

Urban Growth, Youth and Environmentalism driving Local Initiatives in Bandung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism in urban Indonesia has been marked by massive industrialisation. As elsewhere, many of today's environmental problems are direct or indirect consequences of the everyday behaviours of people in the past and the present who will not be here in 50 years. With the city of Bandung as an example this paper looks at local anti-development environmental initiatives enacted by different grassroots organisations comprised primarily of young people who might well become the country's leaders of the future. Drawing on fieldwork between 2013 and 2014, the paper examines how these youth-dominated organisations have challenged rampant development and industrialisation. The purposeful collective identity of young environmentalists is also briefly considered.

Keywords: urban environmental problems, young people, activism, local initiatives

Youth and Environment

Youth are at the forefront of movements that seek to bring about justice and social change, including environmentalism. Young people have every reason to feel concerned, since they will literally inherit the earth. We know that the period of youth and emerging adulthood is an important time of transition to adult roles and responsibilities, including civic engagement (Arnett 2006). Due to their strong idealism and energy, pro-environmentalist youth organizers can be very effective in reaching out to other young people and members of their communities (Riemer and Patterson 2009).

However, this does not mean all youth are activists in the making. Wray- Lake, Flanagan, and Osgood (2010) examined international trends in young people's environmental attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours across three decades. They found an overall decline in personal conservation behaviours and increase in assigning environmental responsibility to the government. Other studies also suggest that environmental concerns have recently become less salient among young people (for example, Twenge, Campbell and Freeman 2012). It is perhaps surprising then to find a strong presence of young people in environmental activism in several rapidly developing Indonesian cities, including Bandung. This paper explores that phenomenon.

Urban Crisis in Bandung

Indonesia faces environmental challenges from both poorly regulated development and growing population pressure. Cities have grown exponentially, along with the middle class. Urban public spaces are littered and polluted. There is little regulation of polluting activities, and minimal public consciousness of uncontrolled building and industrial development. Nevertheless, environmental groups, often founded and led by young people, try to raise the consciousness of the population (Nilan 2015). Pro-growth urban planning and fast-tracked development reduces physical public urban space. Decentralisation has accelerated flow of investment into urban areas (Aritenang 2013). Enhanced by the technological affordances of SMS and social media, there is mounting social protest, not least because the government has ignored the public in decision-making.

Broadly speaking, environmentalist views in Indonesia are most often framed around conservation concerns (di Gregorio 2012), and Bandung proves no exception because rapidly growing industrialisation and commercialisation have impinged upon its urban environment (Arifwidodo 2014). Bandung was the second largest metropolitan area in Indonesia in 2011, with 2,420,146 inhabitants living in a 153 km² area (Statistical Bureau of Bandung 2011). This prosperous city is a centre of information and technology innovation. Indonesia's largest telecommunications company headquarters is located here. Attempting to sustain strong growth, the municipal government has boosted a 'creative-based' cultural economy, which has encouraged more people to come to the city for jobs and further their education (Soemardi and Radjawali 2004).

Martin-Iverson (2014: 534) notes Bandung's historical orientation to global modernity and cosmopolitan culture. In Dutch Colonial times it was known as the 'Paris of Java', and is now 'a showcase for the nation's modernisation and a centre for manufacturing and education (...) something of a "style capital" for Indonesia, a major centre for many interrelated creative industries, including fashion, music, visual arts and new media'. However, the consequences of untrammelled development have been disastrous. A recent study reveals 'rapid land use changes, unmanageable traffic conditions, and uncontrolled population' (Arifwidodo 2014: 243). Lack of regulation, accountability and proper planning has caused recurring problems that the local government has not been able to control.

Under a government-led development profile called the Bandung Metropolitan Area (BMA), foreign and domestic investors flocked from the capital city, Jakarta, to invest in Bandung property acquisitions and hospitality businesses. This has led to spatial pressures in Bandung, marked by declining public space in the city. The government has attempted to resolve this issue by sacrificing some significant historical sites for the sake of commercial needs. Their actions demonstrate how urban development often attempts to spatially homogenise a city for commercial purposes (Mirza 2010). In other words, the local government is dismantling the memory of the past to craft new faces of the city (Kusno 2010).

Li (2007: 263) acknowledges that while individual Indonesians may become environmentalists, it is through collective knowledge and initiative that significant pro-environmental action groups come about and make change. Young people – who do not have political power – have taken the lead in such organisations, and they reach out to members of the Bandung public from all walks of life. Martin-Iverson (2014: 535) notes that Bandung is a significant 'centre of modern urban youth culture' in Indonesia. He also notes 'an assertive pride in the local' among Bandung alternative music scene youth. Our findings in this paper therefore support the argument of Maffesoli (1996: 1-2) that social movement praxis is a space where transformative potential, 'is characterised by *puissance* – the "energy and vital force of the people" rather than *pouvoir* – top-down institutionalised power'.

