (usually all referred to as 'NGOs') and the governmental BRR was very real. Even though it is not my aim in this chapter to look at the many social actors in detail, let me just point at some categories of actors to give a sense of the complexity of the field.²⁶

A huge variety of aid organizations came to Aceh, including small and large national and international NGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations, multilateral organizations and bilateral donors. Many of those organizations were either specialized in emergency assistance or in development aid. They concentrated on particular fields of intervention or on more general forms of assistance. While many international NGOs had signed the Red Cross Code of Conduct, others had not (see below). The national government took the lead in the reconstruction process through BRR, but the provincial and municipal governmental levels were equally important in making reconstruction sustainable, even if they often felt bypassed by BRR. These local and provincial governments acted through many different departments. The local population was obviously highly varied. Importantly, as I pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation, a relatively high percentage of the population in Banda Aceh works for the local or provincial government. Others found work with one of the many aid agencies. As we will see below, aid 'brokers' took on the role of leading the communication between aid organizations and village leaders. We will also see that at the level of neighborhoods and villages the population can be highly varied. Gender is an important dimension of difference, as is for example the relation between 'original' inhabitants and newcomers (see below). There are many more players in the process of reconstruction. However, let me at this point just emphasize the diversity of and overlaps between the categories of social actors that form the complex arena in which reconstruction was carried out.

BRR received much criticism for the lack of coordination of the activities of these hundreds of agencies, for corruption affairs, and for the poor quality of the delivered assistance. The agency itself, however, kept proclaiming its success²⁷ – listing the numbers of houses, harbors, roads, and schools built. On the ground, reconstruction was much more complex, with all kinds of people and organizations involved in what Tania Li has called “a witches’ brew of processes, practices, and struggles” that goes far beyond the scope of programs and plans (Li 2007: 28).

²⁶ For a more detailed focus on different social actors in the process see various contributions in Clarke et al. (2010) and Daly et al. (2012).

²⁷ The book series published at the end of its term presents a clear example of this as it continuously emphasizes how challenges have successfully been overcome (see for example Hanief Arie 2009).

Elsewhere, I have argued for more academic attention to the role of affected people themselves in the reconstruction process, as, arguably, local people and institutions play the most important role in this process (Samuels 2010). As Hilhorst (2007) puts it: “Societies reconstruct, they are not being reconstructed (...).” In this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I retain the focus on how tsunami survivors remade their worlds and, in this chapter specifically, how they did so within a large and complex field of diverse social actors. My aim is to provide an understanding of the reconstruction process that explains emerging post-tsunami subjectivities and the renewed sense of Aceh’s place-in-the-world. It is explicitly not my intention to argue for a ‘spontaneous reconstruction-only’ approach in which external aid would be unnecessary and neither do I wish to advise on reconstruction ‘from below’, which is the increasing focus of aid agencies on ‘participation’, local ownership, building on spontaneous processes and other ‘people oriented’ approaches (Hilhorst et al. 2010). Instead, I ask how reconstruction ‘worked’, and what it did in the process of remaking everyday life. Following Ferguson (1998) I thereby intend to challenge the imagined vertical topography still often used in analyses of development or reconstruction in which the state is supposed to be “up-there” on “top” imposing “top-down” projects on the society or the people who are at the “bottom”, the “grassroots”, or “down-there” organizing themselves “from below”. The image that unfolds in the course of this chapter is one of a complex arena in which there is no ‘above’ or ‘below’, but in which relationships are created through gifts and entitlements. It is an arena in which people in Aceh position themselves as subjects, alternately global, national, or regional as well as based on neighborhoods (*gampong*). In this arena there is no evident ‘below’, no natural politically subordinate local (*op. cit.*: 62), but a range of subject positions created in a field of politics, power, imaginations and social relations.

Back to the neighborhood

Although many tsunami survivors gathered in refugee sites from the day of the tsunami onwards, many others found their way to family and friends, not only in other parts of Aceh, but often in cities like Medan or Jakarta. They stayed there for weeks, months, sometimes more than a year. Their returns sometimes took on a gendered character with a husband returning to Banda Aceh first – to get back to his job, work in one of the clean-up programs and ensure that the family would get a room in one of the temporary shelters or barracks that replaced the tents where the refugees initially lived – while his wife and children stayed out of town. Others quickly came back to live in the tents, arguing for example that they were the neighborhood’s original residents and would not leave the land, that they preferred to suffer the aftermath of the tsunami together with their fellow Acehnese, or that it did not feel good to be a burden on the unaffected family members for such a long time.

Moreover, the basic needs in refugee sites were provided by aid agencies, while people living with family members or in rented houses could not benefit from aid.²⁸ It was already then that different refugee sites received aid from different organizations. While many people afterwards commented on the abundance of aid available, others noticed the differences among different NGOs. So, for example, did Ibu Annira, a middle aged woman who survived the tsunami together with her husband and teenage children. However, the house that they had been building over the last twenty years was for a large part destroyed. They stayed with family in another part of Aceh for three months, after which they came back to the house and started to clean up what was left of it. About the aid distribution in the neighborhood she said:

Concerning the issue of *sembako*,²⁹ there was a lot of it (*lancar dikasih*), but it depended on the NGO that distributed it. For example, in my neighborhood there was Care, while in another neighborhood there was Oxfam. It depended on them. Some people were given more luxurious items than others. (...) We received only instant noodles, salted fish, rice... others got complete packages with plates and glasses, everything. But we did not make a problem of this! Indeed, we had enough. To anyone who wanted to give us anything we just said 'thank you'.

The way in which people, after noticing any kind of shortcomings, often added how grateful they were for anything NGOs came to give them presents a noticeable difference from attitudes towards BRR. Whereas NGO aid was generally seen as a gift, many people felt entitled to BRR (government) aid and therefore felt entitled to complain about it. I will return to this point later in this chapter.

Until after six months temporary barracks were constructed, many people lived in tents. The way in which people often said that "if it wasn't for the foreign donations we would still live in tents" says a lot, not only about the emphasis on 'foreign' charity but also about the hardships suffered during those first months. Weather conditions of heat, wind and rain made living in the tents all the more difficult. Yet survivors quickly set up new businesses or returned to former jobs. During the first year, many people found work in one of the 'cash for work' projects in which people cleaned up neighborhoods for a daily wage (usually about rp. 30,000, €2.50). Although food was provided in the refugee camps and barracks, people explained that they needed the money to buy other necessities, such as

²⁸ Some people told me that later on in the reconstruction process they could receive a monthly stipend, at least if they were living in Banda Aceh. However, some people who made use of this regulation commented on the difficulty of receiving the stipend as one required several documents to prove that one was really a tsunami victim (*korban tsunami*).

²⁹ *Sembilan bahan pokok*, nine necessities for daily life – usually including, for example, rice, cooking oil and dried fish.

clothes and soap. Moreover, many people said that having daily activities helped them to deal with the intense grief after the disaster. And quite some women proudly told me how they had done salaried work for the first time in their lives after the tsunami “when the NGOs came in”.³⁰

Barracks and brokers

While some survivors remained in the tents for more than a year, aid agencies and the government already started to build barracks as temporary shelters in the first months after the disaster. The solution of building temporary shelters instead of the immediate reconstruction of permanent housing has been criticized for its waste of money and for slowing down the reconstruction process (Steinberg 2007). On the other hand, the tents were quickly decaying while the permanent reconstruction of houses could still take years (*ibid.*). Another point of criticism of the reconstruction of barracks was that they were often built far away from the original villages, making it more difficult for survivors to check on the reconstruction of their houses and to rebuild their livelihoods.

Furthermore, and importantly, during the first eight months after the tsunami, Aceh was still a conflict zone.³¹ Even though the Indonesian government asked for international assistance, it was also quick to let foreign militaries and NGOs know that they could not stay for long. Eva-Lotta Hedman (2008) has noted how the government’s drive for a hyper-centralization of post-tsunami relief, including the counting and organization of displaced people in barracks, was part of its effort to restore its capacity for “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998 in Hedman 2008). She found that, unsurprisingly, against the backdrop of the conflict in which the state often forcefully displaced people to barracks to control them, these centralizing efforts were met with suspicion or even opposition (Hedman 2008).

However, the many people I spoke with rarely commented on the necessity of having the barracks built at all. Indeed, I only talked with them much later, when they were already living in newly built permanent tsunami houses, the conflict had long ended and most barracks had been demolished. What people did speak about was the experience of living in the barracks, including the distribution of aid, setting up small businesses and meeting new

³⁰ Doocy et al. (2006) are predominantly positive about effects of cash-for-work programs in Aceh. They show how for a majority of the households included in their study, cash-for-work provided the only source of income. The program thereby helped people to return to their communities. I encountered many community leaders who argued that the cash-for-work programs weakened the traditional *gotong-royong* (community voluntary self-help) in which neighbors used to help each other and clean the neighborhood for free. However, in the neighborhoods in which I did my research the system still seemed to be very much in place. Thornburn (2010: 146-7) draws similar conclusions.

³¹ The province had been an area of military emergency and martial law since May 18, 2003. One year later this was changed to a state of ‘civil emergency’, which did not change much in practice (Hedman 2008). In May 2005 the Indonesian government changed this status to a new and adjusted framework of “civil order” (*ibid.*). The peace agreement was signed in August 2005, eight months after the tsunami (see introduction).

people. For example, tsunami widows and widowers and unmarried young people met with prospective partners in the barracks and married quickly. More generally, people who had lost their partners or parents in the tsunami often married within one or two years, not only because, as some people remarked, the proximity of people in the barracks made quick weddings socially desirable, but also for other economic, social and personal reasons. For example, one young woman who lost all her brothers and sisters and was left with her aging mother told me that the main reason for her quick wedding was that she, and her mother, needed a man in the house to provide for them. Some tsunami widowers told me that they married soon after the disaster, because they needed a woman in the house to take care of the household tasks. Quite differently, one young man married very quickly just to forget his girlfriend whom he had loved intensely and who died in the tsunami.

People often recalled how NGO workers came to the barracks to play games with the children, to give aid and medical assistance, sometimes including mental health care. Aid was distributed through a system of representatives, often village leaders or young men associated with the village leadership. One of them was thirty year old Ahmad, who lost all his brothers and sisters in the tsunami. When we first met in 2007, he lived alone in the tsunami aid house that had been built on his family's land. The foundations of what had been his brother's house were still visible on the adjacent plot. He had lived with his brother's family when the tsunami hit; he was the only survivor. After the tsunami he met up with friends and after living in a refugee camp, he soon became involved in the distribution of emergency assistance in one of the UN offices. Later he became the coordinator of a barrack in his neighborhood, explaining:

When I came home to the barrack here, I became the coordinator for some months. I took care of the refugees, of ten barracks. One barrack had space for 12 *kk* (*kepala keluarga*, litt.: family heads, here meaning families).³² [Thus I was the coordinator of] 120 *kk*.

