



# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

---

Missbach, Antje (2010),  
Review: Matthew Clarke, Ismet Fanany, and Sue Kenny (eds.): Post-Disaster  
Reconstruction: Lessons from Aceh, in:  
*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 29, 4, 119-121.  
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

---

Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.  
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[ias@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:ias@giga-hamburg.de)>  
For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which  
includes: Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current  
Southeast Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America •  
<[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>



## Book Reviews

Clarke, Matthew, Ismet Fanany, and Sue Kenny (eds.) (2010), *Post-Disaster Reconstruction: Lessons from Aceh*, London/ Washington DC: Earthscan

ISBN 978-1-84407-879-0, 266 pages

The devastating tsunami that ravaged Aceh's coasts on 26 December 2004 following a massive earthquake marks a caesura in Aceh's modern history as it caused enormous human loss and desolated entire villages and towns within minutes. Likewise, the global reactions to the tsunami and the immediate help that then poured into Aceh constituted international concern on an unprecedented scale. *Post-Disaster Reconstruction: Lessons from Aceh* aims to draw extensive conclusions about the consequences that arose from the arrival of help in Aceh for the future work of international humanitarian aid organisations, the local reconstruction industry, and also national and state authorities, which all had to respond promptly in this time of emergency. By evaluating in detail many different aspects of physical, material and human recovery, the contributors examined especially the weaknesses and misconduct during the period of reconstruction, hoping that the experiences from Aceh could provide clear lessons to serve as guidelines in similar dramatic incidents elsewhere. However, the transferability of the specific Aceh case to other scenarios, such as the recent floods in Pakistan or the cyclone Nargis in Burma/ Myanmar in 2008, remains questionable throughout the whole book. Moreover, it remains slightly unclear which specific readership the editors had in mind when compiling the volume; some essays that are more descriptive seem to address aid workers in general, while others might have attempted to connect to more academic debates. Generally, the book is divided into two parts: while the first part containing three essays provides the necessary background knowledge of the setting and the reconstruction efforts in Aceh, the second part draws attention to more specific case studies and problems.

Nevertheless, this compilation contains a number of very interesting essays that reach far beyond mere reconstruction issues and prove relevant for gaining an insight into more general post-tsunami developments in Aceh. An outstanding example is Michelle Miller's essay on "The role of Islamic law (*sharia*) in post-tsunami reconstruction" which provides a comprehensive and well-researched overview about the newly enacted Islamic law. In a well-balanced approach, Miller discusses both the constructive role and the impediments of *sharia* in regard to rebuilding Acehese society, which after all suffered not only from the tsunami damage but also from a violent sepa-

ratist conflict for almost thirty years. What is more, by retracing the step-by-step enactment of local bylaws (*qanun*) that are intended to implement specific regulations, such as the restriction of the consumption of alcoholic beverages or intimate relationships between non-married/ related people that are deemed inappropriate, Miller manages to catch the main features of a religious parochialism that prioritises moralities over social welfare and justice. Miller refers to those violent squads as “moral vigilantism” (p.30) as they seek to introduce those *qanuns* in full force by targeting primarily (unveiled) women and the urban poor.

Besides Miller’s thoughtful essay, the first part contains also an article by Damien Kingsbury on the “Political Reconstruction in Aceh”. Contrary to his intention to shed light on the democratisation of *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM), Aceh’s separatist movement that had been struggling politically and militarily for independence from the Indonesian state, and thanks to his closed relationship with the diasporic GAM-leadership, Kingsbury in fact provides more details about the internal quarrels and power struggles of the GAM elite than had been known previously.

In her discussion on “Reconstruction through participatory research”, Sue Kenny elaborates on the common dilemma that on the one hand aid supply needs to be delivered as rapidly as possible but on the other hand aid should also be provided according to what the victims require and desire. Despite the often-repeated ignorance of people’s needs, Kenny also cites a number of activities by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that involved asset-based community development. However, reflecting merely on the deficiencies of the incoming massive rehabilitation efforts that have been carried out over the past years occasionally appears to be hypercritical. This also counts true for subsequent articles, for example Matthew Clarke’s and Suellen Murray’s article about “The voices of international NGO staff”. Exploring the reasons why some NGO staff could not live up to their own expectations or previous experiences of more successful reconstruction work elsewhere, Clark and Murray suggest especially three main and inter-related concerns NGOs suffered from while in Aceh: unclear management structures and poor leadership within the NGOs, inadequate provision of basic infrastructure and lack of preparation and support of the staff while in the field (p.184).

Whereas some articles in the second part of the compilation present more of a ‘bird’s eye view’ on the reconstruction process in Aceh, two case studies in particular portray developments on the ground in a more ethnographic way: Ismet Fanany directs attention to the case of Lampuuk, a village near Banda Aceh whose image of tsunami destruction had appeared in many media around the world, and Annemarie Samuels describes the

“Remaking [of] neighbourhoods in Banda Aceh”. Both are also examples of optimistic evaluations of the post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh that stress the proactive initiatives and the creative endurance of the survivors.

The enjoyment of reading the book is occasionally disrupted by a number of spelling mistakes. A more careful revision could have avoided not only that but also the many repetitions of certain basic information that occur in several essays, which in addition could have been better cross-referenced with each other.

Antje Missbach

- Antje Missbach, Ph.D., is currently a research fellow at Heidelberg University, Institute of Ethnology. She received her PhD at The Australian National University (ANU).  
<antjemissbach@googlemail.com>