13 Another City is Possible!

The Urban Social Forum in Indonesia

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Introduction

The Urban Social Forum (USF) is an annual civil society-led Indonesian forum that brings together NGOs, community-based organizations, practitioners, students, and social leaders, working towards improving cities for a one-day gathering. The slogan of the event "Another City is Possible!" suggests its aim, to challenge people to re-imagine the city by seeking alternative policies and initiatives that can address persistent and urgent problems. By offering a free and public space the event provides an opportunity for participants, from across Indonesia and beyond, to come together to exchange knowledge, build collaborative networks, and inspire people to bring about change in their communities. On another level the objective of the forum is to develop a grassroots civil society coalition and to capture the emerging issues that might become the basis of a platform for advocacy—a new urban agenda.

Over the past five years the USF in Indonesia has developed from a small meeting to become a national-level event. The first meeting was held in Surakarta (also known as Solo) in 2013, and was initially inspired by the World Social Forum and other Urban Social Forum events held around the world. Since then it has been held a second time in Solo (2014), in Surabaya (2015), in Semarang (2016), and in Bandung (2017). Initiated by the Solo-based Indonesian NGO *Kota Kita*, which has led the push for the event's expansion, the USF now operates with several civil society partner organizations and individuals that form a Steering Committee and an Implementing Committee.

Origins of the Urban Social Forum

The USF emerged in 2013 following critical reflection on why urban issues were not more visible or higher on the public agenda in Indonesia, and why the public and government at large lacked the requisite awareness of problems and collective desire to explore alternative pathways. One of the identified problems was that the collection of organizations that make up urban civil society was simply not doing enough to push government at various levels towards more progressive policies. The roots of this problem are difficult to isolate, but Indonesia's vast size and sprawl across thousands of islands, and the many pressing issues that NGOs focus on, has led to difficulties in connecting across cities, islands, and sectors. There are also problems within civil society activism itself.

Local civil society activism began to flourish immediately following Indonesia's *Reformasi* period (1998–2002) with a surge of civil society organizations and activity. This arose, in part, due to new legislation that decentralized decision-making from the capital of Jakarta, to districts and cities. These regions were awarded autonomy to design and implement their own policies, elect their own mayors, and raise local revenue.[1] This was accompanied by a sweeping tide of public interest in issues such as democracy, transparency, environmental justice, and reform. Sadly this momentum has not been sustained evenly across the archipelago. When external funding support withdrew many NGOs were forced to close down, and from the mid-2000s there had been much less activism. Some Indonesian civil society activists believe the shrinking pool of funding has set NGOs against each other as competitors for resources, undermining previous efforts for coalitions and alliances. Also many NGOs still adopt a largely *anti*-government approach, rather than engaging with them to bring about change. In the urban arena this may have contributed to the fragmenting of civil society action, which lacked coherence and a common set of goals.

At the same time urbanization has continued to accelerate across the archipelago as in much of Asia more widely, with population growth pushing more and more into cities, exacerbating poor conditions and particularly affecting the urban poor.[2] In Indonesia city governments have few mechanisms to raise money locally, are largely reliant on central government transfers, and often possess limited human and administrative resources at local-level, so there are limited ways for them to respond to burgeoning urban needs. As a result systemic failures, for example in water and sanitation supply, trash collection, and housing, undermine sustainable urban development. While local governments may be the ones who are best positioned

to implement policies that can improve cities, they are often not empowered or capable of doing so.

The developmental imagination of local governments is also hampered by the disproportionate influence that private sector developers wield in shaping Indonesian cities. With an increasing dependence of cities on private sector investment to create employment, provide housing and infrastructure, and to modernize deteriorating locales, private sector developers are increasingly being relied upon to shape the vision of cities. Many mayors are more than willing to support them. The result is often the re-shaping of cities through the serial-replication of commercial districts, waterfronts, and large mixed-used developments—in line with what Mike Douglass (this volume; chapter 20) refers to as the "globopolis" version of the city—which have become a regular feature of Indonesian urban life.

Another reason why "globopolis" predominates is because few other voices have the power to suggest any kind of alternative vision for the city. Public awareness about urban policies and planning is low, and citizens are often apathetic when faced with unrelenting problems such as traffic and flooding, even during mayoral elections. Citizens have very little recourse to address issues that matter to them, and with the complexity of any serious efforts to deal with them many shrug their shoulders and accept them as part of city life. Citizen response is often muted and not aggregated at a scale that anyone pays attention to beyond the lip service given during election time.

