

Urban Neoliberalism and Environmentalism as Local Initiatives in Indonesia

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Abstract

Massive industrialisation in urban Indonesia has resulted in the emergence of neoliberalism that capitalises the space in the city. With Bandung as a case in point, this paper briefly discusses several key triggering issues that have led this city to experience recurring environmental problems. The emergence of local initiatives enacted by groups of young people provides an insight into how environmental problems have become issues for the future leaders in the country. Drawing on fieldwork in Bandung between 2013 and 2014, the paper discusses nine youth-based environmental organisations whose common visions are educating urban citizens with actions for sustaining pro-environmental behaviour. Examining their actions and trajectories, it concludes that these organisations have transformed the key environmental issues in the city into real actions which bring together urban citizens from varied backgrounds.

Introduction

Urban development in Indonesia is characterised by pro-growth planning that is enhanced through deregulation and, in turn, may reduce physical spaces in urban area. As the politics of decentralisation came into effect in 1999 in Indonesia, deregulation accelerated the flow of investment into urban areas. Furthermore, increased industrialisation exploited urban areas through the establishment of industrial estates, commodified recreational areas, and franchised hotel industries (Firman, 1999). In the post-1999 era, liberalisation in Indonesian cities facilitated extensive growth of trading activities and private housing. Liberalisation has also compelled the local government's development priority to attract more investment and resulted in leadership in the governance system becoming more materialistic than pro-environment (Aritenang, 2013; Permana, 2012; Nurdini & Harun, 2011). It is then undeniable that contemporary faults in Indonesian urban development are reflected in mounting social protest because the government has not engaged the public in its making decision.

According to Escobar (1999), what we perceive in the environment as natural is always also cultural and social. In the context of capitalism, commercial interests translate environmental resources into economic assets that can leverage profitability for investment. They earn profit by direct exploitation of nature and do not encourage environmental sustainability for the subsequent generations. In the global south, these processes lead to concerns about environmental loss, climate change, urban planning, deforestation, water shortages and land acquisitions by those with power, and these problems are recurrent throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (Hannigan, 1995; White, 2011). Besides water and food security, pollution has been a serious problem in Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, and China (Firman, 1999). These kinds of problems become severe when the land and forest are flattened for commercial purposes.

Deforestation accounts for 20 per cent of carbon emissions and is consequently a major factor in climate change (Sari, 2013). In Indonesia, this problem is made more severe by the draining of peat swamps, releasing methane. The burning of forests has also caused severe respiratory problems. Deforestation is subsequently followed by a crisis in water supply, as the rainwater falling on the ground cannot be absorbed by tree roots and stored in the soil.

With respect to the impact of development on the environment particularly in an urban setting, this paper looks closely at the case of Bandung municipality in West Java, Indonesia.

Bandung is the second largest metropolitan area in Indonesia with in 2011 about 2,420,000 inhabitants living in the designated 153 km² area (Statistical Bureau of Bandung, 2011). In sustaining the growth of the local economy, the municipal government boosts a creativity-based cultural economy which in the same vein attracts people to come for jobs and further their education in the city (Soemardi & Radjawali, 2004). For the business sector, Bandung has substantial potential since it is a centre of information and technological innovation with the headquarters of Indonesia's largest telecom industry, PT. TELKOM, in the city. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of industrialisation and business in Bandung has impinged upon its urban environment. Furthermore, a study reveals that rapid land use changes resulting in unmanageable traffic conditions and uncontrolled population (Arifwidodo, 2014, p. 243) have been recurring problems that government and urban planners in the city have not yet able to handle. Due to the emergent creativity-based economy which takes the form of an extensive clothing industry, food courts, and more and more shops in Juanda Street (alongside Dago street), Riau Street, and Cihampelas arcade, as well as on the streets surrounding Bandung Institute Technology and University of Padjajaran, the functions of a pedestrian zone as public space are curtailed (Soemardi & Radjawali, 2004). Furthermore, deficits in the quality of the urban environment have recently been exacerbated by the market-based economy and institutional weaknesses in excluding grassroots aspirations (Martokusumo, 2002).