Annemarie: What kinds of tasks did you have as a coordinator?

Ahmad: As coordinators we organized everything. When there was aid from outside (*bantuan dari luar*) we managed it. When there were problems in the barracks, we solved them. For example when people had trouble with their neighbors or within their

³² The family, as the lowest level of official organization in Indonesia, is formally represented by a family head. During the reconstruction process distribution of aid and houses went through the system of family heads. Similarly, a village leader would mention not how many people but how many *kk* lived in his village. Ahmad's remark that 12 family heads shared one barrack, says little about the actual number of people living in that barrack, as families vary in size. Below we will see how this system became particularly important in the distribution of houses. For instance, a recently married couple with their own family card (*kartu keluarga* also abbreviated *kk*) could get an extra tsunami aid house next to their parents. However, a family with six young children would only get one house as they only had one family card. Thus, distribution of aid was rarely based on the size or the needs of the family.

families, we took care of it. Or, for example, if there was no clean water in the barracks – then we would make a proposal (*proposal*) to an NGO to get clean water. (...) We lobbied (*lobby, melobby*) with NGOs that could help us. (...) At the time, I was busy every day with meeting NGOs that came to the barracks. There were many NGOs. There was Oxfam, there was a special NGO for water, one that only gave food, one that focused on health, there were those that gave trainings.

When I met Ahmad in 2007, his barracks had already been demolished and all former residents had moved either to their newly built houses or to the few barracks that remained in the city and that became increasingly embarrassing to the authorities in the following years, as its residents were often tsunami survivors who because of corruption or a lack of coordination had not yet received a new place to live. At the time, Ahmad worked as a field supervisor (*pengawas pekerjaan*) on a construction project that was financed by Oxfam. The next year, however, when many projects finished and NGOs left, it became more and more difficult for Ahmad to find a paid job.

Ahmad functioned as a local ‘broker’; the person (most often a man) who manages the relations between different parties and who became an important figure in the reconstruction process. In the different neighborhoods in which I conducted my research I came to know quite a few of such brokers who had often worked for international organizations (after the tsunami), spoke some English and peppered their spoken Indonesian with English terms. The broker negotiated between the demands of the people he ‘coordinated’, the organizations that came to offer their help, and other parties such as the local government and the contractors that built the houses.³³ Importantly, the broker did not come from nowhere and was not only part of the ‘project’ of reconstruction, but also of the existing and re-emerging social structure, not so much as ‘broker’ but already holding a particular position in a community (Mosse and Lewis 2006). Indeed, mostly the ‘original people’ from a village (see below) claimed brokerage positions. Moreover, brokers like Ahmad had some experience in working for international organizations and continued to work in that field.³⁴

The complexity of the position of the broker is beautifully shown in the documentary film *Playing between Elephants* by the Indonesian filmmaker Aryo Danusiri (2007). The documentary follows one village head throughout the process of rebuilding houses in his village in East Aceh and thereby grasps the complexities of both the entire process and of

³³ It is important to keep in mind that the situation of an abundance of aid organizations offering assistance was one that could be encountered mainly in Banda Aceh and surroundings.

³⁴ According to Telford and Cosgrave (2007) people in Aceh complained that they felt sidelined by NGOs that only talked to village leaders. This again points at the complexity of power relations in the reconstruction arena and urges us to be careful when speaking of ‘categories’ of social actors as if they were neatly separated in reality.

the position of this particular person. It shows many of the problems encountered in the process, for example when building materials delivered turn out to be of poor quality or when the budgeted money proves to be insufficient to rebuild the whole village. The problems culminate when a Western representative of the donor organization comes to check on the building process (executed by a contractor) and orders newly built houses to be torn down because of the poor quality of their construction. It is the village chief who has to deal with the angry contractor and the angry village people, who now have to wait even longer for their houses to be finished, and who later accuse him of corruption.

The position of the broker could thus be at once powerful, profitable, complicated, and vulnerable – not in the least because of corruption accusations. I heard many stories about corruption on all kinds of levels. It seemed to be both the revealed cases of corruption and the many stories and suspicions that often made people sure that the aid that they saw themselves entitled to had actually been delivered somewhere but never reached them. It was in this context that, especially when reconstruction formally came to an end in 2009, the *proposal* (a term used by people in Aceh) became for many people both a last hope for aid or financial credit and, when never heard of again, evidence of rampant corruption. In the next section I discuss how these proposals for a particular kind of assistance to an NGO or to BRR, seemed to signal the very insecurity, vagueness and indirectness of survivors' relations with aid organizations and government institutions.

The proposal

Ibu Muhaira lived in a coastal neighborhood that had been swept away by the tsunami. She survived with her husband and small children, but lost her mother and older sister. After staying with family members in the district of North Aceh for three months, they moved to a barrack near their old neighborhood. A year later their tsunami aid house (*rumah bantuan tsunami*) was built on the spot of their old house, of which only the foundations remained. When I met her in 2009 she explained that she had to accept the offer for the house, because she had already declined another offer that did not look good and she was afraid that she would not have another chance. All houses in her street at the far end of the neighborhood were built by BRR. That is to say; BRR paid a contractor to build them. Trouble came soon after the building process had started. The houses at the far end of the neighborhood were vulnerable to flooding so Ibu Muhaira asked the contractor to level up the foundations. The contractor protested that his budget was insufficient, but as she persistently argued that he otherwise should not build it at all, he finally gave in. She checked on the construction process every day, since otherwise, she said, "it would have been even worse". In contrast with the strict UN-HABITAT supervisor that ordered poorly constructed houses to be torn down as shown in Aryo Danusiri's film, no BRR supervisor ever showed up to control the construction process of Ibu Muhaira's house. Even though

she checked on the process herself, the house turned out to be of a very poor quality. She showed me how part of the roof had already been blown away in a storm, how the door and the windows did not open and close well and how the walls had already started to crumble. She explained that the water pipes had been damaged by the tsunami and at the time only provided salt water. That water had been used to make cement, which was the reason the walls had already started to crumble. Moreover, unlike some other tsunami houses, hers came with neither a kitchen or floor tiles.

Ibu Muhaira was seriously disappointed with the house and wondered anxiously whether it would even last another five years. Her husband did not earn much money as a *becak*-driver and they did not have the means to either move or repair the house. She pointed to the other side of the main road, where well-constructed houses had been built by the Asian Development Bank, and wondered: “Why has our house not been built like that?” Most of her neighbors did not return to this street to live in the poorly constructed aid houses. Ibu Muhaira explained that most of them were civil servants who either owned a house elsewhere in the city or had the means to rent one. The tsunami houses were sublet to newcomers who were glad to find an affordable place to rent. Importantly, this shows that even though people could not always influence which agency would construct their house, their capacity to deal with any shortcomings often depended on their pre-tsunami social situation that continued after the disaster. Higher echelon civil servants, with a steady income and the possibility to take on loans, thus soon enjoyed a degree of economic comfort even when all their belongings had been washed away by the waves.

Ibu Muhaira did try to make official complaints about the house but found the process highly problematic. In 2007 she first went to the village head (in Aceh called *keuchik*). Together with some of her neighbors, who at the time were prepared to give it a try, she made a proposal (*proposal*). They argued that the houses were too poorly constructed to live in and asked for rehabilitation money (*dana rehab*) to improve them.³⁵ However, the *keuchik* sent them away with the proposal, telling them to go to different government offices, where they did not get any help either. Ibu Muhaira strongly felt that the *keuchik* did not really want to help; otherwise he could have taken up the issue himself and made a *proposal* for them. Finally, they came back to him with the *proposal* and he said he would handle it. But they were asked for a *persentase* (percentage), meaning that if the money would trickle down in some way or another part of it would go to the *keuchik* himself. They agreed, hoping that at least something would happen. But two years later she had never received any response to her proposal, sensing that it probably never even made its way to BRR. She told me she not only wished the *keuchik* would have seriously helped them to

³⁵ Ibu Muhaira told me they asked between 7 and 15 million rupiah per house. 15 million rupiah (€1250) was also the maximum amount of ‘rehabilitation money’ given to families whose house had been damaged but not destroyed.

solve the problems, but also that he would have been more proactive in choosing the aid organizations and controlling the construction activities in the neighborhood in the first place.

In the next section we will take a closer look at the construction, distribution, and quality of tsunami aid houses and look at an example of a neighborhood in which the choice of the organizations to work with was perhaps more seriously considered. Here, I want to draw attention to the *proposal*, especially to what the idea of the *proposal* does in the complex arena of social actors, which is the focus of this chapter.

Ibu Muhaira by far was not the only tsunami survivor who was disappointed with the quality of her house and decided to make a proposal to get money for improvements. She was also one of the many persons who told me they never received any response to their proposal. Often they were not sure to which organization the proposal should be sent or where they might check this. People handed in proposals to the village head (*keuchik*) and waited for a reply. In 2008, a year before I met Ibu Muhaira, I had a conversation with the *keuchik* of her neighborhood. Except for the part about the ‘percentage’, his story mirrors hers. He told me that there were many problems with the houses, especially those built by BRR. The roofs were of poor quality and the foundations too low. He continually received complaints from angry villagers and did not know what to do with them, as by now he was sure that BRR would not offer any more rehabilitation money. He said that he tried to solve the problems, but also sent the people directly to BRR – which did not help either. The confused situation in which it was not clear who was responsible and accountable, and who was entitled to what and from whom, was one that I continuously encountered, especially with regard to housing.

But, even though the *keuchik* did not know what to do with the proposals and even though direct access to BRR seemed hardly possible, proposals were still made and somehow sent into the bureaucratic machinery. In Ahmad’s story above we already encountered the *proposal* as the common way to get access to aid. If anything was needed in the barracks, he explained, he would make a *proposal* and send it to an NGO. However, he spoke of 2005-2006 when there was an abundance of aid and hundreds of NGOs to provide it. In 2008 and 2009 the situation was rather different. BRR had a difficult time dealing with the most urgent housing cases – especially addressing those people who did not receive a house yet, the people occupying houses that had not been given to them and the people who received many houses even though they were entitled to only one.³⁶

³⁶ The latter issue was called *rumah ganda* and caused some commotion in early 2008, when the authorities discovered that hundreds of people had unrightfully received extra houses. On Monday, March 10, 2008, BRR spent a one-page advertorial in the local newspaper *Harian Aceh* explaining how it would solve the problems (“Penyelesaian kepemilikan ganda rumah bantuan tsunami”). However, many people in Banda Aceh I spoke with at the time were skeptical, saying that this was probably just the tip of the iceberg, as they knew many

Focusing on the houses that had been left unfinished by corrupt contractors was considered more urgent than spending the last year and the last part of the budget on improving the thousands of poor quality houses.³⁷

Proposals were also sent to NGOs; particularly proposals in the field of cash grants and credits. For many poor and unemployed people, it turned out to be very difficult to obtain such a grant or even credit in 2008-2009. While in the early reconstruction phase many families had received small cash grants,³⁸ in the years in which BRR had initially planned to prioritize economic recovery it was still preoccupied with housing. *Modal usaha* (business capital) became only more difficult to obtain, even though many poor people in Banda Aceh told me (as they still did in 2010 and 2012) that starting capital was their main need. Women who already had a small business could often participate in microcredit programs, but for men and those women without a running business, capital was hard to find.³⁹ Apparently, though many NGOs were leaving in 2009, the *proposal* still seemed promising – even if it rarely turned out to be successful. In March 2009, Tarmizi, a young unemployed man whom I often spoke with, told me on several occasions that he was working on a proposal for a cash grant of a Swiss organization. He spent a lot of time on the proposal and seemed quite hopeful. He had heard about the possibility of obtaining a cash grant of this organization from a friend. However, a few weeks after he sent the proposal he was informed that the organization did not have a program for cash grants. It was not the first time he was disappointed. Later, I coincidentally met someone who worked for that organization and who told me that they only assisted existing businesses with obtaining loans for an important investment (such as buying machinery).

