

# **Participatory Approach in Rural Poverty Alleviation and Women's Empowerment in Indonesia**

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Prepared for the South-South Forum on Sustainability

Lingnan University, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, 12-14 December 2011

**Indonesian Society** – In spite of the general observation that women in Indonesia remain subordinate to men in the public domain, due to development efforts promoting participatory approaches and women's empowerment in Indonesia's democratizing society there have been some notable success stories of women-led economic activities and of women reaching high positions in their communities and the wider society as well. Here, one result of the Asian financial-turned economic crisis which started in Indonesia in mid-1997 was a period of severe socio-economic-political turmoil (a situation known locally as *kristal* for total crisis) leading to a revitalized democratic movement, giving greater voice to the people, including to women. More recently, Indonesia has weathered the latest global economic turmoil reasonably well. Economic growth has exceeded 6 percent for the past few years. Even though still trailing behind China and India, Indonesia generally remains on a path to meet prospects for a better future for its people.

**PNPM, National Program for Community Empowerment** – Major public sector endeavors to alleviate poverty started in the 1990s, but they have continued to be modified, improved and even consolidated over time. In August 2006, the Government launched the PNPM (*Program Nasional Pemberdayaan Masyarakat*), a nationwide community development program for the purpose of poverty alleviation for and by the community (basically at village level) using central government funding that effectively consolidates all existing government<sup>1</sup> poverty alleviation programs. The core of the overall PNPM program is an ongoing *Kecamatan* (sub-district) Development Program (KDP) which was initially implemented in 1998 in response to a devastating effect of the Asian economic crisis. KDP was specifically designed to address the needs of poor rural communities through support for local infrastructure and for development of local income generating activities. KDP was designed to also impart democratic values and processes. This is to be achieved through encouraging participation among all segments of the community (including women and other marginalized groups) in the overall development process and particularly in decision making on allocation and utilization of available public funding for their self-defined needs and priorities.

**A Gender Perspective in Poverty Alleviation Programming** – In practice, the focus in PNPM and its predecessor KDP on local infrastructure (roads, bridges, irrigation, etc.) as a means for improving local economies and reducing poverty have tended to favor men in terms of employment and economic opportunity, thus limiting the access of poor women to funding made available through the program. As a result, the KDP and subsequently PNPM have been modified to include a requirement that a specified percentage (supposedly about one-third) of budgeted funding is to be allocated to female activities, specifically for micro-credits.

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<sup>1</sup> PNPM serves as an overarching program to include all existing poverty alleviation programs implemented by various Ministries. Some popular programs include subsidized rice distribution by BULOG (Logistics Board), scholarships to the poor by the Ministry of National Education and a program Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) serving as an incentive for the poor to ensure that pregnant women make the recommended health visits and school-age children attend school managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. There are numerous other smaller programs which are also included in PNPM.

**Micro-credit for Women** – The PNPM credit scheme is made available to groups, more or less following the Grameen Bank scheme of group lending. In Indonesia the system is called *tanggung renteng* where all group members are held responsible for the group repayment performance. Social pressure is placed on individuals to abide by the rules of borrowing and repaying as repayment failures affect all members of the group. Numerous success stories have been recorded on the program. Kristen Stokes<sup>2</sup> (December 2009), for instance, wrote about success stories of the PNPM-AP<sup>3</sup> program which focused on rural agriculture and which included a strong credit component. The stories are about the impact of the program on the lives of the participating members and the wider community, how the program has contributed to improvements in their well-being through empowering women with credits giving them a standing in the community. Moreover, providing Indonesian women with credits or the opportunity to actively participate in the market strengthens their bargaining position, not just in the household but also in society. In general Indonesian women are not constrained in their ability to play a role in the public domain,<sup>4</sup> as among the majority ethnic group Javanese, women often dominate the physical market place as both sellers as well as buyers.

**Women's Empowerment Through Education** – The importance of education in empowering people cannot be underestimated. Thus far, education policies have emphasized access to basic education and, to date, the greatest achievements have been at the primary school level with more than 90 of primary school aged youngsters (including girls and children from rural areas) attending school; a consequence of the national policy to have at least one primary school in every village. However, due to nature of the teaching-learning process, rural children are more constrained at the secondary level where schools are more likely to be located in towns and cities.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it can be noted that at junior secondary level (grades 7-9) girls are more likely to attend school than boys. It is suggested that this phenomenon is attributed to the policy of providing 'free basic education'. When cost become a constraint then sons are more likely to be given the benefits of schooling. And thus it can be noted that in upper secondary schools, boys still outnumber girls.

