

“EMPOWERING CITIZENS TO COMBAT THE RESOURCE CURSE”

Focus Group Discussion Conclusions

Blora district, Central Java

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1 MAIN POINTS

- **There is a high demand for better government in Blora, but ordinary citizens do not feel empowered to bring about change.** In virtually every focus group discussion (FGD), participants roundly criticized the government for problems with public services and for not doing enough to help ordinary citizens. Participants had low levels of trust in the bupati and DPRD members and were dissatisfied with their performance. While participants expressed their frustration with the situation, they also feel that ordinary citizens like themselves are powerless to do anything about it.
- **Participants identified the government generally, and the bupati specifically, as most responsible for the situation in the district.** While a few participants identified the central government as the most important actor, the vast majority attributed the responsibility for conditions in the district to the bupati. In contrast, participants did not look to the DPRD members. This could be because DPRD members are elected by party lists and the connection between DPRD representative and constituents is weak, or because the DPRD representatives are largely viewed as concerned with using office to secure private resources to compensate for the high cost of campaigning. There was some optimism that the newly elected DPRD members will be better.
- **People assume their elected politicians are corrupt but many seem disinterested in attaining concrete information on corruption.** There was a surprisingly broad range of interest in exposing corruption in district politics. On one end of the spectrum, the more activist participants in the men’s FGD in Kutukan were very angry and recall their participation in protests following a fertilizer corruption scandal. On the other hand, many participants did not seem to think that KKN was relevant to their daily lives. Participants seemed not to make the connection between corruption and the district level and direct negative impacts on their well-being. This is one reason participants were not more interested in learning about corruption in road projects or in village transfers. In contrast, people do get angry when corruption has a direct negative impact on their daily needs (rice and fertilizer).
- **Javanese remain reluctant to openly criticize their elected leaders.** While people openly grumbled about conditions in Blora it is not certain that they will take individual action to do something about it. Political behavior in Java is still governed by what is considered polite or acceptable in the social hierarchical order. An elected person becomes a member of the *tokoh masyarakat* and attains a high position (akin to royalty) in society. Politeness and manners in Java dictate that ordinary people should not openly criticize such esteemed members of society. They might grumble behind their backs but will not push them when confronted face-to-face. This became apparent in discussions about the post-card campaign. Participants said they want to support it as long as they could do so

anonymously. This is the case because they are unwilling to take the risk that their action will have negative consequences *and* because they feel such actions are impolite.

- **Levels of awareness of the basic political situation are low.** While some participants had a strong grasp of the role of the bupati, the DPRD, and the APBD (the district budget) the vast majority had either a very shallow understanding or no understanding at all. In some groups, this can be attributed to a lack of interest in district politics—some participants thought that district government was too far away and not relevant to their lives. Others cited the lack of information available to them on the district government and its actions.
- **Blora is an information-poor environment, and demand for information seems to exceed supply.** Several participants mentioned occasions on which they had sought out information from village leaders or district representatives but were unsuccessful. A number of others expressed an enthusiastic interest in having more information on policies and the APBD. There appears to be a demand for information but participants said they did not know how or where to get it from.
- **Participants ardently view themselves as taxpayers.** In virtually every group, participants responded to the question of whether they pay taxes with a resounding ‘yes!’ In several groups participants mentioned that they were taxpayers before we even asked directly. Participants most commonly pay the annual PBB tax (a land tax), vehicle taxes, electricity tax, etc. Many participants expressed frustration that their common taxes have been increasing without explanation. When asked if they are paying too much in taxes (*vis-à-vis* the public services they receive) the responses were mixed. Some thought they were getting less than what they paid for but others seemed satisfied with what they were getting. The main conclusion is that participants feel their taxes are a fair share of their income, but feel they are paying too much relative to what they are getting from government in return. Participants are mixed on whether they want to know more about how their tax dollars are spent. A few people said they were interested and have already tried to find out. Others said that it was just enough for them to pay and not ask questions.

One interesting indication though is that the resource curse might be coming from the side of government. Government knows it does not rely heavily on taxes so has few incentives to be responsive and transparent. One participant said he received a response from government akin to “why do you ask – your taxes are too cheap. They are not enough to repair a street or buildings” (to which the participant thought--*nrimo*)

- **It is not clear that the fiscal contract, from the perspective of citizens, is weak.** Participants already feel a strong sense of ownership over APBD, entitlement to public services, and understand the obligations of citizens and government. It is unclear, however, whether the lack of interest in corruption, the APBD, or more information on taxes is due to low levels of taxation.
- **For the upcoming bupati election, people vote on the basis of religiosity and personality, not on the basis of parties or endorsements.** Participants in most groups at first seemed reluctant to even discuss who they will vote for, citing a strong knowledge of their right to a secret ballot. When asked about what factors they consider when voting, most cited religion and personality as the most important issues. In a few cases policies were also cited. Participants discounted the influence of the village head, although they acknowledged they might follow the VH’s guidance if they trusted the VH. In Ngapus, Japah the participants said there had been some vote-buying in their village during the previous bupati election and this had influenced their vote.