While international development agencies and civil society organizations do work on urban issues, for the most part international development aid is focused on supporting national and local governments. Project funding often flows to support reforming government bureaucracies, improving planning, or financing infrastructure, not on raising awareness or increasing the voice of citizens to share their concerns and propose solutions. Furthermore, efforts to address urban issues can often become futile if government leadership changes, or key government officials are re-assigned to different departments, and the reform of government bureaucracies is not an easy task, even for the most committed mayors. Bringing about change in the way governments work is slow, and given the scale of problems, is insufficient. The USF began by challenging a *supply-driven* approach and arguing that to improve government performance and policies a more mobilized and informed civil society sector was needed to *create demand*—to push harder for government change.

Developing an Alternative

In order to start moving towards an improved city, we first need to know where we're going, and that requires formulating and sharing a vision of what kind of city that would be. Some of the barriers to creating a vision of the city are matters of imagination. Citizens are not often challenged or empowered to imagine alternative possibilities for their communities and cities, however this capacity is essential to creating a sense of agency and direction.[3] As a result citizens may feel apathy and resignation towards the status quo. The USFs were developed to not only affirm that another city *is* possible, but to initiate a discussion and exchange about what form it might take. The intention is thus to challenge the existing form that the city has taken, one that has created inequality, exclusion, poverty, pollution, and injustice, and ask participants to imagine something different. The open question is really not *only* what that idealized city is like, but how we get there too.

13.1   Sadyawan Sumardi (second from right) shares his experiences as an activist fighting riverbank relocation in Jakarta. He sits to the left of Mayor Tri Rismaharini of Surabaya, in the opening plenary panel of the 3rd Urban Social Forum in 2015.
Photograph by author.

The USF is an exercise in bringing together voices and perspectives that are usually forgotten, neglected, or under-represented in the life of the city. These voices are not just excluded from planning and policymaking, but in dominant expressions of who belongs and who does not. However, in the search for alternative pathways and new imaginations of the city, it is precisely from these groups, be they the urban poor, youth, the disabled, LGBT, women, or even those from neglected regions such as cities in Eastern Indonesia, where potentially transformational ideas lie. The fact that the USF is non-hierarchical and deliberately open, stressing the inclusion of any and all participants, regardless of how marginal or peripheral they may be, encourages the sense that everyone has something to offer, and that everyone can benefit from those around them. The event creates the setting for a conversation amongst these people, to gather from them new ideas and perspectives that can inspire change and action. From this discourse may emerge not only a new agenda for cities, but also a coalition of communities from across, as well as between, cities that can help to make change happen.

How Does the Event Work?

The 1-day event occurs once a year and is organized by both a local Implementing Committee, as well as a Steering Committee. Both are made up of civil society organizations, universities, and activists; the organizational support is all voluntary. The Steering Committee manages efforts to reach out to participants, partner organizations, and communications, through a collaborative process of sharing responsibilities and decisions.

During the event there are plenary sessions at the beginning and end, and in between there are a number of parallel sessions on a wide range of different topics. The first plenary session usually hosts well-recognized speakers, such as a popular mayor, an inspiring activist, or public intellectual, who serve to provoke thinking about the importance of citizen involvement and alternative approaches to re-thinking the city. During the plenary sessions any organization is free to host a panel, and they reflect an increasingly wide range of interests, from housing to waste management, and urban governance to climate change. During the parallel sessions speakers exchange experiences and perspectives, and participants are able to ask questions and take part in the discussion.

Over the course of the first four years there have been a number of panels that have been featured continuously, while others are new and might be organized to respond to a particular moment or issue. For example, the panels on riverbank settlements, participatory budgeting, and

13.2 The 3rd Urban Social Forum in Surabaya (2015) drew over a thousand participants, many of whom were young activists and students keen to share ways to improve their communities.
Photograph by author.

climate change resilience, have been featured every year. These present an opportunity to continue a dialogue amongst stakeholders from year to year, updating and refreshing thinking, and getting activists to gather and meet in person. Other panels are more sporadic, they might arise from a local partner's initiative, or through the desire to share a particular project— panels on urban literacy initiatives, and the Swedish Embassy's program on city-to-city learning are examples.

