

Aceh Lab School Opens

Following the December 2004 tsunami that hit Aceh and much of the region's Indian Ocean coastal communities JIS, together with other schools and organizations, supported a plan to build a new school that would train both students and teachers alike. After its initial assistance, JIS also pledged a five-year grant toward library enrichment through annual book purchases, training and exchanges.

Margaret Sullivan, herself a consultant to the Jakarta Embassy School as it made the switch to become JIS in 1970, was assigned to coordinate the school project. The following is based on Margaret's latest status report and the article, "Painting the Sky": A School Grows in Aceh," published in the January 2008 issue of the Foreign Service Journal (www.fsjournal.org).

Ambassador Alphonse La Porta, a former Jakarta neighbor, then president of USINDO, and who had been US consul in Medan, first informed me of USINDO's plan to build a new school in the devastated area of Aceh and asked me to be the project's coordinator. Founded in 1994 by the former American ambassador to Indonesia, Edward Masters and former Indonesian Minister, Sumitro, USINDO represents the best of the long-term bi-national associations that are an outgrowth of individual US Foreign Service engagement in countries and regions. It conducts wide-ranging public education programs such as open forums, seminars, publications, scholarly exchanges and cultural performances to foster better understanding between Americans and Indonesians — but had never done bricks and mortar.

Two months to the day after the tsunami, I deplaned in Banda Aceh to conduct a needs assessment. On the way back to return to my home in the USA with several project possibilities to propose, I made a cold call on Dr. Darni M. Daud, then vice rector (and now rector) of Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh. Pak Darni presented his "lab school" vision, full-blown, as more than just a building. High school students would benefit from innovative teaching and modern facilities, while students in the university's education college would have opportunities for pre-service practice under the guidance of master teachers.

The USINDO Board opted for the lasting impact that the proposal promised. The society would collaborate with Indonesians on a project they wanted — a key to eventual success. Led by Pak Darni, key university staff formed the core of the project team. The university provided land on the campus — critical because obtaining land free and clear is a constant reconstruction obstacle. The third major partner is the Sampoerna Foundation. One of Indonesia's leading NGOs, it had been doing educational work in Aceh for several years prior to the tsunami. Sampoerna's field representative, Ramang Basuki, who first arrived in Aceh on the same plane as I, has been the truly irreplaceable man on the ground.

By August 2005, an MOU was signed and establishment of the Syiah Kuala University Lab School was under way. Building a school requires funds. Once the project was announced, gifts began to arrive, even from schoolchildren. In particular, there was a pledge from Do Something, an organization in New York that believes that by pooling their efforts, individual students can make a difference. These gifts were announced at a USINDO dinner in Washington for Indonesia's president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in May 2005. Altogether, schoolchildren in the United States and those connected to the Jakarta International School contributed about \$300,000.

Subsequently, major corporations led by Newmont Mining AIG, Exxon-Mobil and Boeing, as well as the charitable arms of Bank Indonesia and Bank Danamon in Jakarta, provided over \$2 million. JIS trained the principals and librarians and provided engineers to monitor construction. IBM has given computers and training. Many other companies and individuals have also provided funds and much-needed equipment. Thus, bit by bit, the package came together. And so did the school, slowly, in fits and starts, just like the world around it. The design also includes a functioning library, where students can actually use books (not the traditional textbook storage room) and are encouraged to do independent research; a computer/language lab; and science labs. The entire school will have Internet connectivity and, at the neighborhood leaders' request, a community center that can be used for adult education after hours. Large, low windows were the biggest point of contention (the small windows in traditional classrooms are above students' seated height). "The students will fall out." "They will fight and break them." "If they can see out, they will not pay attention to the teacher." At last, truth: "Well, in that case, we will just have to have better teachers."

Pak Jalaluddin and his design team from the university engineering department translated these ideas into working designs and, ultimately, into a cluster of lovely buildings that are an elegant simplification of Acehnese traditional architecture. Meanwhile, ongoing discussions with the university's College of Education and Training and the provincial and local education departments focused on how the school should operate so that it fits within the national education system, yet at the same time retains the special status that will allow it to be truly transformative and innovative in a system that often is not.





