Experiments in Cross-Scalar Labour Organizing: Reflections on Trade Union-Building Work in Aceh after the 2004 Tsunami

Michele Ford & Thushara Dibley

Abstract

As part of the post-tsunami reconstruction effort Aceh, international labour movement organizations “jumped scale” in an attempt to revitalize a moribund local labour movement. This article provides a close analysis of the four internationally sponsored trade union-building projects undertaken as part of that process. This unique intervention sheds light on the crucial role of local context and the extent to which the principles of international solidarity and the pragmatics of trade union diplomacy are mediated through money, institutions, individuals and day-to-day activities. The Aceh case underscores the importance of contingency and the agency of individuals in shaping an international intervention of this kind. In doing so it demonstrates how circuits of labour activism can be affected by constraints and opportunities unrelated to trade union politics or the relations of production.

Keywords: international labour movement, cross-scaler organizing, trade unions, post-tsunami Aceh

On the morning of Sunday 26 December 2004 an earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale struck the middle of the Indian Ocean. Aceh, the westernmost province of Indonesia, was one of eight locations to be affected by the quake and the subsequent tsunami. In the massive reconstruction effort that followed, the conflict-ridden province was opened to wholesale outside intervention for the first time in decades. Among the international organizations that came to work in the province were the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), a number of Global Union Federations and several trade union Solidarity Support Organizations. Alongside their humanitarian programs, these organizations invested considerable time and resources in an attempt to revitalize Aceh's existing trade unions and to encourage new vehicles for labour activism in the province.

Proponents of “new labour internationalism” advocate a shift from the diplomatic interests of national union officials towards a model based on the concerns of grassroots unionists and collaboration with different social movements (cf Waterman 2001). None of the programmes within the Aceh intervention could be said to reflect such a shift. An aid-based model
continues to dominate trade union development work, reliant on funds from wealthy affiliates and Solidarity Support Organizations and therefore to a large extent reflecting their priorities rather than a multi-directional form of solidarity driven from the grassroots (cf Castree 2000). The ICFTU and its successor, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), are confederations of national trade union centres focused primarily on protecting the interests of their own members. The Global Union Federations (as the International Trade Secretariats are now known), too, are controlled by trade unions which “think and act in national terms” (Gallin 2002:238). Meanwhile, although the direct influence of home governments on the Solidarity Support Organizations that support much of the work of the Global Union Federations appeared to have been largely broken with the end of the Cold War (see Wills 1998:116–117), with the Paris Accord states again began to intervene in trade union projects.

At the same time, grassroots solidarity played a more direct role in Aceh than in international trade union work as a whole, as donations from individual trade unionists provided a significant part of the funding for the intervention. In this case, however, solidarity emerged from trade unionists’ responses to a humanitarian disaster rather than from a sense of shared struggle. The fact that trade unions were in Aceh to “help” rather than to fight for a common cause was significant because it shaped the motivations and form of the intervention, pushing international players to take on projects outside the trade union domain. This—along with the decision made by so many international trade union movement organizations to intervene directly at the local scale—made the situation there quite different from other attempts at cross-scaler organizing.

In contrast to the focus of much of the labour geography literature on a single union, a single global union federation or a single dispute, the Aceh case allows us to compare four different union-building projects in the same time and place. This systematic and detailed analysis reveals how cross-scalar engagement is ultimately given form through interactions involving institutions, individuals, activities and money, and allows us to examine the cumulative implications of those interactions in a way that is not always possible. Generally, international labour movement organizations work with national-level trade union actors. However, while some national actors were involved, the international labour movement’s intervention in Aceh took place quite independently of events in Jakarta. In other words, the extent of the disaster and the particular conditions in post-tsunami Aceh presented a unique opportunity to operate directly at the local scale rather than working through national actors to effect change locally. It is this phenomenon to which we refer when we use the term “cross-scalar organizing”. What happened in Aceh was not a process of “scaling up” in order to deal with the challenges of globalization or the formation of regional blocs (see, for example, Aguiar and Ryan 2009; Herod 2003; Sadler 2000; Wills 2002). Nor was it a “multiscalar” approach, in which campaigning occurs simultaneously at several scales (see, for example, Castree 2000; Munck 2008). Rather, the Aceh case represented a process of “jumping scales” (Smith 1984)—down rather than up—in a way that subverted the hierarchical nesting of organizational levels within the labour movement through a massive direct international engagement at the sub-national scale.
This article maps out the processes through which international cross-scalar organizing was given form in post-tsunami Aceh and analyses the challenges faced as a result of choosing to work directly at the local scale. After briefly examining the questions of scale and intent, the article outlines the Acehnese context and the trade union programmes implemented there after the tsunami. It then analyzes the difficulties faced by the international organizations involved. In Aceh, international labour donors had to find ways to negotiate national-level apathy and resistance to their decision to intervene directly in order to work with a virtually non-existent local labour movement. However, many of the obstacles they encountered were a product of contextual factors unrelated to labour movement politics, specifically the primarily humanitarian focus of their programmes and the difficulties of working in a post-conflict, post-disaster context flush with aid money and high expectations of how it should be spent. We argue that donors’ responses to these context-specific challenges both demonstrate how circuits of labour activism can be mediated by factors far removed from labour relations and highlight the importance of contingency and individual agency in shaping a cross-scalar intervention of this nature.

