



Feature

Frederike Meijer, UNV/UNHCR volunteer in Aceh Jaya

Originally from the Netherlands, Frederike Meijer was recruited in October 2005 as an international UNV volunteer assigned to UNHCR. She was offered a job as an Associate Programme Officer, but this role subsequently changed when the previous Community Services Officer (CSO) became ill and later on left. It was around mid to late January 2006 when Frederike took over the responsibility from the previous CSO to be in charge of the community team. This was the beginning of an unforgettable and challenging experience.

"I happily accepted the job as a UNV volunteer because I wanted to contribute to poverty reduction in Indonesia, and I knew I could use my skills to do so" she explains.

At the time UNHCR was implementing a project to build 1134 houses in 6 villages in Aceh Jaya, which is a coastal area located around 150 km south of Banda Aceh, very near to the epicenter of the earthquake that resulted in the devastating Tsunami of 26 December 2004.

"I arrived in the area one year after the Tsunami and the damage was still visible. When driving along the damaged road, it took me a while to realize that before there had been houses, trees and shops standing there" she recalls.

Frederike's team was in charge of registering data and verifying the beneficiaries' eligibility to be granted a UNHCR house. To properly carry out their work in the field, the whole team was transported every Monday morning to Calang, usually by helicopter, and brought back every Friday afternoon to Banda Aceh.

Despite receiving offers by UNHCR officer Margarita Vargas to be provided with better accommodation, Frederike decided to let her adventurous heart discover nature in all its beauty.

"I lived in a Refugee tent that was clean and big enough. In the camp there were 3 toilets and 3 washing cabins or Kamar Mandi, as Indonesians call them. We bathed ourselves as locals do and I loved it that way," she says.

However, adapting to her new living conditions wasn't always easy.

"The tents were sometimes visited by nightly creatures that would eat our toothpaste and soap. Then, when the rainy season started, the sand of the camp turned into mud and we had to find ways to keep our clothes and belongings dry". Adapting her eating habits to the local cuisine was another challenge she managed to overcome.

When unexpected circumstances demanded her carrying out tasks that were not mentioned in her job description, Frederike's commitment and dedication to volunteerism were put to the test.

"In the beginning our office was set up inside a tent, and when it rained it usually got flooded. Sometimes the electricity was down or the toilets were not working and we had to fix them. Communication with the office in Banda Aceh was not always possible, but overall our motto was: 'Go with the flow'. We tried solving problems every time they came our way" she says.

Despite the fact that the UN system provides its staff with the best security measures available in each and every duty station worldwide, security concerns might arise especially when natural disasters have severely damaged a community's livelihood.

"Sometimes we were threatened in the field by people who wanted to have a UNHCR house but were not eligible. Or by people who were not satisfied with the progress of the building process" Frederike said. "But as a security focal point of the camp I managed to calm down the situation. We always tried to find solutions and when there were none left, we would just go to the nearest café and buy ourselves a big glass of cool coconut milk!" she jokes.

Frederike's optimistic nature helped her overcome a number of obstacles during her assignment and encouraged her colleagues to fulfill their commitments towards the community, no matter how difficult this was.

"I felt really disappointed when one day I realized that some people were playing games and in their bid to receive a UNHCR house they weren't providing trustworthy information. That night when I went back to my camp my tent was almost blown away by a huge storm and that's when I felt the stress building up over my shoulders".

Nonetheless quitting was simply not an option for her. "Why didn't I give up? Because at least 70% of the beneficiaries that were on the name lists needed and deserved a house. I had a job to do. Hard times are always present and the only thing one can do is to trust that there will be a solution," she affirms.

With support from the management and local authorities, by mid-July 2006 the beneficiaries name lists were completed and by the end of Oct 2006, UNHCR had built approximately 350 houses in the 6 villages.

Frederike fulfilled her commitment and for that she gained the respect and admiration of all her co-workers. Today she lives in the Netherlands and will soon take over new responsibilities. But her work as an International UNV volunteer will always remain a vivid example of free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity, which are the foundations of volunteerism.



UNCHR tents in Calang

All members of the community team prepare certificates for the first 25 houses that were finished. From left to right: Nora Mia Azmi, Nina Wahyuni, Frederike Meijer and Juferdy.