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Formal and informal flood governance in Jakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

In many respects, present-day Indonesia meets the criteria for effective decentralization—it has a political party system with multiple parties, free press and democratic elections—and it has been trumpeted as a democratic success story within Southeast Asia. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Indonesia scholars conclude in their studies that the principle of decentralization in Indonesia fails in many areas. One major problem is that while local governments now have the power to act, they do not have the means or capacities. As a result, governance has not truly become more democratic or inclusive. This paper challenges the assumed relationship between effective decentralization and democratic or inclusive governance by examining flood-disaster management in Jakarta: although decentralization policies have been effectively implemented in this area, no inclusive government or community empowerment has been developed in the city's most flood-prone neighbourhoods. By taking a bottom-up approach, this paper reveals that while flood-risk governance is increasingly effectively coordinated on a subnational level, riverbank settlers stick to alternative ways to cope with floods. Rather than accepting aid and support from formal political institutions, they pursue their interests and needs through informal channels.

1. Introduction: decentralization in Indonesia

From 1999 onwards, Indonesia made the transition away from an authoritarian regime to more democratic forms of governance, implementing some of the most ambitious and far-reaching decentralization policies (in terms of democratic power handed down to cities and regencies) to have been attempted anywhere in the world (Bunnell & Miller, 2011; Douglass, 2013; Firman, 2009; Green, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; Miller & Bunnell, 2013).

It was expected that effective decentralization would lead to more transparent use of public funds; that funding would be used more efficiently in promoting local development and improving the quality of public service provisions (Firman, 2014: 215); and that local governments, communities and legislative councils would be empowered, drawing the government closer to the citizenry. In line with this expectation, decentralization policies in urbanizing Asia have aimed to encourage the active involvement of urban residents in issues such as environmental sustainability, public service delivery, community building and socio-political stability in often densely concentrated and ethnically diverse populations.

In some respects, present-day Indonesia meets the criteria for effective decentralization: it has democratic elections and a political party system with multiple parties and a free press. Furthermore, some provinces, districts and municipalities have been able to develop impressively under the reform (Von Luebke, 2009), while cities like Solo and Surabaya have been successful in urban development (Firman, 2014). The chief common denominator in successfully developed places was active and capable mayoral leadership that stimulated inclusive governance (Miller, 2013: 875). Nevertheless, academic assessments of Indonesia's urban governance are overwhelmingly negative (e.g. Firman, 2009; Green, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; Sutardi, 2004). One problem is that while local governments now have the power to act, they lack the means or capacities. The implementation of Indonesia's decentralization reform has also been criticized for neglect of bottom-up accountability, design flaws in fiscal equalization, and deficiencies in the operational capacity for local governance (Shah & Thompson, 2004: 25–33). Moreover, some of Indonesia's regions are worse off now when compared to pre-decentralization times, especially those that suffered from poor leadership by local elites. Under the new decentralization policy, local governments in Indonesia have become increasingly inward-looking in orientation, which results

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in unsustainable, self-serving political action. Some have started to exploit the local resources more intensively, and appear unconcerned with the socio-economic conditions of the larger region of which they are part (Firman, 2014; Shah & Thompson, 2004: 34; Silver, 2003: 421). Hence, while Indonesia's decentralization can be considered successful in accomplishing some of its goals within a short period of time, its longer-term success is not assured as the reform has failed to recognize and give incentives for local governments to be accountable and responsive to the public.

This paper contributes to the discussion on decentralization by taking a less explored, bottom-up perspective. While the studies discussed above tend to assume a large impact of formal political institutions on the daily lives of ordinary people (suggesting that effective implementation of decentralization policies will lead to 'democratic' or 'inclusive' governance, while ineffective implementation of decentralization policies will lead or sustain 'undemocratic' or 'exclusive' governance), I argue that a top-down approach overemphasizes the impact of decentralization processes on the daily lives of marginalized communities, while underemphasizing the informal, unorganized ways by which poor or vulnerable actors in society are able to pursue their interests and negotiate beneficially with more powerful actors in society. Often, the marginalized pursue their interests not through formal bureaucratic institutions, but instead through informal channels of power (for example, by engaging with middle-men). Hence, it is not (just) formal rules and regulations that shape cities; instead, a large part of 'city-making' is done by ordinary, non-political actors, who often work around the formal rules and find their own ways to cope with problems (see Chatterjee, 2006 on India; Chabal & Daloz, 1999 on Africa; Simone, 2010 and Van Voorst, 2014a,b on Indonesia). Building upon these observations, this paper proposes that, even in an area where decentralization is effectively implemented, this does not necessarily have a large impact on the popular politics of the poor.