**Questions of scale and intent**

The concept of scale is important to labour geography for several reasons, but particularly because it provides a framework for exploring how labour and capital compete to define what Herod (2001) calls the “landscapes of capitalism”, which in turn enables us to see workers having an interest—and some capacity—to influence the construction of the context in which they engage. More importantly for this case, however, is the way that this fluid conception of scale challenges the traditional hierarchy of the international labour movement. Scholars have warned of a tendency in many studies—including their own—to focus on labour institutions rather than individuals and other kinds of groupings (Tufts and Savage 2009:946; also Lier 2007). Trade unions nevertheless remain a key unit of analysis in many contexts, and in particular when dealing with international campaigns. Examples exist where organic cross-border initiatives have largely bypassed the national and international hierarchies of the labour movement (Castree 2000) or ignored them altogether by creating links with other social forces, such as student movements, or by acting in concert with newer forms of labour movement organization, such as labour NGOs (Cravey 2004; Ford 2009; Silvey 2004).

However, in most cases the hierarchies of the labour movement continue to serve as a conduit for cross-border activism. As a result, outside the field of labour geography, most studies of institutionalized labour continue to equate scale with the different levels (local, national, regional, international) at which trade unions operate, in doing so failing to recognize that scales of activism are reconstituted in ways that cut across these pre-determined levels—be they in the context of the European Union (eg Gough 2004) or in post-tsunami Aceh.

In the absence of any sustained theoretical discussion of attempts to seed trade unionism in developing-country contexts where labour activism has hitherto been absent or moribund, the aspect of the labour geography literature that speaks most clearly to the Aceh case is the literature on union renewal. Particularly useful is Tufts’ description of the process of union renewal as a non-hierarchical “spatial circuit” of “co-dependent local–global campaigns and
strategies” to which different levels of the movement contribute information and resources (Tufts 2007:2387). Importantly, Tufts acknowledges the contradictions in this circuit, which have the capacity to disrupt it, but can also create a productive tension, by providing:

a necessary “check” which can serve a useful purpose for the long-term viability of organizations. When such contradictions disrupt the spatial circuit of union renewal they allow different scales of organization (for example, the local) to disrupt actions by other scales (for example, national union offices) which are deemed unsustainable and prevent the actions of one particular scale of organized labour from acting in a way that may do long-term damage to solidarity (Tufts 2007:2388).

The metaphor of a disruptable circuit suggests that, as Sadler (2000:138) has argued, “the relationship between different terrains of action”—in other words, the relationship between groups acting at the same or at different scales—is just as significant as the question of “which scale becomes decisive for the determination of action”. This is precisely what happened in Aceh, where international trade union donors established a direct local presence rather than channelling their efforts through national trade unions both because of the weakness of many national unions but also because workers had few (if any) links with workers in other parts of the country and, in many cases, little desire to cultivate them as a result of the province's long history of conflict with the central government.6

Equally important, to our mind, is the substance of this particular cross-scalar engagement. As Schmutte (2004:16) argues in his study of Australian unions and the politics of scale, it is necessary to interroga-te what precisely “international activity” means, what its purposes and motivations are, and to what extent those purposes and motivations are structural or contingent. In the case of Aceh, the intervention was driven not by structural considerations but by circumstance. It was not an attempt to address a particular industrial relations “problem”, be it thematic or dispute specific, as is generally the case in examples of bilateral solidarity and in GUF-led multilateral campaigns. Rather, it was an opportunistic response by the international labour movement to the dramatic political shifts that occurred in the wake of the tsunami, a response made possible financially and in terms of movement priorities by a grassroots desire to help the victims of the disaster. Another decisive but contingent force was that of agency. In this case, it is not the agency of individual workers which, as Coe and Jordhus-Lier (forthcoming) remind us, is important to distinguish from the agency of trade unions. Rather, it was the agency of strategically placed individuals within international labour movement organizations who were personally moved by the tragedy and had the capacity to translate their reactions into an organizational response or whose personal links with, and commitment to, the Indonesian labour movement prompted them to try to massage essentially humanitarian programs in order to make room for trade union development work.

