

Cultural Figure and Artist Changemakers for Social Environmental Transformations

Authentic life stories of artists who create for social and environmental change in society through cultural strategies.



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Foreword



Marlis Afridah

**Founder & CEO
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Culture plays a foundational role in helping to accelerate sustainable development. Yet, despite existing efforts, the integration of culture in sustainable development has not become mainstream in public policies, initiatives, and programs from multi-stakeholders in governments, businesses, and civil society. Relative to its power and potential as a part of the solution in realizing social and environmental sustainability in society, the role of culture remains underrated.

With this in mind, Green Network Asia felt called upon to help mainstream the integration of culture in sustainable development through our daily knowledge production and dissemination work, both independently and through strategic partnerships with various organizations. We wanted to showcase how culture could serve as a powerful strategy and approach in the efforts to tackle the world's wicked problems, such as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, waste & pollution, deforestation, poverty, gender inequality, the marginalization of Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities, and others.

In this book, we are sharing the authentic life stories of cultural figures and artists – from grassroots to maestros – who do creative work for social and environmental changes in society through cultural strategies. We researched the profiles of relevant individuals throughout Indonesia using the lens of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). We delved into their stories and works through in-depth interviews, then wrote and published them as creative content for public education that is accessible to everyone, in Indonesian and English.

We thank the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia for the strategic partnership with Green Network Asia in this initiative. Based on our impact evaluation, we found that the featured cultural figures and artists felt directly impacted by this initiative, especially in support of their work in the field. Among the benefits they felt were the accurate representation of their thoughts and feelings as well as the expanded collaboration opportunities with various actors in their fields due to the increased exposure of their profiles and works.

Furthermore, we hope this collection inspires other cultural figures and artists in Indonesia and across the globe to get involved and contribute to help solving the social and environmental problems within their localities through creative works based on cultural strategies. We encourage governments, businesses, and civil society organizations to develop policies, initiatives, and programs that support mainstreaming culture in sustainable development, considering the great power and potential it holds in accelerating social and environmental changes at the local, national, and even international levels.

The Green Network Asia team will not stop here. We will keep actively supporting the effort to mainstream culture in sustainable development through our interdisciplinary creative works. We welcome any collaboration potentials and support from all to realize this big mission.

Thank you.

Jakarta, November 21, 2023

Hangno Hartono

Advocates Waste Repurposing Through Wayang Art

For Hangno Hartono, conserving wayang art also means nurturing humanity and the environment in which humans and other beings live.





*Hangno Hartono performing wayang at Omah Budaya Kahangan.
Photo: Hangno Hartono's personal archive.*

Indonesia is rich in culture. A Special Region in particular, Yogyakarta (also often called Jogja), is known for its art, education, and cultural scenes. Unfortunately, this province has a mounting problem of waste management. Piyungan landfill in Yogyakarta has become literal mountains of waste, unable to take more. This issue caught the eye of Hangno Hartono, a wayang artist and cultural expert.

He heard how locals around Piyungan landfill would sometimes block the road to the dump, causing heaps of waste to accumulate around Yogyakarta. As an artist and Yogyakarta locale, Hangno wanted to contribute to the solution. So, Hangno and his friends started Wayang Merdeka. The name combines the word wayang, an Indonesian traditional puppet art, and merdeka, an Indonesian word for freedom or independence. It is a community with a mission of public education using wayang as the primary medium.



Hangno Hartono and Wayang

Hangno was born in Magelang on August 19, 1963. Growing up in Muntilan, Hangno's interest in wayang began in childhood. He has been shaped and guided by his environment to pursue art. Besides wayang, he was also inspired by other art forms, such as the ancient temples of Borobudur and Mendut.

"In Muntilan, there is a temple where Chinese Indonesians pray. Uniquely, the temple often hosted wayang shows. I liked watching them. The wayang artists were also Chinese Indonesians. That was what made me curious to learn more about wayang. Then, I finally had the chance to do so when I started living in Jogja," said Hangno.



Hangno then spent his higher education studying Philosophy at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah and Leatherworking at ISI-AKNSB Yogyakarta. He also opened a craft business. In essence, Hangno lives almost his entire life among art.

“When I was first given the carving tool, I opened it and smelled how fragrant it was. It smelled like jasmine. At the time, I felt it was an important sign for my journey in life,” Hangno shared. “Since then, I began seriously pursuing the world of wayang. It was a mythical moment that was impossible to understand rationally. But for me, it was an incredibly significant moment.”

Forming Wayang Merdeka Community.

Wayang is among Indonesia’s many traditional art forms. However, time and development slowly erode the existence of wayang in many places. Some people even avoid it because of misperceptions and misinformation from social media. In reality, wayang can be – and has historically been – a teaching medium imbued with messages of morality to build the nation’s characters.

“Wayang is ripe with meaning: the story narrations, the iconography, the physicality—all with its philosophy. When we enter the world of wayang, we enter its depth. It’s a shame that those depths are often forgotten by many,” said Hangno.

He is active in various events and communities that introduce wayang to the general public. Conserving wayang art, for Hangno, also means nurturing humanity and the environment in which humans and other beings live.



*Children learning how to make wayang with Wayang Merdeka Community.
Photo: Wayang Merdeka archive.*



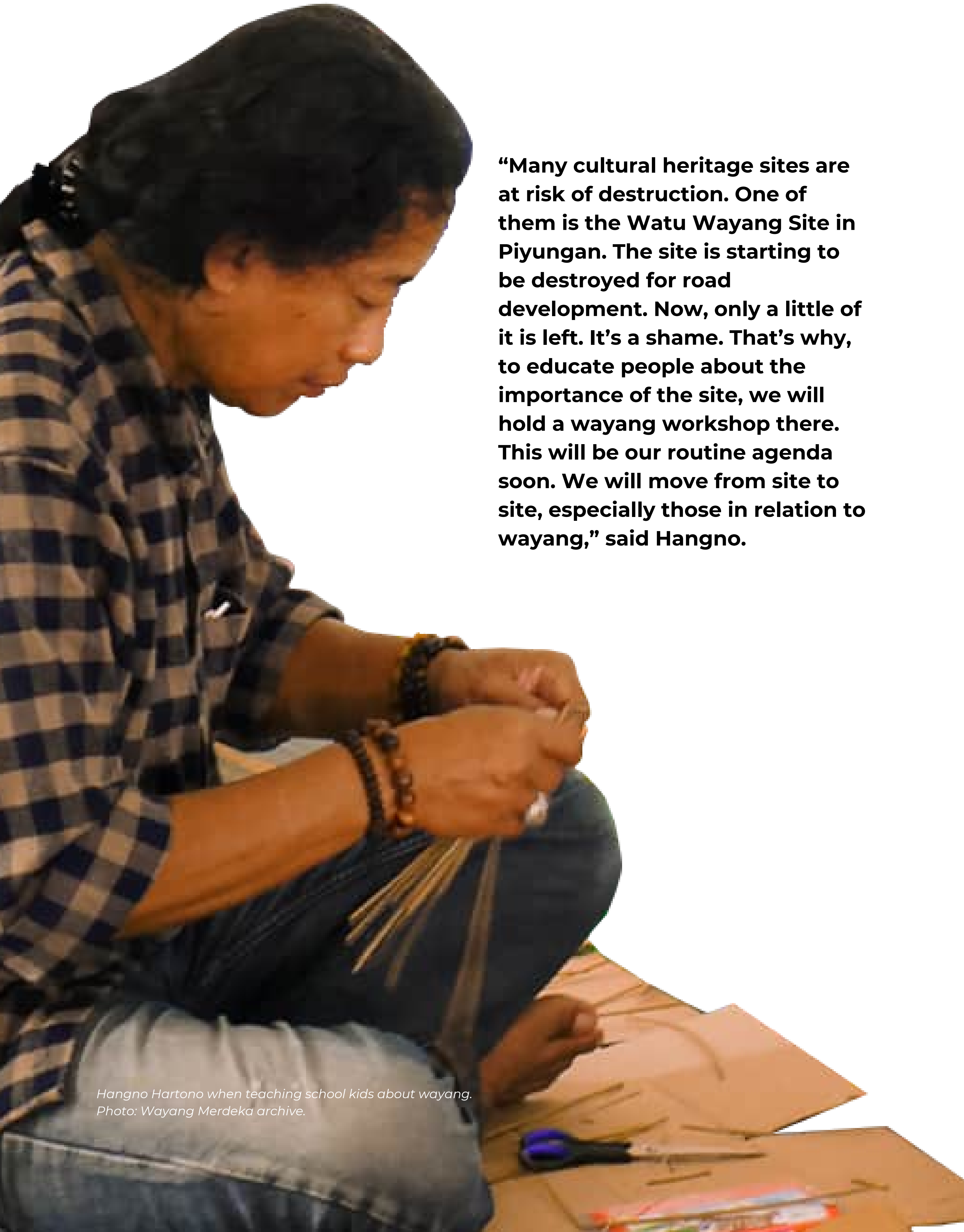
*From left to right: Lejar Daniartana Hukubun, Hangno Hartono, and Dwi Rahmanto, with wayang of their own creation.
Photo: Abul Muamar*

With his friends in Wayang Merdeka, Hangno invites children to help keep their environment clean by repurposing household waste. He teaches them how to turn waste into something of value by making wayang puppets from it.

Since 2022, Wayang Merdeka routinely holds workshops on making wayang from plastic waste and organic materials. It partners with other communities, such as the Urban Farming Kali Code Community, Tumbuh Elementary School, and Kinder Station Primary. Putting aside the rigid and traditional forms and stories of wayang like Ramayana and Mahabharata, Hangno gives the kids the freedom to create wayang as they like.

About the workshop, the father of two explained, “All workshop participants bring their own trash and garbage from home. Then, we teach them how to make wayang at the workshop, from lamination to painting to forming the wayang characters. Our concept is freedom. The kids are free to make any kind of wayang. Our goal is just to plant the word ‘wayang’ in their cognitive awareness, making the art close with and accepted by society.”

The activism of Wayang Merdeka doesn’t stop there. In the future, they plan to protect wayang-related cultural heritage sites.



“Many cultural heritage sites are at risk of destruction. One of them is the Watu Wayang Site in Piyungan. The site is starting to be destroyed for road development. Now, only a little of it is left. It’s a shame. That’s why, to educate people about the importance of the site, we will hold a wayang workshop there. This will be our routine agenda soon. We will move from site to site, especially those in relation to wayang,” said Hangno.

*Hangno Hartono when teaching school kids about wayang.
Photo: Wayang Merdeka archive.*

Inspired by Wayang

In 2019, Hangno established Omah Budaya Kahangnan, a wayang art gallery in Pringgading Village, Yogyakarta. This gallery regularly holds wayang art exhibitions that involve local communities, including students and the public. It also houses a small library specializing in Javanese literature.

Hangno Hartono also formed Wayang Kontemporer, a contemporary wayang community. Once, they held a contemporary wayang show at Omah Budaya Kahangnan. Five wayang artists performed one after another in the show that lasted all night.

Hangno has had his art in many exhibitions. Among them are the exhibitions with Wayang Alien from plastic waste, with Komunitas Malioboro, and a solo exhibition titled 'Trilogi Mencari Arjuna' that spotlighted the significance of leadership. He hopes his exhibitions can inspire many people. Hangno is also active in various communities, such as the UFO Network Indonesia and Cahaya Nusantara (YANTRA), where he is the director.



*One of Wayang Merdeka creation.
Photo: Wayang Merdeka archive.*



*One of Wayang Merdeka creation.
Photo: Wayang Merdeka archive.*

“All elements of life are a part of culture. Not only art; economy, politics, and others are also culture. It’s just a matter of how we approach them to support humanity and the environment,” Hangno said.

Bringing Art Closer to People

Hangno doesn't deny that art often cannot be understood by everyone. Hence, "There needs to be an appropriate communication method to properly convey to people what artists have created. This is seldom done. Most art people only mingle in the art scene, never venturing outside. Even the few who do only explore when there are exhibitions or discussions," he said.

Bringing art closer to people isn't without reason. Hangno believes that art can inspire people and the government in the collective effort to grow, develop, and nurture Indonesian culture.

Hangno affirmed, "When a culture is stagnant, the nation will not develop. That's why we need creative people. So, artists are responsible for inspiring people to create new things. These people can be anyone: politician, business person, teacher, or anything. They, too, are cultural actors."



