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Fish group says give Aceh fishermen livelihoods, not boats

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KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Fishermen in Aceh have more boats now than before last December's tsunami hit the Indonesian province and donors should focus on other strategies to rebuild the fishing industry, a global research body said on Friday. Rural communities traditionally dependent on fish for food and livelihoods were the worst affected by the tsunami, which destroyed the small vessels and low-technology gear most fishermen used, the World Fish Centre said.

A year later, efforts to replace lost equipment has enhanced fishermen's ability to catch fish, but they have not tackled the problem of overfishing and severe depletion that existed before the tsunami, the Malaysia-based centre said in a statement.

It called for a change in the approach.

"We did a survey in some villages in Aceh and found there were more boats there than before the tsunami," said Madan Dey, a fisheries expert. The body was working with the Indonesian government to offer technical advice and help to 18 villages in six districts in Indonesia, he said.

Tsunami relief had swelled the fishing fleets of some villages to more than 40, against less than 20 earlier, he said.

"What we are saying is the focus should not be only on rebuilding boats, it should be on rebuilding the basis of their economic livelihood," said Dey.

More than 10 percent of Aceh's fishermen were killed in the December 26 tsunami, and more than 9,600 boats were lost, according to the centre.

Replacing infrastructure is easy, compared with remaking fisheries policy and changing age-old practices of communities to ensure sustainable livelihoods, it said.

"Required today is a major investment from the enormous donations of the world community in projects to restore fish productivity," it added. "As well, survivors need retraining and education programmes to find alternative livelihoods."

Such a strategy could help lift fish populations in as little as three or four years, Dey said.

"Even if fishermen get a good catch, there can be wastage if poor roads make it impossible to get it to market before it is sold. "Even if it gets to market, the fisherman may not have the bargaining power to get a good price."

"What is needed is a shift in the mindset, which is: let's focus on building these communities, let's empower them, rather than a handout, a boat, or equipment."

Consensus has grown in support of position of the World Fish Centre, part of a network of research groups sponsored by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

A Canadian researcher writing in the journal Nature said this year that international aid, and failed agricultural and social reforms contributed to the unsustainability of Asian fisheries.

Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre of the University of British Columbia, said rebuilding Asia's fisheries with reforms would only worsen their problems.

Instead, emphasis should be put on generating land-based jobs and providing basic education and training to increase the mobility of local fishers, he said.

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