The increasing failure of the *proposal* to get accepted or even to get noticed somehow somewhere was for many people a sign of the large scale corruption in the reconstruction process and the neglect of ‘real’ tsunami victims. Again, as in the case of the distribution of emergency aid, many people emphasized that corruption was an Indonesian problem. Many felt that whereas the foreign donors had generously donated large sums of money, the Indonesian government did not manage to spend it transparently without corruption.

people who received more than one aid house. By then, almost everybody was convinced that corruption in the distribution of houses had been rampant.

³⁷ For example, on January 14, 2008 BRR presented a new policy that focused on finishing the houses that had been left by the contractors. The task of finishing them would now be given to contractors that had successfully completed projects in the past, see “Kebijakan baru BRR: Rumah tak fungsional direhab ulang.” *Serambi Indonesia*, 13 February 2008.

³⁸ I found that the distribution of these grants had been rather arbitrary. Often they had been handed out by the NGO active in a certain village. Whether one received any money and how much then depended on the village one lived in. One woman told me how an aid organization organized a village meeting in which everyone who would like to win five million rupiah (about €400,-) could subscribe. Later the names of five winners were drawn from a large box.

³⁹ Some of these men and women asked a female friend with a business for a loan upon a (microcredit) loan, which indeed worked out well for some.

As Ibu Muhaira emphasized: “This [the poor quality house] is not the fault of the donors. The problem is in the field, and now we are not satisfied with the aid. BRR did not satisfy [our needs].”

What I want to point out here is that the *proposal* as a way to get access to aid brings together, due to its vagueness, hope and frustration, expectation and disappointment. The *proposal* as a way of access balances on a tenuous rope between gifts and entitlements. Uncertainty as to whether one was actually entitled to an aid house of proper quality or the poor quality house was just bad luck and uncertainty about the question of who would get a cash grant or loan and from which organization increased the confusion and frustration of the process. In their comparative study of reconstruction in different tsunami affected countries Telford and Cosgrave indeed found that the lack of information and communication between aid agencies and tsunami survivors has been a major weakness in the process (2007: 20-21). Similarly, I found that vagueness, uncertainty, and lack of information were characteristic of the messiness of the process as it emerged out of survivors’ stories.⁴⁰

Remaking a neighborhood

Before we move on to the issue of housing, let us have a quick look at the neighborhood level and try to see how the people in the neighborhoods in which I conducted my research had ‘started from zero’ in the years after the tsunami. In fact, during the main periods of my research between 2007 and 2009 people frequently remarked that a few years ago they had not imagined that they would live there again. Similarly, in terms of social relations, many things changed over the last years. Whereas on my first entrance in the first neighborhood I lived in hardly any regular social activities had been established, in the following years the monthly *arisan* (women’s rotating credit group) and weekly *pengajian* (Qur’an recitation) were set up again, as well as regular *gotong royong* (in this case cleaning the neighborhood) by the men. As former neighbors moved back into their new houses and newcomers moved into the empty tsunami aid houses, the increasing number of wedding parties and other festive meals revived the neighborhood. As in the rest of Banda Aceh and its surroundings, grocery shops, cafés, restaurants, *warung* (small food stalls) and services such as laundrettes, internet cafés and motorcycle repair shops have emerged in this area over the years.

Asked about post-tsunami changes, many people in the neighborhoods in which I conducted my research commented not only on the physical changes (more houses, that were notably all the same, and fewer trees), but often also on the social changes. Many of the original residents had died; newcomers came to occupy the tsunami aid houses. The

⁴⁰ This also became clear from my conversations with a number of NGO-workers and (local) government officials.

new people came from other parts of Aceh, or from Medan or Java, mostly looking for work. However, the word for immigrants (*pendatang*) was also used for those families who had moved into the neighborhood decades ago but whose forefathers came from elsewhere (which is the case for many people in Banda Aceh). As I have explained elsewhere (Samuels 2011), the relation between people whose families had a certain *gampong* (*kampung*, neighborhood) as their place of origin (*orang asli* or *asal lhok*) and immigrants (*pendatang*) influenced the reconstruction process.⁴¹ The attachment of families to a certain *gampong* dates back at least to the nineteenth century (Siegel 2000[1969]: 35, Snouck Hurgronje 1893), while the division into larger districts (*mukim*⁴²) probably dates back to the seventeenth century (Reid 2005: 107). While in their own *gampong* the *orang asli* usually claim leadership positions and are consulted in case of important decisions, in another *gampong* one may feel like a stranger. Immigrants have to adjust to the rules of the *gampong* and can rarely claim any political influence at a neighborhood level. Although long-term ‘immigrants’ usually take part in all the neighborhood’s activities, newcomers, especially renters, are often excluded from gatherings such as the *arisan*.⁴³

In the reconstruction process, the *orang asli* usually took the lead and I have heard several stories about *orang asli* abusing their power to claim more aid or be the first to receive a new house. On the other hand, many neighborhoods decided on systems in which the most vulnerable (widows and orphans) would receive aid first. For the tsunami survivors themselves, both the *orang asli* and the long-term immigrants, the influx of many newcomers was often a source of worry as it was perceived to be a threat to the togetherness and solidarity (*kebersamaan*) of the *gampong*. However, over the years, this anxiety seemed to ebb away as people more and more often said that things had gone back to normal (*sudah biasa*).

In the preceding sections, I have offered a glimpse of the complexity and versatility of the arena of different players that participated in the post-tsunami reconstruction process, directing attention to the roles of BRR, NGOs, brokers, village leaders, and ‘original’ residents. With this arena in mind, we now turn to what became the main public issue in the process: housing. I will explore why this issue became so much more charged than the other dimensions of reconstruction and I will explore what this says about the relations between the different players in the process.

⁴¹ The Acehnese term *gampong* denotes the neighborhood in both a territorial and administrative sense and is strongly tied to Acehnese *adat* (customs). While I use it in this section because it is particularly related to the relation between newcomers and original inhabitants, throughout the dissertation I follow most of my interlocutors by referring to the neighborhood as *kampung* or village (*desa*).

⁴² The *mukim* is an Acehnese level of government between the *gampong* and the sub-district.

⁴³ The reason for this that was usually given was that one could not be sure that renters would stay long enough to complete the whole cycle of the *arisan*. Participants of the *arisan* have to contribute a certain amount of money every month, the total sum of which they only receive once during the cycle that can last several years depending on the number of participants.

Housing

Driving through Banda Aceh's coastal neighborhoods in 2007, I was repeatedly struck by the uniformity of the rows and rows of tsunami aid houses. Upon coming closer to the sea, fewer and fewer pre-tsunami houses could be discovered. Signs at the entrance of each neighborhood indicated which organizations had been involved in the construction processes in that particular place. In 2012, when most of these organizations were long gone from Aceh, these signs were often still standing. However, the landscape behind the signs changed considerably over the last years. Whereas in 2007 many aid houses were still empty, a few years later almost all of them were occupied, as a considerable number had been sold and rented out. Many people changed their houses: sometimes only by adding floor tiles and plants on the veranda or a gate around their plot; in other cases by adding different rooms or even a second floor to the aid house. Standard tsunami aid houses had a size of 36 square meters, consisting of a living room, two bedrooms and an outside bathroom. Generally, families with a little money built a kitchen in the back as soon as possible after receiving the house. If the kitchen was large enough it could serve as the backroom in which women could retreat when men received guests in the front.⁴⁴ If the family did not have enough money to build such a kitchen, they often divided the living room in two parts, separated by a large cupboard that kept the back part with the television and cooking activities out of sight.

The houses are a visible reminder of the tsunami and the subsequent reconstruction process.⁴⁵ But not only are they the most omnipresent visible reminder in urban space, tsunami aid houses also became the major social and political reconstruction concern in the post-tsunami years, giving cause to frustration, disappointment, demonstrations, and a wide range of complaints. Again, lack of clear information and coordination became major problems and housing was the single most discussed issue in all the conversations I had about reconstruction. Clearly, one crucial reason for this is its importance to everyday life. However, I maintain that housing also became a major issue for other reasons, especially its visibility (and physicality), countability and the way in which it became the only *individualized* entitlement to reconstruction aid that was supposed to be universal for 'tsunami victims' (*korban tsunami*). By contrast, for example access to health care (such as a new clinic in the village) or economic assistance (such as cash grants or credits) was never made into a universal entitlement for tsunami victims. Although, if not provided by the government or an aid organization, there were possibilities to access this kind of aid (e.g. by way of the *proposal*), people rarely considered it an entitlement that an individual or

⁴⁴ Women also sit in front to welcome the guests, especially if the guests are women or a visiting couple. However, when a male guest visits her husband, a wife will usually retreat to the back after taking care of drinks and snacks. Also, if the visitors are close family or neighbors, the women (host and guest) may retreat to the back together.

⁴⁵ See pictures 1 and 2. These photographs can be found at the end of this dissertation.

family could claim. Housing, however, came to emblemize entitlement. My interest in this section centers on the question of why this was so. Consequently, after introducing the process of reconstruction of houses in Aceh, I will show why the reconstruction of houses was interesting from a bureaucratic perspective for aid agencies and the government and at the same time strongly influenced the (self) identification of 'tsunami victims'.