*Wayang in the form of alien from plastic waste created by Wayang Merdeka.
Photo: Abul Muamar*

Ananda Sukarlan

Gives Free Music Lessons to Underprivileged Children

Ananda Sukarlan, a world-class pianist and composer, doesn't want there to be kids whose development cannot be adequately facilitated.





*Ananda Sukarlan teaching piano to children.
Photo: Chendra Panatan's Facebook.*

Every child has a right to education and development. Quality and balanced education is a crucial asset that determines their future life and welfare. Unfortunately, this right remains unfulfilled for many Indonesian children even after the government's 12-Year Compulsory Education Program.

In the eyes of Ananda Sukarlan, a world-class pianist and composer, Indonesia's education issues are quite complex. Ananda thinks that besides the economic factor as a primary hindrance, the education system and teaching methods are not inclusive. Another serious problem is that the education system doesn't support creativity and talent development in children well enough.

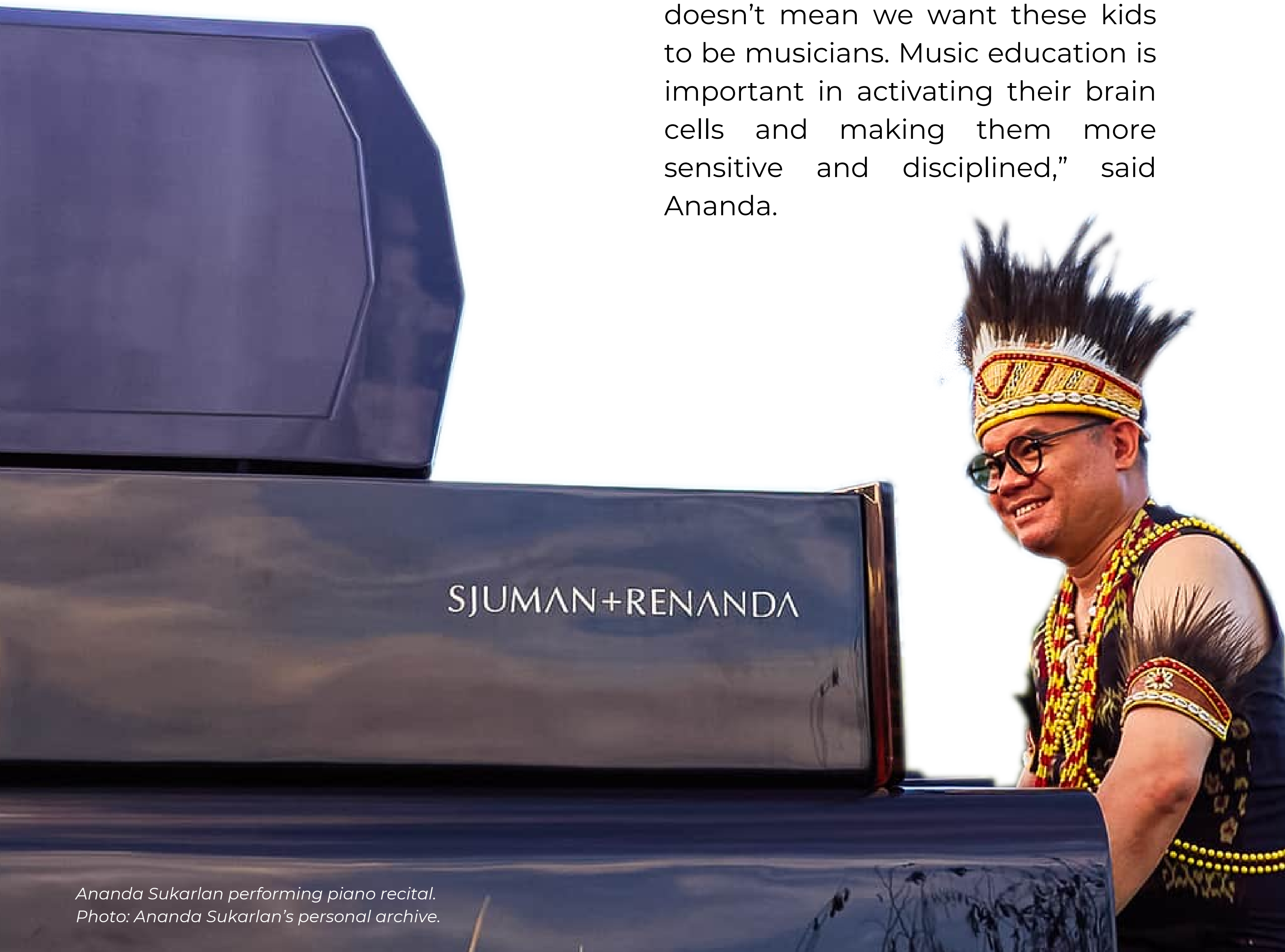
Giving Free Music Lessons

Those issues drove Ananda to give free music lessons to underprivileged children from various backgrounds and conditions. He then established Yayasan Musik Sastra Indonesia (YMSI, =Indonesian Music Literature Foundation) with his friends, Chendra Panatan, Dedi Panigoro, and Pia Alisjahbana. Under YMSI, he has taught hundreds of children through the Children in Harmony program. He teaches them to play various musical instruments at different locations, like the Ananda Sukarlan Center for Music and Dance in North Cipete, South Jakarta.

“I think all kids must receive free art lessons, be it music, painting, dancing, and others. From what I’ve seen, the education system in Indonesia is too focused on left-brain logic. It’s dangerous because it can make their thought process unbalanced. Kids need to think creatively, and they can learn from art where all elements are covered, not limited by right-and-wrong or black-and-white,” Ananda said.

Ananda’s reason for creating YMSI was tied to his childhood memory of growing up in a low-income family. Coming out of this experience, the man born in Jakarta on June 10, 1968, doesn’t want there to be kids whose development cannot be adequately facilitated.

“My own childhood inspired me. Back then, my parents were poor. I studied music at university with a scholarship from the Dutch government. It made me think, ‘Children need access to music education.’ Giving music lessons doesn’t mean we want these kids to be musicians. Music education is important in activating their brain cells and making them more sensitive and disciplined,” said Ananda.



*Ananda Sukarlan performing piano recital.
Photo: Ananda Sukarlan's personal archive.*

Ananda, the musician included in the book “The 2000 Outstanding Musicians of the 20th Century”, doesn’t only teach children how to play music and lets them go home when class is over. He often lends his instruments to them so they can practice more freely at home or anywhere else.

Ananda shared, “Among them, there are kids whose parents are meatball sellers, bajaj drivers, waiters. They usually have low self-esteem. If they can play one musical instrument, it can lift their pride and confidence. Confidence is vital in child development.”

When teaching music to the kids, the Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag-graduate pianist also slips in some character, history, and Indonesian culture education. According to Ananda, those elements are all crucial in art and culture development efforts. For instance, Ananda directs children to work with other musicians in an orchestra to teach them about diversity.



“**This way, children are used to differences,” said Ananda.**

*Ananda Sukarlan teaching piano to children.
Photo: Chendra Panatan's Facebook.*



*Ananda Sukarlan performing Rapsodia Nusantara.
Photo: Youtube Kita Anak Negeri.*

Writing Rhapsodies for Youth with Disabilities

Ananda also pays special attention to equality and diversity issues. He uses every opportunity to speak up about these topics, including when he was the artistic director of the G20 Orchestra in September 2022.

“Music is a universal language. It unites differences. Music functions not only as entertainment but also documentation. It is evident in the program how music can become a form of diplomacy and communication, not just between nations but also between individuals,” said the man who lives in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Cantabria, Spain.

Ananda Sukarlan is known for his magnum opus, “Rapsodia Nusantara”, reaching No. 40 as of August 2023. Ananda develops Rapsodia Nusantara based on songs from all provinces across Indonesia. More than art to entertain, Rapsodia Nusantara is his way to advocate and support the rights of various marginalized groups, including people with disabilities.

Ananda himself was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. Now, he has composed over 80 pieces for people with various physical disabilities. The pieces have varying levels of complexity and difficulty. For example, Rhapsody No. 15 and No. 39 are specifically to be played using only the left hand.

He said, “I do work with kids with disabilities. There are kids who play the piano with only several fingers or one hand. I thought that if they grow up to become pianists, they’ll need pieces they can play at their grand concerts.”

“Until now, Rhapsody No. 15 and No. 39 have only been played by me because they’re very difficult. The left-hand technique is not just playing with five fingers but still playing with high quality. So, for example, when people hear it with their eyes closed, they won’t tolerate subpar sound just because the musician plays with only one hand. The sound has to be good for the piece to be worth hearing,” said the pianist, who has composed hundreds of musical pieces and received international awards.

In Spain, Ananda works with Música Abierta Foundation to develop a music learning app for autistic children and children with disabilities.

“I teach music teachers and give them insight on autism and Asperger’s Syndrome—I have it. So, beyond teaching music, they must know how to connect and communicate with autistic kids. There’s a common misperception that you need to coddle autistic kids.

No. Autistic kids must learn to understand the ‘normal’ outside world just as the world must try to understand them,” said Ananda.

Ananda Sukarlan on Adapting Culture

For Ananda, who has been playing the piano since he was five and held concerts in many countries, art must be manifested in concrete actions that benefit society. So, he wholly supports the Indonesian government’s effort to make culture an investment for the nation’s future.

“Law Number 5 of 2017 on the Advancement of Culture is so cool. There’s nothing like that in Spain—I live there for half a year. That law is so important. There’s an element of advancement and utilization of culture where art is transformed into other arts,” he said.

“For instance, we can see a similar case with Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. In the US, there’s this modernized film version played by Leonardo DiCaprio. I think culture can live long if we adapt it to the contemporary era. I compose Rapsodia Nusantara from traditional songs from tribes across Indonesia.

This way, pianists from all over the world can play those songs that I've adapted and developed into virtuosic piano music on sheet music, a universal language, on concerts to show their artistic skills."



*Ananda Sukarlan teaching music to children
Photo: Ananda Sukarlan's Facebook.*

Lena Guslina

Raises Awareness on Environmental Destruction Through Dance

Lena Guslina, a Bandung-based choreographer and contemporary dancer, protests against environmental destruction through dancing.



The earth is wounded. Massive environmental exploitation—such as deforestation, extractive industry expansion, and land use change—has led to natural disasters everywhere, including in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. From floods to landslides to forest fires, disasters can happen anytime, now more frequently than before, and with varying impacts on various people. For the Bandung-based choreographer and contemporary dancer Lena Guslina, the impact runs deep.

Lena is a Bandung native, born in the city on August 16, 1977. These days, she is almost afraid to leave the house when the clouds get dark. She knows very well that every time it rains, her city will be flooded, and traffic jams will ensue. She sees that floods have happened more frequently in Bandung in recent years, particularly since housing complexes are emerging just below the mountains. In 2010, green sceneries still welcomed her whenever she gazed upon the mountains. Now, the greenery has changed into houses.



*Lena Guslina performing the choreography for Desah Rimba.
Photo: Legus Studio Collection.*

“When the rain falls, all of the water is streaming downtown. Schools are drowned. It’s all over the place. Floods are happening everywhere, even flash floods. Landslides also happen in several regencies, including in Garut,” said Lena. “We’re not just talking about Bandung. I believe environmental issues have no geographical limit—it’s global. These issues are stuck inside my head, evolving into inner turmoils that push me to do something. I can’t just stay still.”

Responding to Environmental Destruction with Dance

Environmental destruction disturbs Lena Guslina. As an artist who has spent 22 years of her life pursuing dance, Lena responds to turmoil through the sway of her body. She pours it all into contemporary dance performances and performs them publicly to raise people's awareness.

“Through dancing, I want to remind people about the environmental wreckage. I am not thinking too far about the possible impacts—this is just my intuitive response. But, I feel like I have to protest against environmental destruction through art, hoping to provide an alternative way to make people realize it. This is only my small contribution, which may seem insignificant to some people,” said Lena, who graduated from the Indonesian Arts and Culture Institute, Bandung.

In 2016, Lena held various choreography and dance performances in Bandung's public parks to protest against the way the city government handled environmental issues, which, according to her, didn't touch the fundamental problem.

