Developing a Movement? Aid-Based Mediated Diffusion as a Strategy to Promote Labour Activism in post-Tsunami Aceh

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Abstract

In this article we examine the extent to which mediated diffusion through trade union development aid succeeded in helping to establish a labour movement in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami. The international labour movement organisations involved in the post-tsunami reconstruction effort in Aceh focused their efforts primarily on humanitarian aid, physical infrastructure and vocational education. However, they also supported trade union-building programs, which succeeded in strengthening individual trade unions and instilling a sense of shared identity amongst Acehnese labour activists but ultimately failed to ensure the sustainability of the movement. We argue that while the Aceh case highlights the importance of local context to the outcomes of such interventions, the constraints imposed on international labour donors and their local counterparts by their focus on reconstruction and the time pressures of the post-tsunami aid cycle raise questions about the efficacy of the aid model as a means of promoting the growth of a social movement.

Keywords: post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, development, social movements, labour movement, trade unions

They have helped develop us — helped us increase solidarity. Before we had never celebrated May Day. When we all met that day we could really feel it, the atmosphere was unbelievable. Before that we didn’t even know when Labour Day was (Rahmad, Iskandar Muda Fertiliser Factory Union).

In 2007 the labour movement in Indonesia’s westernmost province, Aceh, formally celebrated May Day for the first time. The protest was held in the capital, Banda Aceh, and drew a crowd of two to three hundred people. It was initiated by the Trade Union Care Centre, an internationally-funded local labour NGO, in conjunction with a new local political party called the Acehnese People’s Party and a number of Aceh-based trade unions. Student groups and several other local NGOs were also involved. Acehnese labour activists saw the May Day protest as a unifying event. It was the first time that the members of different unions had participated in a joint public action, with the added benefit of making the movement visible to the broader community. Labour activists also regarded the protest as
being symbolic of the contribution made by the international labour movement organisations to the development of a labour movement in Aceh.

When international labour donors arrived in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, it was certainly not the first time they had injected resources in an attempt to kick-start, revive or sustain a local trade union movement. A form of ‘mediated diffusion’, this strategy has been used by the international labour movement since the beginning of the twentieth century, most recently in post-communist Eastern Europe and the semi- and post-authoritarian states of the developing world.\(^1\) The Aceh case was nevertheless unique because of the intensity and restricted timeframe of the intervention, and because labour donors’ trade union building objectives were necessarily subordinate to the humanitarian and development work they had taken on as part of the reconstruction effort. As a result, unlike other such interventions, in Aceh the labour movement was being cultivated by organisations juggling multiple, often unfamiliar and, at times, conflicting responsibilities.

The key question that we pose in this paper concerns the extent to which a social movement — in this case, the labour movement — can be triggered by outsiders through the mechanism of aid. Using data collected through intensive qualitative fieldwork, we address this question by drawing on the critical literature on the relationship between aid and social movements to assess the effectiveness of this form of mediated diffusion.\(^2\) We argue that although the intervention indeed helped to establish a nascent labour movement, the returns on the material and non-material resources invested in the movement in Aceh were relatively low because of the pressures placed on trade union initiatives by their humanitarian focus and the limited timeframe of the post-tsunami aid cycle.

**Mediated diffusion through aid**

The labour movement is a social movement which brings together workers and their supporters in the quest for greater recognition of the contribution that waged workers make to their workplaces and to society. It differs from ‘newer’ social movements because of its long history, its unashamed focus on the particularistic interests of workers and its relatively high level of institutionalisation at the local, national and supranational levels.\(^3\) Nevertheless, like all social movements, local labour movements emerge from specific combinations of social and political circumstances, where dissatisfaction with the status quo — when supported by...

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\(^1\) The term ‘mediated diffusion’ is drawn from Tarrow (2005).

\(^2\) The main phase of fieldwork in Aceh was conducted in 2008 with funding from a University of Sydney Research Development Grant, awarded to Michele Ford. At this time, data was collected over a period of five weeks from in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of four international initiatives and 16 different unions in Aceh, as well as with other stakeholders. We also had the opportunity to observe donor meetings, union training sessions and other union events. Interviews with the regional and country directors of the international organisations were conducted in 2009 and early 2010. Follow-up interviews with local stakeholders were conducted in Aceh in May 2010. Unless otherwise indicated data presented in this article is drawn from interviews collected during those periods of fieldwork.

\(^3\) There is a vast literature on new social movements, and the ways in which they differ from ‘old’ social movements. For an early contribution, see Melucci (1980).
the material and non-material resources required to stimulate autonomous groups and individuals to organise and collaborate — gives rise to sustained collective action.