From temporary barracks to permanent housing

Steinberg (2007) estimates that no less than 120 NGOs in Aceh became involved in the reconstruction of houses. BRR itself, originally predominantly a coordinating body, also started to implement housing projects from the end of 2005 on. BRR had huge difficulties in coordinating the process, not in the last place because some NGOs had already initiated projects before BRR was even installed, but also because of the sheer abundance of organizations working on housing projects. BRR set standards for the maximum amount of money that a house was allowed to cost (to prevent social inequality), but this standard was often ignored. The multitude of organizations offering to build houses, combined with a lack of coordination resulted in an unbalanced distribution: not only among the tsunami victims, but also between different regions (with areas that were difficult to reach being relatively ignored) and between tsunami and conflict areas (Kitzbichler 2011). While in some remote areas hardly any organizations offered their assistance, in Banda Aceh and the neighboring district of Aceh Besar organizations competed for beneficiaries.⁴⁶ This resulted in the interesting (and in the history of humanitarian assistance rare) situation that organizations competed to give assistance to whom they call 'beneficiaries' rather than the other way around (cf. Hilhorst and Jansen 2010: 1130). Many villages and some individuals therefore managed to at least control which organization would build in the village.⁴⁷ Ahmad, whom we met above as a barrack coordinator, explained how the process took place in his village:

At the time, many NGOs came here because they wanted to build houses. But none of them offered to build all the houses in the village. For example they offered to build only exactly 100 houses. So *pak keuchik* refused almost all of them. Finally, ADB [Asian Development Bank] came in and built hundreds of houses. There were also people who

⁴⁶ Stirrat (2006) sketches a similar image of post-tsunami Sri Lanka.

⁴⁷ As in the section on the 'brokers' it has to be noted that in this case, again, leadership was crucial. Reconstruction processes were often much more difficult in places where many village leaders had not survived the disaster (ACARP 2007). Also, individual residents (especially women) were often enough excluded from the decision making processes. Finally, residents depended on the whims of a village head. I know of one village in which by 2009 hardly any house had been completed, simply because the village head (*keuchik*) only allowed projects of NGOs that were prepared to hire his own construction company for the implementation (and hardly any NGO complied).

chose IOM [International Organization for Migration] or BRR. They made individual agreements and reported this to the village head.

Others from the same village told me that ADB was mainly chosen because it agreed to raise the foundations first, something which had not been negotiated in Ibu Muhaira's case above. Apart from ADB, IOM, and BRR, other organizations came in and individually agreed with residents to construct their houses, something which in this case was allowed by the village leadership. At a certain point at least five organizations were constructing houses in the village, all of them employing different contractors. Apart from these, there were the organizations that were involved in other sectors of reconstruction. Often, village heads were preoccupied with having meetings with the multitude of NGOs that got involved in 'village planning', including not only housing, but also water and sanitation, infrastructure, and health. Moreover, organizations sometimes employed different contractors to build different sections of the house. As a result, people in one of my research neighborhoods could not move to their new houses, even though these had been almost finished for about a year, simply because the contractor who should build the bathrooms had not started yet.

As opposed to an approach in post-disaster housing reconstruction that promotes the engagement of residents themselves in the building process, almost all projects in Aceh were executed by contractors (Kitzbichler 2011). Reasons for this were time pressure (BRR aimed to build almost 100,000 houses in just two years) and a concern with quality (many aid organizations demanded that their houses be earthquake-resistant). Paradoxically, however, the contractor approach led to major quality problems; as contractors tended to subcontract their projects (with the subcontractors again pruning away their profits), leaving less money for the construction of the houses. Also, in quite a few cases contractors disappeared with the construction money. Whereas some organizations controlled the process tightly (as in the case shown in Aryo Danusiri's film), others never showed up (as in Ibu Muhaira's case). Further impediments to the quality of the houses as well as the process in general were the fact that only few of the many organizations involved had previous experience with building houses, while almost all of them had a high turnover rate of staff (Cosgrave 2007, Daly and Brassard 2011). Many tsunami survivors, like Ibu Muhaira, told me they had no idea who to turn to in case of questions or complaints.

While almost all aid organizations claimed that their programs were participatory, few of them actually engaged residents in the decision making process (Daly and Brassard 2011, Kenny 2010, Kitzbichler 2011).⁴⁸ The many conversations I had with tsunami survivors echo Daly and Brassard's finding that people had little to choose in terms of

⁴⁸ There have been notable exceptions, such as the case of The Development Forum, described by Kenny (2010).

housing styles. Some people told me how they had explicitly asked the aid agency whether they could add some of their own money so that a kitchen or an extra room could be included in the design, but were met with refusal.⁴⁹ All in all, as the Tsunami Evaluation Committee has noted, most of the reconstruction was supply-driven (Telford et al. 2006). A clear example is the way in which many organizations offered to build only fixed amounts of houses, as we saw in Ahmad's example. Lina, a young Javanese woman who worked for a large international NGO, told me the following story. One day she visited village A, which had just twenty families living in temporary shelters. They asked her to build houses for them, as no other NGO ever offered to do so. However, in neighboring village B, at least ten NGOs were involved in reconstruction activities. Lina asked her boss if they could build in village A, but he refused: twenty was not enough – such a low result was not worth the effort. Lina remembered that the villagers were desperate, asking her: 'should we marry off our teenage daughters so that there are more families in this village?' In the end she did convince her boss to help this village.

Although marrying off teenage daughters may seem to be a desperate final solution to obtain a house, it does get to the core of the housing distribution system. Houses were distributed to families; to people who held a *kk* (*kartu keluarga*, family card). A second initial precondition was the ownership of land.⁵⁰ Initially, thus, people whose house was destroyed and who owned a plot of land could have a tsunami house built on that land. However, in almost every neighborhood I visited, including those near the coast where many people had died, the number of houses had increased after the tsunami. This regularly caused people to grimly joke that before the tsunami there had been more people than houses, while after the tsunami there were more houses than people. One reason was inheritance: even if none of the family members survived the tsunami, a house was often built for the legitimate inheritors. Secondly, if a family owned an extra plot of land and one of the adult children had married and therefore established a *kk* (family card) of his/her own, an extra tsunami aid house could be built. I have seen this in numerous cases and it partly explains the increase in houses. Since it was the *keuchik* (village head) who had to

⁴⁹ Elsewhere, I have wondered why most of the literature discussing participation in post-disaster reconstruction only focuses on the participation of 'beneficiaries' in reconstruction programs instead of asking how aid organizations can participate in the local process of reconstruction, even though it is widely acknowledged that the local population is the most important actor in reconstruction and should be 'in the driving-seat' (Samuels 2010).

⁵⁰ Almost all land-related records and titles were destroyed by the tsunami and boundaries of plots had become unclear (Fitzpatrick 2008b). Land administration and issuing land titles became an important part of the reconstruction process in the first years and was executed through the comprehensive "Reconstruction of Land Administration Systems in Aceh" project (RALAS) (*ibid.*). Village leaders and long term residents often played an important role in reassessing land boundaries. Women's land rights were sometimes neglected (Fitzpatrick 2008a) and became an issue of advocacy for some big NGOs. One female coordinator at a major international NGO told me how she not only strived to make women aware of their rights but also urged people to issue the new land titles in the names of both husband and wife.

sign for this extra house, good relations with the village leadership were essential. Additionally, many people told me stories of outsiders buying land in the village and having a tsunami aid house built on that land (by an NGO or other organization). In the back of Ahmad's village a whole new block of tsunami aid houses had arisen on a plot where previously there had been none. Apparently, someone had bought the land and managed to have the houses built on them; though no one was sure (or would tell me) who it was. Some of the houses were now rented out (see Kitzbichler 2011 for a similar example).

More generally, stories about housing distribution were almost always related to corruption; with people seeing their names which had been on the list of beneficiaries suddenly crossed away, village leaders acquiring up to ten houses and original inhabitants (*orang asli*) of a neighborhood being structurally given preferential treatment over others. Not only did the process seem to be extremely difficult to control, policies were also largely unclear. One thing that was unclear was the entitlement of recently married children with a newly established family card. While one BRR coordinator assured me that all tsunami victims with a family card and land could get an aid house, another official became angry when I suggested this to him a couple of weeks later. He emphasized that certainly only those couples who were already married *before* the tsunami could get a house.

Another issue that remained unclear for a long time was the fate of renters and people who became landless because of the tsunami (mainly because their land had been taken by the sea). For a long time it was uncertain whether there would be any provision at all for this group. Meanwhile, it seemed hardly possible for this mostly lower income group to rent again on the housing market in Banda Aceh, as rents had increased substantially after the tsunami. In June 2006 BRR announced that former renters would be given a cash grant. This announcement was met with heavy protests, after which BRR decided to give land and housing to former renters and people who had become landless (Fitzpatrick 2007). Fitzpatrick (2007) advises that it would be best to give former renters land and houses in their former villages, as that would be the best way to rebuild their livelihoods. It turned out differently. BRR together with its reconstruction partners decided on relocation sites, some of them far away from the city. Elsewhere, I have described the problems in one such site, the Great Love neighborhood in the village of Neuheun in which 800 houses have been built by the Buddha Tzu Chi organization (Samuels 2012). The site is more than 15 kilometers away from the city and houses mostly poor families in houses of deplorable quality.⁵¹ Livelihood possibilities are extremely limited and public transportation is expensive, especially limiting women's mobilities (*ibid.*).

⁵¹ Asbestos has been used in the constructions and some of the walls already start to crumble. Residents complain of respiratory problems.

Finally, another issue that caused public outrage concerned the rehabilitation money promised to families whose houses had been damaged but not destroyed. Initially, the compensation amount was set at 15 million rupiah (about €1,250,-). Quite some people I spoke with received this amount, but found that it was hardly enough to finance even a part of the reparations. By contrast, a new tsunami aid house was worth at least 50 million rupiah, causing some people whose house had been severely damaged to argue that they would rather have seen their house totally destroyed so that they could have received a new house. However, towards the end of BRR's reconstruction mandate many people with damaged houses had not yet received any rehabilitation money.⁵² BRR found its budget insufficient and decreased the amount of money to 2 million or even 1 million rupiah, causing frustration, anger and disappointment.

As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, at the start of its term in April 2005 BRR envisioned that the construction of almost 100,000 houses could be finished in the first two years of its mandate. Three years later, in January 2008, BRR director Kuntoro Mangkusubroto optimistically stated that housing reconstruction would be finished before the end of the year.⁵³ However, towards the end of BRR's term in April 2009, but also long thereafter, the newspapers were full of reports about people who had not yet received their tsunami aid house and tsunami victims who demonstrated in front of BRR's office. That housing had become the main public issue on which most money had been spent also meant that other fields of reconstruction had remained relatively neglected. For example, Lina, the NGO worker whom we met above, told me how a successful livelihood project implemented by her NGO was suddenly halted because the funds were needed for housing. A month after BRR's term had come to an end, the Acehnese bureau of statistics (BPS) made public an economic analysis of the last few years that showed a decline in economic growth and an increase in unemployment.⁵⁴ Similarly, the 2008 Aceh Poverty Assessment concludes that structural poverty remains higher than in the rest of Indonesia (The World Bank 2008). During my research between 2007 and 2009, as well as on return visits in 2010 and 2012, I learned that economic difficulties, including unemployment and rising food prices, remained the most important problem for many lower class people in Banda Aceh. Notwithstanding some livelihood projects and attempts for economic investments, the billions of dollars which had been spent in Aceh had hardly addressed these problems and Aceh remained one of Indonesia's poorest provinces. With this in mind I have wondered why housing became the single most crucial issue for reconstruction to be a 'success' or 'failure'. The possible answers give insight into what 'reconstruction' meant. They point at

⁵² On April 3, 2009, 13 days before the end of BRR's mandate which would mean the official end of 'reconstruction', the major newspaper *Serambi Indonesia* reported that more than 40,000 people were still waiting for rehabilitation money ("41.938 korban tsunami masih tunggu dana rehab").

