

Spring 2002 intern, Beth Rogers-Witte, worked as a humanitarian aid worker in Indonesia after the December 2004 tsunami. Here is her first-person report on her work.

Tsunami did not destroy the smiles of children

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Children in Banda Aceh, Indonesia experienced more grief and anguish in a few months than most people experience in an entire lifetime. Many of them lost mothers and fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and homes. Many are living with strangers and crowded into temporary living centers or poorly assembled tents with limited resources. Yet despite their seemingly bleak situation, children are still laughing, smiling, playing and just being kids throughout the Indonesian province of Aceh.

Playing with children at the “Pusat Pendidikan Anak Nelayan Baiturrahman” orphanage in Lhokseumawe, a town on the east coast of Aceh, I barely noticed the sweat trickling down my face. This orphanage houses children who lost their parents during the tsunami of December 26, 2004. International Relief and Development, Inc. (IRD), the humanitarian aid agency I was working for in Aceh, had just delivered boxes full of school backpacks and the kids were rummaging through the boxes choosing among the colorful knapsacks. I had been chauffeured around the orphanage on a tour, visiting the boys’ quarters and peeking into the girls’ rooms, where many young girls were napping. . Some of them woke up and saw me, a stranger and a foreigner, and were instantly curious. They tapped each other to wake up and wanted me to take their pictures. Their wide smiles were contagious, and I couldn’t help but feel a large grin develop on my face too.

Children living in a temporary living center in the community of Kandang in Banda Aceh were running, playing and climbing the great tree in the middle of the camp when an IRD truck pulled up with various goods. The children instantly dropped from the tree and ran over to me to talk. While some kids were curious about my pale skin, light hair and blue eyes, others laughed and giggled when they saw me, though I couldn’t pinpoint what they are laughing at. The boys temporarily interrupted their competitive game of marbles in the dirt to greet me and the girls crowded around for photos. Some spoke to me in limited English and others just smiled and held my hand. The kids at this living center did not seem externally affected by the harsh new reality that the tsunami threw at them or at their new living situation, though I knew that inwardly and privately, they were suffering.

In order to address post-traumatic stress disorder in crisis-affected children and adults, IRD is implementing a psychosocial program through a local organization, Psikodista Foundation, in Kandang and three other temporary living centers throughout Banda Aceh. With a grant and a partnership from IRD, Psikodista is helping people cope after trauma. The Psikodista Foundation has more than a decade of experience in trauma counseling with survivors of the ongoing political conflict in Aceh and is well established and trusted in many communities. This program includes organizing specific activities

once a week in each targeted temporary camp. Examples of counseling methods that Psikodista employs in the camps include drawing and dancing exercises with children, cooking projects with women and relaxation activities with men.

The smiles I have seen on children's faces throughout the most devastated parts of Aceh is reassuring and is, one hopes, an indication that Aceh will survive the tsunami's devastation and the people, economy and infrastructure will prosper once again.