There is a long-running discussion about the role non-worker intellectuals play in sustaining a labour movement, but this debate does little to illuminate the mechanics of aid-based interventions. Meanwhile, scholars concerned with other social movements have rarely explicitly considered the catalytic role of outsiders, focusing instead on how and why social movements take form, what shapes their capacity to act and what they achieve. There are some partial exceptions to this generalisation, most notably the work of resource mobilisation theorists such as Zald and McCarthy (1987), who have shown how the agency of particular actors can help shape a social movement, arguing that factors such as the presence of an organiser with access to power and resources acts as a catalyst for collective action (see also Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Other scholars have looked at how movements learn from one another. For example, McAdam (1995: 237) differentiates between ‘initiator’ and ‘spin-off’ movements in an attempt to explain the interconnectedness of social movements, arguing that ‘spin-off’ movements are connected to ‘initiator movements’ primarily through a process of emulation rather than through direct intervention.

The effects of globalisation on the interaction between international and local social movement actors — and particularly the extent to which global networks expand the scope and reach of social activism by creating mechanisms through which movements can coordinate to effect change at the national level and above — have for some time been a focus for social movement scholars (see, for example, Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Kriesi & Della Porta, 1999). Yet while the ways in which transnational networks share information and develop strategies across borders have been discussed in detail, analyses rarely focus on the possibility of creating a movement through transnational interactions or the ways in which outsiders may influence movement formation. Instead, they emphasise the conditions under which a movement might emerge, for example where there is limited freedom to make change with regard to a particular issue or concern.

Channels of diffusion

As little is said that speaks to the question of outside influence on social movements, it is necessary to look further for a framework of analysis that can explain the international labour movement’s intervention in Aceh. From the early 1990s, scholars began borrowing from classical diffusion theory, which focused on how innovations such as hybrid corn, prescription drugs or new technologies like the telephone spread from transmitter to adopter communities. These patterns of movement were used to explain the processes through which ideas, practices and resources migrated within and between different social movements (Strang & Soule, 1998).

Not surprisingly, given this foundation, social movement theorists concerned with diffusion initially tended to focus on the transfer of distinct, discernable and ‘modular’ things such as

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4 For an account of these debates and their translation into the Indonesian context, see Ford (2009).
information, material goods, skills and practices within and between social movements (e.g. Tarrow, 1998), a tendency that has been critiqued by scholars such as Chabot and Duyvendak (2002: 706), who argue that rather than transmitting ‘finished products’ diffusion creates ‘works-in-progress’ that change over time and according to context, and that more attention needs to be paid to how local actors take on these new ideas rather than to the ideas themselves. More recent discussions of diffusion have addressed these concerns by focusing on how receiving communities recontextualise ideas and practices so that they become relevant to the local context (e.g. Wong, 2007). Roggeband (2007), for example, makes reference to the ways in which power dynamics between social movement actors in the target community can influence the way new ideas spread, arguing that those who first take on the new idea may develop a sense of ownership over the diffused entity and a sense of entitlement to taking leadership within the movement. As a result of this tendency, they may become less willing to innovate, potentially leading to conflict with later adopters, who have the benefit of seeing how others use the diffused entity and therefore how it may be adapted and improved.

These more recent analyses better account for diversity within social movements and show how ideas change over time under the influence of contextual factors. However, they remain limited in their ability to explain the role outside actors may have in shaping a local movement. A more useful approach emerges from the part of the diffusion literature that focuses on the channels by which new ideas, practices and knowledge can travel. Tarrow (2005) identifies three types of such channels. The first of these consists of relational channels, which rely on direct contact between people who know, trust and see each other as similar. Non-relational channels, the second type, develop when diffusion happens directly between members of a social movement who do not have a relationship or indirectly by way of the media. Finally, what Tarrow calls ‘mediated diffusion’ occurs through a third kind of channel, namely ‘brokers’ who talk about a movement and connect people who might not otherwise have known each other, or promote that movement in places where it does not have a strong presence.

In the case of Aceh, international labour movement ‘brokers’ arrived shortly after the tsunami charged with the task of providing humanitarian aid as part of the largest international response to a natural disaster in history. Close to US$70 million of this aid was channelled through the International Labour Organisation and the international trade union movement. The size of the intervention allowed for multiple modes of engagement at the local scale by a cross-section of international labour movement organisations, while its focus forced them to step outside their traditional roles and engage in the less familiar practices of humanitarian aid and international development (Ford & Dibley, 2011). The subsequent attempt to build up

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5 Tarrow had recognised that cross-border diffusion between social movements does not connect those social movements to each other, leaving considerable space for domestic conditions to influence the formation of the movement.

