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HAFI AB  
KELOMPOK PEMBANGUNAN RUMAH KPR  
OXFAM

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Discussing the future, Lamsenia, April 2005. (Mardiyah Chamim)

# Good News from Lamsenia

*Days go by. Life is a whirl. Those who have left can slowly be forgotten until the Idul Fitri holiday comes. That's when the lost souls return to their families. As if those who had gone—the children, wives, fathers, mothers, and relatives—have returned to their hometown, smiling and carrying souvenirs. Those who were left behind welcome them in tears and they hug each other, at least in memories...*

**T**hat morning, together with about 300 people of Leupung subdistrict, I had just finished performing the *Id* prayer. The congregants started to leave the *meunasah*, leaving it quiet. The sound of the waves could be heard faintly.

“Please, come with us,” said Kak Neh, 28, beckoning in invitation. Together with her husband, Martunis, 32, I followed Kak Neh to a place submerged in seawater that reached our knees. “This used to be a very crowded village. Now it’s a lake,” said Kak Neh. “Over there was our father’s house,” she indicated.

We had to roll our sarongs and pants up to our thighs to walk to the remains of her father’s house. A lonely chipped pillar and a few segments of brick wall were all that remained of the house.

Kak Neh and her husband sat on pieces of bricks and opened the *Yasin* letter of the Koran. “This is where our children and friends died,” Martunis said, before starting to pray.

Between the slow-heaving prayers, Kak Neh whispered. She remembered her children, 6-year-old Andri and 2-year-old Intan, whose bodies have still not been found. She remembered her father, mother, brothers, and sisters who all died because of the tsunami.

Tears streamed down her cheeks...

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That was the first *Idul Fitri* in Lamsenia, Leupung subdistrict, after the tsunami. Unlike the usual on a big day, none of those snack jars were seen on dining tables in Lamsenia. There was no *pli’u* curry, not even the sticky rice cakes. “How are we supposed to make cakes? Even to find drinking water is hard,” a lady from one of the refugee camps said.

Sounds of cheerful laughter were also missing from the house yards. The voices of kids, crying of babies, balloons, toy guns—all that usually make *Idul Fitri* such a festive celebration had disappeared. There were only moldy tents and gloomy adults in sarongs and *telekung*.



Kak Neh pray on the ruins of her house, Lamsenia, November 2005. (Mardiyah Chamim).

“We have lost our children. There are no more kids here,” Sulasmi said. Out of 838 people, there are only 153 people left in Lamsenia.

Before the tsunami Leupung was one of the wealthiest subdistricts in Aceh Besar. Each family had at least one motorbike. In this area private cars were also not considered a luxury. Every morning hundreds of residents’ trucks lined up in a field near a market waiting for

goods. Thousands of acres of fruit orchards, hundreds of *teri* fish pens, ponds, fishing boats, bulldozers, chainsaws, and several sawmills. Leupung’s rich soil and bountiful sea never stopped producing durians, nutmegs, rambutans, mangosteens, chili, cloves, betel palms, fish, prawns, large *teri* fish, lobsters, timber, and even plump cows.

All those signs of prosperity are now history. The tsunami conquered Lamsenia and all of its treasures. Valuables, lives, families, cows, chainsaws, bulldozers, transport trucks—they are all gone.

Fortunately, hope did not die with the tsunami. Slowly the people of Lamsenia rose up, creeping slowly, and built a new life. Now, a year after the disaster, land to replace their village inundated by seawater has been prepared. The layout of the village has also been designed. The able-bodied will start working in early December 2005. If nothing gets in the way, the people of Lamsenia will live in their new village by early next year.

Reminiscing about the first days after the tsunami, I never imagined this defeated village could rise. Great tasks often have to be started with small steps, even faltering steps.

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In the second month after the tsunami, Lamsenia only had one plastic tent, donated by the Social Affairs Department. There was no food, electricity, or clean water supply. “The wells were inundated by salt water. “We usually drank foamy salty coffee,” said Jamil, one of the residents. Relief aid was sporadic. The Lhok Nga Bridge, which connects Lamsenia with Banda Aceh and the outside world, was

badly damaged. The village was almost completely wiped out, except for 10 men who were determined to rebuild their village from the very ground up.

