



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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An Epidemic of Mismeasuring Development: The Politics of Knowledge in Indonesia

John F. McCarthy, Andrew McWilliam, and Gerben Nooteboom (eds.), *The Paradox of Agrarian Changes: Food Security and the Politics of Social Protection in Indonesia* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2023), 464 pages, USD 38/SGD 42.

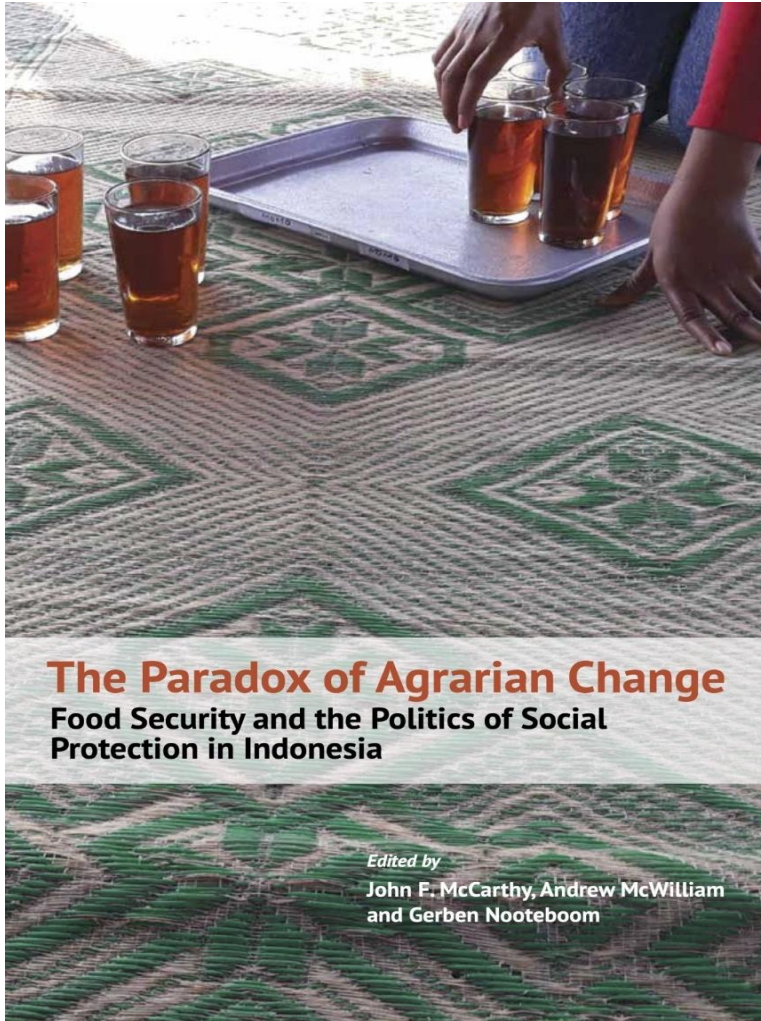
Living in times of big data, statistics, algorithms, econometric modeling, coupled with our infatuation with surface-level progress, economic development and instantaneous gratification of our material desires, we often tend to overlook the tangible realities of life and society. Instead, our preoccupation with virtual realities, as experienced through advanced technological devices, frequently eclipses our awareness of empirical truths. In contemporary urban societies where pivotal decisions impacting the entire population are predominantly formulated, our existence is profoundly enmeshed in virtual realms. The understanding of intricate issues has consequently been reduced to a mere technical exercise, as this review elaborates.

This volume, *The Paradox of Agrarian Changes: Food Security and the Politics of Social Protection in Indonesia*, edited by John F. McCarthy,



Andrew McWilliam, and Gerben Nooteboom looks into the perplexing scenario of escalating nutritional insecurity as evidenced by the high prevalence of stunting. This phenomenon is explored within the context of a declining statistical rate of poverty in Indonesia and the implementation of a social assistance program, the Conditional Cash Transfer program, known as *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH). The study scrutinizes the effectiveness of PKH in addressing dimensions of poverty and food insecurity across seven provinces in Indonesia—Aceh, Sumatera Utara, Yogyakarta, Jawa Tengah, Bali, Sulawesi Tenggara, and Nusa Tenggara Timur (p. 8-11).

