

# ARM: for an alternative disaster management

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Over the last month, as I have been staying in Yogyakarta, I have witnessed the unfolding of the Merapi volcanic disaster. Merapi first erupted on October 26 followed by more eruptions until another major eruption on November 5. The fallout of the eruptions has been more than 200 casualties, the evacuation of 340,000 people as well as the destruction of many houses, farm land and crops and livestock.

The government, while succeeding in evacuating most people before the first eruption, responded slowly and inadequately to the disaster. For example, the government did not anticipate the eruptions and construct shelters in advance of the event, instead waiting until thousands of refugees needed shelter and depositing them in universities and stadiums throughout Yogyakarta and Magelang. In the immediate sense this was as a result of a lack of forward preparation, however the government's failure in this situation is only symptomatic of deeper problems: the endemic corruption and inefficiency fostered by Suharto's New Order regime. Indonesia's political elite are involved in politics in order to serve their own interests, and the welfare of the people is a secondary consideration. In the context of a natural disaster situation, these skewed priorities are clearly exposed.

As a result of this lack of commitment to the Indonesian peoples' welfare, the gaps in the government's response were filled by the community. Throughout the region almost 100,000 people were sheltering in homes and temporary shelters constructed and run by the community. Businesses and NGOs also played an important role.

Throughout the disaster I visited many "poskos" (posts - or shelters) including the major government-run shelters such as Maguwoharjo Stadium, which after the November 5 eruption was sheltering up to 40,000 people, the Jogja Expo Centre and the National Development University, as well as several smaller community-run or home-based shelters.

On Sunday November 21 I visited one of the poskos in Magelang, a city about one hour north of Yogyakarta, where Nantok, a member of the Alliance of Peoples' Struggles (ARM - a coalition of womens', youth, labour and peasant organisations in Yogyakarta) has been playing a central coordinating role. Magelang was more badly affected by the fallout of the eruptions than Yogyakarta, almost one month after the eruptions began Magelang is still covered in volcanic ash and the roads become muddy and slippery when it rains. Even today, when many refugees have returned home there are still 15,000 or more refugees scattered in poskos of varying size and quality throughout Magelang.

The posko I visited was in the Dampit village, which sits between a busy arterial road that goes north to Semarang and south to Yogyakarta and the start of farming land. The posko has been housing up to 400 refugees, with numbers varying depending on the situation. At the moment the majority of the refugees are from a small village, Tlatar, located 10 kilometres from Merapi. The village head, Jarwo, told me that originally Tlatar was a place where other refugees had come to find shelter, but after the big eruptions on November 5, they had had to move also.

The conditions are basic and typical of many self-run poskos throughout the Yogyakarta/Magelang

region - essentially the camp is a big shed, everybody sleeping on the floor in one big room. In the back area there is a basic kitchen, with cooking being done over fires and out the front is a small office where volunteers from Dampit oversee the management of the camp. But while the material conditions are simple, understanding the way that the Dampit posko and others like it are run can give very important insights and ideas into a range of issues.

### **Democratic and independent**

Nantok told me that the two most important principles in running the posko are democracy and independence. I saw these principles in action at the Dampit posko. When I arrived at the posko in the evening, the nightly meeting was happening. This is a time when everyone has a chance to discuss collectively the situation and come up with their own solutions. This is a meeting which only the refugees can attend and participate in, even volunteers that work in the posko cannot join.

Secondly, independence. The management of the posko all come from the Dampit village, they have a structure of responsibility (coordination, logistics, transportation, looking after the children, health care etc), and the refugees themselves also have their own division of labour and responsibilities, for example all the cooking is done by a team of women from the camp. Nantok told me that the management had had offers of help from businesses and NGOs but that they had refused the offers in order to maintain the independence of the posko, which is why there are no banners for NGOs or businesses in the Dampit posko.

These are very important principles in a disaster situation because it means that the refugees maintain as much self-determination and independence as is possible in the situation. One of the biggest problems for people that have experienced dislocation is psychological - from having to leave homes and possessions, maybe experiencing personal loss of family or friends and then the experience of having to wait for weeks on end in crowded and basic conditions and with their future in doubt - can be an extremely destructive experience.

This is especially true in the big government-run poskos, such as Maguwoharjo Stadium, where at the height of the disaster 40,000 people were sheltering. I saw people sleeping under the stairs of the stadium, next to the mud and puddles. To get food means crowding around a central distribution centre, pushing to have your needs met along with everyone else. In those conditions psychological problems can easily develop along with a broader problem of a breakdown in solidarity as everyone struggles to get their needs met and an individualistic, survival mentality can emerge.

Furthermore, because the local government could not adequately manage the national government took control over the relief efforts, calling in the National Agency for Disaster Management (BNBP). This means in many of the big government-run poskos the military were running the shelters. This is problematic because the military in Indonesia have a long history of playing a regressive role in Indonesia, being the main pillar of Suharto's New Order regime. Even today, twelve years after the end of the Suharto-era, the military is still involved in repressing movements, such as the national liberation struggle in Papua, as well as in intimidating activists. The presence of the military can therefore increase the feeling of disempowerment of the refugees and can allow a new opening for the military to ingratiate themselves back into civilian life.

However as a result of the lack of an adequate government disaster management plan and uneven implementation of relief efforts this also creates a space for businesses and NGO's to enter the poskos.

While they of course are contributing to the relief efforts and even if they are attempting to address the psychological and emotional needs of the refugees, the framework is that the NGO is doing

something for the refugees, rather than the refugees doing something for themselves, potentially developing a mentality of passive waiting for help. Furthermore these actors have their own agenda: businesses are hoping to ingratiate their brand amongst the people and NGOs are trying to create new programs that will allow them to get new funding grants.