Those brave men are Syamsuddin, Abdullah Yahya, Nurdin, Mulsim, Tarmizi, Bukhori, M. Jamil, Syamsul Bahri, Adnan Harun, and Martunis, who initiated the rebirth of Lamsenia. They slept beneath the plastic tent at night and during the day they evacuated the bodies of their families and relatives that were scattered at the foot of Sarah Hill—

such a difficult job. Some of the bodies were very badly mangled while others were buried under the big trees. “Some of them were stuck in tall bamboo plants. It was difficult to reach them,” said Franky, a Puter volunteer who assisted the people of Lamsenia from the start.

During the first weeks the volunteers focused on logistics aid. Together with JRS, the Puter team optimized various networks to make the distribution of the relief supplies run smooth. Father Sudrijanta had to fill dozens of plastic jerry cans with water by himself in Banda Aceh and brought them to Lamsenia in a pickup truck.

After the TNI’s Combat Engineers Battalion finished repairing the three broken bridges Leupung and Lamsenia were no longer isolated. Various NGOs like Mercy Corps, Oxfam, World Vision, and the Ratna Sarumpaet Crisis Center, started to arrive. There was no longer any problem with the distribution of provisions.

In March 2005, Lamsenia started to breathe once more. An emergency *meunasah*, an elevated house with corrugated iron roof, was built, donated by Oxfam and JRS. The *meunasah* was equipped with a loudspeaker. A store for relief provisions was also built. Clean water supply was made available by the work of the Oxfam team. A mini generator donated by JRS could at least supply the electricity for the lamps at night. Public kitchens, bathrooms, boats and fishing nets were also available. Other facilities included farming needs, fertilizer, hoes, and chili seeds. Some people even tried to plant chilies in Blang Ateuk at the foot of Sarah Hill.

One by one the people of Lamsenia, who were living in Mata’ie refugee camp, Banda Aceh, began to trickle home. The collective tents could no longer house the refugees. So, 30 new tents were built; one tent per family. Most of the tents were filled by widowers, sole survivors of their families.

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It was not altogether lonely because the villagers liked to gather. Every night they were heard chatting in the tents. The most popular topic: Looking for a new wife, a topic often referred to as “boat hunting”. A voice in one corner was heard: “What size are you looking for?” Someone replied: “He should get a robin (small inshore fishing boat) because he

is small.” The laughter lasted until morning.

During the days, after they had finished the cleaning-up work, they usually visited other villages, looking for those women who lived alone. “You have nobody to share with if you live alone,” Ramli said. But the “hunting” was not so easy because there were also many villages with few women survivors.

In short: Life was not over yet and it was impossible for them to depend on other people’s help forever. Something had to be designed and executed.

Besides finding mates for themselves, the people also hunted for spouses for the members of the Puter Team who were still single. “Let’s go get them Aceh girls. That way they will stay here longer,” M. Jamil said. Every time there was a young woman who was considered a potential for Franky and Rahmat, two Puter volunteers, they would busy themselves as matchmakers. According to reports, these two favorite volunteers were still single.

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In the fourth month, when the distribution of provisions had gone well and the living facilities (clean water, electricity, medical supplies, and *meunasah*) were no longer a problem, with assistance from the Puter Team the people started to design their own future: How they would map out the villages that were inundated by seawater, how they would rebuild their villages, and how they would run their economic life. In short: Life was not over yet and it was impossible for them to depend on other people’s help forever. Something had to be designed and executed.

So, from the last week of April 2005, the people began holding marathon meetings. Every night, after the *Isya* prayer, with a cup of condensed coffee and cigarettes, they discussed and shared opinions. They set their own meeting rules as to who could participate, the agenda, and the decision-making system. Most of the participants were men because all of the 41 surviving women residents had been evacuated to camps outside Lamsenia. “Sometimes we volunteers were not allowed to participate in the meetings because they wanted to discuss something internally,” Rahmat said.

In order to move forward, the people often had to look back. So, one night they charted Lamsenia’s governmental history (which is the same level as *keuchik*) from before Indonesian independence, 1937, until today. For more than almost seven decades, they had been led by eight *keuchiks*. The last

one, Pawang Sulaiman, was killed by the tsunami. As his replacement, the people elected Syamsuddin, 35, who lost his wife and three children, to be a new leader and one of the driving forces behind Lamsenia's recovery.

On another night they re-evaluated Lamsenia's assets to determine their efforts in the future. Besides

One of the important agendas involved housing. The old village, which was inundated, was impossible to rebuild.

sea products, the land was also rich in farming products. Rice, green beans, chilies, corn, nutmegs, durians, rambutans, and mangosteens were among the commodities that Lamsenia was famous for. "It would be wonderful if we could go back to being prosperous like before," *Keuchik* Syamsuddin said. "But we cannot do it instantly. We have to work it out slowly," he continued.