*Lena Guslina performing the choreography for Jejak Rimba.
Photo: Legus Studio Collection.*





*Lena Guslina performing the choreography for Elegi Bumi.
Photo: Legus Studio Collection*

“I think Bandung’s public parks were already pretty enough. It wasn’t the problem. The government shouldn’t only revitalize public parks, widen tunnels, and do all other things in the name of beauty. There were far more serious problems that we needed to collectively think about. Forests and mountains needed savings. How was it possible to turn forest areas into housing complexes? It wouldn’t have been possible without the government’s permission,” she said.

To make her protest echo louder, Lena moved her performance to the forests in West Java starting in 2017. In every performance, she involved many people, including musicians, pantomimists, and actors, to put out shows with different concepts to stay fresh. Several of Lena’s choreographies that express her concern for the environment include *Jejak Rimba* (The Forest’s Print), *Air Mata Bumi* (Earth’s Tears), *Dialektika Tubuh Taman dan Hutan Kota* (Dialectics of the Body of City Parks and Forests), *Desah Rimba* (The Forest’s Sigh), and *Elegi Bumi* (Earth’s Elegy). Lena has performed these choreographies on multiple occasions in front of large audiences.

Lena also has performed choreographies and dances to convey her concern for the victims of natural disasters several times. One of them is *Gemuruh Sunyi* (The Roar of Silence), which she performed at a charity donation event for the victims of the Palu-Donggala earthquake in Babakan Siliwangi City Forest, Bandung, in November 2018.

“I held theatrical dance performances in the forests. The first was in the Manglayang Forest, then Dago Forest, then Babakan Siliwangi City Forest, and others. I also went to Bali to perform at a mangrove forest. Previously, I only talked about biodiversity issues, but lately, I also bring up the issue of plastic waste, which is now the monster [to the environment],” said the founder of Legus Studio.

Lena Guslina’s Struggles and Challenges

Lena shared that holding performances in forests isn’t as easy as it seems. There is a long process behind them, from preparing costumes and properties to obtaining permission from related institutions. It often takes weeks.

“It’s funny because I still need to get permission whenever I perform, even though my shows are for the public’s good and have nothing to do with commercial gains,” said Lena.

Lena believes that artists have to be willing to struggle and contribute to solving the world’s pressing problems. She has never received financial support for every performance. It all comes out of her pocket.

*Lena Guslina performing the choreography for Berjalin Kisah Pelabuhan Cirebon.
Photo: Youtube Lenaguslina.id.*

“From costume procurements to food to surveys, I do them all without the government or other institutions’ help. Artists must be willing to make sacrifices, whether physically or materially. I believe that it will all return to me someday, the good intentions. What has been constant is the support I receive from my friends. It has become the most important thing,” she said.

Lena’s sacrifices are paid off through the audience’s enthusiasm. Her shows have received multiple media coverages for bringing up environmental issues. Through dancing, Lena hopes to drive changes in society.

“Without me doing this, the government should still be concerned about environmental issues. If everyone turns a blind eye, what will we become?” said Lena.

Careful Time Management

Driving changes through her contribution to art is a challenge for Lena. It’s not uncommon for her to face dangerous situations when performing in open spaces. Once, when she was about to perform for an event at the National Gallery of Indonesia, Lena had to withstand strong winds for two hours on stage and keep her costume intact.



Another time, her properties went missing on the day when she had to perform in a forest. The mother of two also has to allocate her time for her family and other matters beyond her desire to advocate for environmental issues.

“I have to be careful in managing my time. I have to take care of my husband and kids as well. When my kids are sick, for example, then I have to tend to them,” said Lena.

Lena always strives to ensure that every single one of her performances can be welcomed by everyone. “When we have tough determination in doing things, no matter the shape or situation, people won’t bat an eye whether you’re a woman or man. I think people will no longer see genders, but the concept. It’s about how we can offer fresh concepts to express things through art,” she explains.



Night of poetry appreciation, in a place of togetherness.
Photo: Instagram Lena Guslina Legus.

Dancing on Canvas

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Lena's body felt caged. She couldn't perform outside due to mobility restrictions. The channel to express her art was blocked. At that time, Lena felt pressured psychologically, mainly because of the negative news on COVID-19 from various media.

Still, Lena's creativity couldn't be contained just yet. When she couldn't perform outside, Lena's fingers quietly danced on canvases. Through paintings, she channeled all the anxious energy she felt while staying home due to the pandemic, which cannot be separated from environmental destruction. When mobility restrictions started to ease out, her 30 pieces of painting were exhibited at the Bandung Cultural Center Gallery on March 20–23, 2022, titled "Kumau Diriku: Gerak Garis Lena Guslina." All of the paintings were created without brushes, just through the moves of her fingers.

Many people were surprised then, mainly because Lena was famous as a dancer and choreographer.



Lena Guslina performing her choreography at the opening of her exhibition at the Bandung Cultural Center Gallery. Photo: Legus Studio Collection.



*Lena Guslina and her work entitled "Illahu, Melintas Cahaya".
Photo: Instagram Lena Guslina Legus.*

“There were several forest areas where entering was forbidden because of the pandemic and strict rules. Then, social distancing happened. We couldn’t go out. Eventually, I conveyed my restlessness on canvas. I illustrated the earth’s condition through painting,” said Lena.

Like her choreography, Lena hopes her paintings can spark people’s awareness of environmental destruction and ignite actions to mitigate it. She believes art is the best channel to drive change because the message is conveyed beautifully.

“Artists have a tremendous role [to drive change], moreover when the calling comes from within. So, artists need to be supported,” she concludes.

Hanna Keraf

Empowers Rural Women by Reviving the Local's Weaving Tradition

Hanna Keraf seeks to empower the women in East Nusa Tenggara by reviving the local's weaving tradition.



Weaving is one of the world's oldest traditions that exists in many cultures, including Indonesia. Unfortunately, the weaving tradition is fading out along with the times. In Indonesia, specifically the East Nusa Tenggara Province (NTT), this concern is intertwined with socio-economic issues like poverty, malnutrition, and the lack of job opportunities. These issues disproportionately affect rural women due to unequal access to decent work.

This situation concerns Hanna Keraf, a young entrepreneur who is one of the founders of Du Anyam. Du Anyam is a social enterprise that aims to empower and improve the quality of life of local women through making woven handicrafts. Equipped with her business knowledge, Hanna hopes to empower the women of East Nusa Tenggara by reviving the local weaving tradition.

Reviving Weaving Tradition

Hanna's journey to empower the women of NTT began in Maumare, Sikka Regency, in 2012. At the time, she was working at Yayasan Sahabat Cipta and Swisscontact. She saw how Maumere was rich in natural resources. Yet, its people couldn't even enjoy them because everything was sold to other places.

“For instance, there was a production of natural forest honey in the forest conservation. We asked the locals if they drank the honey. They said no. How? I think the locals should be the first to get a taste of the honey before selling it outside,” recalled Hana.

Hanna's journey to empower the women of NTT began in Maumare, Sikka Regency, in 2012. At the time, she was working at Yayasan Sahabat Cipta and Swisscontact. She saw how Maumere was rich in natural resources. Yet, its people couldn't even enjoy them because everything was sold to other places.



*Women of Du Anyam.
Photo: Du Anyam archive.*



*Hanna singing along with the people.
Photo: Instagram Hanna Keraf.*

In her journey, Hanna kept encountering similar problems in which the richness and potential of an area failed to result in prosperous local communities, such as the woven handicrafts made of lontar leaves by the women of Sikka. Lontar is *Borassus flabellifer*, a type of palm native to Indonesia. Hanna observed and figured out what factored into this issue: the lack of coordination and innovation among the artisans, limited access to the market, and an inefficient supply chain.

Along the way, Hanna slowly started building a network of hundreds of weaver women. She named it Du Anyam, meaning ‘Woman Weaves’, from the Sikka language. Hanna Keraf guides the local weaver women to hone their skills and innovate to create various woven handicrafts that are functional and aesthetically pleasing.

Every month, the women of Du Anyam can create hundreds of varying woven handicrafts made of lontar leaves. Among the handicrafts are handheld fans, baskets, hats, wallets, sirih pinang (areca nut wrapped in a betel leaf) containers, sobe (cylinder-shaped bags), dese (rectangular bags), lepa (crossbody bags), keleka (rice sieve trays), and monga (plates).

From this point, the lontar leaf weaving tradition in NTT is starting to come back to life, and the artisan women can earn their incomes. Through Du Anyam, Hanna turns the weaving tradition from something with only cultural values to a source of income for local women.



*Women of Du Anyam with their woven baskets.
Photo: Du Anyam.*

“It’s about how women can utilize their skills using local materials to make something worth selling. That’s how simple the idea is,” said the entrepreneur, born on December 14, 1988.

Empowering Women Through Du Anyam

From Sikka, Hanna moved to Lembata and East Flores Regencies in 2014. With two friends, Azalea Ayuningtyas and Melia Winata, she expanded Du Anyam into a bigger and more sustainable social enterprise. What began with small groups in five villages now has become the Du Anyam that reaches about 1,400 weaver women in 32 villages in East Nusa Tenggara and Nabire (Central Papua).

Besides raising the quality and image of weaving, Du Anyam guides the weaver women to sharpen their weaving and business skills. It also helps them sell their handicrafts all over Indonesia and even abroad. Some of their woven handicrafts were introduced in international events, such as the Asian Games 2018 and ASEAN Summit 2023. The income earned makes the women of Du Anyam more independent and empowered.

“The end goal is to make them more independent, becoming entrepreneurs themselves, with their end-to-end skills. Starting from making the products to selling them, including having the storytelling skills to help sell their products. In the end, some of them become trainers. Some become the leaders of their communities, the managers of the credit unions, the village chiefs, the neighborhood heads, and others. They occupy leadership positions where they can do a good job of relaying information. This capacity development is what makes me the most proud,” said Hanna, who graduated from International Business Studies at Ritsumeikan University in Japan.

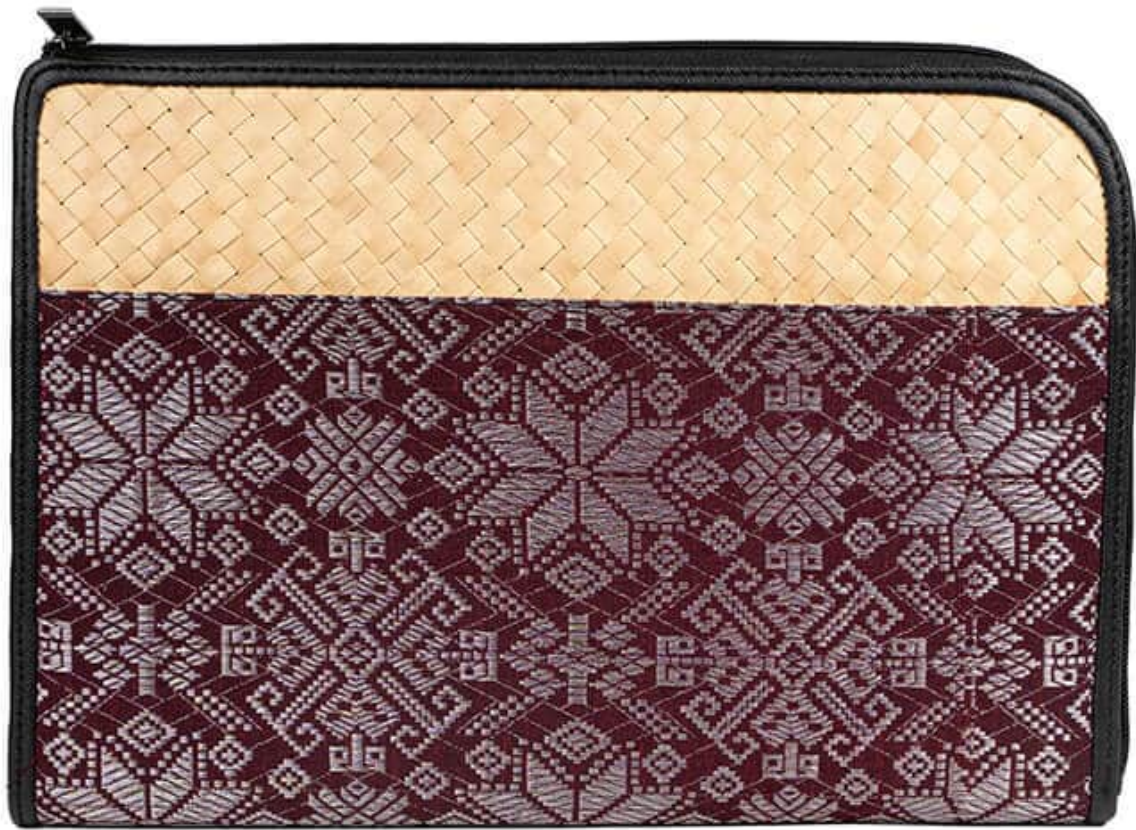
The creation of Du Anyam is not limited to the issues of women’s empowerment and preserving the weaving tradition. Beyond them, Hanna Keraf also sees how local youth aren’t taking a role in advancing the local economy. When they feel that their potential isn’t fully cultivated, most rural youth choose to work in the cities. Hanna believes this problem arises due to the lack of ability to translate and utilize information.



