Urban and Rural Community Resilience in Indonesia: Challenges and Questions

Summary

As a response to the concerns about the consequences of the increase of disaster events, the concept of ‘community resilience’ has gained increasing prominence in academic and policy circles. With the increasing number of natural disaster events, community resilience seems to be a promising concept that is able to enhance the resilience of urban and rural communities in Indonesia. But considering how vast and diverse the country is, it is unlikely that there are one-for-all community resilience approaches that could be applied to all places in Indonesia. ‘Community resilience’ is also a contested concept in which many stakeholders with their agendas could be involved; therefore, the concept should always be criticized and questioned.

Urban areas might only cover less than 3% of the earth surface, yet they are responsible for an estimated 71% of global energy-related carbon emissions (IPCC, 2014). There are also concerns about the increase of climate-related risks and vulnerabilities in urban areas caused by climate change (Revi et al., 2014). Meanwhile, rural areas account for 47.9% of the world’s total population, and its dependence on agricultural and natural resources makes them highly sensitive to extreme climate events and climate change.

In Indonesia, 2929 natural disaster events -- dominated by flood, tornado, and landslide -- were recorded in 2020 (BNPB, 2020). This will also likely be the case in 2021, 1550 natural disaster events -- that are also dominated by the same events -- recorded as per July this year. Located in the Pacific Ring of Fire with 127 active volcanoes, Indonesia is also prone to high seismic, tsunami, and volcano risks. Around 97% of Indonesia’s population are living in areas prone to disasters (BNPB, 2015). Moreover, 42% of its population, across roughly 60 cities, are exposed to natural hazards (Gunawan, 2015). Cities like Jakarta, Bandung, and Surakarta alone make up about 39% of disasters impacting urban areas in the country (Roberts, Sander, and Tiwari, 2019).

Poverty could exacerbate the impact of disasters, especially in Indonesia where 12.86% of its rural population live in poverty. Poverty may lead to lessened access to education, health care, quality housing, food, and other necessities that could act as a buffer of resilience against disaster (Siagian et al., 2012). Farmers can see their crops or livestock damaged or destroyed because of floods, tornadoes, or landslides. Destroyed infrastructure, such as rural roads, could disrupt the supply chain of agricultural products. The remoteness of many rural areas in Indonesia may also limit its abilities and capacities to respond to disasters.

As a response to the concerns about the consequences of the increase of disaster events, the concept of ‘community resilience’ has gained increasing prominence in academic and policy circles (Sharifi, 2016; Meerow & Newell, 2015). Community resilience might also be the concept that is relevant for Indonesia’s context, considering how prone the country is when it comes to natural catastrophe.

The concept of community resilience is dynamic. To start, the etymological roots of resilience stem from the Latin word resilio, meaning “to bounce back” (Klein, Nicholls, & Thomalia, 2003). But as an academic concept, its origins and meaning are more obscure (Meerow, 2016). A divide exists between the concept of community resilience as a reactive process and resilience as a proactive process. The first one sees community resilience as a reactive process where the community is able to absorb, bounce back, and withstand external shocks (Poortinga, 2012). Meanwhile, the latter see resilience as a proactive process of individuals where they perform adaptive actions in
order to increase their chance of survival (Cox & Perry, 2011).

Meanwhile, the latter see resilience as a proactive process of individuals where they perform adaptive actions in order to increase their chance of survival (Cox & Perry, 2011). In many works of literature, a divide also exists between single-state equilibrium, multi-state equilibrium, and dynamic non-equilibrium concepts of community resilience (Meerow, 2016; Holling, 1996). This development of theory has moved away from the idea of resilience as the ability of systems to "bounce back" to the previous state of condition (Matyas & Pelling, 2014 p.54).

The divide exists not only on the basic concept of community resilience but also on the concept of urban and rural. Indeed, industrialization and urbanization have led to massive changes in society. It has shifted the traditional-homogeneous-rural-based society into a more heterogeneous-urban-based society. Tonnies (1887) implied the intense industrialization and urbanization had changed the shifted interaction that was once based on shared values of friendship and solidarity into the relationship that became more based on indirect interactions, impersonal roles and values. Durkheim hints that the homogeneous society, as expected from rural communities, has a higher level of trust compared to the more heterogeneous society. The homogenous society, Durkheim suggests, is bonded by common beliefs, values, and activities; meanwhile, the heterogeneous society, as expected from urban communities, are more diverse due to the fact they have a diverse division of labour. Wirth (2013) proposed three dimensions to differentiate between rural and urban society. He suggested that rural communities are characterized by small, dense, and homogeneous populations. Meanwhile, urban communities have larger, less dense, and heterogeneous populations.

These differences between urban and rural also caused different characteristics in community resilience between the two. Rapaport (2018) hypothesised that rural communities, characterized by intense relationships between their residents, exhibit higher levels of community resilience, while large cities and towns are reported to have lower levels of community resilience as they are characterized by urbanization, increased social alienation and diverse lifestyle of the residents. Cutter (2016) found that community capital is the most important aspect that drives community resilience in rural areas, whereas in urban areas, community resilience is primarily driven by economic capital. Tootle (2007) suggested that lack of human and financial resources can reduce resilience in rural areas, a problem that is not often encountered in urban areas.

With the absence of consensus on the concept of community resilience, what approaches and strategies do we have to use to enhance community resilience against natural hazards, especially in addressing natural disasters’ different characteristics in urban and rural areas in Indonesia? Skerrat (2013) concluded that it is necessary to develop approaches for community resilience in the context of constant change where communities are seen as active agents rather than waiting-for-external-shocks passive agents. Wang et al. (2018) suggested when solving problems in urban areas, there are specific characteristics of urban resilience that must be taken into account. Cutter (2016) suggested that the efforts to improve disaster resilience cannot be universally applied to all places but must be customized to the local context. Meanwhile, Price-Robertson and Knight (2012) suggested more general approaches; that to enhance the resilience of communities, understanding the community’s strength and vulnerabilities, as well as its physical, procedural, and social characteristics, are required. Considering how vast and diverse the country is, it is unlikely that there are one-for-all community resilience approaches that could be applied to all places in Indonesia. Any approaches or strategies that aim to enhance the resilience of communities must be specified to the cultures, hazards, and vulnerabilities of the respective places.

There are also pessimistic answers to the question of what community resilience approaches and strategies must be taken to address different characteristics in urban and rural areas. These answers are what this article took. Perhaps there are no effective approaches and strategies for building or enhancing community resilience. So how do we respond to threats like global warming, or climate change, or any other threats?
Community resilience, through many of its meanings and definitions, could work as a boundary object that facilitates many proposed definitions and concepts (Meerow, 2016). It has the potential to provide answers to tackle many resilience challenges. But it is important not to rest all the answers by just solely seeking the most suitable community resilience approaches and strategies.

Community resilience is a contested definition in which many stakeholders with their motivations, powers, and agendas could be involved. It is important to criticize and question the concept of community resilience. Questions like *What is the goal of building community resilience? Who determines what is desirable for the community? And for whom the community resilience is for?* should always be asked.
Further Reading


