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Media Responses to Urbanization
- Case Study : Indonesia

By

Maria Margaretha Hartiningsih
Media Responses to Urbanization
Case Study: Indonesia *

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When I received AMIC's invitation to attend this seminar representing Indonesian media, almost at the same time, an Indonesian businessman published an open announcement to the press (Kompas daily newspaper in which I work). He offered a reward as much as Rp 25 million ($US 12500) for anybody who can find a crashing "metromini" driver which killed its 32 passengers in the bus. The bus hit Sunter river bank before it jumped into the river and finally sunken down. And most passengers died, while the driver run away.

For Indonesian someone publicly offering a reward in such case is not a common action. When he was asked in what reason as businessman he does it, he explained: "As a human being, my heart was hurt reading such a cowardness. As a nation I am ashamed since this silly thing done by the irresponsible driver was covered worldwide (by CNN and BBC). So I want to help the police to find the driver."

The tragic accident heralded as headline by most Indonesian press on 6 March 94. Of course it has built a bad public opinion and disturb the holliness of the fasting month, the Ramadhan. Most of the victims died because they were trapped inside the bus and swallowed the highly polluted Sunter river water caused by industrial sewage. It was reported that the driver visited the central hospital, RSCM, using a different name, than run away.

However, at the same time, since people were busy of preparing
the Islamic Holiday, the Idul Fitri, most of the press pages fully booked by other news related to this Idulfitri. Since four days prior to the Idulfitri, Jakarta has lost its productivity. More than 50 percent of its inhabitants left the town to their hometowns to celebrate the holiday with their relatives. They went to other cities within or outside Java.

Roads and streets that usually stuck by traffic jam and street vendors suddenly became empty roads and streets. Air suddenly cleared and refreshed, free from automotive pollution. Jakarta, in this time, like a dead city for few days.

Only One Example

That tragic accident which killed many people is only one example of many other similar cases happened in Jakarta. By the end of October last year, the press published another accident a two train crashed caused more than 20 people killed. A bigger accident happened six years ago when another two trains crashed and caused more than 150 people died. In almost 15 days, the Indonesian press gave a lot of attention to this accident. The intensive coverage by the press has encouraged people’s not only to give their help but also to address their concern regarding the bad railways system in Indonesia.

A traffic accident however is only one thing in urban problem. As a main migrants destination many other problems happen in Jakarta. Student fighting each other leading to criminal occurs all the time, and difficult to be handled. Press never tired to cover such a problem until the city government pays
a serious attention and its security officer take a proper action. The media has also covered a fighting between two "kampongs" community in Cengkareng, West Jakarta, caused by social and economic gap which compound with a racial problem that disturbing national stability.

Those cases also related to spatial problem and land acquisition in big cities. Many land condemnation in the name of development and urban renewal, therefore has easily caused social problem lead to a riot related to ethnicity, religion, and race since certain ethnic and religion group are more wealth than the others. Labor strikes and factories damaging has been always another city hot news in these days. This phenomenon needless to say is a negative impact of urbanization and unproper perception assuming labor merely as a production factor causing low wage rate.

City dwelling has also been given a great attention by the press. There is 4.000 ha slump area in Jakarta. This area is the only answered for the poor urban people's housing problem. Not only is this problem difficult to be handled but also more marginalised by many regional regulation and the booming property business.

I oftenly cover these slump areas and witness how the Pareto Syndrome has been working - I don't know - for how long: the poor 80 percent Jakarta's inhabitant competing with the wealthy 20 percent in getting city facilities, while 80 percent of the facilities acquired by the latter. The fact that people are economically segregated is obvious in those cases.

Jakarta is also facing waste problem. According to the
Jakarta Regional Government, there is more than 21,671 cubic metre of waste is dumped each day (in 1990), while the regional office collecting capacity is only 79 percent of the total dumped waste. When the plastic waste trade issue arose and repeatedly reported by the press, other problem was revealed: scavanger fate.

People were getting aware that the scavenger existence have been contributing so much for city cleanliness. People are also aware that this waste trade is a million dollar business, and there has been always a certain people who take advantage from the scavangers' hard life. Important to be noted, following the agressive press coverage, the Indonesian goverment has banned plastic waste import.

Big Challenge

If I only mention Jakarta to show example of several sepecific urbanization problems, it is because Jakarta - the Capital - is the ultimate destination for migrants to seek better life.

The traffic accidents show how unsufficient the transportation system is to accomodate the city population growth. The Sunter river pollution - which killed tents of people - shows how ineffective the regulation is to control industrial waste discharge. The traffic jam causing breathless shows how high the air pollution is that almost reach the safety threshold. The densely populated areas in the same size land of the city, and existing slump areas, show how Jakarta has not prepared a
good sophisticate city management to anticipate problems raised by urbanization.

However urbanization can not be stopped. A big city, like Jakarta, needs people to dinamize its life and maintain its productivity. Urbanization also dinamize small cities and rural areas, so long as the migrants are able to save some of their income and send it to their respective hometowns as remittance. This remittance gives resources for rural economic life.

The annual routine phenomena on Idulfitri, the temporary migration from - especially but not only - Jakarta to rural areas proves that urbanization can not be stopped by any regulation. Jakarta, has an area of 600 kilometers only, was known as Batavia and designed by the Dutch collonial government to accomodate 600.000 population. Less than a century later Jakarta’s population has reached more than 8,7 million people.

The population growth trend in Jakarta, which ever reached 4 percent a year, is really worrying. Demography Institute of the University of Indonesia estimates, in the year 2.000, Jakarta’s population will reach 13 million people with 3,3 percent growth rate per year, a figure higher than the national average growth which "only" 2,2 percent per year.