One of the important agendas involved housing. The old village, which was inundated, was impossible to rebuild. Every time the west wind season came the water could reach the height of an adult's thigh –like I witnessed with Kak Neh and Martunis on the morning of *Idul Fitri*. The people decided to find a new place to live. "We have to find land that is free from flood and does not border the sea," the *keuchik* said. Finally, Blang Ateuk was chosen, at the foot of Sarah Hill, just a kilometer away from their old village.

There was just one problem. The owners of the 1.5-acre area land not from Lamsenia. Was it possible for the land to be given? If it had to be bought, was it possible to get a special price?

Fortunately, the problem was solved quickly. Some of the landlords indeed gave their land while others agreed to sell at a special price. "We will pay in installments for two years," said M. Jamil. "Every month, every family will pay Rp75,000." The land-purchase plan was completed when surprisingly JRS said they would donate the fund. It was perfect. The land problem was solved. Now, it was time to think about how to build it.

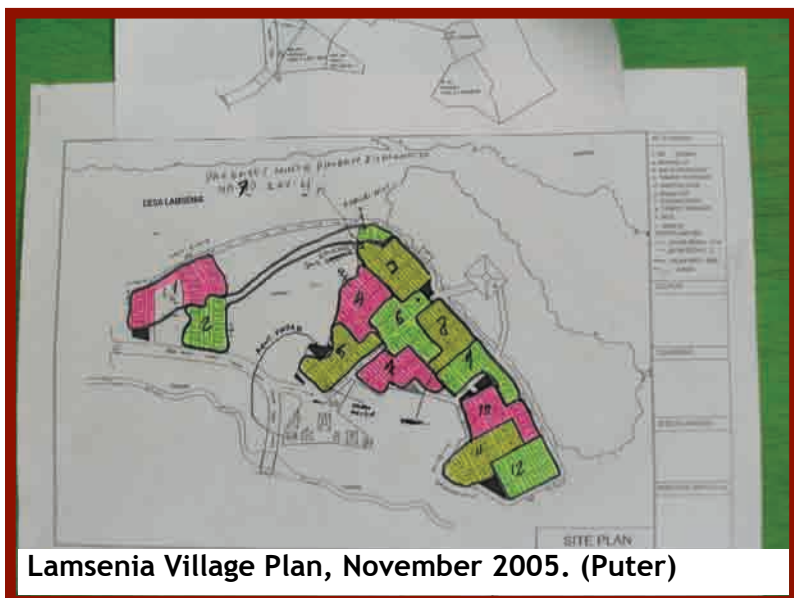
The first step: Dividing the land. Using a GPS borrowed from the Puter Team, the people made a field survey. At night, the results of the survey were discussed at the *meunasah*. Pieces of paper, colored markers, and condensed coffee were also there to witness the discussion. The designs of housing and public facilities were worked on together. "This will be an old house. It will be called *panti raheeng*," Syamsuddin said, pointing at a sketch of an elevated house.

*Meunasah*, school, meeting hall, and house building plans were discussed and designed together. There were 108 householders left in Lamsenia, most of them widowers. There were also some orphans who had lost their parents in the disaster. All of them would get a house. Fortunately, UN Habitat and Oxfam agreed to help in building the houses. UN Habitat provided Rp28.8 million for every unit to pay the workers while Oxfam helped in supplying the materials. The whole building process was handled by the people using a cash-for-work system. It was expected that by the end of 2005 the people of Lamsenia would be able to move into their new homes.

Two weeks after the marathon meetings, history was made in Lamsenia. On Wednesday, 4 May 2005, towards midnight, 25 people posed for a group photograph. The clothes they wore were simple but their smiles and eyes signified optimism. That was the night when they finished designing the future of

Lamsenia. A document signed by all the figures, written in Indonesian, Acehnese, and Arabic, was a witness to the birth of Lamsenia's new history.

Lamsenia kept moving, not quickly, but not too slowly either. Every day there was news and progress reports. People always swarmed the place to hear the news. "They were very excited. It was boisterous," said Iriana, a Puter volunteer.



Lamsenia Village Plan, November 2005. (Puter)

One of those boisterous moments was the draw for houses. Like a raffle, the draw was first announced on the radio and flyers posted on the walls of the *meunasah*. At the gathering, people determined who would live where and their turns of having their houses built. "Pak Keuchik will stay in alley A. This is the result of the draw," Jamil said.