*Women of Du Anyam making a basket.
Photo: Du Anyam.*

She said, “I think this challenge exists in rural areas everywhere, not just in eastern Indonesia. Moving out of the area becomes the easiest option to better their economic standing. One of the main reasons is that often, there isn’t enough job opportunity there. What opportunity there is usually requires high education, then they end up competing in a system far from ideal.”

To Lepironia and Peatlands



*One of Du Anyam product.
Photo: Website Du Anyam.*

In 2020, Du Anyam spread its wings to South Kalimantan Province, turning lepironia plants into woven handicrafts. Lepironia, also known as the gray sedge, is a plant that grows wildly in peatlands and is often used as handicraft material.

This business venture walks hand-in-hand with peatland conservation efforts, collaborating with Badan Restorasi Gambut (Peatland Restoration Agency), focusing on fire prevention, misuse, and land conversion. To contribute, Du Anyam has developed a community-centered production system for lepironia woven handicrafts that involves locals as the primary keepers of peatlands.

“The hope is that the local communities can become ‘the police’ and, simultaneously, reap the benefits of the peatlands,” said Hanna.

In 2021, Hanna also started developing Krealogi, an app to help SMEs improve their skills. Krealogi goes beyond weaving. It also includes other products made by local communities in rural areas.

“The products come from ultra-micro and micro enterprises in remote areas. There are chips, tenun (an Indonesian traditional type of weaving), batik, and others. So, they’re quite varied. We hope to tackle the challenge of micro businesses competing with medium-sized businesses,” Hanna shared.

However, not everything goes smoothly. Hanna and her team face some big challenges, one of which is ensuring sustainability across the supply chain. Other challenges include data recording, uneven skills among artisans, and each village’s cultural traditions and beliefs.

“When there’s a culturally relevant traditional event such as death, birth, or wedding, production halts,” Hanna laughed. “Ultimately, we have to take industrial technique approaches like time and motion study that we adapt and translate to fit the local wisdom.”

Hanna Keraf and Opportunities Gone

Besides reviving the weaving tradition and empowering rural women, Hanna also supports the local communities in Flores and Lembata in other ways. For example, she organizes scholarships for children in these regencies from donors. Until August 2023, more than 400 elementary school to university students have received scholarships.

She also looks for donors to support kids studying and women weaving at night and give out balanced meals to help end stunting in East Nusa Tenggara.

Of course, there have been things to sacrifice in Hanna's journey. When she decided to go to NTT and try to revive the weaving tradition, she forewent a scholarship for a master's degree abroad. Sadly, her path does not meet her parents' expectations of working in big companies overseas.

"There were some opportunities I ended up not taking. And actually, I was directed by my parents to go to Tokyo, Singapore, or, yeah, somewhere abroad. But I wanted to contribute to East Nusa Tenggara, which became the biggest reason to stay and work in Flores. I was inspired by my own family. My family used to be poor fishermen who then broke out of poverty thanks to education," said the daughter of Sonny Keraf, the former Minister of Environment.



*Women of Du Anyam weaving.
Photo: Youtube Du Anyam.*

As a woman, Hanna couldn't deny the 'different' treatment she receives in her endeavors. However, it never stops her because she always believes women have the same potential and power.

She said, "I'm often compared to young male entrepreneurs. Especially with how Indonesia is still a patriarchal society. At the end of the day, because I have a massive responsibility as a leader, I must adapt. As women, I and other woman leaders have to show ourselves as examples of good leaders so the women who work with us can see it's possible."

To close, she added, "Indonesia is rich. There are so many different hyperlocal contexts from each region. A solution that might work for all areas is involving men in women's empowerment efforts. Men must want to admit that women are capable. If not, there will always be a stumbling block when women are to play their roles in society. Then, we need to focus on developing these rural areas based on their local contexts so the local women can grow and develop while also advancing the local economy."



*Hanna walking in a beach.
Photo: Youtube IndonesiaKaya.*

Kristopel Bili

Looks After Sumba's Forests and Culture through Literature

Kristopel Bili established Sakola Wanno to revive Sumba's culture and protect its forests through literature.



Culture is the foundation of life. Beyond traditions and heritages, culture keeps multiple aspects of life flowing in harmony, including our environment. Leaving culture behind might lead to disharmony, and eventually negatively impact our lives. For the Sumba-native Indonesian forest ranger Kristopel Bili, the thought of cultural degradation leaves him restless.

Sadly, Sumba Island, East Nusa Tenggara, is experiencing cultural degradation and persistent threat of deforestation, causing disharmony in the ecosystems.

As a forest ranger, Kristopel Bili sees the need for a more effective and impactful approach to overcome environmental degradation issues. He believes overcoming those issues doesn't need violence or guns; it needs gentle words and culture.



Kristopel Bili with the children of Sakola Wano.
Photo: Kristopel Bili's personal archive.

Establishing Sakola Wanno to Revive Sumba's Culture

Kristopel has been witnessing the cultural values in Sumba, Indonesia, eroding slowly for the past ten years, especially in the villages near the forests. Back then, older people in his village had the utmost respect for the existence of trees in forests and would never cut them down brutally and illegally.

“Back then, our elders would conduct rituals first to ask permission from the guardian spirits and ancestors before cutting down trees from the forests. And they would only cut enough trees according to their needs,” said Kristopel.

Kristopel lamented how some villagers have started to take out wood from the Indigenous forests to rebuild their houses that were caught on fire.

He continued, “But, as time passed, especially when many houses got caught in fire, the forests, including Indigenous forests, were destroyed. Logging becomes uncontrollable. These people no longer pay their respect to the cultural values in Indigenous rituals that are sacred and must be obeyed. Cultural degradation is happening here. It's as if rituals are just ordinary ceremonies. We have lost the true meaning of culture.”



*Kristopel Bili with the children of Sakola Wano.
Photo: Kristopel Bili's personal archive.*

“We don’t have to take out the woods from the forests to build Indigenous houses. Our ancestors have taught us everything about life. Big trees have to be planted in the village, a stack of rocks (kangali) should be placed under the fences, then little forests (kalio’wo) below. These little forests or kalio’wo have been cleared and sold out. Meanwhile, they are the source of our wood, bamboo ropes, and rattan. What does this mean? Cultural degradation is happening here, even among the elders and Indigenous leaders,” said Kristopel.

The cultural degradation also affects various traditions in Sumba. Pasola is one of them. It is a tradition where two groups compete in a sports game of javelin throwing while riding horses. Pasola is a part of the Marapu – the belief of the Sumba people – ritual ceremony to celebrate the paddy planting season and ask for forgiveness and prosperity for the harvest.



*Spring observation rituals.
Photo: Sakola Wanno archive.*

The schedule for the Pasola performance is decided by calculating the position of the moon, stars, and other natural signs. A month before the ceremony starts, the people of the village must adhere to several prohibitions, including hosting parties and building houses.

“Now, whenever ‘special’ guests and foreign tourists are coming, [the Pasola performance] is no longer held according to the rituals taught and inherited by our predecessors. Instead, it will be adjusted according to the arrival of those ‘special’ guests and foreign tourists. It’s weird. I don’t know whose hand is at play here; the schedule is often brought forward and postponed. It’s no longer decided based on stars, constellations, or moon locations like the Indigenous leaders (Rato) used to do. It’s no longer sacred,” he said. “In big cities, cultural degradation happens because of modernization and technological development. Meanwhile, in Sumba, those things aren’t really evident, but the culture is still degrading.”

All those forms of cultural degradation pushed Kristopel to build Sakola Wanno in 2017. The name is derived from the local language, Sumbese. 'Sakola' means school, and 'Wanno' means village. Through the school, Kristopel wants to revive Sumba's culture through art and literature.

His determination to build Sakola Wanno became more solid after reading a message carved on the coffin of Hendrik Pali, an East Sumba Indigenous figure, which he carried with several other people to the burial site.

"There was a writing that said 'Jangan biarkan anak-anak tercabut dari akar budayanya.' Do not let our children be yanked out of their cultural roots. While carrying the coffin, I felt the burden of culture on my shoulders get heavier. I wanted to instill character and culture education for children as early as possible so they wouldn't get easily swayed," said Kristopel.



*Tree planting activity at Sekola Wanno.
Photo: Sakola Wanno archive.*



*Children's activity at Sekola Wanno
Photo: Sakola Wanno archive.*

Kristopel Bili on Shaping Children's Characters with Literature

Every year, the number of Ana Wanno—the term used to call children who study at Sakola Wanno—increases. They are children from elementary, junior high, and high schools. Until 2023, 40 children are studying at Sakola Wanno, coming from Wanno Village, Puu Mangita, Dede Kadu Village, and other nearby villages. The children are enthusiastic about learning to read and write poetry, counting, and playing traditional games.

With the help of two other educators, Kristopel teaches children at Sakola Wanno to plant trees yearly, hold a ritual of blessings for water springs and release eels as the guardian of the springs, and properly develop agriculture farms and plantations. Among the trees planted are porang (elephant foot yam), avocado, banana, and durian. The tree planting also aims to achieve food sovereignty and improve local people's welfare.

“The main priority is to sharpen their characters and minds as village kids so they can be brave and express themselves with conviction. So, when they move out of the village someday and go to Java, for example, they have confidence,” said the man born in Waikabubak on April 1, 1982.

Literature isn't exactly Kristopel's strongest suit. The man who graduated from the Faculty of Forestry, Yogyakarta Institute of Agriculture, was only introduced to literature after he finished college. In 2009, before going back to his village, Kristopel received a message that kept echoing in his head. The message was from Umbu Landu Paranggi, a Sumbanese writer who passed away on April 21, 2021. The message came to Kristopel through the writer's daughter, Rambu Anarara Wulang Paranggi. "It said: Send me the creations of my children. Form a small community of literature and turn Sumba into poetry. Do not look for me; I will come to you in an endless longing," said Kristopel.

"I hadn't written a single poem that time. I hadn't even met him; he was just entrusting his message to me. The words felt very powerful to me. At Sakola Wanno, we firmly believe in the power of words," said Kristopel.

To fund Sakola Wanno's activities, Kristopel and his wife willingly spare a portion of their paychecks every month. "Through literature, we can get to know ourselves, our culture, and our country, Indonesia, better," he affirmed.

Empowering People with Entrepreneurial Training

Not only educating children, Kristopel also reaches out to adults in efforts to halt deforestation. In this case, he uses a different approach. While children are introduced to literature, Kristopel gives entrepreneurial training to adults to develop small businesses, such as in tea and coffee, through Tea Kandara and Coffee Wanno.

"Adults are harder to change, both mentally and in their characters. So, for adults, I use a populist economic empowerment. Because I see that environmental and cultural degradation happen due to the economy I believe they won't cut down more trees when the economy improves," said Kristopel.

Besides Sakola Wanno, Kristopel also established a performing art and culture group for Sumbese culture, Seni Sastra Budaya Sumba (SBSS), with a similar purpose. He wants the youth of Sumba to cultivate love and appreciation for nature and culture.

For everything he has done so far, Kristopel doesn't hope for anything except for Sumba's environment and culture to continue flourishing. He doesn't even budge when people call him crazy for doing what he does. Kristopel hopes that the government and other stakeholders can take concrete, serious, and effective steps to save Sumba's environment and culture.