As an event whose stated objective is to promote meetings and encounters amongst a variety of different civil society members, working on a range of issues from all over the country, a large emphasis is placed on the social nature of the gathering. During coffee break times, lunch, and even during parallel sessions, many participants use the opportunity to meet new people or engage with old colleagues and friends. The number of people has grown progressively, from around 120 during the first Forum (2013), 300 people for the second Forum, and the third and fourth brought together over 1,100 people (2015; 2016). As participation grows the networks and collaborations between people and organizations have multiplied too.

What are the Impacts? Three Lenses

With the event still in its infancy it is difficult to assess or draw many conclusions about its impact. However by taking three different lenses to review its achievements we can gain some useful insights into the kinds of changes that are slowly taking place, both at the event, as well as more broadly speaking in cities across Indonesia. The first is the growing role of youth in cities; second, the value of incorporating marginalized voices into contemporary discussions about the city; and finally the importance of looking beyond one's community and seeing the reality of others.

The Increasing Role of Youth in Cities

Indonesia is in the midst of a youth bulge, which has the potential to provide the economy with abundant opportunities, such as high productivity and economic gains; but, if ignored, may become a source of troublesome problems, including unemployment, dissatisfaction, and potentially unrest. To date youth have largely been ignored by government decision-making, their voices rarely represented, and their needs and issues not reflected in government budgets, programs and policies. In addition Indonesian society is largely deferential to the elders of society, and this serves to both stymie youth engagement, and provide some justification for adults speaking in their place.

While the youth generation's importance may not be reflected in their engagement with the public agenda of cities, their participation in the USF events reminds us to take their contributions and presence seriously. Consistently they have attended the event and in 2015 there were record numbers of young people who both attended and presented on numerous panels. Their active role at the event demonstrated that they are currently bringing about significant change to their communities and cities, and that these kinds of actions spur and inspire others to initiate their own projects. Many youths nowadays are showing their concern for society by volunteering to support local initiatives, and are dedicating their time to finding practical solutions for problems they see around them that aren't being dealt with by government. They are harnessing social media in ways that hadn't been possible before, and being much more familiar with the Internet, coding, and mobile technology tools than the generations before them, are spreading a new wave of activism in cities. Two examples, one about a social media campaign to reduce the use of plastic bags that went viral, and another about the rise in popularity of designing and using mo-

bile apps that empower and encourage youth activism, demonstrate their efforts well.

Trash is a huge and very visible problem in cities across Indonesia, and it is one that has persisted for a long time, despite efforts by governments and sporadic civil society attempts. One of the issues is that it requires both changes in policy, to improve trash collection systems, and the governance of urban areas to ensure that trash is removed hygienically. Another issue concerns the reduction in the proliferation of trash, in the face of increasing use of plastics and disposable materials in modern life. Youth across Indonesia may feel interested in trash-related issues but perceived that the government was not doing enough—so they decided to address it themselves. A group in Bandung fixed on perhaps the most omnipresent part of this—the use of plastic bags.

During the "Innovative and Alternative Trash Management" panel of the 3rd USF young people from four cities shared their experiences about how they are reducing trash and raising awareness about the problem. The Greeneration Foundation group launched a social media campaign, called #Waste4Change, to encourage young people to make an impact in their communities by raising awareness about the problem of using, and disposing of, plastic bags. They created a network of such groups across a number of cities, through student groups and small localized campaigns, and soon they were leading a national movement to reduce the use of plastic bags. The campaign became known as Diet Kantong Plastik, and involved offline gatherings with urban activists, government officials, and general public, plus hearings and meetings with city government, and ongoing social media campaign. Recently, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry chose Bandung as a pilot city to implement and reinforce the #Pay4Plastic initiatives in major retail shops in the city. This was one of many initiatives in which the enthusiastic aspirations of youth combined with new ideas and innovations.

In another panel during the third meeting, entitled "Technology, Creativity, and the City of Ideas", youth showed ways in which they are harnessing the possibilities of technology to bring about change in our cities. Designing apps has proven an effective way to spread messages, collect information, and help them start businesses and careers. The panel was an opportunity for them to share ideas, provide advice, and show how adaptive young people can be in using technology. One group from the Gedung Creative Hub shared an app called Trafizap that helps users to manage traffic congestion in Surabaya, another called Lifepatch, from Yogyakarta, developed sensing technology to monitor water quality in riverbank communities. Riset Indie, from Bandung, have used GIS mapping tools to document

informal systems in West Bandung, such as patterns of informal transportation and food vendors.