The Aceh intervention

Before the tsunami there was little incentive for Indonesia’s relatively weak national trade unions or their international counterparts to strengthen the unions that already had some presence in Aceh or to establish new ones.7 For just over 30 years, the province was the site
of a longstanding separatist conflict between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). While initially the conflict took place in the jungle with few casualties, over time it became more bloody and intruded on the lives of civilians. In 1989 Aceh was declared a Military Operations Zone and remained so for almost 10 years, during which time people’s day-to-day lives were characterized by sporadic yet intense violence, political uncertainty and economic hardship (Aspinall 2009). That status was revoked in August 1998, 3 months after the fall of President Suharto’s New Order regime, but after a short period the violence again increased, prompting attempts by Indonesian leaders to negotiate with GAM (Aspinall and Crouch 2003). The second attempt at dialogue led the Government of Indonesia and GAM to sign a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in December 2002. But by May 2003 the agreement had broken down and the Government of Indonesia declared martial law in Aceh, a ruling that remained in place for the next 3 years. During this particularly repressive period international organizations that had been working in Aceh prior to martial law were asked to leave, international researchers were arrested and many civilians were victim to violent acts committed by both government forces and the separatists. The violence only came to an end after a peace agreement was signed in Helsinki in August 2005, 6 months after the tsunami (Aspinall 2008).

The 26 December tsunami deeply changed the physical, political, economic and social landscape of Aceh, in part due to one of the biggest global outpourings of aid money in the history of international development in the wake of the disaster. A total of $13.5 billion was pledged, the equivalent to $7100 for each person directly affected (Telford and Cosgrave 2006). Of this total, 37% was earmarked for Aceh (World Bank 2005:47–48), where the number of registered international NGOs working on reconstruction and rehabilitation is estimated to have peaked at 180 in June 2005 (Telford and Cosgrave 2006:155). Although a number of national unions raised funds internally to assist victims of the tsunami, most money collected by the labour movement for post-tsunami work came from outside Indonesia. And while some international trade union aid was channelled through national unions, the majority was spent directly in Aceh as part of four humanitarian programmes that sought to assist trade unionists and trade unions (see Table 1).

One of these labour-oriented humanitarian programmes was run by the ILO, which implemented $18 million worth of projects ranging from vocational education to work for cash to road construction (ILO 2005:18; 2007). These initiatives were mostly funded by bilateral and multilateral development agencies, but contributions were also received from trade union donors, including the ICFTU and the United Kingdom’s Trades Union Congress (TUC-UK). With funds donated by TUC-UK, the ILO undertook a small amount of work focused on strengthening existing trade unions and training of trainers with the aim of enabling the three national confederations to deliver their own programmes in Aceh and North Sumatra. A designated staff member was hired whose job was to liaise with trade union representatives and ensure that their interests were reflected in the implementation of the ILO’s overall reconstruction effort and to produce a training manual. A total of 644 union members or potential members attended one of 19 training workshops, each of which lasted 2–3 days and included sessions focused on the roles and functions of trade unions,
international labour standards and technical details regarding the formation and dissolution of trade unions under Indonesian law. The programme manager also sought opportunities through the ILO’s other programmes for unionists to engage with business and local government (ILO 2007).

Table 1. Trade union related projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Main donors</th>
<th>Focus of trade union work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade Union Care Center (TUCC)</td>
<td>Solidarity Center*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* UNI-APRO TU Solidarity of Finland</td>
<td>Training: trade union roles and functions. Other: meetings between union activists, meetings about local labour law, supporting new local union exchange programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Aid Abroad—APHEDA</td>
<td>APHEDA, Volksstilfe Osterreich, TUC-JK*</td>
<td>Training: trade union roles and functions. Other: meetings between union activists, meetings about local labour law, supporting new local union exchange programme.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Major donor for projects that dealt directly with trade unions.

The first of the remaining three programmes, all of which were direct union aid initiatives, involved the establishment of the Trade Union Care Centre (TUCC). Soon after the tsunami the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (known as the Solidarity Center), which has a permanent presence in Indonesia, called a meeting of national trade unions to discuss possible union responses to the tsunami. This meeting was also attended by a representative from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a German Solidarity Support Organization which also has an office in Jakarta. Not long after, a national service sector union called ASPEK Indonesia proposed that an Acehnese-based labour NGO be established to coordinate trade union aid. A memorandum of understanding to that effect was signed between a number of the national unions, along with the Asia-Pacific Office of Union Network International (UNI-APRO), the Global Union Federation to which ASPEK Indonesia is affiliated. However, union enthusiasm for the project waned once the initial humanitarian crisis had passed and it became clear that national centres were unlikely to benefit directly.
from any long-term engagement in Aceh. Just two national unions were still interested in the project by the time the TUCC was established in March 2005, and by the end of 2005 only ASPEK Indonesia was actively involved, forcing donors to take a hands-on role in the running of the TUCC.

