

Where hope is building

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BEFORE the earth shuddered and the waves came two years ago, the people of Aceh's Lampeudaya village could make 500 bricks a day in their brick factory.

Using the traditional method -- buffaloes -- to mix the mud, the work took up to 10 hours.

Now, with the help of Austcare, an Australian humanitarian aid agency, and the adaptation of more modern equipment, the villagers are making 2500 bricks a day -- without buffalo power. They have a new mixer instead.

Previously, the bricks were made entirely by hand.

Sydney-based Austcare, with funding from the United Nations Development Program, is helping rebuild 40 brick factories destroyed by the 2004 tsunami which devastated western Aceh.

Deborah Leaver, Austcare's Aceh program director, says the 40 new factories will help 600 people and produce the bricks needed for the vast reconstruction effort under way in Aceh.

She says that in Lampeudaya village the tsunami destroyed or damaged 13 factories and 29 have been founded since the advent of the Austcare program.

As well as the factories, the communities have also been encouraged to join a system of revolving finance whereby money is lent to the community to build the factories and managers are then responsible to the community for its use and channelling funds back.

On the day the Herald Sun visited Lampeudaya the community was voting for a new factory manager and spirited debate was proceeding on the question of how factory profits should be shared.

Two women joined the 21 men sitting cross-legged in the village meeting hall.

It is these skills -- of leadership, negotiation and business management -- that Austcare hopes will be the added legacy of their involvement in the Aceh reconstruction program.

Austcare plans to be in Aceh until the end of 2008.

Brick-factory worker Hendra, 29, smiles as he tells how the new factory, with its engine-powered brickmaking machine, is much easier work.

And he is looking forward to earning more.

Hendra is paid by the number of bricks made and says he can make many more with the new equipment.

The new factory has the bonus of a toilet and shower block, previously unheard of.

Austcare's programs in Aceh include providing new fishing boats to fishermen, helping farmers -- the organisation is setting up a chilli-farming venture in one community -- rebuilding schools and overseeing a microfinance program to help people set up small businesses.

Tomorrow marks two years since an earthquake off the coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island sent tsunami waves crashing on to the land, killing between 220,000 and 280,000 people in the Indian Ocean littoral states.

Aceh, closest to the epicentre, bore the brunt.

While the agency in charge of Aceh reconstruction has come under fire for corruption and the slow pace of rebuilding, there have also been remarkable steps forward.

Hendra the brickmaker attests to that.

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