The book is divided into four parts, the first consisting of three chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction, establishing the heuristic methodology—specifically, scenario analysis—utilized in the studies conducted to scrutinize food insecurity within the framework of agrarian changes. In Chapters 2 and 3, the focus shifts to an exploration of the extent and ramifications of state-initiated social protection programs. These initiatives were established with the aim of delivering a social safety net mitigating the adverse impacts experienced in rural Indonesia, a byproduct of the escalating economic development and inequality trends within the country. The chapters in part two analyze the structure of rural poverty in the varied provinces of Yogyakarta (Chapter 4), Aceh (Chapter 5), Nusa Tenggara Timur (Chapter 6), Sumatera Utara (Chapter 7), Jawa Tengah (Chapter 8), Bali (Chapter 9), and Sulawesi Tenggara (Chapter 10). These study areas exhibit different structural agrarian change scenarios—oil palm (Chapter 7), irrigated rice production (Chapters 4 and 5), community fisheries (Chapters 9 and 10), and upland and dryland cropping (Chapters 4, 6, and 8)—with varying relational processes and livelihood trajectories.



The Paradox of Agrarian Change
Food Security and the Politics of Social Protection in Indonesia

Edited by
**John F. McCarthy, Andrew McWilliam
and Gerben Nooteboom**

The chapters within the third part delve into the historical trajectory of the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program, subsequently named PHK in Indonesia. This exploration traces its evolution as a policy deeply ingrained in a specific politics of knowledge, starting from its inception in the World Bank. The narrative unfolds through its initial successes in Mexico and Brazil, eventually extending to its adoption in various developing countries, including Indonesia (Chapters 12 and 14).

Chapters 11 and 13 scrutinize the pervasive issue of econometric mistargeting among beneficiaries. This issue encompasses a spectrum of challenges, including the exclusion of low-income families, the inclusion of affluent families, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures for rectifying beneficiary names, and the intricate dynamics of village politics influencing the inclusion and exclusion of beneficiaries. In Chapter 11, the state's efforts to address targeting errors by incorporating elements of Community-Based Targeting (CBT) alongside econometric targeting (PMT) encounter persistent challenges in implementation. These challenges are intricately linked to the nuanced local relational practices that not only dilute but also counteract the fundamental processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The matters of inclusion and exclusion raise serious concerns as they inherently raise questions of fairness and deservedness within the framework of moral and cultural practices. Notably, the informal moral economy plays a crucial role in sustaining the impoverished during times of need, particularly when state machinery and social protection programs fall short in incorporating them into the redistribution system. This dynamic gives rise to disharmony, jealousy, and tension within the village, issues that village officials and elders are keen to avert as they threaten the fabric of the community's solidarity and undermine the intangible moral assistance and informal support systems that are indispensable to the very structure of life and existence. Thus, despite the continuous technical updates and sophistication, as the book rightly notes, "The current system runs up against village structures and practices ingrained in culture, political, and social expectations and behaviour. To some degree, communities maintain reciprocal and redistributive practices that bind together village sociality; this depends



upon the notion of fairness, responsive to expectations of inclusion and moral claims” (p. 293).

The chapters in the fourth part of the book offer a synthesis of the findings (Chapters 15 and 16) and an inclusive analysis of the preceding sections and chapters. The concluding section includes an epilogue that explores the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and elucidates how this novel scenario has instigated changes in the agrarian scenarios discussed in earlier sections (Chapter 17).

This book is best seen and read as a cohesive standalone volume rather than merely as an edited compilation. This perhaps is the strength of the book. The editors have done an adroit job in enabling the disparate chapters, entailing diverse aspects of agrarian scenarios, into a cogent and coherent package where each chapter is tied to and speaks with one another, which is usually not always the case in many edited books in the market. Augmenting these is an arduous task carried out by the contributing authors. Their in-depth ethnographical case studies lucidly illustrate the methodological and empirical connectedness of their studies with the principal research question (or hypothesis) of the book. This enables the whole book to be accessible to a much broader readership. The simplicity of the book makes it a good read for all interested in agrarian changes in Indonesia specifically, and methodologies utilized in the developmental process, in general.

The book’s three key areas of investigation—falling poverty rate, high food insecurity indicated by high levels of stunting, and the social protection program (p. 28)—as well as the corresponding question “why rural poverty and nutritional insecurity persist despite the decline in extreme poverty” (p. 408), implicitly direct our attention to the methodological problems in measuring social dynamics in terms of quantifying agrarian changes and social protection programs,



specifically, and socio-economic and developmental changes, in general. It is interesting to note that such problems of falling statistical poverty rate and an increase in food and nutritional insecurity are not exclusive to Indonesia (p. 28). Rather these are common to several middle-income countries in the developing world.¹

