

# RESEARCH NOTE

## Strategies for shaping change: Networks for gaining access, enhancing exchange and obtain status

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*Abstract: Networks were important in the forming of a collaborative workshop where representatives of relevant groups discussed strategies to shape socio-ecological change in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Networks enhanced capacity, power, control and exchange. Furthermore, participants increased their social capital and status. Being part of established networks was on the one side a precondition for conducting the workshop. On the other side, the fact that two researchers are affiliated to a German university and thus were not part of these networks in Central Kalimantan enabled a dialogical character of the workshop. Communication and the transfer of formal and informal information in networks were widely conducted via WhatsApp, quite unusual for the German researchers but a common procedure in Indonesia. Establishing networks with 'white people' or 'bule' was a motivation for encounters between one German researcher and Indonesian workshop participants where issues of exoticism arose. Furthermore, establishing networks between universities in the global North and the global South are an inherent aspect of transdisciplinary research and engaged anthropology.*

*Keywords: trans-disciplinarity; workshop; networks; resources; Indonesia; Kalimantan*

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Networks are a crucial factor for enhancing capacity, power, control and exchange. Through networks, people not only gain access to material resources but also to social capital and status. Networks were the main points in the organization and implementation of a collaborative multi-stakeholder workshop held in Palangkaraya, the provincial capital of Central Kalimantan, Indonesia in March 2018.<sup>1</sup> The one-day workshop, titled 'Central Kalimantan in the year 2030: Natural Resources, Social Justice and Sustainable Development', brought together around 30 participants from universities, civil society organizations, local media and the provincial government to discuss current and future pathways of natural resource, justice and environmental governance in Central Kalimantan. The aim of the workshop was to elaborate on diverging future visions regarding natural resource extraction on an intersectoral expert level and furthermore, to find correspondences between different scenarios. Four guiding questions related to Central Kalimantan were addressed in the workshop:

- 1) How is the status quo regarding the social, political, ecological, and economic situation?
- 2) What will the future look like in 2030?
- 3) How are pathways towards utopia and dystopia?
- 4) Who might be relevant actors and what are their relationships and their power relations?



Soruce: Alessandro Gullo.

Figure 1: Workshop Participants

All participants described the current and future situation as increasingly worrisome. Accordingly, deforestation and environmental degradation were interlinked with increasing social injustice, a loss of culture and local knowledge and a declining local economy. All participants agreed that Central Kalimantan is rich in natural resources but performing poorly in regard to social, political, and economic development. The low level of development was related to a weak government dominated by companies. Conflicts in the last decades are mostly related to the decrease of access, control, and management of land. Participants argued that the civil society is currently weak because community members and activists are excluded from relevant political processes. However, participants described opportunities for change in the establishment and strengthening of civil society organizations which should challenge, control, and change the executive and the legislative.

The workshop was organized by Kristina Großmann, the project leader, Alessandro Gullo, a student assistant, Semiarto Aji Purwanto, an associate professor in Anthropology at the Universitas Indonesia in Depok/Jakarta doing research on mining in Central Kalimantan, Marko Mahin, a priest, director of an indigenous rights organization and associate professor at the Universitas Kristen in Palangkaraya as well as Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa who both worked for several international and national civil society

organizations in Central Kalimantan. The organizing group brought together people with diverse backgrounds and interests, with access to different networks.

The workshop revealed that networks in the sense of encounters and collaborations with specific groups of people were a key issue in terms of power and access as well as representation and positionality – taking serious (self-)reflection as an obligatory part of participative research (Wittmayer et al. 2013). Access to networks is an asset that can enable people's ability and capacity to gain control (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Networks also function as social capital which, according to Robert Putnam (1995), enables participants to act together more effectively in order to pursue their aims. Establishing networks as asset and social capital was also a driving force in encounters between the Alessandro Gullo and Indonesian workshop participants where issues of exotism arose.

### Selecting key conveners and participants: Importance of established networks

Kristina Großmann, Marko Mahin and Semiarto Aji Purwanto first began to collaborate in 2015, when the two Indonesian scholars were invited to the scoping workshop 'Environmental Transformation, Ethnicity and Gender in Kalimantan, Indonesia' which took place at the University of Passau. Kristina Großmann continued to meet with Marko Mahin and Semiarto Aji