6 There has been much discussion about the extent to which different channels are necessary for diffusion, but it is recognised that a combination of channels are used. See McAdam and Rucht (1993), also Strang and Meyer (1993).
the local labour movement was constrained by this very particular context, and by the purposes for which the aid they delivered had been earmarked. Nevertheless, these international brokers brought with them not only non-material resources in the form of knowledge and transferrable skills, but also significant material resources with which to begin this task.

**The impact of ‘movement aid’**

The impact of such high levels of ‘movement aid’ is not widely addressed in the diffusion literature, which tends to focus on the conditions under which diffusion occurs rather than on the dynamics of the relationship between the source of diffused ideas and its recipients (McAdam & Rucht, 1993; Strang & Soule, 1998). Nor — since the intervention represented a significant departure from established practices of trade union aid — are there directly comparable cases elsewhere. It is therefore necessary to turn to the sub-section of the development literature that focuses on aid projects targeting civil society organisations in order to address the question of how aid interfaces with social movements more generally (e.g. Austin & Eder, 2007; Ford, 2006; Hrycak, 2007; Hughes, 2007). There are many studies that examine the problems associated with the use of aid to support social movements in the quest to ‘develop’ civil society. These studies place a particular emphasis on the mismatch between the stated goals of international donor organisations and the means through which they seek to achieve those goals, particularly as they relate to funding structures and models of partnership.

The primary stated goal of these types of aid programs has been to facilitate democratisation, as a strong civil society is considered an important part of a democratic polity because of its perceived ability to ‘contain’ the state; facilitate the participation of the poor and marginalised in civic life; and promote pluralism (e.g. Allen, 1997; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Although the particular methods by which the international donor community have sought to promote activism have changed over the last several decades, the fundamental purpose of ‘exporting democracy’ has remained the same (Sampson, 2003). In Cambodia, for instance, the international community engaged with the human rights and labour movements in the early 1990s as part of its strategy of ‘peacebuilding via international democracy promotion’ (Hughes, 2007). Organisations that target other types of civil society groups also emphasise the promotion of democratic structures as one of their key goals. In the case of the Ukraine, for example, Hrycak (2007: 80) has argued that ‘foreign donors agreed that women’s organisations were key components of civil society and were crucial to democratisation’.

Civil society is seen by donors as being driven and shaped by a particular value system that prioritises issues of social justice and equality above self-interest, and international development organisations explicitly seek to support or create local groups that share these qualities. Research has shown, however, that the ways in which international development organisations implement their programs tend to encourage a different set of values in their partner organisations. International support often comes in the form of funding that is dispensed for short-term projects through complex application processes, with strict criteria
about how it can be spent. The timeframe for project completion can range from a few weeks to a few years, which allows insufficient time to achieve the kind of change that these projects aim to promote. For example, European Union-funded projects in Bosnia emphasised ‘sustainability’ but only provided funding for local NGOs to work on any one project for two years, a strategy which Fagan notes ‘does little to develop the long-term presence of specialist NGOs working in certain fields’ (Fagan, 2006: 125). In addition, as many scholars have noted, the skills developed as part of the ‘professionalisation’ of civil society pertain more to the writing of grant applications and the development of financial and reporting systems than to the promotion of deep political and social change (e.g. Brunnstrom, 2003; Fagan, 2006; Hemment, 2004; Hughes, 2009).

In some contexts, NGOs appear to have been able to adapt to different donor requirements without letting them dominate their activities (Austin & Eder, 2007). However, most observers are critical of such practices, which they claim stimulate competition between civil society organisations, create hierarchies between NGOs that have bureaucratic skills and those that lack them, and take time away from the substantive project work (Fagan, 2006; Henderson, 2002). This pattern of upward accountability serves to create a civil society that reflects international donors’ ideas about what civil society should be, rather than local concepts of community engagement. According to Hrycak, the Ukrainian feminist organisations that receive international support are those that share similar values and practices to the organisations providing the funding, while those embedded at the grassroots level are dismissed as being ‘traditional’, and therefore an obstacle to the goals of women’s empowerment (Hrycak, 2007). Similarly, Hemment (2004) describes how Russian civil society organisations that have different ideas about what they want the Russian ‘third sector’ to look like are side-lined by donors. In Cambodia, the tendency for international donors to engage primarily with local organisations that fit their own model resulted in grassroots collective action groups being bypassed for international support and subsequently repressed by the Cambodian government (Hughes, 2009).