The use of digital tools and open source platforms to make new ones opens a lot of opportunities for sharing of knowledge and experiences from all over the country, and even the world. Young people are taking advantage of that to create social ventures, promote their work, share ideas and results, and engage the public. This includes bridging Internet based activism with face-to-face interaction, through offline events, and also undertaking joint initiatives and collaborative projects. For example, C2O Library in Surabaya and Lifepatch often work together in projects, in Surabaya's riverbank communities, and in Yogyakarta. They also work with Kampung Halaman, a youth group based in Yogyakarta, to create participatory tools and alternative media and use them as advocacy tools. Their #PetaRemaja (#YouthMaps) records all the youth movements all over Indonesia and puts them on accessible maps.

As Indonesia continues to urbanize and populations continue growing, cities are also getting younger and younger—youth not only represent the potential of our cities tomorrow, but they are its hope and promise today. The USF takes their role seriously and makes it a priority to give them a space to speak in front of others, both to experience public speaking, and inspire others with their bold visions of change. This in turn emboldens them and demonstrates their importance to the wider community. The rise of youth groups and the creation of new organizations breathes life into urban activism. It heralds a new era of activism, guided by their own interests (which are not necessarily the interests of older urban activists and NGOs). For example young people seem most interested in the urban environment, pollution, promoting literacy, bicycling, open spaces; rather than urban poverty, and forced evictions. They are focused on practical problem-solving activism. So herein there is a new civil society emerging, or perhaps reviving.

The presence of youth at the USF is significant both in material and in symbolic terms. They are showing the world how much of an impact they are making in their communities. But they are also learning from one another and inspiring each other, to find ways to build a new and better city, ultimately a city that will be for them. Like the USF's slogan "Another City is Possible!" they are showing us how this optimistic vision can become a reality—and it may inspire a whole new generation throughout the country.

Incorporating Marginalized Voices

Indonesian cities today seem to be designed and developed exclusively for a burgeoning new middle class, one that drives, consumes, lives in model homes, and fills up malls. But such an image and appearance of cities makes us lose sight of the other people who occupy our cities, people

13.3 Members of "Komunitas Sahabat Difabel, Semarang", or "Friends of the Disabled Community, Semarang", part of a nationwide civil society organization, shared their experiences in making cities more accessible and inclusive for all. Photograph by author.

who are often marginalized from urban development processes, and whose voices are rarely given an opportunity to be heard. Youth are certainly an underrepresented sector of urban life, but there are many other voices in cities today—women, children, transgender people, the disabled, the urban poor, and migrants to name a few. But there are limited spaces for them to speak publically and express themselves.

During the 3rd USF representatives of urban poor residents, riverbank communities, transgender advocates, neighborhood leaders and women's rights advocates took the stage and spoke of their struggles and shared their stories. The expression of their stories and perspectives helped people to understand *other* perspectives and narratives to their own, or to the dominant ones that are more commonly expressed. What the poor and other marginalized groups deal with is materially very different to what many academics, activists, government officials, and development agencies have

to face in their lives, so it is extremely important to bring these other issues into a public debate and forum, in order to raise their visibility. Just a few examples were literacy, street children, and forced evictions.

The public and government will not recognize these issues until they are brought into the limelight and are discussed publically. This is why the USF sees it as its mission to provide a stage for all sorts of urban issues, to give people a platform to voice their issues and give them exposure, and to ensure that the social actors concerned are able to participate themselves. We believe the USF gives them a stage to give visibility to issues that may not be covered by local and national media, and help promote the people who can best talk about these issues. It also offers a place to encourage collaborations, and actions that can emerge to address these issues.

Looking Beyond One's Community

Indonesia's particular linguistic, geographic and cultural characteristics often incline people towards an attitude of parochialism, in which people see themselves as being different from other parts of the world, and also often distancing one another within the same country. Those in the outer islands often feel and identify quite differently from the traditionally well-resourced island of Java, and there is also a myopic focus on Jakarta at the expense of other cities and regions. The national and open character of the USF tries to break away from these tendencies by proactively including organizations from throughout the country, and even from across the Asia region. Participants are forced to look beyond their own specific location, even their own particular issue, and reflect on what is going on beyond their own community.