Under an agreement between international trade union donors involved in this programme, the Solidarity Center committed $18,666 donated by US unions and their members for the centre’s running costs, an expense for which it is generally difficult to obtain donor support. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung offered to fund trade union training along with set-up costs for an office and a computer training centre as a one-off response to the devastation caused by the tsunami. In the first instance, its contribution was funded by donations specifically for post-tsunami work by the Confederation of German Trade Unions but the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung later directly funded operational costs such as rent and electricity, as well as programmes, in total committing approximately €124,000 over four years. Over the same period, UNIAPRO and its Japanese affiliates provided a total of $315,000 in support for set-up costs, humanitarian projects such as the distribution of basic supplies, providing grants to children and other community development initiatives. In the second year of its operation, TUCC began to facilitate a major new UNIAPRO project for the building of four community centres in different parts of Aceh funded by Trade Union Solidarity of Finland, which committed €200,000 to the project. The centres were to be used by members of the local community for activities including trade union training. As well as providing a meeting place, the centre located at Krueng Sabee, for example, runs a kindergarten, a livelihoods training centre, as well as a community radio and a hostel for up to 60 female students undertaking courses at the centre. As was also the case with the other centres, two small business units were established, namely a car wash and a drinking water processing unit, in an effort to make the centre financially sustainable (UNIAPRO 2008).

Trade union training work undertaken alongside the TUCC’s humanitarian projects primarily took the form of workshops on topics such as leadership and labour rights, which were run in several locations including Lhokseumawe, Langsa, Kuala Simpang and Meulaboh. TUCC also facilitated the formation of the Acehnese Trade Union Association; organized monthly discussions involving unionists, NGO activists and members of the community; coordinated trade union initiatives regarding local laws affecting labour; and organized an exchange scheme under which union leaders from Aceh travelled to Jakarta to meet with national union leaders (TUCC 2008). In 2009, an agreement was reached between Trade Union Solidarity of Finland, UNIAPRO, Building and Woodworkers International, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Union Aid Abroad—Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA) to continue supporting TUCC with a view to increasing its focus on trade union development. In this second phase, work with the community centres continued but was limited to facilitating coordination between the centres and monitoring their activities (UNIAPRO 2009). In addition, TUCC planned to help establish new unions in the hotel, finance, plantation and health sectors, help existing unions strengthen their dues collection systems and capacity for collective bargaining, and create a pool of trade union trainers who had previously participated in the APHEDA training programme.
The second direct trade union scheme was initiated at another meeting held in Jakarta on 16 January 2005, again involving the Solidarity Center, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and many of the same unions, but also representatives of the ICFTU and a number of global unions. Members of the international delegation then visited Medan and Aceh. After the tour, Education International Secretary General, Fred van Leeuwen, decided that Education International could contribute to the rebuilding of schools and the training of teachers in Aceh through its “Education for All by 2015” programme while simultaneously helping to strengthen local branches of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association. Not long afterwards, the ICFTU’s Asia Pacific office and a number of Global Union Federations established an Asia Pacific Tsunami Solidarity Fund Committee in an attempt to coordinate the international labour movement’s response to the tsunami (ITUC-Asia Pacific 2008). Education International was asked to manage the ICFTU programme, which included provisions for trade union training, computer education and scholarship projects to the value of $191,000 (BRR 2009). Some ICFTU funds were also used to provide physical infrastructure for individual unions and to conduct a survey of unions.

Jerome Fernandez, a Malaysian trade unionist, was appointed by Education International’s regional office in Kuala Lumpur and relocated to Aceh for 4 years. Education International renovated the headquarters of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association (paid for in part by the ICFTU), which then served as the headquarters for both programmes. Having secured €38 million in additional funding from a Dutch NGO, Education International built a total of 35 elementary schools, distributed close to 3500 scholarships to tsunami-affected children and trained teachers and school counsellors between June 2005 and June 2009. Upon finding it difficult to source even basic secretarial staff, a computer skills training scheme was added to its programme, funded by the Sun Media Corporation, which donated $31,500 and 40 computers specifically for that purpose. The top floor of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association building was reconstructed, instructors were recruited and free computer training was offered to teachers and members of the general public. Close to 3000 people attended these courses, which ran to June 2009.

Education International’s work with the provincial branches of national unions was less successful. The trade union training component of the ICFTU initiative was shut down soon after it began when trainers realized that some union leaders had sent their relatives or unemployed former unionists to training in order to collect the allowance paid to participants. Meanwhile, having initially planned to work closely with the Aceh branch of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association, staff very quickly decided that the scope for cooperation was very limited, as local union officials appeared primarily interested in procuring contracts for their own financial benefit. After making the decision not to work with the provincial level of the union, Education International attempted to salvage the trade union training component of its own programme by refocusing on running leadership seminars for grassroots members in districts outside the capital. In four of these districts, Education International provided the new leadership teams that emerged from these training courses with basic infrastructure and supported their efforts to register locally, to increase dues to a more sustainable level, and to
deal with cases such as unauthorized deductions from teachers’ salaries and arbitrary transfers.