The way in which these international organisations interface with the local economy also affects the motivations of the individuals who work for them, particularly where positions with internationally-funded NGOs are very highly paid relative to comparable positions in other sectors. In Timor Leste, for example, twenty per cent of paid jobs available in 2004 were with NGOs. As Hughes (2009) has argued, the gross imbalance between NGO roles and other professional occupations has created a situation where ‘political action, if it accords with the interests of powerful external actors, becomes a way of supporting oneself in an environment where the economy offers limited opportunities’. This ‘career activism’ affects the characteristics of local civil society by creating an incentive to keep working, even after an individual’s ideological motivation for engagement has dissipated (Sampson, 2003). It also potentially influences the broader process of democratisation by drawing highly skilled people away from other sectors that are important for democratic consolidation, for example the public service or political parties (Belloni, 2008). As (theoretically) mass-based organisations, trade unions are structurally different from the NGOs that dominate the
internationally-funded ‘civil society’ sector. However, in the labour sphere, as elsewhere, the temptations of material reward and the need to ensure continuity drive many who work for local organisations to ensure that they remain in the good favour of their international counterparts to the extent that they prioritise their links with their international counterparts over the needs and interests of the local communities that they claim to represent (Ford, 2006).

The tendency to prioritise good relations with donors is nowhere clearer than where organisations in receipt of international development choose — or are forced — to shift the focus of their programs in response to the changing priorities of international donors. Competition for international resources can also lead to a situation in which organisations choose not to work together, or even to share information, even when it might be of benefit to all concerned. In the Ukraine, where USAID provided small grants for local organisations to work on women’s issues under a scheme that provided no incentive to collaborate, the pool of funding was stretched across an increasing number of autonomous organisations, many of them set up in response to the availability of the funding (Hrycak, 2007). In Timor Leste, a similar situation occurred after independence, with close to a hundred new organisations developing within a period of eight months, most of which lacked both management skills and direct connections to local communities (Patrick, 2001).

The structures of international development organisations’ relationship with their local counterparts can also have a detrimental effect on the willingness of local social movement actors to take strong or controversial political stances, or to prioritise political activism over other activities. Research suggests that heavy reliance on donors means that partner organisations tend to be less radical in their approach (Sampson, 2003). In Cambodia, the international community’s concern about its relationship with the government meant that they encouraged human rights organisations to focus on activities such as training rather than on advocacy or public protest, which were considered too volatile (Hughes, 2007). In Timor Leste, an NGO that had received a grant from the Australian Government’s aid agency, AusAID, had it revoked after signing a petition calling for the Australian Government to respect Timor Leste’s sovereignty in their negotiations about a maritime boundary between the two countries. Even where not immediately apparent, the influence exerted by international donors on the behaviour of local civil society organisations can and does ultimately change the form and purpose of the social movements of which they are part.

Measuring change

A difficult but central question arising from this discussion is how can the success (or otherwise) of attempts by brokers to build a social movement be measured? There are important reasons for assessing the success or failure of a social movement’s activity and outcomes, not least for their members. It is also necessary in situations where donors are

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7 For an extended discussion of these differences, see Ford (2009).
8 For more information on this case, see http://www.laohamutuk.org/reports/AusAID/FTM chronology.html (accessed 29 July 2011).
involved, given the growing emphasis on accountability in the aid industry. However, these requirements can be problematic: aid practitioners who work closely with social movements have complained about ‘false conclusions’ being drawn from misinterpretation of information gathered with measurement tools that assume that change happens in a stable and consistent environment and do not account for the complexity of factors that lead to change (Batliwala, 2006).

Scholars of international aid organisations and systems, and to a lesser extent of social movements, have discussed aspects of the measurement of social movement outcomes. However, neither literature provides a systematic approach to assessing the development of newly emerged movements. In the literature on aid, an extensive body of research has developed around the question of donor evaluation in response to the criticism that improved accountability of aid organisations and projects does not always result in better outcomes for the aid project target groups (e.g. Cracknell, 2000; Crawford & Bryce, 2003; McDonald, 1999). One of the key difficulties identified by this literature is the need to strike a balance between holding those who spend project money accountable and collecting data to improve the program being evaluated (Cracknell, 1996; Crawford et al., 2004). A related problem concerns the tendency to sideline local stakeholders by not providing sufficient feedback, not involving them in the process and, when they are involved, not taking into consideration local understandings of research and assessment (Bamberger, 1991; Cracknell, 2000). These debates flag some of the risks involved in attempting to measure qualitative change in the Acehnese labour movement. First, they indicate that it is necessary to move beyond the criteria that the international labour movement organisations set for themselves, since use of these criteria would effectively only measure how accountable the international organisations were to their own constituents. Second, the literature emphasises the importance of context in measuring the development of a movement, in particular with regard to the need to accommodate local understandings of progress. These considerations suggest that any attempt to measure the development of the labour movement in Aceh needs to incorporate an understanding of what Acehnese activists themselves felt constituted advancement.