Despite attaining a high level of economic growth and development with a growing middle class in the past few decades, Indonesia has continued to confront the problems of widespread undernutrition and stunting (p. 5; p. 410). This is statistically characterized by the higher level of families moving out of poverty and attaining a higher level of monetary income. However, these gains statistically are offset by corresponding increases in dietary restrictions. Thus, families progress in terms of monetary and quantifiable indices without becoming nutritionally secure, which is demonstrated by the high level of stunting (p. 410). Stunting, in turn, indicates the explicit multidimensional poverty indicator since it evinces extensive food poverty and nutritional insecurity, i.e. malnutrition, as it leads to a negative relationship between a child's growth and development.² This corroborates the findings of this book (p. 382) as well as the findings of other studies where it has been established that low income and

¹ Bill Pritchard, Vicol Mark, and Rosemary Jones, "How Does the Ownership of Land Affect Household Livelihood Pathways Under Conditions of Deagrarianization? 'Hanging In,' 'Stepping Up' and 'Stepping Out' in Two North Indian Villages," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 38, no. 1 (2017): 41-57. Also see, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019* (2019), <https://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf>

² Sununtar Setboonsarng, "Child Malnutrition as a Poverty Indicator: An Evaluation in the Context of Different Development Interventions in Indonesia," *ADB Discussion Paper No. 21*, Asian Development Bank Institute (2005).



unemployment as well as children from the lowest wealth quintile are more likely to be stunted.³

This brings us to the issues of methodology in measuring societal changes and development. The three key aforementioned areas of investigation of the book are interrelated and are essential to the purpose of understanding how these are related to the methodological limitation in the manner in which development processes, such as inequality, poverty, malnutrition, agrarian changes, urbanization, rural development and so forth, are quantified for sake of scientific investigation. This invariably leads to another more pressing question on the viability and ‘fit’ of such scientific/econometric investigations which are often presumed “objective” and “neutral” by nature in societal contexts where local contexts and subjective relationships shape and define the ‘empirical’ realities of everyday lives. This is evident in the mistargeting of the beneficiaries that inundate Indonesia’s present *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH)—i.e. a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program under the country’s umbrella social safety net program called *Jaring Pengaman Sosial* (JPS), suggesting deeper errors with the econometric models used by the government.

The origins of the JPS and PKH can be traced to the 1997 East Asia Financial Crisis (p. 349–357) that hit Indonesia hard and eventually led to the downfall of Suharto’s government that had ruled the country for nearly three decades. With the crisis and the subsequent bailout by the

³ Harriet Torlesse, Aidan Anthony Cronin, Susy Katikana Sebayang, and Robin Nandy, “Determinants of Stunting in Indonesian Children: Evidence from a Cross-sectional Survey Indicate a Prominent role for the water, sanitation and hygiene sector in stunting reduction”, *BMC Public Health* 16, no. 669 (2016): 1–11. Also see, Kerry J. Inder Ramli, Kingsley E. Agho, Steven J. Bowe, Jennifer Jacobs, Michael J. Dibley, “Prevalence and Risk Factors for Stunting and Severe Stunting Among Under-fives in North Maluku Province of Indonesia,” *BMC Pediatrics* 9, no. 64 (2009): 1–10.



International Monetary Fund (IMF), the country underwent painful political-economic reforms under the infamous Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). It is here that we find the nascent development of JPS designed by the World Bank. The JPS was designed to offset some of the social risks and other unintended consequences of the austerity measures. The World Bank's own report, in 2006, indicated the failure of the program on several fronts.⁴

With the success of the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program in Mexico and Brazil, the World Bank quickly disseminated the model to other parts of the developing countries in Asia (including Indonesia) and Africa.⁵ The transfer of the World Bank's socio-economic models inextricably included the transfer of non-contextual assumptions and detached presuppositions that go into the making of an econometric model oblivious to the local contexts. This is especially poignant in the case of Indonesia, the book arguing that "the efforts of the World Bank over a very short period led to the introduction of the CCT to Indonesia..." (p. 355) suggesting that the Indonesian government not only had no independent planning for the PKH (i.e. CCT), but that they implemented the program with insufficient understanding of the concepts and nor having acquired the capacity to manage challenges associated with its application in complex and highly diverse local conditions (p. 356-357). The outcome is an epidemic of mistargeting among beneficiaries, a pervasive theme throughout the book. This contributes to social discontent with the program, giving rise to corollaries like jealousy and social disharmony at the grassroots level,

⁴ *Making the New Indonesia Work for the Poor* (Jakarta: World Bank, 2006).

