Penabulu–Oxfam Response to Cyclone Senyar in Western Indonesia: From Emergency Relief to Strengthening Local Leadership in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra

Picture 1. Several community members wait for the aid distribution process on Thursday, 5 February 2026, in Aceh Tamiang Regency, Aceh. A member of the Penabulu-Oxfam humanitarian team is seen sitting together with women survivors. Photo: Jefry/Penabulu Foundation

"*The water rose as high as the electricity cables. We had to hold on to each other*."
– Suhartini, survivor in Aceh Tamiang.

This testimony captures the speed and severity of the hydrometeorological disasters that struck Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra starting in late November 2025. Within hours, floodwaters rose to the height of electricity lines. Homes that had been inhabited for decades were submerged overnight.

For Suhartini, 67, a survivor from Gampong[1] Kuala Simpang in Aceh Tamiang Regency, the experience was unprecedented. “We thought the water would recede, but it kept rising,” she recalled. In the same regency, a mother saved her baby by placing the child inside an old refrigerator as the water continued to rise. In South Sibolga Subregency, North Sumatra, a local resident recalled that a disaster had struck the area in 1956—though not as devastating as this one.

These stories reflect the scale of a crisis far wider than individual accounts.

Since November 2025, a series of disasters affecting Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra, has escalated into the largest humanitarian crisis in Indonesia by the end of that year. According to data from BNPB as of 24 February 2026, 1,207 people have died and 138 remain missing. A total of 26,095 people have been displaced across 53 affected regency, with 301,012 housing units damaged.[2] Damage to roads, bridges, schools, and health facilities has further complicated aid distribution and access to basic services. As of February 2026, the Government of Indonesia has not declared the floods and landslides in Sumatra a national disaster[3] and has declined international assistance, stating that it is able to respond using available domestic resources.[4] Despite strong calls from civil society organizations, the government maintains that the response is already national in scale without requiring a formal status change.[5]

Optimizing Local Organizational Resources for Rapid and Targeted Early Response

In crisis situations, the speed of early response significantly determines long-term impact. To address this, Penabulu mobilized its internal resources and local organizational networks to ensure that assistance could be delivered immediately, even before full external funding mobilization was secured.

A key instrument in this effort is the Indonesia Disaster Relief Fund (IDRF)[6], an open pooled fund established by Penabulu in 2022 to channel rapid, limited financial support to local

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[1] “Gampong” refers to a village, the lowest administrative unit in Aceh Province.
[2] See the BNPB Dashboard at: https://gis.bnpb.go.id/BANSORSUMATERA2025/
[3] See: Tempo, Prabowo Defends Decision Not to Declare National Disaster in Sumatra, https://en.tempo.co/read/2077490/prabowo-defends-decision-not-to-declare-national-disaster-in-sumatra
[4] See: Antara News, Indonesia says it can manage Sumatra disasters without foreign aid, https://en.antaranews.com/news/394960/indonesia-says-it-can-manage-sumatra-disasters-without-foreign-aid
[5] Two Indonesian civil society organizations that have formally urged the government to elevate the disaster status are Amnesty International Indonesia and Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation.
See the open letter here: https://www.amnesty.id/kabar-terbaru/surat-terbuka/surat-terbuka-penetapan-status-bencana-nasional-sumatra-aceh/12/2025/ and https://ylbhi.or.id/informasi/siaran-pers/mendesak-negara-hadir-dalam-penanggulangan-bencana-banjir-sumatera-presiden-segera-tetapkan-status-darurat-bencana-nasional-dan-moratorium-seluruh-izin-konsesi-di-kawasan-hutan/
[6] https://idrf.id/

organizations responding to emergencies. Through this mechanism, local partners are able to act swiftly while maintaining accountability in fund management. IDRF serves as a critical bridge to address urgent needs in the early phase of crisis while ensuring continuity of intervention.

Through the IDRF mechanism, Penabulu, together with local partner organizations, has reached 16 regencies/cities with a total disaster response allocation of approximately USD 15,561 (IDR 262,000,000)[7]. Joint rapid needs assessments have also identified 22 regencies/cities across three affected provinces as priority areas.

As part of the early response until February 2026, with support outside the IDRF scheme, Penabulu, together with local partner organizations, prioritized interventions in 10 regencies and cities: Pidie Jaya, Aceh Tamiang, Bireuen, and North Aceh (Aceh Province); Sibolga, Central Tapanuli, and Langkat (North Sumatra Province); and Solok and Agam (West Sumatra Province).