The strands of the social movement literature that address the question of evaluation also emphasise the importance of a deep and considered understanding of the local context. Giugni (1998), for example, argues that this is necessary because research about social movements tends to focus on those movements’ political and policy outcomes rather than on the broader social effects they may have. Other scholars have focused on how the constituents of the social movements themselves evaluate their efforts (e.g. Brown, 2005). However, such evaluations imply that the movement concerned is well enough established to be actively engaged in making change and thus provide little guidance on how to evaluate change in nascent or newly-established movements. As insufficient time has passed since the intervention in Aceh began for it to be possible to get a sense of its broader social impact — let alone to measure its success with regard to political and policy outcomes — what is required is an approach that allows us to evaluate its effect on the local movement itself.
In the absence of a more viable alternative, we have adopted what could be described as a ‘definitional’ approach to measuring the development of the local labour movement in Aceh. Such an approach involves comparing the characteristics of the Acehnese labour movement against movement attributes identified in the work of key social movement scholars. As Tilly (1978: 9) notes, social movements are forms of collective action, which bring together ‘a group of people identified by their attachment to some particular set of beliefs’. Social movements engage in what Tarrow defines as contentious action, namely ‘when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents’ (1998: 2). A further fundamental characteristic is temporal continuity, since social movements can be differentiated from other forms of contentious action, such as riots, because they are sustained over time (Tarrow, 1998). It is against these broad criteria that we reflect on the extent to which Acehnese labour activists believe that the intervention succeeded in developing a local labour movement.

Assessing mediated diffusion in Aceh

The period immediately after the 2004 tsunami was one of immense change for the province of Aceh. After close to two years under martial law, declared in 2002 in response to the long-running conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military, the province was suddenly open to hundreds of international and national organisations involved in physical reconstruction and supporting communities affected by the tsunami. Within six months of the tsunami a peace agreement was signed by the Free Aceh Movement and the Government of Indonesia, heralding the end of thirty years of armed conflict.\(^9\) Greater freedom and security in the province, along with a strong international presence, brought new opportunities for the Acehnese labour movement.

The dramatic transformation of the labour movement in other parts of Indonesia, first in the 1990s and then after the fall of Suharto in 1998, had little effect in Aceh. Acehnese unions had long been isolated from their national and international counterparts and, for much of their history, were largely inactive. Plant-level unions existed within government-owned oil and gas plants, but were isolated from one another and limited in their capacity to recruit members, not least because of security concerns associated with gathering in public places. In addition to the fact that the economic profile of the province made it an unlikely site for targeted union renewal, the conflict made it virtually impossible for national or international labour organisations to engage.

It was this effectively moribund local labour movement that attracted the attention of a number of international labour movement organisations. Among this number were the International Labour Organisation (ILO); a consortium of Global Union Federations led by Education International acting in collaboration with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); a consortium involving the American Center for Labour Solidarity (Solidarity Center), the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Asia-Pacific Office of Union Network International (UNI-APRO); and the Australian Solidarity Support

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\(^9\) For a comprehensive analysis of the conflict, see Aspinall (2009).
Organisation, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA. Some of these organisations had been active elsewhere in Indonesia for decades, and all had been involved there since democratisation began in 1998. Yet while this previous experience clearly informed their approaches in Aceh, relatively little of it proved to be transferrable.10

Having originally responded to the humanitarian disaster, these organisations sought to take advantage of the considerable scope available for disseminating ideas about labour activism and trade unionism, acting as brokers for the establishment of a local labour movement. Importantly, circumstances meant that the strategies they adopted were highly contingent upon the opportunities and challenges presented by the post-tsunami, post-conflict context of Aceh — not least the fact that most of the money they brought with them was earmarked for the rebuilding of physical infrastructure and activities such as livelihoods training. The main focus of the trade union-building component of their programs was training, which was primarily concerned with the basic principles of trade unionism, though it also covered technical skills associated with trade union functions such as worker organising, collective bargaining and advocacy. Through these activities, international organisations not only sought to transfer knowledge, information and strategies, but also to create a sense of collective identity among working Acehnese.

