Telling the story of the people caught in disasters, response and recovery

In August and September 2018, the Indonesian provinces of West Nusa Tenggara and Central Sulawesi were rocked by powerful earthquakes that destroyed several buildings, took thousands of lives and displaced tens of thousands. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) immediately started emergency response measures, and a UN Volunteer stepped in to tell the story.

Among its many mandates, UNDP works with communities in crises to help manage and reduce risks, and works with national and local governments worldwide to incorporate resilience and recovery into its crisis response. Deploying personnel immediately on the ground after the onset of a crisis, UNDP links humanitarian response to long term recovery.

In partnership with civil society organizations and the local community,
UNDP, in line with its principle of “stay and deliver”, addresses crises by restoring basic government functions, managing debris, rehabilitating infrastructure, and working on recovery plans.

In August and September 2018, the Indonesian provinces of West Nusa Tenggara and Central Sulawesi were rocked by powerful earthquakes that destroyed several buildings, took thousands of lives and displaced tens of thousands. Images of bereaved residents, still in shock, searching for loved ones among heaps of rubble filled international airwaves and splashed across front pages of newspapers from Jakarta to New York.

UNDP Indonesia along with sister agencies across the UN system stepped in immediately. With its vast experience handling disaster response in Indonesia and around the world, UNDP staff were deployed to the impacted regions as teams began to work with communities to find temporary shelters and piecing their lives together again.

In the weeks immediately following the disaster, women who had lost their spouses and children came together, collecting clothes that had been discarded and other material, fashioning them into bracelets, hair ties and other items which they sold to make money for basic necessities.

UNDP’s debris clearing programme and “Cash for Work” programmes helped the community as the region struggled in the aftermath of the disaster. Within weeks, the German government stepped in, offering UNDP 25,000 EUR (28,000 USD in 2018 exchange rates) to develop a recovery programme.

The Recovery and Resilience Unit, bolstered by experts with experience in disaster response developed a plan of action under the Indonesia Programme for Earthquake and Tsunami Reconstruction Assistance (PETRA) project to rebuild schools, markets, hospitals, and village health centers. The three-year project recruited teams from around Indonesia with consultants from overseas who had worked on similar projects, to provide advice.

The plan included an ‘all of society’ approach, where the entire community would be involved from planning to final construction.

Someone had to tell their story.

Ranjit Jose, an American journalist, had been working in Indonesia for five years at the time of the disaster. When UNDP reached out via the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, offering him an opportunity as Communications Specialist under UNDP’s SURGE contract (developed to
enhance UNDP’s ability to respond quickly in the recovery phase following conflicts and disasters, he stepped in.

"Although I wasn’t involved in hard news coverage at the time of the disaster, I had been following the news of the earthquake. I wanted to contribute in some way beyond just donating funds or being on the sidelines," Ranjit said of the opportunity. Trained as an anthropologist with a background in international affairs, Ranjit’s experience with the local context helped him craft stories with a human element for an international audience.

I had spent a decade as a feature writer, where we look at stories differently than those involved in news reporting. We don’t just describe the scene on the ground, we focus on the community and talk about their lives and the impact of these disasters and UNDP’s interventions. --Ranjit Jose, Communications Specialist, UNDP Indonesia.

Over the course of his time at UNDP, Ranjit has spoken to students who walked miles to their temporary schools, but remained optimistic about the construction of permanent structures closer to home. He commiserated with women who were widowed and distraught at having lost everything but were still hopeful about their future and to women who had lost farms in the earthquake but trained in construction to help rebuild irrigation canals.

Reporting on disasters isn’t just merely a rehashing of stories of devastation and ruin and international intervention. It is important that we convey the resilience of communities and describe the impact of our work in these communities. That’s where Communications Officers come in and bring these stories to the world. --Christian Usfinit, Team Leader,
Resilience and Reconstruction Unit, UNDP Indonesia

Ranjit’s work goes beyond developing human interest stories. “During the long COVID-19 lockdown, I shifted gears and focused on editing various studies on the impact of the pandemic on small scale industries in Indonesia and on households, particularly in the quake-impacted provinces of Central Sulawesi and West Nusa Tenggara,” he said. The pandemic was particularly challenging in those provinces already struggling to recover from the earthquake.

Volunteers have an advantage in that they are flexible in their approach.

“The key to a successful advocacy effort is storytelling. A large portion of UNDP’s communication efforts require specialists who can transform our work into compelling narratives that engage audiences. Over the years, we have benefited from a group of skilled volunteers who can offer these essential skills. --Tomi Soetjipto, Head of Communications Unit, UNDP Indonesia

Ranjit has also worked with various teams across the office on developing writing and photography skills. Over the course of the three years he spent at UNDP Indonesia, he was also involved in workshops on gender-sensitive communications and worked with colleagues to ensure inclusive messaging at all levels.

In 2022, as the PETRA project shifts to handing over completed projects to the provincial government, Ranjit has turned, once again, to filing reports and overseeing publications such as an e-book on the reconstruction journey told through vivid images and interactive graphics.
My experience as a volunteer has allowed me to wear multiple hats. My affiliation with the PETRA project showed me parts of Indonesia that are almost hallowed ground in development circles. It certainly has been a privilege. Connecting with other projects across the office and working on their campaigns, has enhanced my work as a communications professional. --Ranjit Jose, Communications Specialist, UNDP Indonesia

“There is more to deliver as UNDP remains in the region and fulfills its obligations. I started off writing human interest stories,” Ranjit reminisces. “But I plan to stick around until the job is done!” he concludes.
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