“There are so many postponed dreams I want to realize, especially for the Sumba culture. I don't want to be rich with material things, that's for sure. I want to feel rich from my abundant and concrete work. But this dream needs support. I hope I'm not alone in this,” he concluded.



*Kristopel Bili providing learning activity for children of Sakola Wanno and Dyatame Community.
Photo: Sakola Wanno archive.*

Agus Yusuf

Aspires to Open an Inclusive Art School for Artists with Disabilities

It feels selfish to only think about myself. I want to help as many people as possible. After all, all of this belongs to the Almighty first and foremost.



“If normal people can do it, we with disabilities can do it, too,” said Agus Yusuf Endang Kresno Raden. He is a painting artist with disability from Madiun, East Java, Indonesia.

There is a long story behind the word ‘can’ that the painter said. Before he began, Agus took a moment. He was staring far out the open door of his house, shifting through his memories under the bright sky that day.

That afternoon, Agus worked on a painting at his gallery behind his house. It was an almost-finished scene of fishing boats docking.

“I’ll continue tomorrow,” he said. Agus usually paints in the morning until midday when his concentration is at its best.

Natural Talent

Agus was born in Madiun Regency on May 20, 1963, to a family of farm workers. Born with physical disabilities, he grew to be an independent kid who refused to burden anyone, including his parents.

Despite starting school later than other children his age, he was never discouraged. Every day, he tackled a three-kilometer journey to school without any aid. He shared, “I went to SDN Sidomulyo. It’s a public school, not a special school for students with disabilities.”



*Agus at painting exhibition in Surabaya, East Java.
Photo: Sri Rohmatiah.*

Agus is an autodidact painter whose talent was first realized in second grade. Painting with his mouth and left foot, his creations stood out among his classmates. His teachers soon noticed this talent and entered him in a village-level painting competition when he was in fifth grade. Afterward, he kept winning other art competitions up to the regency level in Madiun.

Strong Will

In 1985, Agus graduated from middle school as a 22-year-old. Afterward, he didn't know what to do as job searching was not easy.

"I didn't continue [my education] due to my parents' financial situation. At the time, my younger brother also wanted to enter vocational high school. So, only he could continue. I was idle for a while after graduating," he said.

"I didn't continue [my education] due to my parents' financial situation. At the time, my younger brother also wanted to enter vocational high school. So, only he could continue. I was idle for a while after graduating," he said.



*Agus teaching children to paint.
Photo: Sri Rohmatiah.*

For three years, Agus was at rock bottom. At times, he mourned his condition. Still, he never really gave up. His will to not burden anyone kept lighting up his mind, pushing him to improve his skills.

"Besides studying and reading a lot, I also spent that time fasting, getting closer to the Almighty. I did all kinds of fasting. I prayed to be given work—something light but with a high salary," he confessed.

His prayers and efforts were answered. One day in 1988, a neighbor told him about the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists of The World (AMFPA), which was then looking for painting artists with disabilities from Indonesia. With conviction, Agus sent his application to the association headquartered in Switzerland.

After a year-long selection process, Agus became a part of the AMFPA as a Student Member. Through this association, his paintings become his source of income.

"If you think about it logically, with my condition, it was impossible. But God is All-Knowing," he said.

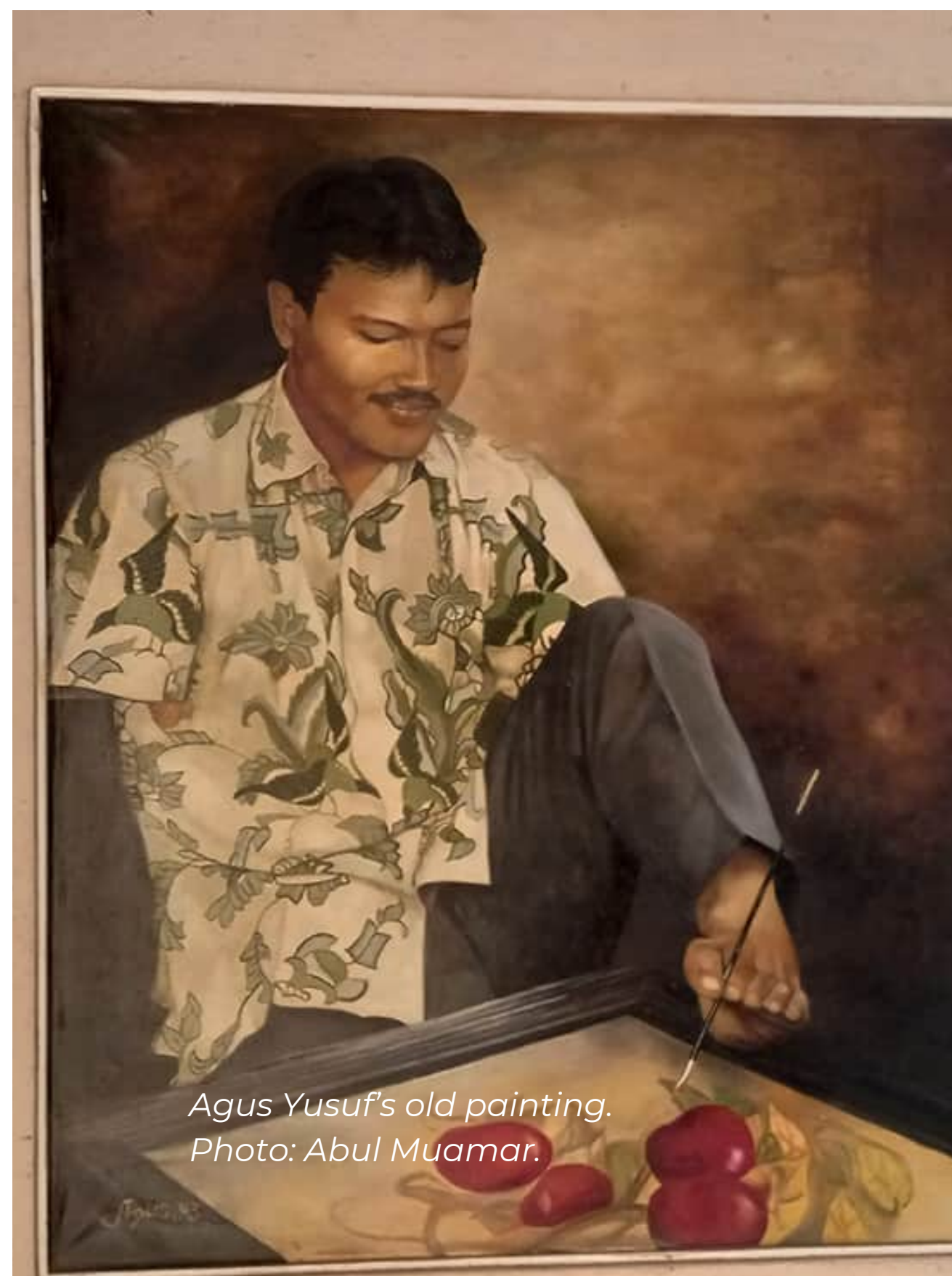
As a Student Member, Agus must send 3 to 6 paintings every three months to the AMFPA via post. Besides for sale, the paintings are evaluated by the AMFPA to gauge his development as an artist and eligibility to up his status from Student Member to Associate Member and finally to Full Member.

It took Agus 21 years to level up. “In 2010, I leveled up to be an Associate Member,” he shared.

Aspiring Painting Artists with Disabilities

From the start, Agus didn’t want his painting to benefit only him. He has been teaching kids to paint since 2003. Besides the regular classes at his gallery, he often gets invited by art teachers from schools all over Madiun to be a specialist who tutors students joining art competitions. Some won; many fell more in love with the painting art.

When teaching, Agus always emphasizes the importance of enjoying the process. This principle guides his students to express their art and feelings onto canvases comfortably without restraint. It also helps them find their uniqueness, their signature strokes and colors.



*Agus Yusuf's old painting.
Photo: Abul Muamar.*

He said, “After that, I start going into the theory, like color composition, lighting, and stroke techniques, so the quality of their paintings can be assessed properly.”

Agus keeps the doors of his gallery open for anyone who wants to learn to paint. He said, “I invite the villagers to learn to paint here for free. I also invite orphaned kids every Ramadan month, offering them painting lessons. But, well, the locals aren’t very interested in art and don’t encourage their children to learn about it. So, I don’t have a lot of students.”

To share his knowledge with more people, Agus dreams of opening an art school that will also empower other artists with disabilities who are still struggling to live a good life. As he imagines it, he hopes the art school will be a learning facility that is inclusive of aspiring artists with disabilities. With several public figures in his network, he is sure his aspiration is not out of reach.

“It feels selfish to only think about myself. I want to help as many people as possible. After all, all of this belongs to the Almighty first and foremost. I already have the land. I know the current regent well. All that’s left is thinking about conveying this plan,” said Agus.

He added, “What’s clear is that I am ready to give my energy to teach. I will prioritize aspiring artists with disabilities because I understand well how it feels to be one. Once everything is running, I will invite my friends who are painting artists with disabilities to help teach. Inshallah, they’re ready, too.”



*Agus Yusuf live painting with the orphaned children he invited.
Photo: Sri Rohmatiah.*

Empowerment

Agus has created over 650 naturalist-realist paintings throughout his career. Most of his paintings take inspiration from nature.

Every three to five years, Agus and other AMFPA members hold joint exhibitions worldwide, such as in Spain, Austria, Switzerland, Singapore, and Thailand. He also regularly does joint exhibitions with other painting artists with disabilities in several Indonesian cities.

“I hold exhibitions to introduce mouth and foot painting artists to the public. Usually in Surabaya, Jogja, and Salatiga. The exhibitions are also an opportunity to learn from each other and improve our techniques,” he said.

With his paintings, Agus lives a prosperous life with his wife and two children. With the money he saved every month, he was able to purchase a 1,400-meter farmland and employ five farm workers. During Ramadan every year, he donates to the poor and the orphaned kids around his village. He is also a regular donor at the local amil zakat agency, Yatim Mandiri Madiun.

Long story short, Agus’s dreams go beyond opening an art school. More than anything, he wants his life to be beneficial for as many people as possible.



*Agus Yusuf performing live painting.
Photo: Instagram Agus Yusuf.*

He said, “Just like my principle: if normal people can, I can, too. I don’t want to burden anyone. I can drive a car. I can ride a motorcycle. I can eat by myself, no need to feed me. And alhamdulillah, my wife and I got to perform the Hajj recently (June 2023).”

“So, I always insist, especially to children with disabilities, let’s not depend on others. Don’t hope for pity from others. Don’t give up. We have to explore our abilities. If we keep our spirit, our will, Allah will give us a way,” he concluded.



Agus Yusuf painting with his mouth.
Foto: Abul Muamar.

Indah Darmastuti

Makes Literature More Inclusive for Visually Impaired People

Through Difalitera, Indah Darmastuti dedicates time, energy, and mind to make literature accessible for everyone, especially for visually impaired people.





Indah Darmastuti with Difalitera Reading Terrace members in 'Reading Poetry' activity at Plaosan Temple, Central Java. Photo: Nico Haryono from Difalitera.

“An educated person must learn to act justly, beginning, first of all, with his thoughts, then later in his deeds,” wrote Pramudya Ananta Toer, an Indonesian writer, in his novel, ‘This Earth of Mankind.’ The excerpt has been quoted a lot; the ‘an educated person’ part’ is often replaced with ‘us’ to make it more relevant for everyone.

That excerpt has led Indah Darmastuti, a writer based in Surakarta, Indonesia, to the path she has pursued in the last several years: bridging the need for literature for visually impaired people. She has been dedicating her time, energy, and mind to creating ways for literature to be enjoyed by everyone through Difalitera, a platform providing audiobooks for literary works in Indonesian.

That night, after returning from work and attending an event, Indah shared her stories with Green Network Asia. “I’m sorry. Have you been waiting long?” she asked while entering a coffee shop in Kartasura, a part of Surakarta city where we had agreed to meet. After ordering food, Indah sat and told long stories in manners that are akin to reading someone a novel, with music from the café blaring not-so-quietly in the background.

Providing Audiobooks for Visually Impaired People

Indah's journey in building Difalitera started in June 2016. During a literature event in her hometown, Surakarta, a visually impaired college student who was also speaking at the event shared the challenges and difficulties in accessing reading materials.