⁵³ "Kuntoro optimis rehab-rekon selesai sebelum 2009." *Harian Aceh*, 30 January 2008.

⁵⁴ "Ekonomi Aceh melambat lagi: pengangguran meningkat." *Serambi Indonesia*, 16 May 2009.

the “practice of politics” of governmental bodies and aid organizations in their efforts at what Tania Li (2007) has called “rendering technical” and show an emerging subjectivity in Aceh in which people were defined and defined themselves as tsunami victims or, importantly, non-tsunami victims.

Measuring success

The main reason why housing is generally so important in post-disaster reconstruction is of course that it is a basic human need. But livelihood (income), health care and education are basic human needs as well. Although many projects have been implemented in these fields, they were not based on universal individual (or family, *kk*) entitlement and they never really became a measure for success.⁵⁵ Why, then, did housing become the measure of successful reconstruction for almost all players involved? I suggest that housing became such an interesting field for supplying aid for NGOs and other international governmental organizations as well as an interesting field for measuring success for both these organizations and for BRR for two main reasons. The first is the way in which development organizations, according to Tania Li who builds on the work of James Ferguson, translate their “will to improve” into actual programs in the two steps of “problematization” and “rendering technical”. The second concerns the immense pressure on aid organizations of so-called ‘upward accountability’ to donors and BRR’s political need to show ‘success’. These reasons are closely connected to one another as well as to the emergence of the subject position of ‘tsunami victim’, which I will describe in the next section.

In his groundbreaking work on development projects in Lesotho in the 1970s and early 1980s, James Ferguson (1994) points out two crucial features of development programs which still appear highly relevant. Firstly, development programs addressed issues of poverty as technical problems that could be solved with a technical solution, and secondly, projects would only focus on those problems that they could address in a technical way (see also Li 2007: 126). The development industry thereby deliberately sidelined political questions of structural socio-economic inequality. Importantly, Ferguson points out how these projects have many unintentional side effects beyond the project’s plan and beyond the question of its failure or success.⁵⁶ More recently, Tania Li showed in *The Will to Improve* (2007) how development programmers translate their will to improve following two steps: they identify a problem and subsequently turn it into a technical problem. The

⁵⁵ As explained above, the entitlement to tsunami aid houses went through the system of family heads and was therefore not strictly spoken individual (and disadvantaging women as the family heads are most often men). I use the term ‘individual’ here to point out that houses could be claimed by individuals representing families and to bring out the contrast with other forms of aid that were often not based on an entitlement attached to persons/families.

⁵⁶ Later, David Mosse, argued that orientations of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ itself “obscure the underlying operations and relations of development” and, similar to Ferguson’s argument, obscure the actual effects of development (Mosse 2005).

problem addressed can only be one for which a solution is available and, usually, excludes political relations (2007: 7). Problems need to be solved with technical interventions to which calculations can be applied (and thus results can be measured). Therefore, “[t]hey address some problems, and necessarily not others” (*op. cit.* 2).⁵⁷

Arguably, this process of “rendering technical” is enlarged and speeded up in the post-disaster context. One could argue that in a case of ‘starting from zero’ an integrated approach, combining the many facets of remaking, would be needed. Quite to the contrary, in Aceh most NGOs and foreign donor agencies started to direct the main part of their resources to building houses, even though many of them had no previous experience in housing construction. As we have seen, in one village many organizations could be involved in different dimensions of reconstruction (complicating an integrated approach), but often enough many dimensions of reconstruction were not addressed at all.⁵⁸ In the light of the works of Ferguson and Li, this focus on housing becomes less surprising. Aid agencies received overwhelming amounts of money and in 2005 they often had to design million dollar projects in a few weeks time (cf. Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). An analysis of social and political relations was thus not only necessarily excluded, but also much less possible than in regular development projects. As opposed to, for example, ‘livelihood recovery’, housing provided the clearest “arena of intervention in which calculations can be applied” (Li 2007: 2), because the houses were visible units providing measurable results.

Thus, both large and small aid organizations started housing projects in many different locations. NGO worker Lina said she regretted that her NGO had immediately started to build houses in so many places all over Aceh. She said she would rather have seen that they had started with only one district to be able to give more focused assistance. Engaging in housing construction was not only attractive because building houses was a technical, visible and quantifiable solution to a problem that was apparent to all, it also seemed to be ‘apolitical’ to a large extent as it did not address issues of social inequality. As we have seen, the policy was that every family that lost a house would get a house in return, irrespective of their wealth or family size.⁵⁹ Secondly, being only responsible for one particular technical effort in one particular village (e.g. building hundred houses, or constructing a sanitation

⁵⁷ Li argues moreover that it is exactly this process of “rendering technical” that confirms the boundary between the experts (who define the problems and design the interventions) and those who are subject to the program (2007: 7). I will return to this issue later in this chapter.

⁵⁸ These were often the ‘invisible’ dimensions of reconstruction, by many aid workers called the ‘soft’ reconstruction.

⁵⁹ Of course, in the course of the reconstruction process it was exactly housing that became the most politicized issue and as we have seen its distribution was to a large extent influenced by socio-political relations on different levels. As Ferguson (1994: 256) noted, even though de-politicizing the question of poverty “a “development” project can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations”. These effects, however, did not have to be addressed at the outset of designing (and “rendering technical”) the intervention of ‘building houses’.

system), organizations were able to ignore not only questions of power and inequality, but also any other need within or beyond this particular village and project.

The second reason that made housing such an attractive issue, and one which also speaks to many other dimensions of reconstruction, was the need for what is often called ‘upward accountability’ and what we can understand more broadly as ‘measuring success’. Daly and Brassard (2011) show that agencies’ enormous emphasis on being accountable towards their donors instead of being accountable to the tsunami survivors made them focus on quantity instead of quality and on quick results instead of taking a long-term perspective (see also Telford and Cosgrave 2007). The quality of a large part of the aid houses was poor, but reports and evaluations only presented numbers. If any organization could claim to have built two hundred houses, the quality of those houses seemed to be generally less interesting to the donors. This focus on quantity and ‘hard’ (material, visible) reconstruction over quality and ‘soft’ (immaterial, invisible) reconstruction was also apparent in other fields than housing. Telford and Cosgrave (2007: 17) show that ‘livelihood’ projects would rather focus on handing out a certain amount of fishing boats (that sometimes turned out to be unusable because the agency providing them had never provided fishing boats before), than addressing people’s diversified livelihoods and participation in labor markets and the service sector.⁶⁰ One Indonesian NGO coordinator, working for a large international NGO, told me he regretted the emphasis on quantity. Their program addressing “reproductive health” mainly consisted of handing out cartons of milk to school children. He said he would rather engage in discussions about reproductive health with religious leaders, but, he objected, “how could we sell that to the donors?”

Before focusing on BRR’s ways of measuring success, let us briefly take a closer look at this pressing issue of ‘accountability’. Over the last decade, the complexity of accountability has been much discussed in literature on development and post-disaster aid (see for example Daly and Brassard 2011, Davis 2007, Hilhorst 2002, Slim 2002).⁶¹ Above, I discussed the pressure on aid agencies for “upward accountability” which generally meant that they had to present clear, measurable, results to the donors. Accountability towards the people who were subject to the agency’s programs was often still lacking in Aceh (Daly and Brassard 2011). Moreover, it turns out to be very difficult to hold aid agencies

⁶⁰ For a similar account see Stirrat (2006: 13) on the situation in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. Commenting on the way in which disaster relief had to be visible and photogenic, he states that “[c]ompetition [between organizations] was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the ‘right’ way which would fit with Western donors’ visions of what relief should be.”

⁶¹ As Mosse (2005: 9) has noted, the vagueness and complexity of such a development concept may account for its “productive ambiguity”: simply because of its complexity and many possible interpretations, it may unify different social actors in a common project.

accountable for what they do or do not do, especially if they stay only for a short time as they do in most post-disaster contexts (Davis 2007).

For NGOs, guidance towards the issue of accountability is given in the Sphere Project⁶² and the Red Cross Code of Conduct,⁶³ the latter of which is signed by many large international NGOs, but is voluntary and thus has no monitoring or complaints mechanisms (Hilhorst 2005).⁶⁴ Also, numerous NGOs that had not signed the Code of Conduct became active in Aceh. The Buddha Tzu Chi organization that built the asbestos houses in the Neuheun relocation site (Samuels 2012) was one of them, but there were many others. It turns out to be tremendously difficult to hold these organizations accountable for the bad or even dangerous quality of the delivered assistance.⁶⁵ The short-term stay of organizations was a general obstacle to accountability. In one of my research neighborhoods, for example, dozens of households suddenly had to pay a very expensive electricity bill. One of the NGOs involved in the reconstruction of the neighborhood had told them that electricity had been paid for for the first four years of residence. However, suddenly the electricity company billed the families for the last two years of this period. The company said that it did not know about this agreement and because the NGO had already left Aceh it turned out to be impossible to verify.

Finally, I would say that a major problem with current approaches of accountability is that they hardly include accountability of aid that is *not* given (cf. Davis 2007: 15). An aid agency is only accountable to the beneficiaries of its own project and it is only accountable for the specific intervention it has designed. Therefore it is difficult to hold the international humanitarian ‘community’ accountable for the lack of economic recovery, as well as for missing out on whole villages; such as the village of twenty families referred to by NGO worker Lina.⁶⁶ The one institution that could be held accountable, however, is the Indonesian government and its national Bureau of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, BRR. Below, I will discuss how people in Aceh did try to hold BRR accountable and how the relationship of entitlements and the related gift relationship informed the way in which people in Aceh positioned themselves as subjects in relation to the Indonesian government and the international community. For now, let us return to the second reason why housing

⁶² www.sphereproject.org.

⁶³ Which was developed and agreed upon in 1994 and is available at www.ifrc.org.

⁶⁴ For ‘official’ donors there are the principles for Good Humanitarian Donorship (see Telford and Cosgrave 2007).

⁶⁵ Of course, the Indonesian government had the final say in permitting or forbidding organizations to work on its territory. Organizations suspect of doing Christian missionary work have been thrown out under huge public attention. Very little attention, however, has been paid to organizations delivering poor quality aid.