Across these areas, 10,080 households—including 4,800 female-headed households—have received humanitarian assistance, reaching an estimated 36,921 affected individuals. Among those affected are vulnerable groups, including 11,815 children under five, 1,108 persons with disabilities, 738 pregnant and breastfeeding women, and 3,323 elderly people. Assistance has been prioritized for households with severe housing damage and vulnerable groups, focusing on basic needs provision, psychosocial recovery, and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) support. This approach ensures that early response efforts are not only rapid but also targeted, inclusive, and grounded in local needs.

Picture 2. Abdul Hamid (wearing a checkered shirt), 36, a resident of Lhokseumawe Regency, assists with the aid distribution process on Thursday, 5 February 2026, in Aceh Tamiang Regency, Aceh. Photo: Jefry/Penabulu Foundation

[7] https://idrf.id/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/idrf-bantuan-sumatera-02032026.pdf

Strengthening Community-Led Response through Inclusive and Accountable Local Partnerships

Engagement with local partners is central to ensuring that response efforts are grounded in the real needs of affected communities. This approach strengthens local ownership and leadership, facilitates access to funding, and improves the quality and contextual relevance of needs data and reporting. In Aceh Province, response efforts have been implemented in collaboration with Flower Aceh, YPANBA, and PKBI Aceh. In North Sumatra, partnerships include YAFSI, WALHI North Sumatra, and Yapemmas; while in West Sumatra, collaboration involves WALHI West Sumatra, KPA BIAS, and Jemari Sakato.

Beyond aid distribution, collaboration with local partners has been tailored to specific local contexts and early response needs. For example, together with Flower Aceh, Penabulu promoted a feminist humanitarian approach that places women in decision-making roles. Women survivors were actively engaged in conducting Rapid Gender Assessments (RGA).

Together with YAFSI, efforts focused on protection and recovery for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, including the establishment of Child-Friendly Spaces (Ruang Ramah Anak) and psychosocial support activities.

Additionally, through collaboration with the Humanitarian Knowledge Hub (Jejaring Mitra Kemanusiaan –JMK) and the Local Network for the Empowerment of Indonesian Civil Society (Lokadaya), Penabulu has strengthened the capacity of non-humanitarian local organizations to enhance their effectiveness and long-term adaptive capacity in disaster response and recovery.

Picture 3. A child threading beads with his mother during a psychosocial support activity organized by Yayasan Fajar Sejahtera Indonesia (YAFSI) on Sunday, 8 February 2026, in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra. Photo: YAFSI

Meaningful Engagement of WROs and WLOs to Protect and Fulfil Women's Rights

Penabulu promotes meaningful engagement of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) in the design and implementation of humanitarian responses. This approach reinforces women's participation in decision-making and their active involvement during the early response phase.

Operating under the Women's Local Humanitarian Leadership (WLHL) Consortium, Flower Aceh utilized flexible humanitarian funding from SHIFT Asia project to reach "blind spot" areas in Aceh Tamiang and North Aceh, locations cut off from mainstream aid due to infrastructure damage.

Guided by the feminist principle of "Power With," the response positioned women as decision-makers. Women survivors managed community kitchens, determined food distribution systems, and ensured adequate nutrition for toddlers. Flower Aceh also collaborated with Yayasan Pulih to establish informal safe spaces providing psychosocial support. Rapid distribution of dignity kits helped safeguard women's reproductive health and dignity in displacement settings.

Picture 4. A community member participates in the On-site Distribution Monitoring (ODM) process after receiving assistance on Thursday, 5 February 2026, in Aceh Tamiang Regency, Aceh. Photo: Jefry/Penabulu Foundation

Rapid Gender Assessments were conducted participatorily, with women survivors serving as enumerators. This approach generated more contextualized data on the vulnerabilities of pregnant women, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities.

Flexible funding enabled swift decision-making without administrative delays. Flower Aceh also leveraged collaboration with Penabulu for logistics, JMK for water source restoration and WASH education, and Lokadaya for local philanthropic mobilization.

Beyond emergency relief, field evidence has been used to influence the Post-Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Plan of Aceh Province. This case demonstrates that locally led women's humanitarian leadership—supported by flexible funding—can accelerate response, enhance contextual relevance, and strengthen accountability to affected communities.

Local Collaboration for Protection and Recovery of Vulnerable Survivors

In Lingkungan[8] Perdamaian, Tangkahan Durian Village, Langkat Regency, even as floodwaters remained in the area, Yayasan Fajar Sejahtera Indonesia (YAFSI) began delivering humanitarian aid under the Sumatra Recovery and Resilience Program in partnership with Penabulu.