"The student said there are literary books written in Braille, but there aren't many. E-book reader applications also exist, but the intonation is too stiff," Indah recalled. "At that time, I hadn't really understood [about the issue]. Even after the event ended, I was still oblivious. It wasn't until a few weeks later, when I watched the recording of the event, that I realized that literature hasn't been paying attention to the needs of visually impaired people. Meanwhile, Pram [Pramoedya Ananta Toer] said we should act justly with our thoughts."

Upon realization, Indah's days were restless. However, she couldn't think of a way to bridge the needs of visually impaired people for accessible literary works. Even after months had turned into years, Indah hadn't found the right solution.



DIFALITERA
SASTRA SUARA INDONESIA

Cerita Anak

Cerita Pendek

Puisi & Geguritan

Cerita Cekak

English Lesson

Short Story

Dongeng

Selamat Datang di Difalitera
Sastra Suara Indonesia



CERITA PENDEK

PUISI & GEGURITAN

CERITA ANAK

SHORT STORY

CERITA CEKAK

DONGENG

ENGLISH LESSON

ARSIP

Difalitera's website interface.
Photo: Website Difalitera

One day, four students from Sebelas Maret University in Surakarta contacted her, asking permission to turn one of her short-story collections into an audio format. When she received the recording of the students reading her work, Indah felt a spark of interest to explore this area further. This moment eventually inspired Indah to create the Difalitera audiobooks.

“Because reading is a personal experience, it’s crucial, and also a challenge, to explore the reading style, tempo, and intonation to make the stories more alive,” said Indah.

After grappling with the concept and looking for partners to assist her, Difalitera’s first audiobook was released on July 1, 2018. Difalitera’s website followed suit, launched on November 10, 2018. Aside from short stories, Difalitera also provides audiobooks on children’s stories, poems, geguritan (poems in the Javanese language), cekak (short stories in the Javanese language), short stories in English, and other short stories in many different languages.



Indah Darmastuti with Difalitera Reading Terrace members in 'Membaca Candi Sukuh' (=Reading the Sukuh Temple). Photo: Nico Haryono from Difalitera.

“Actually, there are many audiobook services out there. Difalitera wasn’t the first. But, Difalitera tries to be accessible for everyone, everywhere, and every time, free of charge,” said Indah. “What makes Difalitera different from other audiobook services is the partiality for people with disabilities. From the beginning, Difalitera was intended for people with disabilities. So, everything has to be accessible, from the progress to the website. Even though it’s dedicated to visually impaired people, I also try to embrace people with other disabilities to produce these audiobooks.”

Challenges in Building Difalitera

Indah’s journey to build Difalitera hasn’t been smooth sailing. A year after Difalitera was launched, Indah felt hopeless trying to keep her team consistent. “I was frustrated. I spent a lot of time thinking, until late at night, about how to continue this [Difalitera],” she reminisces. “Eventually, I said to God, ‘God, I can’t do this anymore.’ I gave up.”

However, not long after she declared giving up, the universe put Indah back on the path she had been fighting for. “Someone messaged me on Instagram.



Indah Darmastuti with Difalitera Reading Terrace members in ‘Membaca Kali Pepe’ (=Reading the Pepe River) activity in Boyolali, Central Java, Indonesia.
Photo: Nico Haryono from Difalitera.

It was from Daeng Maliq, from Makassar. He said he had retinal detachment, which impaired him visually. In his message, he said that Difailtera's website benefited him. I was surprised. I had given up. Why was I being directed back to this path? I told God, 'If this is what I must do, help me God.' After that, the road became a bit smoother. Many came to help Difailtera. Per my friends' suggestions, I signed Difailtera up as a legal entity," said the woman born on March 12, 1973.

As Difailtera became increasingly steady, the number of people involved also grew more consistently. Even though they lived in different places and most hadn't even met yet, converting literary texts to audiobooks ran quite well.

"Many of my friends were willing to be narrators. There are radio announcers, writers, and many more. I'm delighted. They come from Purwodadi, Makassar, Bulukumba, Bima, Biak, Kalimantan, Padang, Aceh, and several other cities in Indonesia. There are also friends from England. Our working rhythm also flows from recording to editing and mixing the music. A few narrators also have physical disabilities. So, this is from one person with disability to another," said Indah.

Creating Audiobooks in Local Languages

In 2020, Indah began to work on audiobooks with local languages and created a special channel called Sastra Suara Bahasa Nusantara (=Nusantara Languages Audio Literature) on Difailtera's website. She wanted to introduce various local languages in Indonesia to visually impaired people and support the efforts to conserve local languages that are on the brink of extinction.



In its third year of running, there are approximately 32 audiobooks in various local languages across Indonesia.

“Difalitera provides geguritan and cekak [short stories and poems in Javanese]. Then I thought, there are many other literary works in local languages besides Javanese in Indonesia. From that point, I started to accommodate other local languages in Indonesia to reach more visually impaired people across the nation, to bring them closer to their mother languages,” said Indah.

Indah knows that there are more than 700 local languages in Indonesia. So, her and her team continue to look for literary works in local languages to be converted into audiobooks.

To give appreciation to the contributors, Indah often allocates a portion of her paycheck as a worker in a batik company. “I often give them money to pay their internet bills,” she said.

Becoming Friends with Visually Impaired People

Aside from building Difalitera to be accessible for everyone and free of charge, Indah also established a small community of visually impaired people called Teras Baca Difalitera (=Difalitera Reading Terrace). Through this community, Indah routinely reads longer literary works for the community members in Surakarta and surrounding areas.

“Difalitera doesn’t provide novels yet, even though novels are important. So, I read novels for visually impaired friends offline. In the beginning, I read them a book titled ‘Canting’ by Arswendo Atmowiloto. It contains the ambiance of Solo [Surakarta], so it’s connected to their lives,” said Indah.



*Indah Darmastuti recording narrative for audiobook.
Foto: Youtube Difalitera*

To be accepted in the community of visually impaired people, Indah had to prove her sincerity by reading them stories. She tried to be their friend by visiting every weekend and bringing food to snack while they listened to the stories.

“They live in a dorm at Yayasan Kesejahteraan Anak-Anak Buta (= Blind Children Welfare Foundation). They come from Trenggalek, Tulungagung, Boyolali, even Sumatra. Every time I arrive, they welcome me, ‘Ms Indah has arrived! Ms Indah has arrived!’ I feel delighted. They’re like a family to me,” said Indah.

Aside from reading novels, Indah also invites the community members to visit public places. Some of the places are Suku Temple, Plaosan Temple, Balekambang Park, Lokananta Museum, Loji Wetan, Central Java Cultural Park, Omah Petroek, and Atsiri House.

“As time passes, I also want them to learn how to write so that they can do more than just listen to stories. So, I invited them to visit public spaces to broaden their knowledge so that they could get ideas when writing. I want them to have knowledge, which wouldn’t be enough just by listening to novels,” said Indah.

“There are several children who ended up wanting to write. They write poems, flash-fiction, and stories about their experiences while joining Difalitera’s activities. It’s like a field note. Their writings are good, and the writings are planned to be published by the Maysanie Foundation,” Indah continued.



Indah also encourages visually impaired people to learn things beyond reading and writing. One of them is crafts. “I also encourage them to try making pottery, to introduce shapes to them. Their crafts are cute, and they have very cool imaginations. We visited Rumah Atsiri [Atsiri House] to train their sense of smell. They were thrilled. It moved me,” said Indah, her voice shaking slightly.

Interacting with many visually impaired people develops Indah's understanding of their conditions. She grows into loving them more. "Sometimes, some children go out with their parents but can only sit and wait while their families take pictures. That's why they were very happy when I brought them to explore public places," said Indah. Her voice got increasingly shaky. "If that's the case, how could I ever leave them?"

Indah Darmastuti on Making Literature More Inclusive

Literature can be an effective channel to deliver messages on diversity and inclusivity. However, to achieve that, the people involved in the literary world, from writers to publishers to bookstores, must also be inclusive.

"I see that the development of technology and literature are equally rapid. It's just that sometimes, we forget that some groups still can't access [those developments] as easily as other people. While there are technologies that can support them nowadays, the reality is that literary works still aren't accessible here and there. This is the issue that we must overcome together," said Indah.

Therefore, making literature more inclusive needs participation and support from many parties beyond the core people involved in the literary world. Difalitera, Indah admitted, also needs that support.

"Difalitera's team are all volunteers that don't get paid, so sometimes our work timelines are uncertain. I, too, sometimes get overwhelmed due to my activities. The truth is, we need support from many people, from psychologists willing to lend their ears to visually impaired friends, musicians, artisans, teachers, and many more. Beyond money, we need support from these people. This is if we really want to make literature inclusive. It's a big challenge, and I can't do it alone," Indah concluded.



*Indah Darmastuti at Difalitera's website and Audiobook launching ceremony.
Photo: Instagram Indah Darmastuti*

Butet Manurung

Provides a Liberating Education for Orang Rimba, the Indigenous People of Jambi

Since 2003, Butet and Sokola Institute have been providing a liberating education for Orang Rimba and other Indigenous peoples in Indonesia.



At the beginning of decentralization in Indonesia, logging was rampant in Bukit Duabelas National Park (BDNP), a protected area on the island of Sumatra. This area included Makekal, home to the Indigenous community Orang Rimba. Day by day, trees were cut down, forcing Orang Rimba to flee deeper into the forest for a safer place to live.

The situation troubled Saur Marlina Manurung. At the time, she was working at an NGO focusing on assisting Indigenous communities living in the forests of Jambi. She thought the issue should be handled more comprehensively from the roots, beyond preventing and ceasing illegal logging or aiding Orang Rimba after the fact.

The woman familiarly called Butet Manurung saw that behind the deforestation, a uniquely complicated problem kept making Orang Rimba the victims of injustice, scams, rights violations, and cultural genocide.

“In the early 2000s, I saw, for instance, many programs and aids from the government without any cultural perspectives. There was a ‘welfare package’, essentially inviting Orang Rimba to get out of the forest, live a modern life, build houses on soil, embrace religions, wear clothes, farm, and settle. For some, it might not be a problem, but it was a big one for me. Because it wasn’t what Orang Rimba wanted. Surprisingly, this model is still used nowadays,” said Butet.



*Butet Manurung teaching the children of Orang Rimba.
Photo: Butet Manurung's personal archive.*

Another pressing issue that caught Butet's eye was the education of Indigenous people. She saw that the schools the government provided often didn't accommodate or respect their cultures.

She said, "The schools provided were exactly the same as other public schools we know. Their cultures and lifestyles were ignored. For example, Orang Rimba were used to being in wooden houses on stilts but were forced to go to school in concrete buildings on the soil. They were told to wear uniforms and be in school from morning to late afternoon. Told to learn about things that had nothing to do with their lives while not being taught how to survive in the forest."

The dissonance of concept and method for the education of Indigenous peoples wasn't a trivial matter, in Butet's opinion. She believed that if we let it go on, Indigenous peoples and their ways of life, including their knowledge and wisdom, would be further pushed to the brink of extinction. This scenario would be most unfortunate for the world as their existence is essential for the continued health of biodiversity and ecosystems.



*Butet Manurung teaching the children of Orang Rimba.
Photo: Aulia Erlangga.*

“We often hear how education is to help you reach your dreams. Well, their dreams are to stay in the forest and protect it. ‘Outsiders’ find that hard to understand about Orang Rimba. The meaning of ‘success’, ‘happiness’, and ‘intelligence’ that outsiders bring differs from what Orang Rimba have, yet they keep forcing it. Even that’s already a problem,” said Butet.

Since then, Butet has been adamant that to save the forests, we need to empower the Indigenous communities living in them.

“It’s impossible to save the forest if its inhabitants don’t do it themselves. They have to be stronger. So, I finally shifted my focus from the forest to the people to make forest conservation more sustainable,” said the woman born on February 21, 1972.



*Butet Manurung playing along with the children of Orang Rimba.
Foto: Butet Manurung's personal archive.*



*Butet Manurung teaching how to write to the children of Orang Rimba.
Photo: Aulia Erlangga*

Establishing Sokola Rimba

Butet spent months studying the life of Orang Rimba and roaming tens of thousands of hectares of forest to better understand their predicaments. From the experience, she was convinced that the path to go was an education that liberated them.

She recalled, “From them, I learned that their troubles were complicated. Orang Rimba must be able to help themselves, not have us help them.”

