There are not many books that provide a detailed account of post-disaster recovery. This one is notable in trying to provide a comprehensive picture of post-disaster reconstruction in Aceh where the Boxing Day tsunami killed more than 150,000 people (more than 250,000 worldwide) and left more than 500,000 displaced. The book consists of ten chapters, divided into two sections. The first section gives the context of the reconstruction, which is very important for understanding the social, political and economical context of Aceh—a region that has experienced thirty years of armed conflict and finally received special autonomy from the government of Indonesia. The second section presents various cases illustrating the complexities, strengths and weaknesses of the reconstruction efforts in Aceh (p.16).

The book begins with a preface by Ahmad Suedy that describes the situation after the event. He mentions that the tsunami destroyed not only the physical environment, but more importantly led to the “destruction of soul” (p. xv). The editors Matthew Clarke, Ismet Fanany and Sue Kenny, along with Damien Kingsbury, then provide an introductory section in the first chapter. They present a brief history of Aceh’s long conflict and describe players on the reconstructions in Aceh. In addition, they provide a short discussion on perceptions of reconstruction and then give the readers a summary of the book’s content. This chapter is well organized and leads directly to the main discussion of reconstruction in Aceh after the tsunami.

Michelle Ann Miller starts the first section by discussing “The Role of Islamic Law (Sharia) in Post Tsunami Reconstruction” in Chapter 2. As stated in the introduction, this chapter aims to look at “how sharia (Islamic law) is conceptualized by the key NGO and civil societal actors in Aceh, and how their development priorities and programs have been influenced accordingly” (p.16). Yet, the author portrays the attitude of key actors toward Islamic law by using extreme examples or cases, both from international organizations as well as from national and local players,. These tend to fall into stereotypes. She overlooks other key actors that may conceptualize sharia and prioritize post-construction programs differently. For example, she argues that the policy on working with mass-based Islamic organizations, as described by the CGI (Consultative Group on Indonesia, a consortium of 21 bilateral donor countries) and Bappenas is not neutral (p38). However, she fails to recognize the mass-based Islamic organizations like
Nahdatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and strong meunasas (Islamic boarding schools) that work on the reconstruction regardless of their position on shariah law. In any case, shariah law is only implemented in the region of Aceh. The CGI and Bappenas recognize these actors as well as the formal governmental ones the author emphasizes.

The complex nature of Aceh is made apparent through the discussion of political reconstruction in Aceh addressed by Damien Kingsbury in Chapter 3. He explores the political evolution of Aceh before and after the tsunami. He points out the relationship between Jakarta (the central government), which in the past very much controlled Aceh, and the Aceh separatist movement (GAM). He also traces the development of the recent peace process, an important contribution because, as he says, “without peace, reconstruction cannot go beyond a series of hollow technical interventions” (p.75).

In Chapter 4, Sue Kenny addresses participatory practice in the reconstruction effort. She discusses the discourse of participation which is based on the classical concept of “a ladder of participation” (Arnstein, 1969) with four stages on a continuum from manipulation through consultation and partnership to ownership (p. 81). She uses this continuum to investigate the implementation of a people-centered participation approach in Aceh’s reconstruction process. Her investigation indicates that the degree of commitment to the participatory approach varies. She finds that in the early stage of reconstruction, the International and Indonesian aid agencies paid little attention to participation. However, by 2006, most aid agencies understood the importance of local participation. She mentions factors affecting participatory programs and practices along with some reflection and lessons learned from the experiences of participation in post-tsunami Aceh. This discussion is relevant and also serves as a transition to Section Two of the book, which discusses practices and experiences with reconstruction efforts.

The first case study in Section Two is Chapter 5 by Ismet Fanany, who presents a model of constructive interaction between aid donors and recipients using the Lampuuk example. The author describes the process in which the residents of five villages were heavily involved in the process of reconstruction supported by foreign aid. The study shows how recipients have the ability to pick and choose among potential donors as part of their responsibility for reconstruction (p.117). The author also points out the importance of active participation in any stage of reconstruction including evaluation and verification of both recipients and donors. This can improve the probability of meeting the needs of recipients and avoid corruption.