The last of the trade union initiatives was run by the Australian Solidarity Support Organization, APHEDA, which implemented projects to the value of $781,052 in Aceh. A major donor for APHEDA’s activities was Neighbour in Need, a back-funder for APHEDA’s Austrian sister organization, Volkszählung Österreich, which contributed $445,650 for the construction of a community health centre and a community health programme. APHEDA also received $50,000 from TUC-UK for trade union training and vocational education, $154,402 for vocational education from direct donations from Australian sources and smaller amounts donated by the Canadian Association of Labour Lawyers and Italian unions. APHEDA itself donated $192,665 to Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (an environmental NGO) and to the People’s Crisis Centre for environmental and micro-credit programmes (BRR 2009). It also supported a number of local NGOs working on small-scale agricultural projects.

APHEDA’s primary work involved livelihoods training and other programmes for unemployed union members, their families and communities, many of which focused on women (Butler 2009). However, in January 2006, APHEDA invited the ILO, some of the Global Union Federations and the Solidarity Center to a workshop at which the participants identified three key areas that needed to be addressed in the Acehnese labour movement. The priorities identified in that meeting were to help unions strengthen their recruitment procedures, improve basic knowledge about unionism at the grassroots levels of the organization and to encourage unionism in non-unionized areas (Butler 2009). With these goals in mind, APHEDA used the relatively small portion of its funds designated for trade union training to employ two full-time organizers to work directly with unions and potential unionists, providing courses on basic union principles, as well as targeted training for trade union facilitators and organizers. APHEDA scaled back its activities when its funding cycle came to an end and its Aceh office closed in February 2009 but, as noted above, continued its involvement through the TUCC.

Although there was considerable overlap between their programmes, the labour donors involved in the four initiatives engaged at the local scale in very different ways. At the one extreme, ICFTU affiliates and a number of Solidarity Support Organizations like Trade Union Solidarity of Finland, Volkszählung Österreich, and TUC-UK maintained the distance traditionally associated with trade union aid, channelling their funds through the ILO, the Global Union Federations or other Solidarity Support Organizations. At the other extreme, APHEDA and Education International established their own offices in Banda Aceh, complete with an expatriate presence — and, in APHEDA’s case, by experienced labour NGO activists from Java. Meanwhile, UNI-APRO’s regional secretary played an active monitoring role from Singapore and through its national affiliate, which has close ties to the Singapore office. The three international organizations with a permanent office in Indonesia also engaged in Aceh in different ways. The ILO established a local office coordinated by some of its Jakarta staff. By contrast, the Solidarity Center and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung initially decided to
take a more hands-off approach, supporting national unions in the establishment of a local labour NGO.

A similar degree of variation was evident in their choice of partners. Constrained by its tripartite structures, the ILO primarily engaged with the three national confederations, albeit working with their local representatives as well as with their head offices. Education International, which has a difficult relationship with the Indonesian Teachers’ Association at the national level, sought to work directly with the union’s Aceh branch, and when that failed turned its attention to mobilizing teachers in districts far from the provincial capital. It also dealt with the local branches of several different national unions in its work on behalf of the ICFTU. Meanwhile, the Solidarity Center, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and UNI-APRO had to take a far more direct role in the management of the TUCC (whose work focused on strengthening grassroots unions) than they had sought because most of their intended national-level partners decided not to participate. Finally, APHEDA worked to build capacity in established unions but also encouraged the establishment of independent, Aceh-based unions with no national links. These decisions, along with choices about whether to have an office in Aceh, what type of staff to assign and how involved they would be in the projects, reflected the different “personalities” of the international institutions involved. It is not surprising, then, as we demonstrate below, that the success of the different projects was contingent not only on how international organizations engaged with the local context and with trade unions at the national and local scales, but also on how they negotiated inter-institutional dynamics.