Environmentalism as a Local Initiative

Many 'green' community organisations and actions have been initiated by young urbanites with a common mission to restore Bandung to a liveable city. For the most part these young people are from middle class backgrounds, and well- educated. While formal learning about the environment is confined to some university courses, informal learning takes place in such collectives. Discussed below are the Bird Conservation Society (*BICONS*), *Culindra*, *Komunitas Taman Kota* (City Park Community), *Sahabat Kota* (Friends of the City), *U-Green*, *UNPAD Green ID*, Greenpeace Youth Volunteers Bandung and *Backsilmove*. A general characteristic of the organisations is firstly that the founders were creative young people aged between 19 and 29 years old; and secondly that they attract youngmembers.

BICONS was founded in 1999 by a group of university students studying Biology. They protested the decline in local bird species and habitat due to intense urban development (Suharko et al. 2014). *BICONS* has since extended its activities to research, training, environmental education and outreach. To encourage awareness of local bird habitats there is Sunday Bird Watching (SBW) which offers one day training in observing birds in designated areas of Bandung where birds nest and flock. Enthusiastic young *BICONS* members conduct the training.

Three organisations aiming to revive sustainable use of urban parks are *Culindra*, *Komunitas Taman Kota* and *Sahabat Kota*. The young artists of *Culindra* provide an annual urban festival - *Parktivity* - to educate Bandung people about pro-environmental behaviour using a simple urban market format. People visit stalls displaying environmental demonstrations and experiments, such as bio-porous absorption holes, organic fertiliser and the management of household waste. The festival takes place in two prominent parks with shadytrees and greenery. An open-mike and band show is staged to attract young visitors and others to socialise, hang out, and learn about the environment. Through its Green Invasion Project workshop, *Culindra* encourages an environmentally friendly lifestyle among senior high school students. Following the workshop, each school starts a 'green' student group to disseminate information about the value of parks for public socialising. When the extensive Babakan Siliwangi (Baksil) city forest was about to be commercialised, *Culindra* took part in the protest campaign with an open air concert called 'Baksil Afternoon Party', which aimed to sensitise its young audience to the ecological crisis facing the urban forest. *Culindra* partnered with the *Sanggar Olah Seni* (Art Workshop) organisation, Sundanese painters headquartered in the northeast area of Babakan Siliwangi forest to stage theparty.

Komunitas Taman Kota (City Park Community) was founded by a youthful Adjo Akasia (Suharko et al. 2014) to draw school-aged children to parks and introduce them to socio-ecological functions of socialising in nature and learning about the environment. *Komunitas Taman Kota* conducts drawing and colouring competitions, a free children's book library, sporting activities, traditional games, a nature adventure, a collective lunch or potlach, and a second- hand book sale – all in parks. For young people there is the weekly *Senjalogi* event including open-air music concerts and art performances. Young people in Bandung now lack public space for expressing their identity. *Senjalogi* allows them to showcase their artistic talent, build more networks for socialising, and nurture their love for green spaces. *Komunitas Taman Kota* is currently concerned about the city's lack of trees to help absorb carbon monoxide gas. They recently conducted guerrilla seed-bombing on kerbsides. Similar organisation *Sahabat*

Kota was founded in 2007 by six university students discontented with the limited number of urban playgrounds. At first they simply provided school holiday activities. Later, urban ecological adventures were developed. Children were transported to city forests, rivers and parks to teach them about the vital function of public space. Great interest saw this become an annual school holiday program. *Sahabat Kota* has forged partnerships with local stakeholders Nature

Conservation Agency and Construction Work Agency to collectively contribute to sustainable cityplanning.

University students actively contribute to promoting pro-environmental attitudes. One student-led organisation, U-Green, organises an annual *Sekolah Hijau Muda* (Young Green School) three month course. Young people study diverse subjects relating to forest degradation, waste management, animal conservation and ecological philosophy. Field trips to devastated nature sites demonstrate on-going environmental problems. The U-Green Wild Animal Welfare program includes Fauna Day which teaches school aged children about the ethical treatment of animals. Sustainable Waste Management is modelled through the implementation of 3R (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) on campus. At a different university, UNPAD Green ID devotes its attention to the development of the campus as an environmentally friendly space. They campaign on waste separation and management. They also host a nature photography competition, a candle-lit green music concert, an environmental road show and a sustainability campaign in localneighbourhoods.