Purwanto every year since during visits in Indonesia to deepen the exchange and discussions on current conflicts regarding resource extraction in Central Kalimantan and the three scholars developed the idea for a research project on mining. In 2017, they finally started a project and Kristina Großmann, building on the preceding collaboration, invited Marko Mahin to act as a co-convenor of the workshop observing his skills as a 'frontrunner'; a critical discussion partner and able to provide access to networks of people working on issues of environmental transformation in Palangkaraya. Marko Mahin is not only a Protestant priest, associate professor, and former vice president of the Universitas Kristen, but also the head of an indigenous peoples' rights organization promoting the rights of Dayak, the indigenous inhabitants of Kalimantan. Due to his manifold positions, Marko Mahin is well connected and has established networks to the political and intellectual elite in Palangkaraya. He has access to various networks such as to universities, the government, and Dayak organizations all on the provincial level. The collaboration also involved Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa who work with various environmental and indigenous peoples' rights organizations and hence have access to a broad range of civil society organizations and media. Consequently, when the preparation team started to discuss whom to invite to the workshop, it became soon clear that Marko Mahin, Pinarsita Juli-

ana and Meta Septalisa led the selection process of the participants as they were very well connected to a set of relevant actors. Generally, Kristina Großmann was glad that the cooperation partners in Palangkaraya headed the invitation process because this ensured that relevant actors to whom she didn't have access to, attended the workshop. During the first preparatory meeting, they collected about 60 potential participants from various sectors and decided to invite 25 of them. However, when it came to the selection process whom to invite, Kristina Großmann felt she lacked knowledge of the social and political relevance of the suggested civil society organizations, education institutions and local newspaper. Thus, Marko Mahin, Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa had to slow down their pace in the decision-making process and had to give background information of respected institutions to the others in the preparation group. Additionally, in order to get introduced to the still unknown invited participants Kristina Großmann joined Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa handing over the written invitation personally.

### **Creating a space for discussion: (Not) being part of networks**

One major task of the preparation group was to bring together relevant actors from different sectors to discuss issues with environmental governance, such as extractives and palm oil production. The organizing committee created a space for critical discussion where power relations were rather questioned than reaffirmed. Besides from companies, representatives from all other sectors took part and discussed the status quo, conflicts and future visions in regard of socio-ecological transformation in Central Kalimantan. This would have not been possible without the access to diverse networks and the respected position of the group members from Palangkaraya. Marko Mahin is a well-known person in the provincial capital, linked to the university and the Protestant church, which both tend to be associated with rather providing spaces for dialogue in regard to conflicts than advancing political and economic interests. Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa worked already in several programs of different civil society organizations as advocate, mediator and field researcher.

Thus, the conveners are not only well

connected but also respected because of their vast experience of the situation and conflicts 'on the ground' and their personal engagement to enhance the situation of community members. Moreover, the fact that Kristina Großmann as one of the main conveners is a representative of a German university and thus coming from 'outside' Central Kalimantan and being not part of a certain network signaled also a dialogic character of the workshop. Invited participants were curious what will happen during a transdisciplinary workshop as it was their first one in this manner. They stated that they gained new and comparative insights in discussions with scholars from Germany and Depok/Jakarta and the working atmosphere was affirmative.

### **WhatsApp as means to transfer information, communicate and control in networks**

During the first planning phase of the workshop, Kristina Großmann, who was in Germany, and Marko Mahin, who was in Indonesia, corresponded via the messaging application WhatsApp. Marko Mahin designated two female assistants, Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa, by sending Kristina Großmann a picture via the messenger depicting the three of them underlined with the title "Team of Success". Kristina Großmann knew only Meta Septalisa before and actually wanted to ask her to collaborate, but Marko Mahin was faster. It turned out that Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa were very experienced, cooperative and reliable in the preparation and implementation of the workshop, thus Marko Mahin's initiative was most welcome by Kristina Großmann and his choice was excellent. The workshop preparation group decided that a moderator should chair and orchestrate the whole event being responsible for introducing into the topic, leading the general discussions and keeping the time frame. Therefore, the group decided to meet him in advance to discuss the topic and the procedure of the workshop. Marko Mahin suggested a colleague of him from the Universitas Kristen who is not only well known but also very busy. Unfortunately, the meeting with him one day ahead of the workshop had to be cancelled because of the delay of his flight to the provincial capital. Marko Mahin instead sent him the discussion topics, the procedure

of making future scenarios and what he should explain in the introduction mainly via WhatsApp until the evening before the workshop. The moderator fulfilled his tasks very professional as if we would have met several times before for preparation.

Another area where WhatsApp seemed to be indispensable was sending workshop reminders to invited participants. When delivering the written invitations, Pinarsita Juliana and Meta Septalisa requested a mobile phone number for contact of each invited participant. In the following they reminded them – especially the invited state officials – via the messenger several times before the workshop in order to ensure their participation. This way of using a messenger service was quite unusual for the German members of the preparation group but a common procedure in Indonesia. However, WhatsApp was not only used as a formal means to transfer information and maintaining the contact to invited participants when personal meetings were not possible. The preparation group also used the messenger vibrantly for their internal communication in order to find and affirm dates for meetings, exchange the status quo on current tasks, discuss questions and encourage group members if problems occurred. Thus, WhatsApp was not only used for formal and informal information transfer and communication amongst participants of certain networks but also as a tool for reminding and trying to control the invited participants.

