

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

“Pounds of Prevention” is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: INDONESIA

Indonesia frequently confronts a range of natural hazards, including powerful earthquakes that have the potential to trigger tsunamis. Knowing this, the people of Indonesia, with financial and technical support from USAID, have prioritized reducing their disaster risk, investing to build a culture of safety, and preparing themselves for the next event.

On April 11, 2012, a magnitude 8.6 earthquake and 8.2 aftershock struck off the west coast of the island of Sumatra. Citizens around the globe turned their attention to the Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system. The system was developed by the international community, with support from the U.S. Government and other donors, in response to lessons learned following the deadly earthquake and tsunami of December 2004.

The alerts functioned appropriately, allowing hundreds of thousands of residents in at-risk coastal areas—not only in Indonesia but also in Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India—to receive mobile phone or other messages explaining what had happened. Due to the work of communities to raise awareness about disaster risk, people knew to depart buildings and move to higher ground. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Government’s rapid response teams quickly assessed affected areas, and the national search-and-rescue agency mobilized to deploy.



USAID has worked with national and local groups in Indonesia to strengthen the country’s level of emergency preparedness for over a decade. Photo courtesy of International Medical Corps.

Fortunately, due to the way the earth’s plates moved that day, a large tsunami did not result. Minimal damage occurred to buildings, bridges, roads, and other infrastructure. Injuries were few, and evacuees returned home soon after. This major test, however, illustrated the life-saving potential of preparedness and early warning investments made over the past decade by USAID, the Government of Indonesia, and many other international, national, and local groups.

USAID, in particular, was heartened to see the fruit of its years of support for programs to train police, paramedics, and other emergency response professionals, local governments, and communities to act quickly after an earthquake. Over the years, partner civil society groups have worked with local officials and community members in coastal regions to prepare tsunami evacuation routes and execute tsunami response drills. Furthermore, the linkages forged as part of these programs among communities, international organizations, and government agencies at the national, provincial, and district levels helped improve coordination and communication on April 11.

One particular USAID partner, Ambulan 118, has exemplified the evolution in Indonesian capacity that has taken place. Once a small Indonesian medical disaster response organization, Ambulan 118 has grown into a premier group of emergency responders with expertise in training agencies in medical first response, collapsed structure search and rescue, and hospital preparedness for mass casualties following a disaster. When a disaster strikes, these staff are ready to respond rapidly and effectively, should the occasion warrant.

USAID was relieved that the humanitarian needs following the earthquake were relatively minor and takes comfort in knowing that Indonesia’s proactive preparedness stance will save lives, alleviate suffering, and reduce the need for international assistance when the next earthquake strikes.