**Challenges of working directly at the local scale**

The complexities of the context in which they were working deeply challenged representatives of the international labour movement organizations most closely involved in the Aceh intervention. The extent of the global response to the disaster meant that they were required to disperse much larger sums of money than usual in a place they knew virtually nothing about. At the same time, they were very much constrained by limited or time-bound budgets and the particular emphasis of different secondary donors. This situation was not unique to Aceh, but there the pattern was complicated by the fact that most donations were earmarked for humanitarian and development work rather than trade union development work. Having to manage humanitarian and development projects alongside trade union building forced the trade union donors to stretch beyond their core focus, effectively taking on the roles of contractors and community workers as well as trade union educators and organizers. APHEDA, which had the most experience at juggling these different tasks, was nevertheless strongly criticized by the trade unions for not focussing exclusively on labour organizing. Education International and the consortium of donors behind the TUCC were even less successful in achieving a balance between their development and trade union work. Like Education International’s schools project, the community centre project dominated TUCC’s activities for several years, putting considerable pressure on staff and limiting opportunities to further develop trade union building activities.
While many of the challenges encountered during the course of these initiatives were a function of trying to introduce a trade union building component into what was essentially a humanitarian/development response to the tsunami, others were very similar to those faced by international trade unions not only in post-Suharto Indonesia more generally, but also in other post-authoritarian contexts, such as post-Communist Eastern Europe (see Croucher 2004; Herod 1998a). The first of these is the question of local knowledge. The Solidarity Center and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung have offices in Indonesia staffed by expatriates and Indonesians with a deep understanding of the Indonesian labour movement and the challenges it faces, while APHEDA has longstanding grassroots programmes in other parts of the country. The ILO has a Jakarta office, and some Global Union Federations, including Education International and UNI-AFRO, had dedicated local field officers stationed in-country. However, Aceh’s lack of exposure to over half a decade of post-Suharto trade union development work as a result of its isolation before the tsunami meant that conditions in the province were very different from those elsewhere in Indonesia. As a consequence, staff from the international organizations needed considerable time to understand the dynamics of the Acehnese labour movement after initiating their programmes.

Second, like all international organizations involved in the reconstruction process in Aceh—and like the sponsors of trade union development programmes elsewhere—trade union donors had to negotiate the power relationships that are inherent in their donor/recipient relationship with local trade unions. As the main source of funding for labour-related activities, they had a strong voice in prioritizing particular activities. At the same time they were more accountable upwards than downwards because of their need to maintain good relations with their own donors. This tension caused occasional but quite serious conflicts between the Acehnese trade unionists and the Aceh-based staff responsible for the international projects. Some of these conflicts centred on the balance between development projects and trade union work, as local unionists felt that all the resources should have been exclusively for trade union building. Others centred on the fact that Acehnese unions wanted more direct control over the available funding, a sentiment exacerbated by the fact that most Indonesian staff employed to implement the projects were not Acehnese.

Third, the Aceh experience confirms that while national unions may act as potential sponsors in such situations, they may also act as gatekeepers. There are many examples of how personal and organizational dynamics at the national level affected the implementation of programmes in Aceh, in some cases because of the relationship between the national level union and the international organization, in others as a result of the internal dynamics of the union. The ILO’s programme was affected by the death of Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions president Rustam Aksam in April 2006, after which support from the central committee for projects in Aceh dramatically decreased. APHEDA experienced difficulties in the second year of its livelihoods project because of the split in the Aceh branch of the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Trade Unions, after which the confederation stopped providing support to the trainers and small business groups (Butler, 2009). TUCC survived a crisis not long after it was established, caused in part because its director was associated with the Secretary General of ASPEK Indonesia, Saepul Tavip, who was defeated in a leadership
spill in mid-2005. It also faced criticisms from local ASPEK Indonesia affiliates, who felt they should have a greater say in the operation of the Centre because of ASPEK Indonesia’s role in the project at the national level. Conversely, Education International’s attempts to bypass the national leadership of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association were foiled by the lack of commitment and infrastructure at the provincial level of the union.

Less common internationally, but equally challenging in the context of Aceh, was the fact that the intensity of the intervention brought different organizations into close quarters, and at times into competition—in doing so revealing the negative impact of longstanding fissures within the international labour movement itself. The barriers posed to solidarity-based collaboration by the structure and internal politics of the international trade union movement was most clearly evident in the events surrounding the establishment of TUCC and the Education International-ICFTU project. The Global Unions report on their initial post-tsunami visit in January 2005 indicates that the participants in the mission became aware of the TUCC initiative very shortly after their visit to Aceh (Global Unions 2005:5), but chose to embark on a separate initiative rather than pooling resources. Divisions within the international labour movement were also reflected in how dismissive donors and Aceh-based staff were of other trade union programmes, of which they generally had little knowledge. In some cases this tendency was exacerbated by personality clashes between Aceh-based staff, but it was primarily a reflection of the different focus of particular donors, their different histories and their alliances within the international trade union movement. Consequently, the four programmes operated largely in isolation.17

There was also competition regarding money paid to training participants for expenses like transportation and accommodation. As the local Education International project manager observed, the lack of communication between international donors resulted in duplication:

There was no coordination amongst those working to support the labour movement here post-tsunami. Each trying to plant their own flags. Why don’t we sit together and divide the tasks? We are doing all this work and the unions are making a mockery of the whole thing—people go from one NGO union training course to another.

The effects of this duplication, particularly where basic trade union training was concerned, were reflected in complaints by some unionists that the training they received had not helped them deal with more difficult tasks like handling cases of discrimination against shop floor organizers.