Students in the Lab School library, sponsored by JIS and Exxon-Mobil, enjoy a range of learning materials not available to them in other area schools.

A yayasan (managing foundation) was formed, mainly from the university community and provincial and city education department representatives, but with USINDO, the Sampoerna Foundation and the Jakarta International School as members, as well.

The university named a principal, Ibu Syarifah, and a vice principal, Pak Nasir, both well-qualified, delightful, thoughtful and committed people. They have been central to the planning. The school advisory committee decided that all of the teachers should be young, so that they would not be locked into old ways of teaching. Of 200 applicants for teaching positions, 13 were chosen. In June 2007, 102 students were selected out of 650 applicants for the first class of 10th-graders. Sixty come from the immediately surrounding neighborhood to keep it a truly community-based school, serving an area that had been badly damaged and dislocated in the tsunami and the previous troubles.

Rather than taking only the brightest test takers from all over the city, the students were chosen for their range of abilities and backgrounds. The school motto is "Everyone can learn." Ultimately, the school will have 300 students in grades 10-12.

On July 16, 2007, the Indonesian flag was raised at the Lab School, and the inaugural class of the new, three-year senior high school was welcomed. That opening day was the first step of the project's next phase. Now the primary responsibility has shifted to the school community: the yayasan, the school staff, the parents and the teachers. Much remains to be worked through. Complicated and frustrating as it can be, constructing buildings is easier than creating and nurturing successful schools.

The tsunami also accelerated renewal of peace negotiations between Aceh and Jakarta, producing an agreement on Aug. 15, 2005, two days before the country's 60th anniversary of independence. The first-ever provincial election took place in Aceh in December 2006, overwhelmingly electing a former Free Aceh leader, Irwandi Yusuf, as governor.

Irwandi is actively confronting the province's immense challenges, not the least of which is integrating former insurgents into an imbalanced economy with vast resources designated for tsunami-afflicted areas and more limited resources for allocation elsewhere. Planning for the long-term sustainability of the infrastructure that has been rebuilt or is still on the drawing board is an additional challenge.

Responsibility for tsunami reconstruction will be transferred from the national government-established Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency, or BRR, to the province in May 2009. As of June 2007, while some families were still in temporary housing, many barracks had been razed; 84,387 permanent houses (of the 128,000 needed), 405 health facilities (about 125 percent of the requirement), 804 schools and 1,586 kilometers of roads had been built. And the work continues.

- International organizations and big charitable agencies that are experts at relief are not always good at reha-bilitation and reconstruction. Donors often push for "getting things built now" — before there has been time for thoughtful planning or bringing the communities along.
- There has been too much staking out of territory as "belonging" to one NGO or another (then not necessarily following through with promised efforts), and not enough thoughtful collaboration among them. Schools, for instance, have been rebuilt but not furnished.
- Only so much money can be absorbed into the wreckage of disaster and an already poor economy at any given time. Funds therefore remain unspent, even though most of what was pledged has been obligated. Prodigious efforts have been undertaken and achieved — but not always producing the right thing in the right place at the right time.
- With so much money around, there is corruption — notwithstanding BRR's insistence on and active practice of transparency. Several NGOs have stopped projects to weed out malpractice and bring miscreants to trial — which is, in and of itself, remarkable.
- The planning required is overwhelming and, of necessity, has gone by fits and starts. (So many of the basic institutions — and the people to staff them — were destroyed or not there in the first place.)
- Labor and construction material shortages, compounded by the need to bring everything in by sea or over a narrow, pot-holed highway from Medan, caused prices to skyrocket, nearly doubling early reconstruction cost estimates.

Getting to know individuals is the most rewarding aspect of spending time in Aceh — and, compared with rebuilding and changes in the landscape, the hardest to write about. Everyone has lost someone, or many someones. Yet the Acehnese are welcoming, accepting, proud, reserved and persevering. These friendships are a special blessing.

As for the lessons I've learned from the project itself: patience and a sense of humor are all-important. Things work — or don't — in their own time. Construction goes better with close monitoring, usually. Great as it is, you can't count on e-mail, particularly when you need it most. And I still have so much to learn.



Students at the school are encouraged to learn by questioning their teachers and their peers and research on their own.