Then, in 2003, Butet established Sokola Rimba with several friends. The word ‘Sokola’ comes from the Rimba language, meaning ‘a place to learn’. There is no fixed curriculum. Besides the basic literacy of reading-writing-counting, all lessons are adapted to the conditions and life problems of Orang Rimba.

“They shaped our school system. My friends and I realized that education must liberate. It has to be aligned with customs and cultures, participative, filled with dialogues, and beneficial for the daily life,” she said.

Butet gave us an example. To protect their forest, Orang Rimba must learn skills to support their advocacy efforts, such as mapping, understanding the laws and rights of Indigenous peoples, and even scriptwriting and documentary making.

“They’re critical, always asking the purpose of each lesson. If I can’t answer, they don’t want to learn. The point is that we can only teach them what they don’t already know—helping them tackle their problems and understand the outside developments. So, Sokola exists not to modernize them or educate them as if they’re stupid. No. We offer the knowledge to help them defend and attain their rights,” said Butet.

Butet’s path to provide education for Orang Rimba wasn’t smooth. She faced a lot of rejections and expulsions in the beginning. Still, she kept trying to get close to them and live among them. She even learned their Indigenous language, Rimba, learned how to hunt, ate what they ate, and dressed how they dressed. In short, she applied an anthropological approach to convince them. Later, when Sokola Rimba developed, this approach was also used by other volunteers in all communities.

At last, it took seven months for Orang Rimba to accept Butet, but not until after she swore not to commit evil in their forest.

At last, it took seven months for Orang Rimba to accept Butet, but not until after she swore not to commit evil in their forest.

Butet reminisced and laughed at the memory, “At the time, I was asked to swear: not to sell their children, not to sacrifice them, not to make them Muslims or Christians, not to sell their forest, not to change them to be city dwellers. Those vows were like threats should I violate them. If I were on land, a tiger would eat me; if I went to the forest, a tree would fall on me; and if I went to the river, a crocodile would eat me.”

“When I was first accepted with those conditions, suddenly, the Chief passed away. The pencils I brought were thought to bring death. Then I thought, ‘If pencils aren’t allowed, I’ll use twigs with coal to write.’”



*Students’ activity at Sokola Rimba.
Photo: Butet Manurung’s personal archive.*

From Orang Rimba to the Rest of Indonesia

Butet's struggles bore fruit. After years of Sokola Rimba, Orang Rimba slowly became capable of protecting and attaining their rights, including pushing the government to adopt their customs into the Bukit Duabelas National Park Zonation regulations.

"The students of Sokola formed an organization called KMB—Kelompok Makekal Bersatu (=United Makekal Group). They were the ones advocating for the zonation laws. They demanded to have their customs adopted into the National Park policies," said Butet.

She recounted the process, "It was a long battle that lasted about 12 years. They learned mapping and made a documentary film on their culture. They had to learn GPS to pinpoint forest areas. They went back and forth, mapping on paper and inputting it into the computer. Before those things, they had to learn how to write letters to convey their criticisms and make film scripts. Finally, they were legally recognized, and their customs got adopted into the BD National Park policies. If I may say, it wouldn't have been possible without Sokola."



*One of the students of Sokola Rimba.
Photo: Butet Manurung's personal archive.*

Sokola Rimba changed its name to Sokola Institute and developed to also become a research center on Indigenous communities in 2016. Then, after over a decade in the forests of Jambi, Sokola Institute began to spread to other Indigenous communities across Indonesia that still struggled due to illiteracy.

As of 2023, Sokola Institute has established education programs in 17 Indigenous communities with varying geographical and cultural characteristics. These include the Sikka in Flores, the Sodayan in Sumba, the Asmat in Papua, the Kajang in Bulukumba, the Masyarakat Pesisir in Makassar, and the Togutil in Halmahera.

Until now, Sokola Institute has provided alternative education for over 15,000 Indigenous peoples in Indonesia. Those who were illiterate and disadvantaged because of it have become empowered and able to protect their own rights.

“If asked what made me persist until now, well, maybe this is what passion is—the willingness to struggle for what we believe in. But this isn’t about sacrifice. I have never felt that I’ve sacrificed anything to be here. It’s not even serving. It’s me serving my own dreams. It’s me that’s thankful for Orang Rimba who have helped me live my dreams,” said Butet.

Butet hopes for stronger legal protection for the Indigenous peoples of Indonesia. She believes that the Indigenous People Bill that has been discussed since 2010 will contribute to realizing that hope. Moreover, she also hopes every policy regarding Indigenous peoples will be based on field research robust with the cultural study approach.

From Orang Rimba to the Rest of Indonesia

In the eyes of Butet, who has been researching and studying the ways of life of Indigenous communities for over two decades, Indonesia needs to transform the education of Indigenous peoples. She wants all Indigenous communities in Indonesia to be able to organize their own education systems.



Butet Manurung with the students of Sokola Sumba.
Photo: Butet Manurung's personal archive.

“Many schools for Indigenous peoples in Indonesia don’t let the students use their Indigenous languages. They must use Bahasa Indonesia. If they’re found using their native languages, they will be punished. Unwittingly, this harms the children. When they come to their communities, they may deem their Indigenous languages shameful and low. Ultimately, all knowledge within their Indigenous cultures will disappear due to unuse,” said the Anthropology and Indonesian Literature graduate from Universitas Padjajaran.

***Seenggok jagung di kamar
tak akan menolong seorang
pemuda
yang pandangan hidupnya
berasal dari buku,
dan tidak dari kehidupan.
Yang tidak terlatih dalam metode,
dan hanya penuh hafalan
kesimpulan.
Yang hanya terlatih sebagai
pemakai,
tetapi kurang latihan bebas
berkarya.
Pendidikan telah memisahkannya
dari kehidupan***

“I get sad when I read Rendra’s poem. If the formal education model is applied to Indigenous peoples, Indonesia will experience loss: Indigenous knowledge will be gone, and our forests will be gone. There will be ecocide and linguicide. The eradication of language is related to the eradication of natural resources. When an ecocide happens, everyone loses,” she concluded.



Students' activity at Sokola Rimba.
Photo: Butet Manurung's personal archive.

Lian Gogali

Brings Back Harmony in Poso with Schools of Peace

Lian Gogali has dedicated herself to protecting the post-conflict harmony in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, through schools of peace.



The beginning of Indonesia's Reform era was a period of uneasiness in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The conflict between groups on the 1998 Christmas Eve roared into a public conflict full of violence ignited by provocation and agitation from irresponsible individuals under the guise of religion. Conflicts erupted multiple times before reaching reconciliation on December 20, 2001, through the Malino I Declaration. It was estimated that between the time it took to reconcile, more than 550 people died, and thousands of buildings were burned.

Even though the declaration was signed, the spectrum of conflict in Poso continued years after that. The conflict was amplified by the presence of extremist groups who launched terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, most media channels often spread this grim narrative without conveying the whole story.

As a Poso born and raised, Lian Gogali saw that the sectarian conflicts happening in Poso had nothing to do with religion. "Those conflicts happened because of political and economic interests. Conflicts often happen among young people because of their ego, including romance-related issues. So, when I heard the narrative on how Muslims and Christians were killing each other, I felt like something was missing from what the mass media told us," said Lian.



Lian Gogali when speaking at the Poso Women Conference with the theme of 'Soil, Water, Forest'. Photo: Mosintuwu Institute archive.

Building Women's School

Lian's concern wasn't only about how incomplete narratives about the conflicts were circulating and impacting the district. She also saw that in rebuilding Poso post-conflict, the role of women was often neglected. She believed that the women of Poso had always had a significant role and potential in keeping the harmony and peace of the district.

As time went on, Lian began to find a way to turn her concerns into actions. It all started when she was doing research for her master's degree at Sanata Dharma University in 2003–2004. Taking the topic of 'Politik Ingatan Perempuan dan Anak dalam Konflik Poso' (The Politics of Memory of the Women and Children during Poso Conflicts), Lian interviewed hundreds of women and children whose lives were affected by the conflicts in Poso. One time, Lian was asked a question by an older woman whom she interviewed in a refugee shelter in Silanca Village, Lage District, Poso. The question haunted her even years afterward.

"I remember it very clearly. The woman was cooking instant noodles at that time. She asked me, 'After you finished writing your research about us, then what? How is it going to change our lives?' That question hit me hard right in the face. It was a debt I must pay," said the woman born on April 28, 1978.



*Lian Gogali with the students of Women's School.
Photo: Mosintuwu Institute archive.*

Hence, after finishing her studies in Yogyakarta, Lian was determined to return to her hometown instead of building a career in another city. After mulling over the steps she could take and designing the concept for five years, Lian finally established Mosintuwu Institute in 2009. It is a grassroots community working towards achieving peace. Sekolah Perempuan Mosintuwu (=Mosintuwu Women's School) was the first program created by Lian. The word 'mosintuwu' was derived from the Pamona language, an ethnic group in Poso, meaning 'to work together.'

"When working on my thesis, I didn't only get stories about the layers of violence experienced by women and their children, but also stories about women's role in guarding the peace in Poso. How Muslim women helped Christian women and vice versa. They helped each other in their daily life—something that the mass media never talked about. Because of that, I saw that women's power should be a huge asset in building fair and sustainable peace in Poso," said Lian.

Through this school of peace, Lian brings together women from various backgrounds to exchange ideas and untangle prejudice and assumptions about religious differences, including teachings, discourses, and traditions.



*Lian Gogali during Women's School's interfaith activity.
Photo: Mosintuwu Institute archive.*

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“Mosintuwu Women’s School opens rooms to get together, manage, and elaborate issues, then create real, impactful actions. So, it’s not only thinking of ideas but followed by real actions,” said Lian.

There are nine teachings at Mosintuwu Women’s School: Women and Peace; Gender; Women and Culture; Women and Politics; Analytical and Speaking Skills; Social Services Rights; Political, Socio-cultural, and Economic Rights; Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights; and the Economics of Solidarity.

Regarding the last teaching, Mosintuwu Women’s School tries to create economic sovereignty for women through ecotourism and organic plantations with a permaculture approach.

“The Economics of Solidarity is really a part of how we criticize the concept of creative economy echoed by the government, which treats nature as an economic object that can be exploited. We believe that we need to develop an economy with solidarity, not only between humans but also with nature,” said Lian.

The Emergence of Other Schools

When the Women’s School almost reached ten years of running, Lian saw that the efforts to cultivate peace couldn’t just involve women. In many instances, she realized that other societal elements like men, youth, and public figures have significant roles and should also be involved. At the same time, Lian also saw that the women graduating from the Women’s School Perempuan needed something to do.

Hence, in 2017, Lian began developing other programs, such as Sekolah Pembaharu Desa (=Village Reformer School) and Sekolah Rumah Kita (=Our House School). These schools train their students to think critically about Indonesia’s concept of development.

For Village Reformer School, the students are the women graduated from Women’s School who are willing to do advocacy in villages in Poso with other elements of society. They are a violence advocacy team, child protection team, people’s rights and services advocacy team, village business team, and media team.

“The media team encourages transparency in the villages. The mothers who graduated from Women’s School do coverage, which is then broadcast through our radio. We have a community radio station called Mosintuwu Radio,” said Lian.

On the other hand, Our House School offers a room for discussion and learning for youth from different backgrounds. Lian elaborated, “Here, young people gather not only to meet and make friends but also to think about the future and explore the values of Poso Culture. This is important to build their perspective on the development in Poso and encourage them to feel and practice peace.”

Religious figures are no exception. Seeing the importance of their roles in guarding peace, Lian built Sekolah Keberagaman (=School of Diversity) as a forum for religious figures to share experiences and insights within tolerance and companionship.

“Not only priests but also students from religious higher education. The room for critical education in the School of Diversity aims to spread the understanding that religion isn’t just about heaven and hell. They have to support fair and sustainable development,” said Lian.



Activity at Women's School.
Photo: Instagram Lian Gogali

School of Peace for Children

Furthermore, Lian also initiated a school of peace for children through Project Sophia. It includes a mobile library and Sophia Library in Mosintuwu Institute at Tentena, Pomona Puselemba.

Similar to the previous three schools, the idea to build a school for children was also born from the Women's School, where many participants are mothers with very young children. The name 'Project Sophia' itself is taken from the name of Lian's daughter, Sophia Ava Choirunissa.