YAFSI also focused its interventions on the urgent needs of affected families, including shelter kits and cooking sets for 27 households whose homes were severely damaged or destroyed, food assistance for 120 households, and a Child-Friendly Space serving 110 children.

YAFSI also provided psychosocial support services, including educational and recreational activities for children and parents.

Picture 5 & 6. Left: Disaster survivors are chatting with volunteers from Flower Aceh and Lifeguard.
Right: Several children are participating in a coloring activity organized by Lifeguard on Tuesday, 10 February 2026, in Karang Baru Subregency, Aceh Tamiang, Aceh.
Photo: Flower Aceh and Lifeguard

[8] "Lingkungan" refers to a sub-village administrative unit (comparable to a hamlet) in Aceh.

“We want assistance to reach people as quickly as possible, but also to be properly targeted,” said Badriyah, Chairperson of YAFSI. According to her, emergency response must create space for sustainable recovery so that communities do not remain in prolonged vulnerability.

Strengthening Humanitarian Capacity of Non-Humanitarian Organizations

Through collaboration with JMK, Penabulu has expanded engagement with non-humanitarian organizations to enhance preparedness and response capacity. The objective is to build a broader, adaptive humanitarian ecosystem capable of delivering coordinated and sustainable responses.

Capacity strengthening efforts focused on enhancing response planning, implementing WASH and livelihood interventions, mainstreaming GEDSI principles, strengthening MEAL systems, and improving financial management to ensure more effective and accountable humanitarian action.

Enumerator training using SurveyCTO has enabled real-time online data collection. Collaboration has also involved joint water source assessments with JMK, strengthening local organizational engagement with Lokadaya, and implementing rapid gender assessments through WLHL.

Picture 7. A staff member of Yayasan Perempuan dan Anak Negeri (YPANBA) hands over food assistance to a resident in Takengon, Bireuen Regency, Aceh, on Thursday, 5 February 2026. Photo: Lutfi/Penabulu Foundation

This approach ensures that local organizations are not merely implementers of activities, but primary actors in humanitarian response within their respective areas—aligned with commitments to locally led humanitarian models.

Current Conditions in Assisted Areas

In Aceh Tamiang and North Aceh, the disaster's impact remains visible. Debris and wooden wreckage still cover parts of residential areas. Many families have lost their homes and continue to survive in precarious conditions. Access to clean water remains a major challenge, and most household belongings—including cooking equipment—were swept away.

Beyond physical destruction, disasters also leave profound psychological impacts. Women—particularly pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, as well as female-headed households—and children face heightened risks of emotional distress and psychosocial challenges due to the loss of safety, caregiving burdens, and limited access to essential services. Yet amid the crisis, women often assume critical roles as drivers of recovery at the household and community levels. Therefore, the provision of gender-responsive and inclusive psychosocial support becomes an urgent priority in the recovery phase.

Penabulu: A Locally Rooted and Globally Connected Humanitarian Organization

Founded in 2003, Penabulu Foundation is a locally rooted Indonesian non-profit organization that serves as a Civil Society Resource Organization (CSRO), strengthening the capacity and sustainability of civil society across Indonesia. In humanitarian action, Penabulu is committed to providing life-saving support while building dignified and equal lives for all—especially women, children, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups. Grounded in humanitarian principles, Penabulu promotes locally led solutions, community participation, and accountability to affected populations.

Since November 2023, Penabulu has become a Prospective Affiliate of Oxfam International and is progressing toward full affiliation as Penabulu-Oxfam (Oxfam Indonesia). This affiliation reinforces Penabulu's commitment to advancing localization within the humanitarian system—strengthening local leadership, expanding flexible funding mechanisms, and ensuring that Indonesian civil society voices shape global humanitarian discourse.

At the national level, Penabulu is a core member of the Indonesia Humanitarian Coordination Platform (IHCP – locally known as Platform Koordinasi Kemanusiaan

Indonesia, PK2I), a strategic multi-stakeholder non-governmental forum that strengthens humanitarian coordination across preparedness, response, and disaster recovery. The IHCP marks the transition from the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) to a more inclusive coordination model, led by national and local civil society organizations—a global breakthrough in humanitarian coordination architecture. Through this role, Penabulu contributes to building a more effective, evidence-based, and accountable humanitarian system in Indonesia that is locally led.

Locally rooted and globally connected, Penabulu works to reduce suffering, strengthen community resilience, and ensure that humanitarian response not only saves lives but also restores dignity and supports long-term recovery.

Locally rooted, Globally connected