Identity formation and contentious action

Classic accounts of the emergence of labour movements emphasise the slow, iterative processes of class-based identity formation that occur when waged workers, alienated from their labour power, begin to realise that they are not alone in their suffering, and that if they act collectively, they can change their fate.11 In addition to being an expression of solidarity in the face of authoritarianism or unfettered capitalism — both of which contain or stifle contentious action — trade union aid has at times sought to redress the apparent failure of these processes of identity formation in some developing country contexts.12 With its long history of conflict and its diffuse economic base, Aceh presented a clear case for both.

As the account with which we began demonstrates, the intervention succeeded in sparking in participants an awareness of their identity as workers. As one member of the Independent Acehnese Workers Union explained, she learnt that ‘anyone who is earning a salary is a worker’, an insight that now underpins her awareness-raising work with the community. According to other union leaders, the sense of belonging to a global labour movement gave their members more confidence to negotiate with their employers. To some extent this confidence extended to the broader policy arena, an arena into which Acehnese trade unions had never before ventured. For example, having acquired basic legal knowledge from their training, local unionists from around Aceh decided to draft their own version of the proposed

10 For details of the funding arrangements and specific activities associated with these initiatives, see Ford and Dibley (2011).
11 For a discussion of these issues in the Indonesian context, see Hadiz (1997) and Warouw (2008).
12 Another important driver of trade union aid has of course been state ideology. State-driven ‘solidarity’ was particularly evident in the early decades of the twentieth century and then again during the Cold War.
provincial labour law. With the support of TUCC and APHEDA, a working group met regularly from January 2007 until early 2009 to compose a draft. By helping local unions to work collaboratively on this project, the international trade union organisations not only helped to generate a sense of collective identity amongst Acehnese trade unionists, but also demonstrated to them that they were able to fruitfully cooperate on such projects.

The literature indicates that attempts to create a sense of shared identity and common purpose can be undermined when donors distribute large sums of money in the form of salaries, honoraria or in-kind resources, creating competition or diverting valuable human resources from other parts of civil society. Competition between the recipients of trade union aid was minimal in Aceh, primarily because the vast bulk of resources were not given directly to members of the movement to manage, but rather spent on activities that involved members of multiple trade unions. Moreover, these activities did not distract established unions from their work, but rather aimed to enhance trade unionists’ ability to support their members. Nor did the intervention open up avenues for career activism: although a small number of Acehnese were involved in the four programs, most staff came from elsewhere — a point of contention for some local trade unionists — and in any case the positions created were temporary.

However, a different kind of competition emerged as a result of the respective ideological orientations of the trade union donors. Most notably, the Australian Solidarity Support Organisation, APHEDA, recruited activists from a left-leaning labour NGO in Bandung which it had supported for some years. These activists’ choice of strategy in Aceh was strongly influenced by their long experience of oppositional labour politics during the 1990s in Indonesia, when they were instrumental in developing a labour movement in a context where independent trade unionism was still illegal. Unlike the other programs, which focused primarily on attempting to reinvigorate established enterprise unions, APHEDA invested much of its energy in the establishment of new unions not tied to a particular workplace. Part of the justification for this strategy was APHEDA trainers’ belief that established enterprise unions were necessarily ‘yellow’ unions incapable of breaking with their conservative past. The extent to which this perception influenced their approach was reflected in the fact that graduates of their training programs were quick to distinguish between their own, consciously more radical, ‘red’ unions and those ‘yellow’ unions. This discourse created some sense of division among local trade unionists, although in practice the approaches of these ‘red’ unionists were little different from that of the ‘yellow’ unionists they so readily criticised.

Financial dependence and temporal continuity

The influence of outside funding was demonstrated most clearly in the formation and operation of new trade unions in previously non-unionised geographical areas or sectors that

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13 One of the provisions of the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding was that the provincial government in Aceh could create legislation about any issue excluding foreign affairs, external defence, national security, monetary and fiscal matters, justice and freedom of religion.

14 APHEDA eventually ceased its support for this process because of its links to the implementation of syariah (Islamic law), an example of how relations with donors can be contingent on operating within the donors’ value system.
were not tied to individual workplaces. For example, when the Aceh Workers Union was established in mid-2007 by the former Acehnese representative of the Confederation of All-Indonesia Prosperity Labour Unions, many suggested that the split was motivated by the prospect of financial support — an observation borne out by the fact that the new union quickly stagnated when funding was not forthcoming. Other trade unions set up during the intervention were the Aceh Health Workers Union, formed by members of the Indonesian National Nurses Union who participated in APHEDA training, and the Independent Aceh Workers Union, formed by members of pre-existing unions from several sectors following their participation in a program run by TUCC, the local labour NGO established by the Solidarity Center, FES and UNI-APRO.