### **Exotism: Establishing networks with 'bule'**

In regard of his German background, Alessandro Gullo encountered forms of exotism during the workshop, which are closely connected to the concept of whiteness. While racism is most often defined in regard to the rejection of something foreign, exotism emphasizes the attraction of something foreign. Still it is a special form of racism that endorses a sexualization of something foreign and turns the racist rejection into exotic attraction (Danielzik & Bendix, 2010). The 'advantage' is to be defined as 'white supremacy'. As Applebaum (2016: 4) argues, 'white supremacy' is not understood as in the ways groups such as the Klu Klux Klan portray themselves as the superrace, but rather "the continual pattern of widespread, everyday practi-

ces and policies that are made invisible through normalization and thus are often taken for granted as just what is". Hence, in the words of Mills (1997), white supremacy is a form of suppression that is unintentionally reproduced by daily practices.

In the context of the workshop, whiteness played a crucial role in a situation that took place at the end of the workshop. During the workshop discussions, the participants debated about different topics in a serious and critical manner. However, after the official closing mostly female participants changed this attitude, what was quite sudden for Alessandro Gullo. Within seconds the analytical and critical atmosphere turned into impulsive, emotional and stereotyping encounters. In this Alessandro Gullo was prompted to take a series of pictures with different female participants. While this is not an uncommon situation, if one is traveling as a 'white person' in Indonesia, the sudden change of behavioral manners in the context of the workshop was remarkable for Alessandro Gullo. Hence, also in academic contexts in Indonesia, the appearance of white people is still something exotic.

In reflecting the described situation, Pinarsita Juliana explained that according to her opinion, many Indonesians are very proud when they meet or work together with foreigners, especially with people coming from the global north and having a white skin. She describes that people she knows in Indonesia have high expectations about 'white' or 'bule' people, as they are labeled as rich, smart and clever. According to her perception, it is almost like an inherited perspective and like a syndrome of the past. Thus, the described puzzling encounters for Alessandro Gullo and the following discussion make clear a prevailing thinking of white supremacy amongst participants and team members. Consequently, it poses a challenge for the researcher to be aware of exotism in a research process and (re)act in an appropriate manner. Thus, the researcher must be self-aware of his positionality in an encounter that is still coined by colonial thinking. Hence, strong (self-)reflexivity on the whole

research process is needed. This includes, in the words of Yancy (2008: 231), that researcher needs to stay vigilant, in order to address and counter the "structural and material power racial hierarchies" and thus not reproduce white supremacist values and beliefs.

### Networks: Gains & Synergies

On the base of the successful preparations and implementation of the workshop the organizers plan a follow up for 2019. This first joint workshop showed that the organizers could rely on each other, could complement their experiences and competencies, and could exchange information and knowledge. The Indonesian scientists stressed that in the course of the collaboration with German scholars they could enhance their knowledge on the global embedment of environmental transformations in Kalimantan and further their knowledge in theoretical approaches. Moreover, for them, international networks are important indicators for their academic performance in order to get promoted, first and foremost when collaboration results in joint workshops and articles. For Semiarto Aji Purwanto and Kristina Großmann while doing research in Central Kalimantan, encounters and relationships with intellectuals and activists in Palangkaraya is important in order to discuss and test arguments and gain information and knowledge on complex issues on socio-ecological transformations. Furthermore, establishing and maintaining networks between universities in the global North and the global South and including the expertise of non-academicians is an inherent aspect of transdisciplinary research and engaged anthropology aiming to make research accessible and applicable for the public and for communities with whom researchers work (Low and Merry 2010; Jahn et al. 2012).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Conducting future workshops is one methodological pillar of the participative and trans-disciplinary research project FuturEN, which is led by Kristina Großmann. Applying a participa-

tive research approach and combining theories from anthropology and sustainability science, the project members of FuturEN analyze power relations, conflicts, and implementations of future visions in coal mining in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia along the nexus of ethnicity, gender, and status. They aim to mitigate conflicts, enhance participation, and generate transformation knowledge in correspondence with extra-scientific actors such as villagers, members of civil society organizations, and representatives of the state and companies. The project with the title 'FuturEN- Governance, Identities and Future along Categories of Differentiation. The Case of Coal Mining in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia' is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

<sup>2</sup> For further information about the aims, results and impacts of the workshop, see Großmann 2018.

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