⁶⁶ More broadly, Davis (2007) argues that the multipolarity and discordance of the aid system make it very difficult to define responsibility and create accountability systems. For example, no one will be fired when the Millennium Development Goals are not achieved. “No one”, Davies argues, “is responsible for halving malnutrition, or for explaining to the mothers of children who will not be saved why their sons and daughters will starve.” (Davis 2007: 5).

became so politically important: its quantitative measurability – which is not only needed by NGOs to be accountable to donors, but also by the state to show its ‘success’.

Towards the end of its term BRR repeatedly declared reconstruction in Aceh to be an enormous success, proving this with numbers; ranging from the number of kilometers of roads built, to the number of kilos of debris removed, to the number of houses constructed. Just like the floor tiles in front of the Aceh thanks the world memorial represented the disaster in numbers, reconstruction was also quantified. The fact that more than 100,000 houses had been constructed in four years time became the most important indicator of success.⁶⁷ However, BRR hardly ever reflected on the poor quality of thousands of these houses and the fact that many people had not received a house yet while other houses stood empty.

“State simplification” (Scott 1998) and, more specifically, the political need for numerical representation of success is nothing new. Tania Murray Li (2007: 57) writes about New Order Indonesia: “By declaring its [the regime’s] legitimacy to be based on the number of bridges built, the tons of fertilizer delivered, and statistical measures of progress that were always positive if not yet *optimal* – now an Indonesian word – the regime attempted to limit debate about the purpose of development and its distributive effects.” In a slightly different way, I would say that the way in which the success of the reconstruction effort was proved by the numbers effectively silenced debates on quality. Similarly, reports in the main newspapers as well as public protests were usually based on and directed at numbers. While throughout 2008 and 2009 the newspapers were full of articles with titles like “96 BRR houses unfinished”⁶⁸ and “49 *kk* tsunami victims have not yet received a house”,⁶⁹ they also regularly reported on tsunami victims who protested at BRR’s office because they had not received a house or rehabilitation money yet. Again, the reports and protests focused mainly on the entitlement to houses, rather than on their poor quality or other public issues. The entitlement to a house (or rehabilitation money) became strongly attached to a particular political subject: the tsunami victim.

‘Tsunami victims’

On an afternoon in 2009, I went on an outing with a middle class family and we drove past some very poorly constructed shops and tents. One of the family members commented that

⁶⁷ BRR officials often proudly compared this achievement to the reconstruction processes after other disasters. In an interview with the Jakarta Post in 2007, the director of BRR favorably compared the 100,000 houses in Aceh to reconstruction after Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and the earthquakes in Gujarat (India), Bam (Iran), and Kobe (Japan). He did not mention the enormous discrepancy in funding for these reconstruction processes (“Aceh, from sharia to economic development and peace.” *The Jakarta Post*, 10 January 2007).

⁶⁸ *Serambi Indonesia*, 23 January 2008.

⁶⁹ *Serambi Indonesia*, 22 May 2009.

people had been living in those shacks (*gubuk*), but soon they would be demolished because they were illegal. “Where will they go?” I asked, and added that it was quite sad. One of the others replied that they were not tsunami victims but “just people looking for work”. They would have to go back to their *kampung*. It might be sad, he said, but the cleanliness of the city (*kebersihan kota*) was more important.

In their illuminating study of the history of the concept of trauma and the condition of victimhood that trauma has come to authenticate, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman show how in contemporary societies the moral category of trauma has come to serve the identification of who is a legitimate victim and who is not (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Crucially, they argue, the process of identifying legitimate victims is intimately tied with claims to financial compensation. In chapter three I will pay more detailed attention to the concept of trauma. Here, I aim to draw attention to the way in which in post-tsunami Aceh the category of the tsunami victim (*korban tsunami*) became inseparable from the right to compensation, in particular the entitlement to receive a tsunami aid house.⁷⁰

In this regard the example above is revealing: even though living in abject poverty, whether or not an indirect consequence of the tsunami, people who did not lose their house due to the tsunami were not tsunami victims and thus had no right to (tsunami) assistance from the government.⁷¹ As we have seen in some examples above, the newspapers often referred to the exact number of *korban tsunami* who did not receive a house yet. In that context it was implicitly clear that a *korban tsunami* indeed should receive a house. Similarly, in the many conversations I had about the reconstruction process people talked about themselves as *korban tsunami* or *orang tsunami* (tsunami people) when they referred to the right (*hak*) to receive a house. The distinction was made explicit especially when talking about cases in which people who were not *korban tsunami* unrightfully received houses, while the ‘real’ (*benar, betul*) *korban tsunami* did not.

In this way, the issue of housing came to define who was a legitimate ‘tsunami victim’. With housing as the only clear individual (or family) right for all ‘tsunami victims’, reconstruction became legible and its success measurable. As I have argued above, both its being “technical” (and thus non-political) and measurable (and thus upwardly accountable) made housing the ideal reconstruction intervention. However, the focus on housing as the major individual right to compensation and the concomitant emergence of the widely adopted subject position of tsunami victim based on the exclusive terms of loss of a house, denied more structural political questions of poverty and inequality. The

⁷⁰ The term ‘tsunami victim’ or just ‘victim’ (*korban*) was also used to refer to people who died in the tsunami. The way in which I discuss the term in this section refers to the way in which people used the term in the context of the reconstruction process.

⁷¹ This does of course not exclude them from charity. However, here and below I want to draw explicit attention to the difference between charity and entitlements.

replacement of the house of a lowerclass family with five young children with a tsunami aid house of 36 square meters did nothing to address their economically disadvantaged position. Moreover, significantly, poverty in Aceh is highest in its rural areas which, mostly not directly affected by the tsunami and largely deprived from reconstruction assistance, remained structurally poor (The World Bank 2008). What I have tried to point out here is that in the complex arena of social actors the individualization of aid in the form of housing came together with a rights discourse in which the figure of the 'tsunami victim' became a rights bearing citizen.⁷² In the next section I will show how tsunami survivors defined their relationship with the state and international aid organizations as respectively one of entitlement and one of gifts.⁷³

Gifts and entitlements

Entitlements and state legitimacy

BRR has often been criticized for its work, not only in the Acehnese and national media and by tsunami survivors themselves, but also by the people I spoke with in international organizations, local government departments and local NGOs. While public protests centered on corruption scandals and unfulfilled promises concerning houses, a number of people who worked for local government institutions or international organizations criticized the lack of coordination and the way in which the already weakened local government was bypassed in decision making.⁷⁴ However, even after decades of armed secession conflict, the national government was also widely accepted as the actor that indeed should provide aid to its citizens and from which one could claim the right to an aid house. Exactly in the course of criticism and failure, it was also the institution that was held accountable by citizens, NGOs, and the media. This may be not surprising in a democracy in which citizens can hold their government accountable. But it does say something about the precariously emerging legitimacy of this government in the post-conflict and post-

⁷² The figure of the victim as such is not new to Aceh and the figure of the tsunami victim is related to the figure of the conflict victim (*korban konflik*) historically as well as in the current political transformations. In the post-conflict arena the latter also became attached to the right to compensation. However, the subject positions of *korban konflik* and *korban tsunami* also have very different histories and trajectories. As I stated in the introduction, though related in time and space, the 'post-' of the tsunami is a different 'post-' than that of the conflict. My aim here is not to delineate the history of the figure of the victim as such, but rather to show how the figure of the 'tsunami victim' gives us insight into the kinds of subjectivities that emerged in the post-disaster reconstruction process.

⁷³ Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) point out that international aid agencies increasingly adopt a vocabulary in which recipients of aid are rights holders. In Aceh I saw mainly how people claimed their rights (to housing) from the state, rather than claiming rights to aid from international aid agencies. I will discuss this in detail below.

⁷⁴ It has to be noted that others did praise BRR for its work. Moreover, some BRR officials I spoke with reacted that indeed coordination of hundreds of aid agencies and the reconstruction after such an enormous disaster were immense tasks and that people often gave disproportionate attention to the problems instead of pointing at the results that BRR had delivered.

tsunami years.⁷⁵ Crucially, by holding the government accountable, citizens contribute to ‘making’ the state, giving it legitimacy in carrying out projects that affect them. Apart from that, the following brief exploration of the relation between the government and tsunami survivors brings out more clearly the difference between this relation and that between survivors and international aid organizations.

Newspapers and magazines were one of the primary forums in which journalists, cartoonists, readers and public figures expressed their discontent with the reconstruction process, and particularly with the work of BRR. Many complaints about BRR can for example be found in the text messages of readers that the newspaper *Harian Aceh* published in early 2008. Another common way of bringing attention to the problems was through humor. Consider for example the following joke (with serious subtext) that was published in *Aceh Magazine* (February 2008, page 50):

Three business people from Indonesia, the USA and Japan come to the office of the Agency for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (BRR) Aceh-Nias. A staff member meets them and says that the entrance of the office needs to be improved. Thereupon, the staff member organizes a tender to choose a contractor that will implement the project of constructing the entrance. The first contractor, from the USA, estimates the costs at Rp [Rupiah] 30 million. He specifies this to Rp 10 million for the materials, Rp 10 million for the labor and Rp 10 million as his profit. The second contractor, from Japan, says he needs Rp 60 million, with the specification of Rp 20 million for each of the sectors material, labor and profit. When the third contractor, from Indonesia, is asked how much the costs will be, he says Rp 560 million. The staff member is shocked and asks for a specification. The contractor calmly approaches the staff member and whispers, “pssst... Rp 250 million for you, Rp 250 million for me, and with the rest we order the Japanese guy to do it.”

On its opinion page, newspaper *Serambi Indonesia* regularly published statements mocking news facts (with the news fact in the first line and the joking comment in the second). On March 17, 2008 one of them related to the general public outcry over the fact that BRR meetings were often held in expensive hotels, sometimes even on Java:

Demonstrators close off the BRR office in Banda Aceh
Ha-ha, another opportunity to have a meeting out of doors

⁷⁵ Moreover, the fact that BRR employed a significant number of ex-GAM combatants (Aspinall 2009b) may have contributed to its strong political position as well as the continuing peace in the province.

These jokes were part of the *pojok* or corner-columns which have been discussed by Benedict Anderson for Jakartan newspapers as an art of writing that builds on “allusion, innuendo, sarcasm, and mock surprise.” (Anderson 1990: 143).⁷⁶ Filling in acronyms in new and creative ways, another common Indonesian way of joking, was also regularly applied to joke about BRR. In everyday talk I heard for example the Indonesian version: BRR means “Baru Rencana Rencana” (just plans), and the Acehnese versions: “Bek Riau Riau” (don’t make a fuss) and “Boh Rom Rom” (referring to a kind of sweet snack that, as someone explained the joke to me, when boiled goes up and down all the time).