While more resilient than the Aceh Workers Union, the Independent Aceh Workers Union also struggled to maintain its momentum in the absence of targeted financial support. By contrast, the Aceh Health Workers Union received substantial funding from the Australian Nurses Federation, which enabled officials to be directly involved in the recruitment and training of facilitators in order to provide basic trade unionism training for nurses around the province. Union leaders’ commitment wavered, however, when donors eventually demanded that the union start to collect dues or risk not being given any further support. To that point, the union had managed to avoid collecting dues — something organisers felt put unnecessary strain on the marginal workers they had organised — because there had been sufficient donor money available to run their training activities and maintain a secretariat.

Part of the problem for the Aceh Health Workers Union was that it had focused more on health workers who had the time to attend training — the key activity for which funding was earmarked — rather than fulltime, permanent hospital employees. This strategy speaks to some of the difficulties inherent in aid-based mediated diffusion. First, it demonstrates the extent to which recipient organisations are driven by donor agendas, both in terms of the kinds of activities undertaken but also in terms of the need for expedience in order to ensure that program targets are met. Fulltime hospital nurses are part of the labour aristocracy in a context where regular employment is not the norm. Although they face serious problems in the workplace, particularly with regard to occupational health and safety, they consider themselves to be relatively well off. Although the Aceh Health Workers Union initially attempted to organise this constituency, when this proved to be difficult, they turned their attention to marginal health workers only too aware of their precarious status and thus open to the promises of an internationally-backed organisation, which paid them to attend training sessions and demanded no dues. Second, it speaks to the demand for upward accountability, an issue which represents a far more fundamental problem for trade unions, which claim to be democratic institutions accountable to a mass membership, than for director-led NGOs (cf. Ford, 2006). Third, it demonstrates the potential for mismatch between the stated goals of donor organisations and the means through which they seek to achieve those goals.

The fact that funding from the Australian Nurses Federation was tied to an aid cycle of just a few years forced both APHEDA, as the implementing agency, and the Aceh Health Workers

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15 For a discussion of those agendas, see Ford and Dibley (2011).
Union to prioritise project completion over long-term sustainability and effectiveness. This decision came at a great cost in terms of organisational focus, as it proved difficult to move marginal workers beyond their initial concerns about security of employment. Moreover, when faced with donor demands that due collection be initiated as a sustainability measure, officials found it difficult to do so because of their members’ parlous financial situation and geographic dispersion. The union would have had a far greater chance of developing a sustainable dues base and achieving visible successes in workplace campaigns if it had been in a position to persevere with the time-consuming work of convincing fulltime hospital employees of the benefits of unionism — a strategy that would have strengthened the union and allowed it to reach out to precarious workers from a much firmer base. As it stands, there appears to be little hope for its survival once external financial support ends.

The question of sustainability, as it pertains to the capacity of a trade union to maintain its basic organisational existence, is not as relevant to existing and new plant-level unions, which either have or can bargain for access to a check-off system through dues deducted directly by the company on behalf of the union. Rather, the issue here is sustainability in the sense of maintaining activities that promote social change, be it in the workplace or in society more broadly. Some existing enterprise unions were engaged in collective bargaining and other workplace-focused activities before the tsunami; however, many were not. Both groups were targets for training activities focused on technical skills such as negotiating as well as broader programs dealing with issues like labour law.

For some, like the plant union at the Andalas Cement Factory, a ‘one size fits all’ approach, coupled with replication of content due to a lack of coordination between the programs and the inexperience of some trainers, meant there was little to gain from the training programs. However, for others, these opportunities were invaluable and led to a remarkable transformation of their organisations. For instance, a plant union in existence since 1991 in the private plantation company, PT Perkebunan Lembah Bakti, had been little more than a shell, even though it had experienced some change in the period between the end of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 and the imposition of martial law in Aceh. Paralegal training provided by TUCC gave officials from the union a far better understanding of their labour rights, including the right to bargain beyond the ‘normative’ legal requirements. Training in negotiation then raised their bargaining skills to a level where they have secured a collective labour agreement far in excess of the minimum legal standards normally reflected in such agreements, including pension rights for low-level employees and a month’s long service leave after every six years of employment. They have also used their new negotiating skills outside the collective bargaining process, for example to avert the planned sacking of a worker for a minor misdemeanour. Further training on workplace democracy equipped them to hold free and fair elections for union officials and to effect smooth leadership transitions. Although TUCC continues to provide advice and encouragement, the union does not rely on it to maintain these changes in trade union culture.