Finally, it was clear that each of the initiatives also experienced specific difficulties because of the particular collaborative arrangements into which they had entered. The ILO initiative was completely dependent on the national confederations, which meant that its efficacy was affected by their weakness at the national level, their internal politics, and Aceh’s isolation.18 When asked about the relationship between unions in Aceh and Jakarta in 2008, the secretary-general of the Acehnese office of the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions commented that while his office had good relationships with the national leadership of several sectoral unions (including some that are in conflict with the confederation’s head
office), it had received little support from the central leadership. The head of the provincial branch of the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions also felt that problems in the relationship between the confederation and its affiliated unions at the national level had affected operations in Aceh. Indeed, as the regional coordinator of the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Trade Unions commented, there were no real benefits for local unionists in being linked to a national structure beyond the occasional opportunity to attend training. In the latter case, conflict between Jakarta and Aceh came to a head in early 2006, resulting in the formation of a break-away local trade union called the Aceh Workers’ Union, which claimed to have 3000 members as of late 2009 (Gayoland 23 December 2009). According to ILO staff, their education programmes may have been a contributing factor in the split, as the confederation’s national executive was not open to accommodating demands that its Acehnese members had put to them after attending an ILO-sponsored training workshop.

In Education International’s case, it faced particular difficulties in its attempts to work with the local branch of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association. Direct engagement between Global Union Federations and national-level industry unions has been fruitful elsewhere in Indonesia (see Ford 2009:166–167) and Education International itself has run an extensive programme involving grassroots members of the Indonesian Teachers’ Association in other provinces for several years with the aim of rebuilding the union from below. In Aceh, however, Education International encountered an unsurpassed level of corruption among local leaders, fuelled by expectations of benefit common among Acehnese in the post-tsunami aid economy, but also by the isolation of local officials from changes elsewhere in Indonesia since the fall of President Suharto. As a result, their knowledge of trade unionism, and even of their own union, was very weak; district and even provincial leaders had never seen a copy of the union’s constitution; and in 2007 a Department of Education bureaucrat, not a teacher, was elected as the union’s provincial head. Although attempts to work around these entrenched structures was more rewarding in the short term, as the head of Education International’s regional office acknowledged, the sustainability of Education International’s efforts at the district level was in doubt. In the absence of funding for ongoing direct contact after the Aceh project finished, the failure of Education International’s attempts to work with the union’s provincial leadership means that it is unlikely that local leaders in far-flung districts can rely on support from Banda Aceh.

Like the ILO and Education International, the international organizations supporting both the TUCC and the programme managed by APHEDA experienced difficulties working with established unions. One of the key problems faced in APHEDA’s mentoring work with a cross-section of organizations representing each of the three confederations was that most participants failed to recruit new members between mentoring sessions (APHEDA 2007). As a result, this part of the APHEDA programme only ran for one year before it was replaced by facilitator training. A further challenge encountered by both APHEDA and TUCC was dealing with the preoccupation of the majority of local union leaders with politics in the lead-up to the elections in 2009, which left them little time for plant-level organizing. APHEDA and TUCC continued to work with these unions but invested much of their energy into the establishment of new geographically based trade unions, which created new sites of labour
activism in the short term but had little hope of survival in the absence of continued outside funding.

Conclusion

The magnitude of the humanitarian disaster in Aceh following the 2004 tsunami inspired the contribution of a vast amount of money for post-tsunami reconstruction and triggered an unprecedented level of direct foreign intervention in the formerly conflict-ridden province. The amount of money poured into trade union building work, the diversity of institutions involved and the flexibility international organizations demonstrated in their choice of partners meant that the intervention had a great deal of potential to make a significant difference to labour organizing in Aceh. At the same time, the micro-politics of the intervention exposed the extent to which the principles of international solidarity and the pragmatics of trade union diplomacy are mediated through money, institutions, individuals and day-to-day activities.

In many ways the situation in Aceh was unique. The momentum generated by the grassroots humanitarian response to the devastation wrought by the tsunami and emotional engagement on the part of staff in key organizational positions created conditions in which international trade unions were able to break with tradition and engage directly at the sub-national level. As a result, the staff of international labour organizations worked intensively—and even lived—for an extended period in Aceh. Their sustained and direct contact forced them to deal with the local dynamics of labour organizing at the local scale rather than channelling their efforts through a national trade union centre or nationally based trade unions or trade union federations. The extent to which they continued to be hampered by their lack of understanding of the complex local situation and the legacies of Aceh’s isolation even years after they first arrived confirms the crucial role of local context, particularly in interventions of this intensity and scope.