The jokes not only refer to what BRR did or refrained from doing, but also implicitly acknowledge what it should do: not only make plans but also implement them, spend money on the reconstruction process instead of having expensive meetings, and be transparent in accounting for the money spent. The jokes, and more broadly the protests, therefore comment on the role the national government should have in providing for its citizens. The protests both show the broadly accepted legitimacy of the government in taking on this role and the public questioning of its proper intentions and capacity to do so.⁷⁷ It may therefore also not be surprising that BRR felt the continuous necessity to emphasize its success and its effort of building towards a bright future instead of discussing past grieving and grievances and current problems. While I will return to this issue in more detail in chapter four and chapter five, here I would like to emphasize the role of BRR and the ways in which people held BRR responsible and accountable in the remaking of post-tsunami and post-conflict subjectivities. At the same time, the state gained legitimacy in this process. As we will see, international aid also played its part, although in a rather different way – with people in Aceh stressing international assistance as a gift from ‘the world’ rather than a citizen right or entitlement.

The gift from the world

Tarmizi, the young man who sent his credit proposal to a Swiss NGO, told me the following about international assistance:

So many aid houses have been built here. It is not that we are not grateful (*bersyukur*) or that we are not happy with it, we are happy. After the tsunami there were people who wanted to help us; perhaps the aid came from all over the world. If they had not

⁷⁶ The *pojoks* in Serambi are quite similar in style to those described by Anderson, for example by using the one line statement and second line mockery rejoinder and by playing with different languages.

⁷⁷ Attitudes towards the Indonesian government were often ambivalent. In spite of the difficult years during the conflict, the distrust by the Indonesian government, and the severe human rights violations committed by the Indonesian army, becoming part of the police forces or even the army was still the dream of many young Acehnese men. Moreover, significantly, the government is one of the main employers in Banda Aceh and many people depend on the income of civil servants.

come to help Aceh, and Indonesia, we would not be like this now. Perhaps we would still live in tents. Therefore, I am grateful towards the ones who helped us and also towards all the other NGOs. Evidently, they left their own countries to work here, to help Aceh. Yes, there are still some flaws. Some houses are not good. But that is (just) what aid is.

“But that is (just) what aid is” (*namanya bantuan*), says Tarmizi. I have heard that phrase numerous times and usually in the same context as the one in which Tarmizi presents it here: Yes, the quality may be poor, but how could you complain if it is a gift? Many people used exactly that expression: “what can we say? People gave it” (*mau bilang apa? Ini orang kasih*). Because it was a gift, one should not complain about it. This is notably different from the attitude towards BRR, which was, as discussed above, rather one of claiming rights, the rights of citizens to assistance from their government (even as, in the case of Ibu Muhaira, one could hardly claim good quality). I do not want to dismiss the cases in which people did complain about aid given by NGOs, especially concerning houses. I also recognize the way in which the feeling that one cannot complain because it is a gift can be frustrating and even humiliating (Korf 2007). And yet I was struck by the way in which tsunami survivors continuously expressed their gratitude towards ‘the generous world’ that had come to their help, as we have seen earlier in this chapter. Even when complaining about the poor quality of aid many people added that the foreign donors or NGOs had come with good intentions but that they had just hired the wrong (corrupt) contractor or got stuck in the Indonesian bureaucracy. Expressions of gratitude, moreover, were often directed not so much towards the specific organization that had rebuilt one’s house or neighborhood, but towards the generous international community at large.⁷⁸ I have come to understand these expressions of gratitude, then, not as a forced form of reciprocity, but as an active way of building a relationship based on recognition.

This observation does not dismiss the criticism of donors who actively demand gratitude in exchange for their generosity (Korf 2007). Based on research in post-tsunami Sri Lanka Korf argues that gratitude is exactly the way in which victims can reciprocate generosity and that this confirms domination by the West. I am sympathetic to his philosophical plea for grounding the ‘duty to help’ in a universal moral entitlement to aid (*ibid.*). In my analysis in this section, however, I do not aim to analyze the moral and philosophical aspects of the reciprocal relationship of generosity and gratitude.⁷⁹ My point is that this way of (actively) framing the relationship has had a particular socio-political

⁷⁸ Yet, international organizations did ‘brand’ their ‘gifts’ by putting their signs on it. I did not find any ‘recipient’ who found this disturbing. On the contrary: one man told me that the NGO that built his house had not put its sign on it and that he planned to make this sign by himself as a way of expressing gratitude.

⁷⁹ Unfortunately, further engaging with the ethical-philosophical appeal of Korf is beyond the scope of this chapter that rather focuses on a particular socio-political reality.

effect in post-tsunami Aceh. Interestingly, in this particular political context, the post-tsunami gift did, for my interlocutors in Aceh, not become the humiliating force that turned them into “passive recipients devoid of their status as fellow citizens on this planet” (Korf 2007: 367). As I argue in this section and the next, the effect of reciprocating with a *generalized* gratitude seemed to have the opposite effect – namely building a relationship in which they were indeed recognized as ‘citizens on this planet’. By exploring the idea of a ‘gift’ I will focus only in passing on what the perception of aid as gift did with the specific relations between tsunami survivors and donors. The more important question in the context of this chapter is how it shaped a particular subject position that was based on a historically grown image of Aceh’s position in the world.

To be sure, the ‘gift’ in the reconstruction process in Aceh was never a pure, disinterested, gift. As we have seen above in the case of housing, the gift was part of power and politics and entangled in webs of exchange from the start (cf. Korf et al. 2010, Stirrat and Henkel 1997). As mentioned, NGOs and other aid organizations clearly indicated where they were working by putting signs at the entrance of neighborhoods. But these were not the only NGO signs: one could find them on houses, kitchenware, garbage bins, t-shirts and hats, *becaks*, and plastic tarpaulins. Stirrat (2006) argues that the whole structure of disaster relief turned the gift into a commodity in a process of competition between aid agencies. Indeed, all agencies have their own organizational rationale and thus surely do not give disinterestedly. Moreover, aid objects are not only not pure gifts but also not part of a dyadic gift exchange. Rather, they move through a long line of actors. However, this does not fully answer my question of why so many tsunami survivors, while knowing that people working at NGOs get paid a decent salary and have to be accountable to their so-called beneficiaries, considered reconstruction assistance given by international agencies (or, as people often said in an even more generic way: ‘the world’, *dunia*) so differently than assistance from BRR. To address this question, we have to look beyond the direct donor-recipient relation. Let us therefore have a closer look at the nature of the gift.

In his *Essay on the gift*, Marcel Mauss (1990) famously formulated the three-part structure of gift exchange which consists of the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate. In that essay he showed how reciprocity is fundamental to social life. Recently, Joel Robbins (2009) has argued that Mauss’s theory can be understood as part of a broader theoretical perspective on mutual recognition as the basis of social life. He compares and combines Mauss’s system of gift exchange with the three-part structure of recognition developed by Hegel. In this structure, to become a self-conscious subject, a person first has to recognize another person. Subsequently, the other has to acknowledge the recognition and, thirdly, recognize the first person in return. This fits precisely with Mauss’s gift exchange and Robbins maintains that Mauss’s idea of

reciprocity is closely tied to recognition. Through reciprocity and recognition, subjects, and social life as such, come into being (Robbins 2009). Sylvia Tidey (2012) has fruitfully applied these insights to the Indonesian context in her analysis of the entanglement of state and society in civil servants' networks of reciprocity. Applying these insights to post-tsunami aid in Aceh, we see that describing international aid as a gift may also imply acknowledging recognition – which one can give in return.

Importantly, Jacques Derrida has noted that Mauss, in *The Gift*, “speaks of everything but the gift” (Derrida 1992, quoted in Siegel 2006: 5), because the pure gift is not only disinterested but also unrecognized by the receiver. Recognition brings with it gratitude, which could be seen as the symbolic equivalent of the ‘gift’, effectively annulling it as a gift. Building on this insight, Laidlaw shows how Mauss carefully explored the paradox of the gift when he focused on transactions that at the same time are and are not free gifts. Rather than understanding Mauss’s essay as opposing gift exchange to commodity exchange, we should see both kinds of exchanges on a continuum between the pure gift and the commodity (Laidlaw 2000). As the pure gift and the commodity mutually constitute each other, Laidlaw argues, the idea of the self-negating free gift (impossible in practice if there is a gift) is always, momentarily, present in gift exchange (Laidlaw 2000: 628). Invoking a similar kind of continuum, Siegel (2006: 5) writes that even though the pure gift may not exist, some gifts seem purer than others: “We feel most strongly indebted when a gift comes to us without any previous sense that the donor was obligated to us. The less he was obligated, the more we are grateful.” Subsequently, Siegel explores Mauss’s analysis of the *hau*, the spirit that makes the gift circulate and thus makes it a social force. For the Maori, the *hau* only came to the gift when it was passed on and returned by a third party (Sahlins 1972). This circulation means not just that the gift relationship is not dyadic, but also that there is no original giver, the gift always comes from “elsewhere”: “The name of this “elsewhere” is a force that transcends any particular individual, meaning that the gift always embodies something strange.” (Siegel 2006: 6). It is in the light of these insights, namely that gratitude is a form of reciprocity (Derrida), that the gift is part of a continuum between gift and commodity (Laidlaw and Siegel) and that the spirit of the gift transcends the dyadic relationship (Sahlins and Siegel), together with Robbins’ insights on gift-giving and recognition, that the “Aceh-thanks-the-world” attitude that I found with so many people in Aceh becomes understandable as a way of building, or even rebuilding, a relationship. Exactly because it is not a pure gift, the aid gift may be acknowledged in terms of receiving recognition, as a start for building relationships with an “elsewhere”.

Let me emphasize that what I discuss here is an abstract relationship between imagined communities rather than the actual contacts in the reconstruction arena (although they surely did influence each other). Tania Li (2007) argues that whereas a development project is often aimed at reducing the boundaries between what she calls the trustees or experts

and the subjects who have to be improved, the whole set up of one group having expertise to improve the other only reinforces this boundary. Similarly, the development 'gift' may only reinforce the boundary between the givers and the receivers (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). In the post-tsunami reconstruction arena in Aceh this was certainly also the case. It becomes most clear in Aryo Danusiri's film (2007) when the foreign coordinator wearing sunglasses (already a sign of difference since he is the only one wearing them, and of authority since in Indonesia sunglasses are often mainly worn by the police and therefore associated with the state) comes to inspect the constructed houses and, based on his expertise, orders them to be torn down. The notion of expertise does create and reinforce these boundaries (cf. Jones 2010a) and many tsunami survivors resented the fact that most projects were not participative at all. However, I suggest that on another level of imagining and building relationships, one that is in Siegel's terms always "elsewhere", people in Aceh turned what could be a 'poisoning', unreciprocated gift that denies recognition and ongoing relationships into a possibility of mutual recognition and creating relationships. They did so by glossing international assistance (and its expertise) as a gift in terms of recognition; something that can be reciprocated by recognition and create (or revive) relationships. The kind of relationship which I mean to get at is then not so much the relationship between tsunami survivors and NGOs, but the relationship between Aceh and the world.