Examples such as that of PT Perkebunan Lembah Bakti suggest that at least some Acehnese trade unions have experienced real change as a result of the intervention. However, a labour
movement is a broad oppositional movement concerned with the promotion of the interests of workers, not simply the sum of individual trade unions (Ford 2009). It is therefore necessary also to consider the impact of the intervention on labour’s presence in the public sphere. The literature suggests that aid-driven programs can have a detrimental effect on the ability of local social movements to take strong or controversial political stances, or to prioritise political activism over other activities. This was definitely not the case in Aceh. Indeed, local workers exposed to APHEDA trainers were likely, if anything, to become more radical, not more conservative, in their political positions. More generally, trade union donors (including APHEDA) became frustrated when the 2009 election diverted the attention of many unionists almost entirely from their trade union work. Yet even the most conservative of the programs encouraged unionists to take more interest in policy debates that concerned labour. While it is difficult to predict if policy advocacy or broader political engagement will continue once the remaining program winds up in 2014, the potential impact of these experiences on individuals — not only as labour activists but as citizens — has made an important contribution to the promotion of democracy in Aceh.

Conclusion

Our definitional approach to measuring how the Acehnese labour movement developed in response to the four international initiatives emphasises three key features of a social movement: the emergence of a collective identity, participation in contentious action and temporal continuity. In the absence of a more sophisticated model for assessing newly-formed social movements, it is difficult to quantify the depth of change wrought by the intervention. However, it is obvious from our qualitative data that the aid-mediated diffusion of skills and ideas about unionism has had a significant and positive impact, although Acehnese labour activists have mixed views concerning its precise value. Those that received direct funding or whose organisations were able to make effective use of the methods taught at the training sessions described it as highly successful. Members of other trade unions, particularly those that were relatively well established prior to the intervention or for whom the training was not entirely relevant, felt that the intervention was less significant. Regardless of these differences, almost all felt that the international intervention created a sense of being part of a movement. However, it remains to be seen what the movement can achieve — and indeed whether it can sustain itself — beyond 2014.

In terms of replicability, trade union donors have indicated that the Aceh model is unlikely to be used in other international settings. International labour organisations were pushed to the edge of their comfort zone through their work in Aceh, and have made it clear that they would not voluntarily engage elsewhere in such a way. This case nevertheless raises two important sets of broader questions about aid and diffusion. The first of these concerns the impact of financially-driven mediated diffusion on the value systems and agency of local actors. The second concerns the importance of context to diffusion, specifically the extent to which an aid-based model can facilitate the diffusion of ideas and practices in contexts that have been relatively isolated for an extended period of time. The sub-text to both of these
questions concerns the ways in which the temporal rhythms of the aid cycle influence the outcomes of this approach to bringing a social movement to life.

In many ways, international labour organisations’ use of the aid paradigm in this context has had fewer drawbacks than have been observed where aid has been used by northern governments to develop civil society in an attempt to promote democracy. Themselves part of the global labour movement, trade union donors shared the values and goals of their local partners to an extent seldom, if ever, found in examples of government-funded attempts to develop civil society through aid. Moreover, the fact that the intervention involved very little direct transfer of money to the local trade unions deflected some of the problems of dependence, competition and misplaced motivation seen in other contexts, and in many of the other post-tsunami projects in Aceh. In fact, the international labour organisations’ practice of channelling funding to collective activities such as training was one of the key catalysts for the development of a strong sense of shared identity among the members of the labour movement.

Significant challenges emerged, however, over the course of the intervention as a result of its timeframe and post-disaster context, forcing labour donors and their local partners to prioritise expedience in ways that promise to have a lasting effect on the form and viability of the movement. As in other settings, international labour donors were forced to comply with the rhythms of the aid cycle, which seldom correspond to the cadence of a newly-formed social movement. They faced additional constraints because their trade union development work was necessarily subordinate to the demands of reconstruction. As a result, they had far less time and flexibility than when working with local labour movements in other contexts, a fact that significantly influenced the decisions and trajectory of some of their local partners. The potential impact of these constraints on the long-term prospects of the Acehnese labour movement thus confirms that, in order to be a viable strategy for developing and sustaining a social movement, aid-mediated diffusion is best implemented by brokers who can maintain a long term relationship with local actors.

**Bibliography**