"They [the women] often brought their children to class. But, I saw that these children didn't have a place to do activities. My daughter, Sophia, really liked reading books. From that, I saw that reading books can be an activity for young kids," said Lian.

Like women, children need to receive an education on peace because they also suffer from conflict. Furthermore, they are very vulnerable to provocations and hate narratives.

"While researching my thesis, I saw that children are often neglected and treated as if they understood nothing. In fact, they have very strong traumatic memories of the conflicts. It was evident in the refugee shelter. I saw those kids drawing detailed images of their lives in the shelter, how they saw people getting shot, their homes burned, and so on," said Lian.



*Lian Gogali reading tales and stories about peace to the children.
Photo: Mosintuwu Institute archive.*

Through Project Sophia, Lian equips children suffering from conflicts and violence with books about the importance of tolerance and respect towards differences. “The purpose is to build dialogues between the kids. Now, Project Sophia has developed. Besides books, we also deliver messages about peace through tales and stories. The children really like tales and stories,” Lian explained.

Lian Gogali on Breaking the Chains of Conflict

Lian’s initiatives are not without struggles. Since the first day of coming back to Poso after graduating, Lian has faced many obstacles. “Living in Poso with a patriarchal and feudal society isn’t easy. Especially considering that I have a kid but am not married. I have experienced so much discrimination and pressure,” said Lian.

The struggles felt more difficult because Lian didn’t have prior experience organizing people. “My background is as a writer and researcher. I didn’t have any experience at all in leading an organization. When I introduced this concept and critical movement, several husbands of the women [who joined the classes] messaged me.

They disagreed with the knowledge that I shared. But it allowed me to form a dialogue with them. So, yeah, everything is learning by doing,” she reminisced.

The most arduous struggle for Lian isn’t the objection from the men as individuals but from the local government, which, according to her, was disturbed by the ideas she shared with the women in Poso.

“The situation becomes more precarious when the government is having an ‘affair’ with investors and people in religious institutions. Grassroots concepts and movements are often hindered because of that affair. The government with its power, investors with capital, and people in religious institutions with their verses. Grassroots movements like us are often silenced with the claim that these kinds of movements don’t come from God,” said Lian.



*Lian Gogali presenting in front of the people.
Photo: Youtube BNPT TV*



*Women from various religious backgrounds are laughing together.
Photo: Mosintuwu Institute archive.*

However, Lian's determination never falters. She believes that with unity and peace, the power of grassroots groups can encourage changes in a better direction.

After running for over a decade, the Schools of Mosintuwu are now present in more than 80 villages in Poso, aiming to break the chains of conflicts between generations among communities with different backgrounds. The people of Poso can go back to living with harmony and peace like they used to, helping each other in their daily lives and throwing away prejudice from their hearts and minds. Their children can blend in, play together, and help each other.

"My only hope is that what Mosintuwu has worked on together with the people can influence their point of view and encourage fair and sustainable policies for people and the planet," said Lian.

Now, Lian can smile in relief. She has now answered the question that has haunted her for years with concrete actions.

Lian Gogali now spends most of her days in Dodoha Mosintuwu, a library built from bamboo at the side of Poso Lake, still working to guard peace while staring at the beautiful lake. Dodoha simultaneously becomes the center of Mosintuwu Institute's activities and the place of gathering for the women protectors of peace from various religious and ethnic backgrounds.

"Yeah, this is what my days look like," said Lian, smiling, when I visited her at the Dodoha on an April evening in 2019.

Alex Waisimon

Dedicates Himself to Papua's Forests and Wildlife

Alex Waisimon takes care of Papua's forests and wildlife through a birdwatching ecotourism program and a school of nature.



Papua has the largest forest cover in Indonesia. Spanning 34 million hectares, Papua's forests are home to thousands of animal and plant species vital to the ecosystems. Unfortunately, just like other forests across the globe, Papua's forests are not safe from greedy hands. Since a few decades ago, they've been under the persistent threats of massive logging and wildlife hunting. These are among the problems Alex Waisimon wants to tackle.

In Nimbokrang District, Jayapura Regency, Papua, Alex Waisimon strives to take care of Indigenous forests and the endemic wildlife that live in them. Even though he can only cover a small part of Papua's forests, Alex's dedication matters to the land's biodiversity and forest ecosystems.

After a long and busy week in the forests, Alex shared his story and experience protecting the Indigenous forests and their biodiversity in Rheapang Muai Village, a part of Grime Nawa Valley. That night, cicadas accompanied his "Good evening" greeting over the phone.

"I live by the forest. So, we can hear the cicadas at night. You can still hear me, right?" he asked.



Alex Waisimon approaching the locals on taking care of the forest.

Photo: Isyo Hill's Bird Watching archive.

How Alex Waisimon Began

Alex Waisimon was born on September 19, 1961, in the Ombrop Village, Nimboran District, north of Nimbokrang District, where he lives now. After high school graduation, Alex moved out to cities on Java Island until he settled in Denpasar, Bali, with his wife and four children.

Decades of living away from his homeland didn't dull Alex's homesickness, especially when he remembered witnessing the destruction of the Indigenous forest in his village by irresponsible parties since he was a child. Finally, in 2014, he moved back to his hometown at 54 to live with his family in Yenggu Village, Nimboran District.

Soon after arriving at Yenggu, Alex saw just how rampant illegal logging and wildlife hunting were. Endemic birds such as cendrawasih (bird-of-paradise), mambruk (crowned-pigeon), and kasuari (cassowary) were hunted a lot. Ironically, his own tribe fellows were among the perpetrators. Along the Jayapura-Sarmi road, the sight of endemic bird sales was commonplace.

"Logging has been happening for 40 or 50 years here, and of course, the hunting. Where there's illegal logging, there's wildlife hunting. Some of them are sold outside of Papua. The ones who do this are irresponsible people. I've counted 30 big trucks with logs going back and forth each day," Alex said.

What was even sadder was how wildlife hunting became more prevalent because tourists wanted to keep those exotic animals as pets. He shared, "Many people who came went home bringing animals as souvenirs. Mammals are also hunted, like the tree-kangaroos. Some of them used lasers for hunting. They're high-tech."



*Alex Waisimon at interview with Auriga Nusantara.
Photo: Youtube Auriga Nusantara.*



*Alex Waisimon doing bird watching.
Photo: Youtube Nat Geo Indonesia.*

Alex then tried to make the locals wake up and stop those practices. However, he failed, and the locals got angry at him for disrupting their livelihoods. “I was facing my family and friends from my own tribe. It was tough. Four months in, we couldn’t stand it and went back to Denpasar,” said Alex.

However, the call to come home to Papua was strong. After four months in Denpasar, Alex returned to Jayapura with a stronger resolve and a more thorough preparation. He didn’t come home to Yenggu but to the Rheapang Muaif Village in the Nimbokrang District. There, his efforts to protect the forests and endemic wildlife went a little smoother.

“But it wasn’t as easy as ABC. For the first year and a half, the locals saw me as a crazy person who just got back home. They thought I was stressed in the city because they saw me enter the forest in the morning and come out at night. But I just accepted [their judgment] because I had to stand with my dream to protect Papua’s forests,” said Alex.

Birdwatching Ecotourism

After a successful attempt at convincing the community group who had the customary rights in the Nimbokrang District of the importance of forest conservation, Alex established a birdwatching ecotourism program in May 2015. It's called Isyo Hill's Bird Watching, involving 15 people in the group.

The purpose is, of course, to stop illegal logging and wildlife hunting by providing an alternative livelihood for local communities. For Alex, community-based sustainable ecotourism is the most viable way to achieve that in his village.

Every day, Alex and his colleagues strive to protect Papua's forests while birdwatching, looking for the perfect spots and marking them to share with the tourists. From the monitoring posts, they also patrol the woods every day to ensure no illegal logging activities.

They also ban people from dumping waste and toxins into the river. Within months of its establishment, Isyo Hill successfully prevented dozens of illegal logging attempts at the Rhepang Muaif Forest.



Alex Waisimon guiding the tourist in the forest.
Photo: Isyo Hill's Bird Watching archive.



*Alex Waisimon guiding the tourists in the forest.
Foto: Isyo Hill's Bird Watching archive.*

“Through ecotourism, the forest can be saved. If we didn’t turn it into an ecotourism spot, the trees would keep getting cut down. This is somewhat of a ‘middle road’ between protecting the forest and supporting the local economy,” said Alex.

Isyo Hill’s Bird Watching encompasses a 19-hectare land of Indigenous forests. What began in Rheapang Muaif slowly grew. Yenggu Baru and Yenggu Lama Villages in the Nimboran District and Sawesuma Village in the Unurum Guay Village started replicating and adapting the ecotourism concept. According to Alex, dozens of locals from 16 tribes are now involved in the ecotourism program development.

Besides birdwatching, those villages also offered other services such as camping, forest exploration, hill hiking, and lake exploration. These areas see 300 to 400 visitors yearly, most of whom are nature lovers.

Alex said, “The point is that we’ve returned to the nature services that our ancestors used to do. We still have many more to develop. The people of Papua are close to the forests, lakes, rivers, and seas. Now we’re developing the concept so other people can come and enjoy them without destroying them.”

Slowly, the locals, who used to cut down trees and hunt wildlife for additional income, begin to realize the negative impacts of those practices. They are now a part of the conservation efforts.

“We’re starting to see some behavioral changes, especially in the tribes where Isyo Hill operates. Forests started being protected. Wildlife hunting also started to lessen. I told them, ‘You catch one cendrawasih, and you might get one million (rupiah). You’re being ripped off. Your kids and grandkids will never see them again.’ After a while, they realized [it was true]. I invited them to be tour guides so they could make an income from that,” said Alex.

School of Nature

To support his missions, Alex established Yombe Yawa Datum Cooperative in 2017. Yombe Yawa Datum comes from the Genyem language, meaning ‘grow for us all’. Through this cooperative, Alex brought the idea of a school of nature to teach local kids and youth about nature, the wild animal and plant species in the forests, and how to protect them.

Despite its shaky start, Sekolah Alam Yombe Yawa Datum (Yombe Yawa Datum School of Nature) now has a library and three classes: Noken (traditional woven bags), Papuan Indigenous Language, and English. Students from the University of Cendrawasih and Earth Hour Papua Community often volunteer for this school.

“The students are kids around Isyo Hill’s. There is no age restriction. Some are very young; some are teenagers and youths. These are children from 16 tribes. I’m aiming for more students, so this conservation knowledge will be widely known to save Papua’s forests,” said Alex.



*Alex Waisimon guiding a photographer in the forest.
Photo: Youtube Nat Geo Indonesia.*

Besides the Sekolah Alam, the cooperative also funds the birdwatching ecotourism program’s side businesses like lodges, tour guides, a restaurant featuring traditional Papuan cuisines such as papeda and ikan kuah kuning (fish in yellow soup), and handmade souvenir shops with noken and wooden bracelets.



*Alex Waisimon at interview with Gudang Suara
Papua Podcast.
Photo: Youtube Gudang Suara Papua Podcast*

“We’re trying to improve and develop this traditional craft business so it can replace wild animals as Papua’s unique *oleh-oleh* (souvenirs),” he said.

Protecting Papua’s Forests

Protecting Papua’s forests isn’t easy. The forest areas Alex has tried to preserve through his ecotourism program are only a tiny part of the province’s expansive forests.

“All of this is not easy. Especially for a small individual like me, it’s impossible to fully prevent illegal logging when faced with irresponsible parties backed by the institution,” said the man who received the Kalpataru Award and was named the ASEAN Biodiversity Hero 2017.

Therefore, Alex invites all stakeholders to protect Papua’s forests together by fulfilling their roles. Alex believes that protecting and recognizing Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities’s rights is one of the keys to achieving this mission.

“Indigenous peoples have been protecting the forests since ancient times. And what did they get? Their forests kept getting destroyed. This country must understand well that the demands of Indigenous peoples, such as rights over Indigenous forests, villages, and others, must be met. No more corporate expansions of oil palm plantations or mining in Papua. Indigenous peoples now want to live with nature because it’s their riches and resource,” Alex said, finishing off.



*The students of Sekolah Alam Yombe Yawa Datum.
Photo: Iryo Hill's Bird Watching archive*



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