It turns out that what some see as the problem of diversity and broad extent of Indonesia is also a source of many potential alternatives—because we can capture many different perspectives and ideas. Asia more widely offers a rich source of learning too, and by including an array of Asian participants in 2015, many participating through interpreters and simultaneous translation, USF added new perspectives from places such as India, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Thus cross-regional learning can spur the breaking down of barriers and opening of minds. By doing so Indonesians can not only be exposed to new perspectives and dialogues nationally, but internationally too. Discussions about the Habitat 3 event in Quito, and the Global Platform for the Right to the City, an international advocacy network, helped to open up activists to new tools and approaches.

Other ways in which the 3rd USF promoted looking beyond one's immediate issues and context, was through inter-generational learning, between younger and older participants. The flow of information and ideas by no means only goes in one direction; in fact members of the older generation of activists were able to share the stage with a newer generation and teach lessons they had picked up from years of experience. They are in a sense *passing the baton* to a newer generation, but lessons about the use of technology, activism using social media, and community mobilization, were shared from the young to the old too. Rarely do such exchanges take place, but the wide range of age groups, and youthful character of the USF events, have made such moments commonplace.

Lastly, there is also an interesting learning experience that takes places between local government officials, and the abundance of young, dynamic, civil society initiatives. While the government does not have many opportunities to speak at the forum, they are invited to listen, and some officials shared their surprise at how much innovation and activity groups were bringing to urban problems that had long vexed them. Such chance encounters between people of different sectors, different cities, even different countries and regions, thus enable a sharing of new ideas, opportunities, and achievements.

What Cities Do We Want?

The slogan of the USF, "*Another City is Possible!*", not only serves as a reminder that there *are* alternatives to the worsening urban conditions of our cities, but also sets out a challenge to all participants—*What city do we really want?*

Since it is not easy for everyone to come up with alternatives, it is important to use our imaginations, to dream, to share our hopes and ideas, to discuss, and really think outside-the-box. The USF believes that to really bring about change, we need to have a vision of what that change is, otherwise we will lose direction and sight of our destination. Doing this becomes easier when surrounded by other enthusiastic, passionate and dedicated people who are working towards similar goals, sharing their experiences and encouraging each other to keep moving forward. The USF thus seeks to bring together people from all walks of life, of different ages and from different parts of the country, giving these people an inclusive and open platform to discuss, share and speak their minds.

In this, the Forum space mirrors how *all* cities should be—accepting of any and all people, not discriminating against anyone because of

where they are from, their age, gender, or if they have a disability. This is a model and example for how ideas, policies, and planning can be, and should be discussed—where anyone can raise an issue, contribute their opinion or put forward their ideas for change. As the meeting progresses, from year to year, it can also be used to reflect upon how learning from others, such as youth, the disabled, the urban poor and marginalized, has indeed translated into positive impacts that shape the cities we live in.

Building an Urban Reform Movement

It is too early to determine exactly what impact such an initiative will have upon the development of Indonesian cities, but there are indications of a growing feeling that people can, and should, be part of the process for change. While there is sparing evidence of viable alternative proposals for cities in public and political discourse, there is now a burgeoning number of small-scale, citizen-led, initiatives springing up all across the country. They may be isolated, but these initiatives now have a regular space in which to interact and exchange, and their constituencies can only be empowered by this emerging and growing network. These early signs may prove to be the seeds of a public advocacy platform to raise associated urban issues to an altogether higher plane of visibility. With civil society organizations, spanning a range of issues, in dialogue with one another and working together, beneath a unifying banner that advocates for more sustainable, democratic and inclusive cities, we may witness the emerging contours of a national urban reform movement.

Notes

1   Michelle Ann Miller, "Decentralizing Indonesian City Spaces as New 'Centers'" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37 (2013) 834–48.
2   UNESCAP, *The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015—Urban Transformations Shifting from Quantity to Quality* (Bangkok: UNESCAP/UNCHS, 2015).
3   Arjun Appadurai, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition" *Culture and Public Action*, eds. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 59–84; see also Tim Bunnell and Daniel P.S. Goh, "Urban Aspirations and Asian Cosmopolitanisms" *Geoforum* 43, 1 (2012) 1–3.