

Why Indonesia is right to limit NGOs post-disaster

by Ashlee Betteridge

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A stranded ship after an earthquake and tsunami hit Donggala, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, on October 1. Antara Foto

The devastating earthquake and tsunami in Sulawesi, Indonesia, have shocked people around the world. Images of the earth liquefying, the terrifying screams as people watch a tsunami engulf the shore, and the wreckage left behind have led to a global outpouring of support and responses from aid agencies and NGOs.

Last week, Indonesia's disaster coordination agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana, or BNPB) issued guidelines on the involvement of foreign aid workers, stating that they needed to conduct all activities through local partners, and be registered with government agencies.

The announcement **has surprised the humanitarian sector** at large, and some have called it **confusing**. World Vision Australia's Tim Costello said it was "very strange". Amnesty International Indonesia have **labelled it** "a sad example of bureaucracy trumping humanity".

The official announcement is helpfully written in English in an infographic on Twitter.

Regulations for International NGOs qim to provide assistance in Central Sulawesi Province. pic.twitter.com/2LhypKpJ12

— Sutopo Purwo Nugroho (@Sutopo_PN) October 8, 2018

The **same Twitter account** has posted images of shelter tents with Chinese characters on them, retweeted World Food Program photos of Australian aid shipments, celebrated Canadian aid supplies arriving, and been thankful for JICA supplies. The World Bank and UN **have visited**, with the former offering **a US \$1 bn**

package. It's not a response that is turning its back on international relief, contrary to some commentators.

Following criticism, the policy on foreign aid workers and volunteers was further clarified:

“Letting foreigners enter disaster-hit areas without limitations and clear management would just give the country’s task force more work,” said BNPB spokesperson Sutopo Purwo Nugroho.

Sutopo told reporters 22 nationals had been asked to leave due to not having the necessary expertise, and having failed to register with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or their respective embassies.

“There’s no harm in [volunteers] coming, as long as they meet our requirements. What’s so hard about reporting?”

To those who are trying to frame this as foolhardy, or a political decision due to upcoming elections, issues of sovereignty, or a move to protect Indonesia’s apparently fragile sense of nationalism, there is a real need to take a step back.

Indonesia is quite experienced in dealing with natural disasters. It is a country where a substantial amount of aid has been invested in building local capacity to do so. And after the Boxing Day tsunami hit Aceh in 2004, it is also quite experienced in dealing with the hodge-podge of do-gooders that rock up when big disasters unfold.

The Australian Council for International Development’s (ACFID’s) response has been balanced, noting the pressures of a huge influx of international actors on government and the need to work with local agencies rather than to take over. It also noted that its members have not reported problems from the rules in their responses. (However some NGOs from abroad have told media they couldn’t get access.)

It seems that Indonesia’s intention was not to kick out experienced international NGOs, many of which have substantive national offices in Indonesia with predominantly national staff (and a quick Google shows they are currently very

active), nor to boot out relevant technical experts. It is to try to exercise some kind of control over the cavalcade of randoms who might not be all that helpful, may have niche interests and who are not coordinating with government. In other words, those acting from self-interest.

BNPB has a solid reason for wanting to exercise some degree of control, based on past experience. For those who have forgotten some of what went on during the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, here's a quick reminder.

- A boat building program for local fisherman built boats that were unsuitable for use at sea ([pdf, p. 23](#)) This was part of a larger explosion of boat building programs that led to a risk of overfishing ([pdf](#)).
- Child trafficking of 'orphans' ([here](#) and [here](#)).
- Too many new houses were built in some areas, or not built appropriately for local needs [[pdf](#)], leading to 'ghost villages' still uninhabited ten years after the tsunami.
- An influx of unwanted items, like [expired or inappropriate drugs](#) and [too many](#) prosthetic limbs.
- The capacity of local NGOs was decimated by the influx of international actors, [who poached a lot of their staff](#).
- [High inflation](#).

(Robin Davies' [powerful pieces](#) on his time in Aceh in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami are also well worth reading for perspective on the challenges in response to a large-scale disaster.)

Life in Aceh has well and truly resumed after mass devastation. In that sense, aid worked. But there was a lot of wastage and questionable behaviour, which is what BNPB seems keen to avoid.

As someone who spent several years living in Indonesia, working mostly in the media, friends and former colleagues have been reporting from the ground in Palu and Donggala (a mix of Australian and Indonesian nationals, which seems relevant to note). The stories and images are heart-wrenching. It's understandable that people want to help.

But the one thing they have all noted is the incredible generosity of local people. The kindness. The resilience. The problem-solving.

Those may sound like clichés, but they aren't hard to believe if you've spent time in this part of the world. And it makes sense to build on the good that is left.

Of course there is a need for an urgent response in Palu and Donggala, and of course there is immediate suffering to address. The rebuilding task is huge.

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No government-coordinated response to a major disaster will ever be perfect. In six months or a year there will be many lessons learned on what could have been done better. There will always be particularly Indonesian quirks about an Indonesian disaster response (like the fact that West Sumatra **always sends heaps of beef rendang...**). The response is **already being criticised**.

But harnessing local capacity makes sense. People in the sector go on about it all the time – **including at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016**, where “localisation”, as it is called, was adopted as one of the major objectives in humanitarian responses world-wide.

And for the rest of us, without any useful skills in disaster recovery to offer the good people of Palu and Donggala, **we should just give money**.

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