The results of the raffle apparently did not make everyone happy. One middle-aged man protested; He did not want live next to his mother-in-law. "She is annoying," he explained. "Every time I have a woman over to my house, she is always disturbing. It's inconvenient to always have her watching me while I am looking for a new wife."

The objection was accepted. The man was allowed to negotiate with others who didn't mind switching houses.

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To me, Lamsenia is not only a village. The area is a tiny spot in the map that shows a new hope for Aceh's future. For other activists who are used to moving fast, the Puter Team's approach might have seemed slow. However, we were grateful we could make the people learn about working in an organization, making plans, and bonding. That was such a significant progress.

It seemed nowadays the role and the power of Aceh civilians were growing. The people were no longer leaving everything up to the bureaucrats as they had in the past. The Lamsenia's *keuchik* election was one example.

About three weeks after the tsunami, five people of

Lamsenia were invited to Leupung subdistrict. They were asked to form village committees, a *keuchik* and staff, to ease the distribution of relief aid. The five people spontaneously appointed Syamsuddin as a new *keuchik*. "We were all surprised. How could a *keuchik* be elected only by five people while this involves our future together," Abdullah said.

Not only electing a leader, the people also learnt to collectively manage money transparently.

In reaction to the news, the people soon held a short meeting. Fellow villagers, who were scattered in various refugee camps, were invited. Finally, due to limited transport available, there were only about half a dozen people present. They discussed the situation in the ruins of the *meunasah*. Eventually, they all agreed to choose Syamsuddin. The final decision was the same, but the process was totally different. "Most importantly, everybody got to choose," said Abdullah.

Not only electing a leader, the people also learnt to collectively manage money transparently. "We have Rp23 million in the village coffers," Jamil said. The fund was collected from saving the cash-for-work fees for cleaning the village, digging wells, dredging the bay, and planting tobacco. From the Rp35,000 daily wage, the people put aside a small amount to be put in the collective cash fund. The funds were used to buy petrol for the *keuchik* for when he had to attend a meeting at the district office, to buy diesel fuel for the village generator and coffee for the night meetings. "Once in a while, we used the money to treat the volunteers...ha, ha, ha..." Jamil said proudly. There were also some people who demanded the cash fund be divided equally. But the village committee refused. "If that happens," Syamsuddin said, "I will resign as *keuchik*."

Jamil and other people of Lamsenia should be proud. While many other villages still depended on charity organizations, Lamsenia already had their own money as a capital. In many places in Aceh the

people had learnt to make proposals for the sole target of receiving aid. Any undertaking, from building a place to bathe before praying to buying snacks for meetings, all required proposals for funds.

Certainly, it was not only the people who were to blame. The clumsy charity organizations, who gave away relief without any clear concepts, also played a role in creating the dependence.

For Lamsenia, the bond between the civilians, which was getting stronger, had helped them to stand proudly with dignity in the middle of the traffic of relief that was sometimes unreasonable. *Keuchik* Syamsuddin had a story to share. That August 2005, they had just staged a protest against the bureaucrats in Leupung subdistrict who without the

people's approval sold rice, which belonged to the people of Lamsenia, to the poor.

As for the compensation, the people were given Rp2 million but they refused. "We need rice more," Syamsuddin said. "Besides, who knew what percentage of that Rp2 million had been cut?" The money was finally returned to the subdistrict head and he agreed to give the rice to the people of Lamsenia. It all went well; everybody was happy.

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A new history was being written not only in Lamsenia but also in other places in Aceh. The assistance programs held by various NGOs had encouraged local communities to be more assertive in fighting for their rights. In Peukan Bada, Meuraxa, the people were assisted by the volunteers from Uplink (Urban Poor Consortium), while in Gampong Baru there was a team of volunteers from the *Yayasan Rumpun Bambu Indonesia* (YRBI). Furthermore, in Calang there was *Nurani Dunia*, in Krueng Raya, Lamno, and Nasi Island there were JRS volunteer teams, and in Samatiga (Meulaboh) there was a team of volunteers from Walhi who had worked on building a medical clinic. I was also impressed by the assistance provided by the Network of Humanitarian Volunteers (JRK) in Kuala Tuha village, Nagan Raya. There had been many NGOs who had successfully raised the confidence of the villagers until they had managed to become independent. However, all of the assistance programs were still sporadic and there had not been any maximum coordination and synergy between the institutions involved. It would be wonderful if the positive energy of the spirit of assistance in various areas could be optimized.