⁵ Daniel Béland, Michael Howlett, and Ishani Mukherjee, "Instrument Constituencies and Public Policy-Making: An Introduction," *Policy and Society* 37, no. 1 (2018): 1-13.



thereby eroding the social fabric, including crucial elements like the moral economy (i.e. informal support system) that serves as an essential source of support for the poor within society.

The book rightly states that such problems or impasses in the present Indonesian social policy arise “from a process of institutionalization that lacks indigenous ideas of appropriate social policy models” (p. 349). Of course, the keywords here are the “lack of indigenous ideas.” On the other hand, the Indonesian government had little choice but to accept the World Bank’s advice and model, which came as a *de facto* package for the allotment of loans from international financial and funding institutions. Ironically, however, either out of pure ignorance of history or simply a conscious disregard of the past, this is not the first time that Indonesia has faced such a disconnect between its programs for socio-economic development and the realities of their application based on global ideas disseminated through global institutions that generally ground their foundations on detached concepts and complex econometric models that negate the existence of unquantifiable cultural practices and close-knit relations of “exchange networks and enduring clientelist ties of obligations and co-dependency” that regulate society at the local grassroots (p. 400).

Take, for instance, the largest transmigration program in human history undertaken in the name of socio-economic development in Indonesia from the mid-1900s. Here, the plan was to move millions of landless poor from the central Indonesian islands of Java, Madura, Lombok, and Bali to the sparsely populated outer islands of West Papua, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Flores, Ceram, Halmahera, and Timor. The purpose here was to reduce the pressure of overpopulation and



unemployment in the inner islands of Java and Bali.⁶ The problem here was that the method and the policy of transmigration assumed away some of the complex realities and the people who already occupied those islands. The policy and the method were an extension of the colonial policies (known as the ‘colonization program,’ and after independence the government of Indonesia termed it ‘transmigration’).

The policymakers assumed the outer islands to be underpopulated and underdeveloped. By taking a scientific approach to the program, policy specialists *assumed away* the vibrant diverse cultures hitherto populating the outer islands. Indeed, such generalization discarded the fact that Indonesia has nearly 300 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own separate culture. Transmigration not only isolated and deprived indigenous societies of their ancestral lands, ruining their cultures, but it also increased violent conflict between the indigenous people and the transmigrants. Indigenous groups were forced to participate in an enlightened and rational development project (based on detached quantifiable models rather than empirical realities), thereby destroying the whole basis of their existing ways of life.⁷ The indigenous peoples of the outer islands became a minority in their land; robbed not only of their land, food, and shelter, but they also became victims of mass atrocities. Furthermore, they were forced to abandon their traditional ways of life and integrate themselves into the transmigrant

⁶ J.M. Hardjono, *Transmigration in Indonesia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977). Also see, Colin MacAndrews, “Transmigration in Indonesia: Prospects and Problems,” *Asian Survey* 18 (May 1978): 458–72.

⁷ “Open letter to Mr. Clausen, Retiring President of the World Bank, and Mr. Conable, President Elect,” *The Ecologist* 16, no. 2–3 (1986): 58–60. Also see, MacAndrews, “Transmigration in Indonesia: Prospects and Problems.”



settlements to conform to the national goals of development and progress.⁸

Even for the transmigrants, things did not fare well. The transmigrant communities also experienced a marked decline in their nutritional standards; their health similarly deteriorated because these communities, now isolated from the main islands, were introduced to non-indigenous diseases. In other cases, some of these resettled communities were further moved from their relatively disease-free areas to malarial-infested zones. Compounding these for the transmigrants was the fact that the development program designed to increase transmigrants' living standards became an utter failure. Their lives became worse and their living standards were reduced. The transmigrants had sold what they had in their home towns before their migration in the hope that they would (as promised and envisioned by the government) be provided with homes to live in and plots of land to farm, none of which were adequately fulfilled by the state. What is more, the program only increased the number of landless farmers, which was opposite of what the project had intended—reduce landlessness and unemployment.⁹

Because it was assumed that the outer islands were underdeveloped and underpopulated, these islands would be fecund for agriculture. And since migrants would be given plots of land to farm on,

⁸ Robin J. Pryor, ed., *Migration and Development in South East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979). Also see, Marcus Colchester, "Banking on Disaster: International Support for Transmigration," *The Ecologist* 16, no. 2-3 (1986): 61-70; and G.W. Jones and H. V. Richter, eds., *Population Resettlement Programmes in South East Asia* (Australian National University: Canberra, 1982).