For example, a coalition of NGO's in Yogyakarta has recently embarked upon a project of data collection, as a means of creating a new program to gain funding grants. Yet the government already has adequate information about losses of houses and livestock, the more important thing is to encourage the refugees to demand the compensation that the government has already allocated funds for. While the 3 trillion that has been set aside for reconstruction and rehabilitation by the national government is a significant figure, widespread corruption means that many people will be unlikely to receive their rightful compensation. Furthermore, while the refugees may have their needs met, the longer-term effects of having been in a powerless and passive position can weaken the individual's psychology and even contribute to a breakdown within the community.

On the other hand, the self-run poskos can actually serve to strengthen the individual and the community. The poskos provide the refugee community an opportunity to have an experience of democratic functioning and increase the self-confidence of the community to solve their own problems even in extremely difficult circumstances, rather than being treated as a powerless victim as in the big government, or NGO-run poskos.

One problem with the self-run poskos is that it strengthens a tendency within Indonesia to avoid having to confront the government. One of the strong cultural values within Indonesian society is the idea of "gotonroyong" - or the collective solving of problems, and while this value contributes to the strong community response during disasters such as Merapi, it can also mean that the government is not challenged to meet its responsibilities to uphold the basic human rights of its citizens. This allows the widespread corruption and inefficiency within the government to continue unchallenged.

So what could be a better solution and what should people struggle for?

### **Government responsibilities:**

1. The government should create take responsibility for the construction of community-based emergency shelters complete with good quality cooking and washing facilities and bedding, therefore avoiding the need for refugees to be herded into the large and alienating stadiums and university sports halls, or on the other hand for the community to have to build or locate shelters once an disaster has already begun which is a time-consuming process and also involves the already poor communities to use their own resources to provide for the refugees.
2. The government should take responsibility for the delivery of emergency supplies, such as food, clothes etc to the community shelters. This would avoid the situation where members of the community are having to do the work of going out every day to the search for and bring back these supplies. Again, this is a time-consuming, costly and inefficient process for the community. In many situations volunteers have stopped work or study in order to do this work.
3. The government should work with community leaders to create emergency plans, so that each community knows which shelter they should evacuate to, the host community should also know what their responsibilities are, for example having leadership structures and divisions of responsibility already in place.
4. The government should provide a liveable wage to those volunteers within the host community who work full time within the shelters for the duration of the disaster. This would avoid the

development of resentment within the host community, who in attempting to provide for the refugees suffer their own hardships as a result.

5. The government should have teams of health-care workers and teachers who are paid to work within the shelters for the duration of the disaster.

6. Finally the government should take responsibility for ensuring that all financial losses are fully compensated for. This would mean consultation with the community leaders about the details of losses of livestock, houses etc, rather than this work being undertaken by NGOs.

### **Community responsibilities**

However, while the government should take the main responsibility for disaster management, the community poskos need to be run independently and democratically by the refugee and host communities themselves. This would give the best possible chance of avoiding psychological problems such as depression or the development of a passive victim mentality. While being a refugee involves large amounts of time waiting for the disaster to subside, this extra time could be used more effectively, for example as a time to study, for example with special educators having a program of visiting the shelters to give the refugees a chance to broaden their education.

### **Cuba's example**

For an example of successful disaster management, we can look to the socialist government of Cuba. Despite being a Third World country and suffering for more than 50 years under an economic blockade by the US, Cuba has an outstanding disaster management system. According to a 2004 Oxfam America report, *Weathering the Storm: Lessons in Risk Reduction from Cuba*, the country suffered six major hurricanes between 1996 and 2002 and yet only 16 people died. In 2004 a category-five hurricane hit Cuba destroying 20,000 homes, but there was no loss of life.

A 2002 Oxfam report concluded: "[Cuba's Civil Defence Force, early warning system, well-equipped rescue teams, emergency stockpiles and other resources] are impressive, but if they were the only determining factor, then other wealthier countries such as the United States would have lower disaster death tolls. Thus, it is equally important to consider the role played by other 'intangible' qualities in making the Cuban system work so well." These include community mobilization, solidarity, clear political commitment to safeguard human life and a population that is 'disaster-aware' and educated in the necessary actions to be taken in the event of a disaster." But Cuba's achievements are a product of the country's socialist orientation following its 1959 revolution — looking after the needs of the majority of people instead of the profits of big business, and building a system of popular power based on a politicised working class.

See this report for more details:

<http://www.ciponline.org/cuba/photos/Final%20Cuba%20IPR%200509.pdf>

The Indonesian government however, being completely beholden to the interests of global capitalism and riddled with corruption is incapable of developing and implementing a well-resourced and planned national disaster plan. Furthermore, the Indonesian government is unwilling to encourage the self-organisation of the people as this has the potential to threaten its power. Therefore while Indonesian people need to demand better disaster management ultimately what is needed is the construction of a new government based on the self-organisation of the people that can prioritise human need over corporate profits.

### **Role of the ARM**

The ARM aims to work alongside other volunteers from the community for disaster relief, but as well as helping with relief efforts they also aim to play an educational role for example volunteering to give a workshop on women's health that may lead into a broader discussion about women's role in society. Furthermore through being involved in the disaster relief the ARM can help the refugee community formulate their demands to the government, for example about compensation for financial losses. In this way, the ARM can help the people to struggle to ensure that the government fulfill its responsibilities. But beyond the immediate issues of the disaster, the ARM also aims to educate people about the need to become involved in movements for increasing the democratisation process in Indonesia as well as the need for broader social change and ultimately governmental change.

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\* From: [www.armformerapi.blogspot.com](http://www.armformerapi.blogspot.com)