In other ways, the Aceh experience was a magnification of other kinds of cross-scalar labour activism. In particular, it speaks to us about the importance of contingency and individual agency in the operation of circuits of labour activism (cf Tufts 2007). The direct involvement of international labour actors in Aceh was contingent on grassroots humanitarian responses to the disaster but also on the personal and, in some cases, very emotional, reactions of key individuals within the international labour movement. While the internal politics of the movement influenced some of those actors’ choices—particularly with regard to collaboration with other international organizations—others still reflected the perspectives and proclivities of the CFTU and GUF regional secretaries and the Solidarity Support Organizations’ country directors, as well as of local staff and their “target” groups. Equally importantly, however, the constraints imposed by the humanitarian focus of the intervention demonstrated the extent to which circuits of labour activism may be mediated by factors not directly concerned with the dynamics of the international labour movement or even relations of production, in this case the principles and practices of international development.
References


Suomen Ammattiliitojen Solidaarisuskeskus (2008) “Annual report form, Indonesia, Trade Union Solidarity of Finland Aceh Community Centers (Trade Union Solidarity of Finland-UNI APRO Community Centers in Aceh).” Unpublished progress report

Acknowledgements
The 2008 phase of fieldwork was made possible by a University of Sydney Research and Development Grant. Michele and Thushara would like to thank all their informants for their willingness to participate and for their frank and open responses.

Notes

1 See Johns (1998) for a discussion of the tensions between space and class and their manifestation through accommodationist and transformative international solidarity.
2 As Ghigliani’s (2005) account of the planning of a campaign against the McDonalds fast food chain shows, discourses of accountability to state-based members can act as a conservative force within the Global Union Federations.
3 In 2008, data were collected over a period of 5 weeks from in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of 16 different unions in Aceh, representatives from each of the four international labour initiatives and other stakeholders who participated in labour-related activities (such as candidates from political parties and representatives from local NGOs that had participated in labour activities). In addition to interviews the researchers also had the opportunity to observe donor meetings, union training sessions, meetings about the new labour law that involved representatives from most unions in Aceh and other union events, as well as to
visit a number of the community development projects established with funding from APHEDA and to visit the community centres set up by the TUCC. Follow-up interviews in Aceh and interviews with the regional and country directors of the international organizations involved were conducted in 2009 and 2010 in Jakarta, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia. Unless otherwise indicated data presented in this article are drawn from interviews or from observer participation.

4 As Lier (2007) notes, most analyses assume that “jumping scale” means jumping up

5 For a review of some of the strands within the early literature on the spatiality of labour unionism, see Herod (1998b). For recent surveys of the field of labour geography, see Castree (2007) and Coe and Jordhus-Lier (forthcoming).

6 Note that in practice the national–local hierarchy has been less influential than in most unions since the fall of Suharto. There is increasing evidence not only that dues are not being passed up through most union structures, but also that local level unions in the weaker national federations are localizing decision-making processes in other parts of Indonesia. The international labour movement has had difficulty responding to the growing importance of the local scale in these other contexts.

7 For estimates of union presence and its sectoral distribution in Aceh before the tsunami, see ACILS (2005).

8 Researchers cite various reasons for the emergence of the conflict. Some analysts argue that it was linked to economic disparities between those who came to work for the oil and gas companies from other parts of Indonesia and the local people in those areas who did not benefit from the natural resources in their area. Others argue that these economic grievances were but part of a more complex identity struggle. For a detailed discussion of its causes, see Aspinall (2009).

9 Dollar amounts cited refer to US dollars.

10 The Swedish Solidarity Support Organization, the Olof Palme Center, had a project in Aceh in close collaboration with the Free Aceh Movement, but did not engage in trade union work.


12 Labour NGOs have a long-established role in the Indonesian labour movement. For a discussion of their emergence and contribution, see Ford (2009).

13 For details of the Education for All programme, see http://www.ei-ie.org/educationforall/ en/. Except where otherwise noted, the information presented here is drawn from an interview with Education International’s Chief Regional Coordinator Aloysius Matthews conducted in Kuala Lumpur in September 2009.

14 Note that these figures are indicative rather than authoritative, as not all funding was reported and the online database was not kept up to date. Funds from the ICFTU were part of the $1,015,678 its Asia Pacific office raised from its affiliates for work in tsunami-affected areas. When interviewed, Asia-Pacific General Secretary Noriyuki Suzuki declined to say how much of this money was channelled to Aceh.

15 For a detailed discussion of Global Union Federation financing, see Croucher and Cotton (2009).

16 For a discussion of trade union aid and accountability in the Indonesian context, see Ford (2006).

17 There were some exceptions, for example collaboration between TUCC and APHEDA in the hosting of four workshops about developing a local labour law (Suomen Ammattiliittojen Solidaarisuuskoskus 2008).

18 For discussions of the weaknesses of the confederations at a national level, see Caraway (2008) and Ford (2004, 2009).

19 According to local unionists, this was the case because participants came from industries where recruitment was difficult, for example in the oil and gas, paper and cement sectors, where jobs had been outsourced and regulations existed prohibiting outsourced staff to join the enterprise union.