Time and recognition

When discussing post-tsunami aid, many tsunami survivors said that there had never been such a big disaster in the world's history and that therefore it was not surprising that the whole world (*seluruh dunia*) paid attention. They said that now the whole world knew where Aceh was and summed up NGOs and countries that came to help. In the beginning of this chapter we saw how Ibu Munia mentioned England and Turkey. Other countries that often made it onto such lists were America, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Japan, and the Netherlands (the latter perhaps because people were talking with me, but probably also because of the colonial past). Sometimes people told me at length about the individual foreigners that had come to help, working for an organization or just visiting Aceh on an individual basis.⁸⁰ There was a strong sense that, after decades of conflict, of having been closed off from the world and unseen by the world (cf. Spyer 2008: 16), Aceh was now finally *seen* by the international community. In an important way, the emphasis on the renewed international relations through the 'gifts' from the international community can thus be regarded as the redefinition of what Ferguson (2006) calls the sense of a "place-in-

⁸⁰ Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) call the growing group of individuals that go to disaster areas to give aid, often bypassing larger organizations because they are dissatisfied with the money spent on bureaucracies, NGIs (Non-Governmental Individuals).

the-world.”⁸¹ The idea of an ‘international opinion’ and ‘international community’ which one can appeal to is often encountered in conflict and post-conflict situations (Malkki 1995, Nygaard-Christensen 2010) and became indeed very important in the later years of the conflict in Aceh (Aspinall 2002, 2009a). Similar to the case of Aceh, Nygaard-Christensen (2010: 184) has pointed out how in East Timor “the foreign” became “imagined as a source of political potency”. In Indonesia, especially after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the idea of an ‘international gaze’ being on the country became politically influential (Strassler 2004). But whereas at a national level this was the kind of gaze that could potentially embarrass the Indonesian nation, in post-conflict and post-tsunami Aceh being seen by the international community felt as the rightful recognition of ‘Aceh’ in the context of a narrative of historical exclusivity – against ‘Indonesia’ rather than as ‘Indonesians.’⁸² Importantly, Edward Aspinall has pointed out that this sense of Acehnese specialness as being different from ‘Indonesia’ is fairly recent; a consequence of the special position granted to Aceh in the conclusion of the 1950’s *Darul Islam* rebellion (Aspinall 2007b). The idea of having a place in the world for Aceh, as a nation equal to other nations, subsequently became fundamental to the nationalist ideology of the Free Aceh Movement that was established in 1976 (Aspinall 2007a). And it was again the idea of Aceh’s specialness and struggle to get a place-in-the-world that informed the post-tsunami reception of the international gaze.

In chapter five I will further explore how this sense of having a ‘place-in-the-world’ influenced expectations of the future. The rest of this section discusses how the climate of post-tsunami international attention and the image of a foreign gaze finally ‘seeing’ Aceh (again) gave rise to the emergence of a temporal orientation connecting the past and the present through a narrative of revived international relationships. It is the post-disaster climate and its political situation that made certain temporal orientations possible (cf. Crapanzano 2007).

Throughout my fieldwork, people referred to the Golden Age of Aceh, the glorious Acehnese past that was situated in the time of Sultan Iskandar Muda (early seventeenth century, see introduction), in which Islamic rules had been implemented properly and in which Aceh had maintained vibrant international relations. Concerning the latter, people commented on the great Sultanate that Aceh had been at the time and mentioned the trade

⁸¹ For Ferguson ‘the world’ “refers to a more encompassing categorical system within which countries and geographical regions have their “places,” with a “place” understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories (as in the expression “knowing your place”).” (2006: 6). Malkki already emphasized that such appeals to the world and the international community are based on ‘internationalism’ rather than ‘cosmopolitanism.’ The point of attaining such a place-in-the-world is then “not the denial or denaturalization of the order of nations but the attainment of a legitimate place in that order, a seat at the table.” (Malkki 1995: 253).

⁸² Patricia Spyer shows how after the conflict in Ambon Ambonese Christians similarly emphasized their unique identity based on a “historically sedimented sense of entitlement.” (2008: 31).

with countries like Portugal and Turkey. A most common way of referring to the continuous presence of this past was the question ‘do you know what Aceh means?’ To which answer was: ‘A-C-E-H: *Arab, Cina, Eropa, Hindia*.⁸³’ Generally, the person who had posed the question would go on to proudly explain that bodily features of all these regions could be recognized in the many different faces of the Acehnese, for example in the blue eyes of the people of the coastal town of Lamno where the Portuguese had settled centuries ago.⁸⁴ Many people remarked that those good relationships with foreign countries had now been revived. When I carefully noted that the relations with Japan and the Netherlands had not been so good in the past, the answer was often that although this was so, after the tsunami, our countries had become good friends. The words of Pak Zamzami, a highly educated man in his forties, illustrate this position. In chapter three we will see how he dealt with his grief after losing everything in the tsunami. Here, I quote at some length his idea about Aceh, because it resonates with the ideas of many others:

In my opinion, Aceh has been a universal (*universal*) region from the start. From the start its people have been globalists (*globalis*). Since the time of our forefathers, Aceh has had social relations, trade relations, economic and political relations with countries all around the world: in the first place with Europe, with the Netherlands, Portugal and Turkey. When Aceh came together with Indonesia these global values have been closed off (*tertutup*). Now, I see people from all countries again in Aceh. God has given back the greatness of Aceh that was taken away from it by the government. God tested us and God then sent brothers and sisters (*saudara*) from many different nations (*bangsa*) [to Aceh]. He sent money from these nations and experience and knowledge. (...) I think that Aceh now has to go on with being friends with the world (*tetap di dalam kontek pergaulan dunia*). (...) If we do not do that, the ‘closing off’ may happen again, the conflict may start again.

Like many others, Pak Zamzami narrated Aceh’s recent contacts with countries around the world as part of a historical narrative of relations that had been ‘closed off’ and recently ‘opened up’ again. In the narrative, it was the Indonesian government that came in the way of Aceh’s cosmopolitanism. To avoid a new conflict, international relations had to be continued. In his opinion, as well as in that of many others, the ‘foreign gaze’ remained crucial to Acehnese politics.

One specific historical international relation that should be mentioned here is the relation to the Turks. Many Acehnese were well aware of the historical trade and political

⁸³ The Indies.

⁸⁴ Reid (2006a: 5) states that “[i]n reality, however, the principal source of ethnic admixture with the Austronesians of Sumatra appears to be from southern India (...)”

relations with Turkey (or, in the past, the Ottoman Empire) (Göksoy 2011, Reid 2005). They were particularly proud of the post-tsunami aid from Turkey, to the extent that some people told me that if they did not know who the donor was they would usually just say Turkey. Although the importance of good relations with all countries was emphasized, international relations with Islamic countries and with Muslims more generally, received a lot of attention. Thus, many people were moved upon hearing stories of Westerners converting to Islam, asked about Muslims in the Netherlands and talked at length about the Western converts who had married Acehese women. The popularity of the Turks may thus be based both on a sense of the revival of a historical relationship and on the appeal to the global Islamic community (*umma*).⁸⁵

Conclusion

When people told me that they had ‘started from zero’ they implicitly asked me to imagine their losses and the emptiness of the post-tsunami landscape. Yet, using this phrase they also showed how much things had changed since the day of the tsunami. They had indeed started again and have been remaking their world ever since. As I hope to show throughout this dissertation, this was a process in which people in Aceh themselves were the most important actors. This is not to say, however, that the billions of dollars donated by many people and governments around the world have played no role in this process. On the contrary, people in Aceh considered those donations most crucial, as without them, they argued, “we would still live in tents.” In this chapter I have argued that the expression of gratitude towards ‘the world’ has to be understood in relation to the particular historical moment of the post-tsunami and post-conflict climate.

Even without zooming in on the many different players in the process, in this chapter I have tried to give a sense of the complexity of reconstruction and its arena of social actors. I focused especially on housing; not only because it became the major social and political concern in the post-tsunami years, but also because the relations and political imaginings that emerged through the process of housing reconstruction are exemplary for what reconstruction was and did in Aceh. I suggest that two main reasons for so many inexperienced NGOs to become involved in the construction of houses were, firstly, that houses were visible and countable ‘hardware’ which was easy to account for to the donors and, secondly, that housing seemed to be a technical, non-political, intervention of replacing what was lost. For BRR, the measurability of the ‘hardware’ as opposed to quality and invisible reconstruction became crucial for proclaiming success. However, as the only individual entitlement for those families that identified themselves as ‘tsunami victims’,

⁸⁵ Anthony Reid has shown that the appeal of “unity of the ummat under a sole Caliphate” was important to Aceh’s diplomatic relations with Turkey in the nineteenth century (2005: 86) and that already in the sixteenth century “Aceh saw itself as part of an Indian Ocean Islamic Network” (2006b: 57).

housing in practice became highly politicized, with tsunami victims claiming their rights, while actual construction and distribution got enmeshed in webs of corruption, competition, and power relations (such as between original residents and immigrants; village leaders and other residents; men and women; experts and subjects; aid organizations, contractors and local residents).

Exploring the housing issue does not only demonstrate the many problems in the reconstruction process. My conversations with tsunami survivors about reconstruction also point at emerging post-tsunami subjectivities. While people held BRR accountable for the failures, gratitude towards 'the world' that came to help after the tsunami was omnipresent. I argue that, rather than humiliating, this active expression of gratitude was aimed at remaking relationships with the world and thereby Aceh's 'place-in-the-world'. The 'Aceh-thanks-the-world' atmosphere was a way of remaking Aceh's identity and place in the world, rather than its place in 'Indonesia'. As foreign aid was glossed as a gift that entailed recognition, it was reciprocated with gratitude, which also reciprocated recognition. The emerging subjectivities that I have tried to describe here were shaped in a post-tsunami and post-conflict climate, in which Aceh would stay part of Indonesia and in which Acehnese thus claimed their rights from the Indonesian government. At the same time, Aceh not only received a special status and far reaching autonomy within the Indonesian state, many Acehnese felt that they also finally received attention and recognition from the international community and thus a place-in-the-world for 'Aceh'. Subjectivity was thus remade in relation to Indonesia and the international community, and with a strong emphasis on reclaiming a special Acehnese-ness.

This special Acehnese identity was framed in a particular historical temporality, drawing on special international relations as well as the image of a glorious Acehnese past. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will return to this temporal orientation when discussing people's ideas about the future, again in relation to the sense of having a place-in-the-world. In the next chapter, time will be an 'actor' in a different way. The next chapter focuses on the one topic that in my conversations with tsunami survivors was more important than reconstruction: the tsunami itself. I will explore what could be described as 'tsunami experience' in people's narratives and their embodied memories of the tsunami. Time, I hope to show, is crucial in creating this experience by bringing together the narrative event of our conversation and the narrated event of the tsunami.