Under a thematic government-led development profile called the Bandung Metropolitan Area (BMA), foreign and domestic investors have flocked from the capital city Jakarta to invest in Bandung. This investment takes the form of property acquisitions and hospitality businesses, and it has led to spatial pressures in Bandung, marked by declining public space in the city (Firman, 2010). For example, for commercial purposes, the government has endangered some important historical sites. The Bandung Cultural Preservation Committee led a protest against the Bandung local government when a heritage building in the city, Dago Catholic Senior High School, which was built in the early 1940s, was demolished and converted to commercial premises (The Jakarta Globe, 2012) despite a decree on local heritage conservation having been passed as provincial legislation. This example illustrates how urban development often attempts to spatially homogenise the place for commercial purposes (Mirza, 2010) rather than allowing coming generations to obtain direct knowledge about the historical past of the city. In other words, the local government is dismantling the memory of the past to create new faces for the city (Kusno, 2010).

Underlying the above-mentioned problems, we will discuss below some local initiatives that could engage more citizen participation to collaborate in addressing the situation regarding urban areas.

Environmentalism as local initiatives in Bandung

Along with growing awareness about environmental dangers triggered by industrialisation, much of the environmentalism taking place in the global south has become part of a solution. The gap in the implementation of sustainable development has stimulated a number of initiatives and social movements at both national and international levels (Siebenhüner & Heinrichs, 2010, p. 186). As Bandung experiences on-going environmental problems related to city expansion, many community organisations are being formed and actions are being undertaken by young people in the city with a shared mission to recreate Bandung as a liveable city in Indonesia. Several organisations that are worth mentioning are the Bird Conservation Society (BICONS), *Culindra*, *Komunitas Taman Kota* (City Park Community), Riset Indie, *Sahabat Kota* (Friends of the City), U-Green, *Sahabat WALHI* (SAWA), Greenpeace Youth Volunteer Bandung, and Backsilmove. In general, these organisations were all founded by creative young people aged between 19 and 29 years.

Of these organisations, BICONS is the oldest, as it was founded in Bandung on September 24th 1999 by a group of university students studying biology and animal conservation at institutes such as University of Padjajaran and Indonesian Education University (UPI, Bandung). The majority of them were concerned about the decline in numbers of birds in urban Bandung as a result of their devastated habitat due to expansive urban development (Suharko et al., 2014). Since its establishment, BICONS has focused on conserving bird habitats. *Yayasan Peduli Alam Lestari* (YPAL, or Nature Conservancy Care Foundation) was their initial umbrella organisation with a role to connect them with external networks like funding donors and international bird experts (Suharko et al., 2014). Instead of limiting its work to bird conservation, BICONS has extended its activities to research, training, environmental education, and public outreach to instil environmental consciousness. To allow the public to appreciate the existence of current bird habitats in urban Bandung, this organisation runs a regular weekly activity, namely Sunday Bird Watching (SBW), through which interested people can come and be provided with one-day training for observing birds in designated areas in Bandung such as parks, hills, and forests where large numbers of birds fill the sky.

Other organisations that orient their actions toward reviving the sustainable use of urban parks in Bandung are *Culindra*, *Komunitas Taman Kota* and *Sahabat Kota*. Even though their work lies in the nexus of urban parks and the participation of people, their core activities to engage more public participation are different.

Since the establishment of *Culindra* in 2012, this organisation has used the urban festival called *Parktivity* (a blend of ‘park’ plus ‘activity’) to educate the public about pro-environmental behaviour. Between 2012 and 2014, *Parktivity* has been organised annually. Its concept was adopted from a simple urban market which enabled people to visit several booths presenting environmental demonstrations and miniature experiments such as making bioporous absorption holes, the compounding of organic fertilizer, and managing household waste and garbage separation. As this action included numerous activities, it took place in two popular public parks in Bandung with plenty of shady trees, Praratayudha Park and Budaya Ganesha Park. In addition, open-mic and bandshows were also staged to encourage more visitors. With this activity, it is expected that the people in Bandung can have opportunities for socialising, hanging out, and befriending. In addition, environmental education designated for middle school students was organised. Through the Green Invasion Project, *Culindra* initiated a workshop to encourage an environmentally friendly lifestyle for all senior high schools students in Bandung. In the aftermath of the workshop, all participating schools were required to create student groups as ‘green’ change for disseminating the values of the importance of parks for public socialisation in Bandung. When the Babakan Siliwangi forest of Bandung was about to be commercialised, *Culindra* took part in the protest campaign by holding a music concert labelled ‘Baksil Afternoon Party’ to raise awareness among the young audience about the ecological crisis of this urban forest due to expansive development in Bandung. Partnering with the *Sanggar Olah Seni* (Art Workshop) organisation, whose members are Sundanese painters headquartered in the northeast area of Babakan Siliwangi forest, *Culindra* successfully held a screening of an award-winning video produced by university students, a story telling, and an afternoon of acoustics involving a local youth band.