Worldwide ENGOs have extended their working operations to Bandung. For example, Greenpeace Volunteers Bandung has worked on the conservation of the Citarum River. In 2012, on their own initiative, young volunteers ceremoniously carried contaminated river water through the city centre on a day of celebration. The effect was extraordinary, as they wore astronaut outfits while walking along the street with the bottled contaminated water. Their involvement looks to have been instrumental in the success of the Greenpeace Citarum River project, since there was markedly less local property damage after the 2012 floods. When the Babakan Siliwangi urban forest was threatened by government- approved developers in 2013, Greenpeace youth volunteers independently founded the protest organisation Backsilmove to present young people's grievances against the development site plan. Using SMS and social media, they successfully mobilised a protest rally of young people which processed from the city forest to the parliamentary building. With national media cameras focused on them, Greenpeace Volunteers Bandung presented a dramatic theatrical performance that symbolised their disgruntlement and opposition to the government-sanctioned plan. The rally was widely publicised in Indonesia's two prominent newspapers, KOMPAS and Media Indonesia. The forest was eventually saved due to the collective efforts of many youth-basedorganisations.

Collective youth identity

None of these organisations could function without the concerted efforts of young people. Interviews with Bandung environmental youth activists revealed a strong commitment, for example, 'we need to do something, and remaining silent is not a solution' (William, M, 23). One young woman declaredstaunchly,

A real activist is someone who can defend her ideology with whatsoever means she has. Aside from that, she must be able to measure the risk and protect herself from any threat. Being in a movement is not necessarily shouting out loud in front of the public, but we should be able to face groups who disagree with our standpoints (Larissa, F.19).

Hung (2011) indicates that young people who develop a strong attachment to place can become highly aware of the social, spatial, political and economic forces that impact on their communities, and Larissa seems to exemplify that kind of 'located' political activist stance. Moreover, it seems that for many of them love of nature was an importantmotivation,

In early 2013 I was shocked to hear that part of Babakan Siliwangi would be developed as a (hotel)/restaurant complex. As someone who loves nature that moment wrenched my feelings and put me down. When I heard that so many newspaper headlines were covering the annexation of Babakan Siliwangi my hands were shaking. It was like I had lost my own home (Gibrán, M.22).

Gibran's reaction to the proposed degradation of an urban green space was clearly emotional. This finding aligns with the claim by James, Bixler and Valda (2010) that early and sustained involvement in nature and with environmental causes leads to a crystallization of a young person's identity around their environmental work as they journey towards adulthood.

Greenpeace Volunteers Bandung was a rallying point for young activists because they learned a great deal that made sense of pro-environmental feelings they had earlier in life,

Before joining Greenpeace I had been concerned with our people's behaviour. They are not thankful to God who has bestowed Bandung with clean air and nature air to be protected, conserved, and preserved (...) there are no shady places on the street side to sit but the government workers are felling the trees for flyovers and they allow private companies to install advertising roll banners which are only profitable for some (Cindy, F,21).

This supports the argument of Hung (2011: 578) that 'young people's experiences, perception, and attachment to different places inform the strategies and stances of their social and political activities'. The young people acted on their own emotional reactions to disturbing environmental degradation of the familiar urban landscape.

Greenpeace Indonesia offers specific training for young urban volunteers that requires a sense of purpose and consolidates a feeling of collective identity in the struggle for sustainability,

Once we are trained by Greenpeace every volunteer will be assigned a task related to the local residents or at the grassroots and we must be willing to accept that offer (Anita, F,19).

This echoes the finding of Chan (2009: 257) on the evolution of environmental activist identities, 'the story progresses through high points, low points, and turning points that focus on themes of agency and developing a sense of identity as an agent of change'. It seems that through their experiences with nature and their early community awareness, a merging of the self with the environment occurs such that a motivation toward, and commitment to, environmental activism emerges for Bandung activist youth who share a collective 'green' identity.

Conclusion

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 will translate environmental resources into economic assets that can leverage profitability for investment. They earn profit by the direct exploitation of nature and compromise environmental sustainability for future generations. These processes have led to concerns about urban environmental loss in many Indonesian cities. This paper has briefly shed light on some of the key youth-based organisations in Bandung that are challenging the status quo of untrammelled urban development. While the number of these organisations is not large, they have emerged as transformative players (Nilan and Wibawanto 2015) in shifting the consciousness of the urban citizenry to alternative visions for making the city sustainable.

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