This means that Jakarta is "ready" to become one of the 18 mega-cities in the world - together with Mexico City, Sao Paulo, New York, Calcutta, Bombay, Tokyo, Paris etc. The UN even has much bigger estimated figure, if the growth rate can not be reduced, in the year 2025, Jakarta will be inhabitted by 20 - 30 million population.

Jakarta is also facing more and more difficult environmental
problems. An environmental expert, Prof. Otto Sumarwoto, said that the air and water pollution level in Jakarta is worse than those in New York or Paris. According to him this situation is caused by overexploitation of natural resources using modern technology. The overpopulation causes higher competition for people to live. Physical and material comfort is used as norm for measuring one's life successes or failure.

The harmonic interrelationship among human beings, and between human being and the environment, has been gradually vanishing. In many cases, a piece of recommendation letter, given by certain government officer for a certain group of people - mostly the rich - had benefitted those small groups by tenuring almost unlimited land size, at the expend of the rest - the poor majority. The city is merely perceived from its physical and spatial dimensions, while the other more important non-physical aspects, are neglected.

The Urban-biased Policy

What causes urbanization to Jakarta? The answers given are mostly still rooted in a standard theory. First, economic stagnation in the rural areas. A fragmented agricultural land due to inharittance diminishes its supporting capacity for the rural life. In the past five to ten years ago, a peasant family in Indonesia, still had around 0.5 to 1 ha of rice field per family, but nowadays they in average have only 0.25 ha per family. To compound the problem, the octopussing growth of industry and property business has removed many arable agricultural land around Jakarta. It is estimated that each year a land use of more
than 6,000 ha of land has been changed from agricultural function to industrial one.

Second, relatively high population growth in rural areas despite the nation-wide family planning program implementation. People's low income has forced them to seek other way by migrating to big cities.

Third, the urban-biased development policy. As a notice, money circulation in Jakarta alone, real as much as 66 percent, in West Java 8 percent, in Central Java 4 percent, in East Java 7 percent, of the total national figure. The rest, as much as 15 percent only, are widely distributed outside Java covering 23 provinces. The policy is highly tend to protect industrial sector in cities, while promising higher and more "prestigious" income for rural people.

A rational that has been used by businessman to get more arable land for industrial purpose is an input-output comparisson theory. They claim that one hectar of land for agricultural activity needs only 20 persons with an output between Rp 15 - Rp 20 million. If they use it for industry it will absorb 500 employment with an output as much as Rp 12 - Rp 20 billion.

Other reason causes urbanization, according to Todaro (1981), is the wage and salary system implemented in the modern sector. Theodore W Schultz (1964) concluded that peasant family's capital formation capability in developing countries generally is very weak. This condition has made them unable to fit in with market mechanism. In addition the term of trade of their products has been worsening. The Statistical Bureau (BPS, 1991) noted in the past seven years the term of trade has never improved.
The Indonesian government has recently started a new initiative to combat the poverty in rural areas. Yet it is just started and the result would not be instant. Therefore there is no doubt if urbanization will still be continuing in some years to come.

The Media Role

The above mentioned examples has shown the press power in influencing and forming public opinion. Specifically important to be noticed its influence in the government decision making process, in the case of the postponed Traffic Act and decreasing the fine stipulated by the Act, despite the fact that the Act was already ratified by the Congress (DPR).

That happened last year. Various other political issues, emerged around that time, such as the Non Aligned Movement Meeting etc., has, however, shifted press attention from the Act ratification by the DPR. One of the new Act article stipulates much higher fine, from ten of thousands in the old Act to millions of Rupiah in the new one: higher compar to the Indonesian people GNP which is only US $ 630 per capita.

Nevertheless, the news reported and analysis or features written by the press in addition to many other public leaders opinion on that matter opposing to the Act finally shown its succes: the government postponed the Act implementation at least for one year and decreasing the fine stipulated in it at more rational figure.

Mass media has also been in the front line in revealing problems faced by urban poor, and in helping them increasing
their bargaining power towards governmental policies. When the city government prohibited street vendors, intensively the press published articles advocating the poor vendors' fate. The policy was not revoked, instead the government provided a special program for the vendors. The city government provided technical assistance and seed grant or vocational skill. Various non-governmental organization also took some roles dealing with the problem.

Or in other problems such as those that faced by less protected domestic servant. Articles published by the press have strongly pushed the Jakarta city government to improve the waging and social security system for domestic servants. It is not fully effective, yet at least a protective regulation has been provided.

Media not only reacts and responds to any current event in the city, but also investigates ones that might happen and emerge as serious problem in the future. The objective is to attract more attention both from the government and the society.

From the urban poor inhabitant and their daily bitter life, for instance, we can uncover many other problem such as child prostitution - a social problem that has been hidden and even denied for many years. Many 'official' whorehouse have a special room for girls under age. While, on the streets, homeless street children hang around the city. At nights they sleep in shops veranda or in city market.

In 1990, when I conducted a small research on street children, I found many of them had already carried transmitted deseases such as gonnorhoe or syphilis at the age of ten!
Of course not on every thing that press has said on urban matters, the press reach the government doors let alone to change the policy they made. Nevertheless the Indonesian press is still able to play its role as social controller, especially its function in watching government policy and whatever happens within the society.

It may be true, there is an impression that the Indonesian press no longer holds its freedom to publish many issues considered sensitive for the country's national stability. But it is also true, that the wind is now blowing towards a democratic air full of freedom - a freedom that also needs a responsibility for the sake of the nation unity and integrity***

*) Presented at "Urbanization, Sustainable Development and the Media," Seminar conducted by AMIC, the Environmental Forum for Communicators of Singapore (ECOS) and the National Council on the Environment (NCE), Singapore, April 8 and 9, 1994.

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