Yet it remains important to recognize that providing girls with schooling within an environment as described earlier, an Indonesia that is democratizing, where gender equity is often a criteria in seeking access and/or benefits and where poverty alleviation programs for rural communities are increasing, including programs that strengthen the economic position of women in the household and the community – makes a major contribution to creating an enabling environment for women to also take up leadership positions in the public domain. More specifically, for some women to blossom, all they need is most likely a little help, often coming from the outside of their respective communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Kirsten Stokes, 2009, SUCCESS STORIES FROM PNPM-AP: Sulawesi Tenggara, Sulawesi Selatan, Nusa Tenggara Timur & Nusa Tenggara Barat

<sup>3</sup> PNPM-AP (The National Program for Community Empowerment – Rural Agribusiness) is a component of PNPM. This particular component is funded by AusAID, and aims to increase productivity and incomes, and reduce the vulnerability of rural households through improved access to technology, inputs, and markets.

<sup>4</sup> However, public discourse even at the national level still continues to emphasize women's responsibilities for the well being of their families suggesting a continuing level of uncertainty on women's role and status in her dual role and her existence in the domestic arena and in the public domain.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007, 84 and 55 percent respectively of lower secondary school aged children 13-15 years and upper secondary school aged youngsters 16-18 years, attended school.

**The Role of NGOs in empowering people** – NGO's, the outsiders coming into a rural community, can be of great benefit to large numbers of women. One such NGO is PEKKA,<sup>6</sup> which focuses on empowering female household heads. And one example of their success can be seen in the story of Ms. Petronela Peni Loli, a widow from a remote village in the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia. In fact, she became a high school graduate, uncommon among people of her village. She obtained her education in the district capital city, where she married and stayed until her husband was murdered. Then, with the assistance of PEKKA, Ms. Loli succeeded to become the first female head of her poor and remote village and in a community environment where traditions usually do not favor women. Yet Ms. Loli achieved a landslide victory over her closest male rival by a margin of 260 to 60 votes. She then gained even greater trust from her fellow villagers as she applied rules of good governance fostering participation, transparency and accountability in utilizing public development funds. From a rather disadvantaged rural community far away from the nation's capital city of Jakarta, Ms. Loli managed to move up the ladder, attending meetings at increasingly higher levels from her village to the sub-district, on to the district, province and national level and even on to meet with leaders of the World Bank in the USA.

**Need far more NGOs for Rural Women Empowerment** – There are more stories, but the fact that only one real success story of public leadership is presented about an empowered woman coming from a remote village located on an island far away from the hustle-bustle of the nation's capital city in Jakarta, is indicative of the difficulty of producing such gems. There are still too few NGO's sincerely dedicated to empowering women, particularly in poor and isolated areas. On the one hand the reason lies in the limitations of available and committed persons for this type of dedicated work; on the other hand, the constraint may also lie with limited funding. NGO's like PEKKA have benefitted from access to international donors. But at present, as Indonesia has reached reasonable development levels it has become less a focus of donor funding including funding activities dedicated to causes of poverty alleviation focusing on women. Even so, these efforts make it clear that true empowerment of rural women remains one of the best indicators of success in building participatory approaches, including for poverty alleviation.

Jakarta, 25 November 2011  
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<sup>6</sup> PEKKA stands for *Pemberdayaan Perempuan Kepala Keluarga* of Women Headed Household Empowerment. PEKKA grew out of PPSW (*Pusat Pengembangan Sumberdaya Wanita*, or Center for Women Resources Development) which was established in 1986. On request of the *Komnas Perempuan* (National Commission on Violence against Women) with full funding from the Japan Social Development Fund administered by the World Bank, the chair of PPSW, in 2001 Nani Zulminarni was asked to coordinate a 'widows project' to provide assistance and empowerment for single ever married and disabled women in war-torn Aceh. In the meantime PEKKA has spread its wings, expanding to other parts of the country. The specific organization's objectives for women household heads (WHH) include: (1) Improving their welfare; (2) Organizing and facilitating them to have access to various resources; (3) Enabling them to actively participate in every phase of development; (4) Raise their awareness about their rights as human beings and citizens who are equal to others; and (5) Empower WHH to have control of their lives, in making decisions within their families as well as in society.