⁹ Mariel Otten, "'Transmigrasi': From Poverty to Bare Subsistence," *The Ecologist* 16, no. 2-3 (1986): 71-76. Also see, J.M. Hardjono, *Transmigration in Indonesia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977); and MacAndrews, "Transmigration in Indonesia: Prospects and Problems."



this would, in turn, improve their livelihoods and living standards. Nevertheless, policy specialists, too keen on scientific models, not only *assumed away* the delicacy of the soil in the tropical rain forests but also failed to consider Indonesia's two monsoon seasons which play a key role in determining the nature of Indonesia's ecology. The plots of land given to migrants were unsuitable for farming. This was not helped by torrential tropical rainfall because local ecology and climate were regarded as tertiary to the primacy of their statistical models. The lives of the migrants, thus, actually became worse.¹⁰ Collectively the Western governments poured close to US\$800 million into the project with the World Bank as one of the leading international development and financial institutions to provide technical advice (concepts and abstract econometric models detached of local cultural practices and indigenous ideas) and fund the transmigration project.¹¹ The historical evidence parallels how the World Bank in 2017 disbursed a US\$200 million loan, amounting to 25 percent of the 2017 national budget to help Indonesia finance the PKH between 2017–2021.¹² *Déjà vu!*

The methodological aspect, based on a particular politics of knowledge, of relying on technical econometric models reduces issues of social policy and developmental issues to a mere technical problem or technical question. The questions of poverty, inequality, and other developmental issues which are political in their very essence become anti-politics, where these questions are reduced to a technical inquiry of

¹⁰ Charles Secrett, "The Environmental Impact of Transmigration," *The Ecologist* 16, no. 2–3 (1986): 77–88.

¹¹ Colchester, "Banking on Disaster: International Support for Transmigration."

¹² World Bank, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development Program Appraisal Document on a Proposed Loan in the Amount of US\$200 Million to the Republic of Indonesia for a Social Assistance Reform Program, Report No. 112703-ID (Jakarta: World Bank, 2017).



targeting, quantifying, fine-tuning technical models and data collection, and noting down on official documents for record keeping. To render a highly political question of distribution (since politics is about “who gets what, when, and how,” as Laswell famously states it) into technical exercise, i.e. one that depoliticizes the distributional processes, is to misread the nature of the problem, which is political by nature and which requires political will to address it. No wonder, as the book notes, “Current programmes appear to bump up against local structures and cultural processes, derailing and undermining the technical procedures set out in policy blueprints,” which rely on a particular politics of knowledge derived, “from the CCT blueprint, a traveling World Bank policy model, imported wholesale from Mexico into the Indonesian context, but without substantial inclusion of Indonesian policy ideas and social realities” (p. 401).

Policymakers and advisors undoubtedly formulate policies and develop econometric models with the intention of mitigating societal issues, aiming to alleviate rather than exacerbate them. Ironically, it appears that various forms of human suffering often arise from endeavors deemed beneficial for societies. Such suffering is not rooted in a desire to inflict harm upon individuals or societies, themes poignantly exemplified in Goethe’s *Faust*. The tragic character of Faust symbolizes the profound destruction of meaningful aspects of life in the pursuit of improving the human condition—a moral or ethical dilemma. As with many dilemmas concerning human conditions, finding a resolution is seldom straightforward.

The contemporary manifestation of this dilemma is unmistakably evident in the ongoing endeavor to relocate the capital of Indonesia from Jakarta to Nusantara, situated on the outer island of Kalimantan reminiscent of a Transmigration, perhaps Transmigration 2.0? Given



that the new capital is a planned city, one can only hope that it will not succumb to the fate of being another sterile, meticulously planned city, akin to examples such as Brasilia, Naypyidaw and Chandigarh, none of which serve as exemplary models for successful implementation. The capital is being shifted because Jakarta is shrinking due to environmental problems. Paradoxically, in the process of constructing a new capital and striving for “even development across Indonesia’s vast archipelago,” significant ecosystems are disrupted, and numerous indigenous communities are dispossessed of their lands and compelled to relocate. Indeed, in Transmigration 2.0, the environmental destruction is justified in the pursuit of establishing a “green city,” revealing a significant contradiction. Such contradictions underscore the urgent need for an empirical understanding of reality in measuring and planning efforts to enhance human conditions, particularly within the context of Indonesia. This book serves as a cautionary tale for those who may overlook empirical realities, yet it raises the question of whether Indonesia is heedful of its historical lessons.

Note on the Reviewer

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Nanping, China on the theme “Wuyi Forum on the Two Integrations of Five Millennia of Chinese Civilization and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” In addition, he has served on numerous invited occasions as a resource person in academic workshops as well as delivering lectures.

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