- **People are suspicious of NGOs.** Numerous participants expressed support for the work of LPAW but were inherently suspicious of LPAW’s motives. Several participants cited past experiences in which NGOs had said they would do similar programs and used public support to extract contracts from government. In another case the participants said an NGO had sought their support and used that to run for office. Several participants asked about LPAW’s funding sources and seemed reassured when they learned their funding came from Jakarta and international donors.

2 Implications for Public Awareness Campaign

In every group we conducted an exercise where we asked individuals to tell us whether they were not interested, a little interested or very interested in learning different pieces of information. The table below shows the results:

Table 1: Demand for Information

CATEGORY	Overall Average* (n=77)	Women (n=40)	Men (n=37)	p-value from ttest
Amount of money in the APBD	1.32	1.25	1.49	.174
Amount of money in the APBD per household	1.37	1.13	1.71	.000
Amount/share spent on development	1.45	1.28	1.72	.002
Amount spent on different public services	1.49	1.38	1.67	.027
Amount spent on salaries of civil servants	1.00	0.93	1.11	.348
Amount spent on salaries/benefits for DPRD	1.32	1.28	1.38	.550
Amount of money that is misused	1.40	1.44	1.49	.764
Amount spent to help the poor	1.74	1.76	1.81	.667
What your tax money is spent on**	1.63	1.52	1.75	.140
What the money from oil and gas is spent on**	1.34	1.05	1.65	.000
Amount of money that comes from taxes	1.26	1.25	1.38	.344
Amount of money that comes from natural resources	1.52	1.40	1.56	.004

*0 for not interested, 1 for a little interested and 2 for very interested

**Only asked in the last four FGDs so average is adjusted

The results are for 77 FGD participants

The null hypothesis for the ttest is that means are equal

A few interesting things can be gleaned from Table 1. The first column shows that on average, people say they are at least somewhat interested in each item (the numbers range between 1 and 2). Participants are most interested in learning the amount of money that is spent to help the poor (1.74), followed by “what your tax money is spent on”. These are followed by the amount that comes from natural resources. Participants were least interested the amount spent on bureaucracy and (interestingly) the amount of money that comes from taxes. On the whole, men were more interested in each item than women, although for several items we can reject the null hypothesis of equal means ($p < .05$)

- **The campaign should involve interactive games and nice visual aids to hold people’s interest.** Participants clearly started to zone out once we got into the script version of the LPAW program. It needs to be shorter, more-engaging and interactive as much as possible.
- **Provide a fair amount of information to all groups about Government 101.** The FGDs required going through a certain amount of basic information before the more substantive topics were addressed. The basic information included the roles and responsibilities of the bupati and DPRD (including deciding how the money is spent), basics on public service delivery, and an introduction to the APBD. A certain amount of foundational information will need to be provided.

- **The campaign should focus on the relevance to participants' daily lives.** For instance, why the APBD and/or corruption are related to improving job opportunities and salaries in Blora, public service delivery, etc.
- **The campaign should have a specific and concrete goal.** One option is to demonstrate public support for transparency and participation, but these are broad goals and do not have a specific action plan. Another option is to use the postcard campaign to communicate people's needs directly to the candidates (e.g. by having them write on the post-card what they want to see improved in the district). The post-card for instance could have a list of things they would like to see improved, support for transparency and participation, or a box for 'everything is ok'. People can check what they want government to focus on and mail the post-card.
- **Reassure people about the role of LPAW.** People are suspicious of NGOs in general. They also are worried that criticizing government can negatively impact them. The campaign should include information on LPAW, including its activities and its funding sources. The fact that LPAW has an MOU with government needs to be framed carefully. Participants also need to be informed clearly that their postcards will be anonymous. Because of the suspicions that NGOs are just after something, a treatment that involves making a donation to LPAW is probably not a good idea.
- **The campaign should keep LPAW's long-term goals as an advocacy organization in mind.** Numerous participants expressed frustration at their experience with NGOs in the past, where programs were started but then dropped (usually when the NGO received a contract from government). They also get frustrated when they do not see results or hear follow-up from their involvement. This program could build LPAW's support base and put LPAW in a position to advocate for grassroots interests or transmit information. If LPAW does not have long-term goals to play this role, then this program needs to carefully manage expectations. For instance, it could present itself as a one-off campaign to influence bupati candidates in the lead up to the elections.
- **Gender differences.** Dividing participants into women's and men's groups revealed there are major gender differences. In Cepu the women were much more active and engaged than the men, but elsewhere the women commonly said issues like corruption were men's concern. In most cases, women seemed more interested in the discussion of public services than men, who were primarily concerned with employment and earning a living. The main conclusion is that gender is an important heterogeneous effect AND, if we do the treatment at a cluster level with group meetings, we should divide the meetings by gender.