Komunitas Taman Kota (City Park Community) is an organisation which was first created with headquarters in a miniature book kiosk in Bali Street in Bandung. Before it grew, Adjo Akasia, the founder, named this organisation *Komunitas Senyum Selalu* (Always Smiling Community) (Suharko et al, 2014). Citing the diminished function of parks in Bandung, *Komunitas Taman Kota* took the initiative to target school-aged children with public environmental education. The primary goal of targeting children was to get them closer to the atmosphere of parks and thereby introduce the socio-ecological function of parks for

socialisation and learning about the environment. In encouraging the participation of children, this organisation has conducted drawing and colouring competitions, puzzle arrangements, free children's book libraries, sporting activities, traditional games, nature adventures, collective lunches or potluck, and garage book sales. For teenage groups and young people in general, it organised an event called *Senjalogi* (in which *senja* means 'dawn') every Sunday afternoon, taking the form of a music concert and other art performances. This action was held to reflect the fact that young people in Bandung lack public space for expressing their identity. With *Senjalogi*, young people can showcase their artistic talent and increase their networks for socialising as well as nurture their sense of loving Bandung. Though Bandung is developing as a modern city, it lacks trees on the kerbside that would help the absorption of carbon monoxide. As a movement to tackle this issue, this organisation held a seed-bombing activity, in which they randomly spread the seeds of trees along the kerbsides.

Sahabat Kota targets children for education about the urban environment. It was established in 2007 by six university students who were dissatisfied with the limited number of urban playgrounds in Bandung. Initially, its activities were aimed to provide activities for children over the school holidays. Later, it developed this activity into an adventure, so children are taken to different city spots such as forests, rivers, creative industries, parks, and other city amenities to teach them about the presence of public spaces in Bandung. After the initial activities in 2007, more and more school-aged children have become interested in participating, and since then *Sahabat Kota* has turned into an annual school holiday program. In 2013, one of the leading activities, *Riung Gunung*, had a theme called *Mari Reka Kota* (finding treasure in the city). During this event all participating students were taken by bus around the city to visit specific sites such as forests, areas through which rivers flow, industrial areas for clothing, museums and other historical buildings, and government offices. The program concluded with a design exhibition for students, showcasing their Bandung City 2035 sustainable design. Besides educating children, this organisation has also forged a partnership with local stakeholders, such as Bandung's Nature Conservation Agency and Construction Work Agency, to help them create city planning for a sustainable livelihood.

Universities located in Bandung also contribute to the environmentalism by promoting pro-environmental attitude to urban citizens. Firstly there is U-Green, which is based in Bandung Institute of Technology. As it is situated on the campus, this organisational reporting goes up to the Student Directorate of ITB and the membership covers all students regardless of their study major. In preparing the members with environmental knowledge, U-Green organised an annual *Sekolah Hijau Muda* (Young Green School) course for members over three months. During this course, newcomers learn about diverse subjects related to forest degradation, waste management, animal conservation, and ecological philosophy, and they are also introduced to institutional arrangement. Field trips to devastated nature sites give first-hand experience to members about on-going environmental problems. U-Green programs are not limited to campaigning for an ecological lifestyle among campus academics and students, as it also embraces other global concerns such as energy conservation through activities such as Climate Change and Energy, Wild Animal Welfare (WAW), and Waste Management. WAW involves a Fauna Day event for school aged children to educate them about ethical treatment to the animals, and Waste Management promotes implementation of 3R (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) throughout the ITB campus. In addition to U-Green, other students have led environmental initiatives undertaken by University of Padjajaran headquartered UNPAD Green ID. This organisation primarily devotes their activity to the creation of the campus as an environmentally friendly space, and their programmes are largely environment campaigns for the public such as waste separation and management, as well as public outreach through nature photography competitions, a candle-light green music concert, an environmental roadshow and a campaign taking place in neighbouring villages.

