

From *Pasung* to Personhood: Building Mental Health Services in Aceh

Mrs J. is a 37 year old widow and housewife with 5 children. There were two other children but they died. She lives in Pidie district in Aceh and she had been suffering from mental health problems for 19 years. She heard voices that made her angry and she was a victim of frightening hallucinations that gave rise to violent episodes, during which she threw objects at the homes of her neighbours. She was also known to wander aimlessly and to shout at people in the street.

Her family did seek help in the past by taking her to the only mental hospital in the province located in Banda Aceh where she received medication. This provided some temporary relief, but an irregular supply of medication, the cost of the family travelling to hospital and the time that was lost by relatives to escort Mrs J. meant that her medication was discontinued and all of her symptoms reappeared.

Mrs J. was then taken to a traditional practitioner who attempted to cure her hallucinations by piercing one of her eyes with a piece of hot metal which led to blindness in one eye. To deal with the fact that she heard voices her ears were mutilated. She was then put in chains (*Pasung*) under her house because her relatives did not know what else to do.

Today Mrs J. is free from her chains, can carry out household tasks and has been integrated into her family again, all thanks to the care she received after being identified and treated by a community mental health nurse. After several months of visits the nurse has not only taught Mrs J. how to deal with her hallucinations, but also provided a regular supply of medication and gradually taught her to perform daily tasks. She has been completely released from her chains and her family are now fully supportive.

The training of community mental health nurses is a program supported by ADB through the Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) to help put in place a community mental health system that operates at different levels. It is fully supported by both the Ministry of Health and implemented by the Provincial Health Authority and the District Health Offices.

To strengthen the referral and care system, nurses also train "*kader*" (cadre) to support '*desa siaga sehat jiwa*' or mentally healthy alert villages. *Kaders* are provided with a checklist when they visit persons exhibiting mental health problems and if they determine there is a need for referral this can be done quickly to the health center's community mental health nurse. This care will benefit those who are suffering from psychological problems caused by the tsunami as well as decades long conflict in Aceh.

The combination of care from the *kader* and mental health nurses have allowed Mr. M. from Aceh Jaya district to recover. Mr M. is only 20 years old, unmarried and lives at home with his family. He developed mental health problems as a teenager at the age of 15. He too heard voices and wandered aimlessly, talked to himself and neglected his personal hygiene. His family believed his illness was caused by his disappointment at

not being able to go to another province to further his studies in the holy Qur'an. They were unable to afford to pay for his tuition fees and living expenses.

He also was taken to a traditional healer but there was no improvement in his condition. Finally, with help from a neighbour, the family decided to lock him away in a room in January this year. Fortunately, Mr M. started to receive care by the community mental health nurse in April 2007 and by June his family felt safe enough to release him from the room because of the help given by the nurse in teaching him how to manage his hallucinations and the importance of taking medication. The nurse also worked closely with his family who was distressed but had no understanding that he was suffering from a mental health problem or how to help him. It is not at all unusual that as in this case the family did not approach the health services for care and treatment because of the lack of understanding that mental illness can be successfully treated with medication.

The community mental health nurses in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam have found and successfully rehabilitated many other persons like Mrs J. and Mr M. back into work. To date ETESP has supported training of over 650 persons in community mental health in 2006 and 2007. This includes: community mental health nurses, local facilitators as leaders at district health offices, *kaders* and doctors. The ETESP mental health program has led to the identification of some 1,808 patients in 2006 and a further 2,398 in 2007.

There is a belief that people like Mrs J. and Mr M. cannot be helped but the care and treatment given by community mental health nurses has proven that even those persons suffering from severe mental health problems can be supported to lead better lives within their communities.

The community mental health nurse program is part of ADB's \$12 million support for the health sector in Aceh and Nias. In addition to this initiative, ADB's support also comprise of rehabilitation and reconstruction of health centers and provision for disposal of medical wastes accumulated during the emergency period.

The assistance is part of a \$291 million ADB grant to the Government of Indonesia that is helping to rebuild the areas devastated by the earthquake and tsunami disasters. ADB's multi-sector assistance package covers agriculture, fisheries, irrigation, micro and small enterprise development, housing, water and sanitation, health, education, transport, power, spatial planning and environmental management, and fiduciary oversight.

In addition, ADB has contributed a \$10 million grant to the Multi-Donor Fund for Aceh and Nias.

ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through pro-poor sustainable economic growth, social development, and good governance. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members – 48 from the region. In 2007, it approved \$10.1 billion of loans, \$673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to \$243 million.