In Chapter 6, Craig Thorburn investigates Aceh’s post-tsunami political regeneration. Unlike the Chapter 2, which focuses on the broad political environment, Thorburn focuses more on the rebuilding of village governments in tsunami affected areas. He surveys 18 villages three years after the tsunami, looking at leadership, decision-making and problem solving, transparency and accountability, women’s participation and social capital. He finds that every village has a different pathway to recovery, but there are
commonalities and patterns than can be extracted (p.148) such as the correlation between good leadership and good recovery.

To magnify the complexity of problems in reconstruction, Matthew Clarke and Suellen Murray bring in the voices of international staff in Chapter 7. The authors attempt to capture the experiences of 21 non-relief staff that an international NGO deployed to Aceh for implementing reconstruction interventions. They look at problems that affect the capacity of the staff such governance and leadership, infrastructure and implementing systems. One staff member, discussing a leadership issue, said, “I probably wasn’t that effective and I don’t think that anybody was being effective. People were running around in circles because nobody was providing any leadership about what was to be done and who should be covering what and how should be handled…” (p.166). The authors do a good job describing the challenges and most common problems faced by International NGOs, particularly in a very large scale response.

Fuad Mardhatillah presents another intricate case in Chapter 8. The author discusses the role and experience of the government reconstruction agency (BRR) founded by the Government of Indonesia in March 2005, three months after the tsunami. He says that decades of social strife followed by the large-scale natural disaster increased the complexities of the relationship between the central government and Aceh region, which affected the reconstruction efforts. He describes BRR management and operations, in which the agency has to deal with coordination, participation, and transparency issues in its relationship with 500 foreign NGOs involved in Aceh’s rehabilitation and reconstruction. The author also points out local perceptions of BRR, which was accused of employing more workers from outside (Jakarta rather than Aceh), lack of transparency, corruption, etc. However, this chapter is not well structured compared to the other chapters. In addition, it lacks a description and discussion of how the BRR delivered and managed the reconstruction process in Aceh.

The last case study in the book is written by Annemarie Samuels. She relates personal stories from people three years after the tsunami. The ethnographic approach that she uses to study the everyday life of people is thought provoking, as there are not many studies in recovery (with the notable exception of Oliver-Smith’s 1986 classic *The Martyred City*). Throughout this chapter, she argues that local people are the main actors in remaking society (p.20). She also explores everyday aspects of grass roots reconstruction. She states that “it is impossible to separate everyday practices according to what is ‘reconstruction’ and what is ‘normal’ since making and remaking continuously overlap, and reconstruction and everyday life are so much interlinked” (p. 211). In addition, she notes that social ties and social relationships are not less important than physical reconstruction. This chapter is fascinating as she provides a vivid connection for readers to the survivors of tsunami.

Sue Kenny and Matthew Clarke provide an excellent summary chapter describing lessons learned from Aceh as a conclusion in Chapter 10. They highlight 11 lessons that
focus on cultural sensitivity, community engagement, political regeneration, participatory practices, government planning and international responses. They suggest, “the reconstruction is not a one-dimensional process. Reconstruction must refer to multiple aspects involve multiple players and allow for multiple perspectives and experiences.” (p.228).

The final chapter of the book is an Afterword by Ismet Fanany. He illustrates the invisible landscape—the private and the personal impact of the tsunami on the Acehnese. It returns to the tone set in the preface, concentrating on the fact that the physical reconstruction of Aceh has taken precedence, but the damage to the souls or hearts and minds of the local people remains and has barely been addressed.

In the end, this volume lives up to its promise to deliver a thorough analysis and critique of post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh. Reflection on its lessons would help ensure that future responses to disaster are more effective and efficient. Not only will international and local aid agencies benefit from this book, but hazard/disaster researchers, decision makers, and readers in general will also find it informative and useful.

References