With young people constituting 60 per cent of its population and having many national leading universities (e.g. UNPAD, ITB, and UPI), Bandung has become a strategic hub for large organisations to extend their working operation. Also digital media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) have enabled local environmental issues in Bandung to become viral across Indonesia, so it draws interest from national organisations, such as Greenpeace and WALHI, to establish subsidiary organisations in order to encourage more membership and to ensure that their values are instilled among the youth. In order to engage the participation of more young people, Greenpeace founded Greenpeace Volunteers in seven cities of Indonesia, including Bandung, where Greenpeace Volunteers Bandung has worked closely with Greenpeace Indonesia, especially on the Citarum River project. In 2012 the young volunteers became local activists and took contaminated water from this river to the major streets in the city during the *Hari Berhak Tahu* ('Right to Know' Day) commemoration. Their repertoire was extraordinary, as the activists wore astronaut outfits while walking along the street carrying the contaminated water in bottles. The involvement of young activists was instrumental in the success of the Greenpeace program for the Citarum River Campaign, particularly when assessing the properties of the victims in the aftermath of the critical Citarum flooding in 2012. The close proximity of Bandung to Jakarta allowed young people from both cities to engage in significant collective activities. When Bandung suffered its urban forest crisis in 2013, Greenpeace Volunteers from Bandung and Jakarta founded a protest organisation, Backsilmove, to present the grievances of young people towards the commercialisation plan of the Babakan Siliwangi urban forest. The credibility of this organisation cannot be underestimated because they successfully enacted a protest rally from Babakan Siliwangi forest towards Gedung Sate parliamentary building, mobilising more than 40 young people. In front of the building, this group of vigorous young people enacted a theatrical performance as a symbol of dissatisfaction with and opposition to the government. The rally caught the attention of the public as well as national media, as the movement was widely published in Indonesia's two prominent newspapers, KOMPAS and Media Indonesia. In contrast with Greenpeace Volunteer Bandung, *Sahabat WALHI*'s actions are less political. Though WALHI as the mother organisation dominates the SAWA's governance, especially in deciding what can be organised and what can not, SAWA has gained popularity among local young people who are interested in online 'eco-bombing': campaigning about the dangers of the Incinerator Power Plant in Bandung on Twitter after the end of a rally.

Urban transport is vital to support the mobility of citizens within the city. However, the failure of governing transportation following the zoning exacerbated the situation in the city itself. Bandung is no exception. Research reveals that the unplanned urban and peri-urban areas in Bandung generated a high motorised transport dependency (Permana, Perera and Kumar 2008). Although Bandung municipal government has provided 66 routes for city public transportation serving passengers 24 hours a day (Ghazali & Martini, 2012, p. 321), the city remains crowded and people tend to commute using their private vehicles. Furthermore, a study into private vehicle use confirms this fact that high ownership of cars (40%) and motorcycles (60%) (Soesanti & Nakai, 2010) has been a significant factor leading to congestion. To encounter these problems, a local organisation, Riset Indie, developed *Angkot Day* movement to campaign for the use of a collective city mini shuttle bus (*angkutan kota/angkot*) to lower congestion in Bandung. In practice, Riset Indie held the event for the whole of one day free-of-charge. As part of social experimentation, the conduct of *Angkot Day* was instrumental in instilling awareness among people about the convenience of using *Angkot* for sustainable commuting.

Conclusion: Future ‘Assemblages’

As a rapidly developing city, Bandung is experiencing environmental problems related to urban area expansion and industrialisation. Regarding this matter, the paper has briefly shed light on some key environmental problems in Bandung and the ways local initiatives in the form of youth based environmental organisations (Skogen, 1996) have incorporated their actions to help minimise the impacts through a range of environmental education and campaigns. Although the number of these organisations is not large, they have emerged as transformative players and provided ‘some background to the recent development of grass roots “assemblages” of environmental activism’ (Nilan & Wibawanto 2015, p. 62) in shifting the consciousness of urban citizens to alternative visions in order to make the city more liveable.

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