As a case study, I focus on flood governance in a flood-prone riverbank settlement in Indonesia's national capital Jakarta. Data underlying this paper were obtained during one year of anthropological fieldwork in 2010–2011, followed up by subsequent visits to the research area in 2014 and 2015. My main methods were participant observation, conducting surveys and in-depth interviews on coping strategies with 130 riverbank settlers. In addition, I interviewed over 25 policymakers and flood experts, and analyzed policy documents and literature on flood governance.

Jakarta provides an important site for examining the outcomes and implications of wider processes of decentralization and democratization, because it has experienced profound economic, political and social transformations during the period of decentralization (Bunnell & Miller, 2011: 36). Indonesia's highly centralized and hierarchical system of government has long meant that political power was truly concentrated in the capital territory, and it is still home to the national executive and legislative power. Yet it has also become a city region with decentralized city administrations, each with their own spheres of authority. The 'Special Capital Territory of Jakarta' is one of Indonesia's four decentralizing regions with special province status. It comprises five cities and one district (consisting of nearby islands). This complexity becomes visible in the issue of flood governance: the Ciliwung river, the largest and most flood-prone river in Jakarta, crosses the provincial administrative regions of West Java and of Jakarta and cuts across local jurisdictional boundaries. Consequently, floods are formally governed partly by the national state, partly by the provincial Disaster Agency, and partly by the local sub-districts. Flood governance is a topic particularly relevant to decentralization, as disasters must be considered 'part of the politics of governing cities' (Douglass, 2013: 5). Flooding disaster management requires capable, committed governments to be effective (*ibid.*); and in the highly flood-prone city of Jakarta, urban authorities are put to the test frequently.

2. Jakarta's flood governance

Although periodic inundations were already a rather common phenomenon in Jakarta during colonial times, the severity and frequency of floods in the city have seriously increased in recent decades due to geographical, demographic, environmental and infrastructural reasons (Brinkman, 2009; Caljouw, Nas, & Pratiwo, 2005; Texier, 2008). Recurrent floods are a nuisance for all of Jakarta's residents, but they are a major concern for the city's 3.5 million slum dwellers, who live in Jakarta's most flood-prone locations and who are most vulnerable to the negative consequences of floods (Texier, 2008; Van Voorst & Hellman, 2015). In the communities where research for this article was conducted, every rainy season brings along floods of at least 1 m high that create economic losses and disease outbreaks (Haryanto, 2009; 2010).

Urban floods typically lead to the destruction or damage of property, thus reproducing or worsening poverty among vulnerable groups in society (Zoleta-Nantes, 2000: 77). They also have negative impacts on health. Strong currents and electrocution can cause injuries or death. Furthermore, floods often pose a high risk of the rapid spread of communicable diseases, such as diarrhea, influenza and skin infections (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 2003: 220; Few, 2003: 46) or induce severe mental stress and anxiety (Green, Tunstall, & Fordham, 1991: 234).

Since flood victims together form an enormous voter bank for Jakarta's politicians, it comes as no surprise that the issue of flooding is an increasing concern for policymakers in Jakarta. Over the past decades, different steps towards a solution have been taken. Firstly, flood governance was decentralized: gradually, less responsibility for disasters came to lie with the national government, and more with the city *(kota)* or the regency *(kebupaten)*. It was hoped that decentralization would make it easier for local governments to respond adequately to floods, without having to wait for orders 'from above'. Secondly, to institutionalize disaster-management decentralization in Jakarta, a vast number of flood mitigation policies, strategies and projects have been formulated and to a certain extent also implemented. Most importantly, in 2004 Indonesia adapted the 1974 Water Resources Law. The new law (No. 7/2004) was meant to formally change the role of the government in accordance with a decentralized management style (Hadi, 2008). It proscribes duties, authorities and responsibilities of the different government levels and the community, and covers planning, utilization and emergency aspects of water resources and flood control. Also, interagency disaster task forces have been created, to coordinate disaster management at the provincial level (SATKORLAK), the district level (SATLAK) and the sub-district level (SATGOS/POSKO). A national body provides central coordination (BAKORNAS), with support from technical ministries including the Directorate General for Water Resources (DGWR) of the Ministry of Public Works (PU). The National Forestry Department still has the responsibility for upper watershed conservation, and six regional Watershed Management Units have been set up in Java. The districts are responsible for implementation of activities aiming at conserving water resources and reducing erosion. Furthermore, the city's RTRW Spatial Plan 2030 (produced in 2013 by Jakarta's Bureau of Spatial Planning and Environment) emphasizes that floods are a main issue for the city government. There has also been a growing awareness of the need for spatial plans to include West Java as an interconnected region of waterways (Ma'mun 2012: 62–67).