3 DETAILED SUMMARY

Below I summarize additional information by section from the FGD Discussion Guide. These points are supplementary to those discussed above.

3.1 Problems in the District

Economic problems top the list of concerns for people in Blora. We began each FGD with a brainstorming session in which each participant wrote on separate pieces of paper his/her main concerns about their daily lives or the situation in the district. While some participants had trouble identifying worries or concerns (or were uncomfortable with writing them down), most had no problem. In both men's and women's groups, the number one problem was employment and earning a living wage. A great number of participants still struggle to fulfill their daily needs and talk about the difficulty of getting cheap rice (or *raskin* which is government subsidized rice), cooking oil and fertilizer.

The quality of public services is also a concern. We asked several specific questions about people's usage of public services and their levels of satisfaction. While some seemed satisfied others registered a number of complaints. For instance, for living permits (KTP) participants claimed they could no longer get them done in the village but had to travel to the capital. If there was a problem with the permit, they often had to make several trips at great cost to them. The men's group in Randuplatung questioned why it cost 35,000 and took one week to get a KTP in Blora when in the neighboring district of Sragen it only takes five minutes. The men's group in Blora complained about extortion, harassment, and discrimination by the police. One man called it a well known secret. Additional concerns include a lack of access to water; lack of fertilizer, lack of public transportation, and disobedient children (who watch too much TV and play computer games). Most said their problems would be resolved if a person has money, so the first order concern is improving employment and salaries.

Numerous participants commented on poor quality health care. Participants complained that hospitals discriminate against patients using jamkesmas (the government health program for the poor) and prioritized wealthy paying clients. Participants also complained that for many medical problems they have to travel outside the district since hospitals in Blora are ill-equipped. At one FGD (women's group, Blora), participants said that hospitals assigned doctors and refused to let patients see specialists.

People also still wonder why they are paying education fees when education should be free under BOS. The men's group in Tempelan said families are still paying 70,000-80,000/child for school fees.

3.2 Attitudes towards district government

Participants hold the bupati responsive and neither trust nor are satisfied with the performance of the district government. Participants in each discussion group identified the 'government' as being responsible for solving their problems, and the district government in particular. Within the district government the bupati is recognized as the most important player. In contrast, almost no one identified the DPRD as playing a role in addressing their problems. One person said that the DPRD spends its time getting the money back from its election campaigns. There seems to be little information available about what the DPRD does on a regular basis. No one voiced outspoken support for the district government or satisfaction with its performance.

Participants expected that both corruption and waste are common in district government. No one had conclusive information, but participants suspected that corruption and waste are prevalent. As an example of waste, one participant (female, Cepu) asked why some roads go unpaved while some roads that are already paved get re-paved often. The Blora women's group seemed uncomfortable talking about corruption, saying that was a man's issue (indeed, the men in Blora had strong opinions on it). Other groups seemed reluctant to comment on corruption because of a lack of information.

There are very weak links between elected politicians and citizens. The bupati and DPRD members rarely visit constituents and address constituent concerns. In the women's group in Kutukan it was mentioned that the bupati visited their area but did not meet directly with the people. Also the DPRD members never ask for suggestions from society. We asked the participants if they ever get angry when their elected representatives do not consult them. One responded that the DPRD members are still new so maybe they are still learning their jobs. Maybe later after the DPRD knows about their jobs, they will try to give some suggestion. They think that DPRD members just think about their immediate supporters.

The men's group in Ngapus said that last year they told visiting members of the DPRD about the problem with obtaining fertilizer. The government has a law about fertilizer distribution, but sellers do not obey the law. While they told their problem to the DPRD member there has been no effect and no more information. This year (since the April 2009 elections) Japah no longer has a DPRD member.

3.3 Corruption

Groups varied in their willingness to discuss corruption. The men's group in Randuplatung was far and away the most activist. They complained that all of Sancoyo's contracts are done through family members. Also, school headmasters are supposed to serve only for four years, but some have served as long as 13 years and others are headmasters in multiple schools. Civil servants aren't hired on the basis of merit but on the basis of connections.

There seem to be complex attitudes towards corruption in Blora. On one hand this issue clearly makes some angry. On the other hand, a surprising number of participants said that corruption was not their concern. There appears to be a lack of awareness of how corruption at the district level negatively impacts the daily lives of ordinary people.

There is a history of corruption in Blora. There was a major corruption scandal involving the head of the DPRD from 1999-2009 (Warsit). Many others expressed concern that the current bupati (Yudhi Sancoyo) conducts all contracting business through his son, who just recently was elected to the DPRD.

There are two instances of corruption in Blora that sparked large-scale political action. In recent history there have been two major incidents involving corruption that have sparked public protest. One involved the head of the DPRD (Warsit) who weaved a net of corruption around several DPRD members—*korupsi perjamaha* (corruption together)—during his two terms in office.¹ Despite major protests against him in 2004 (before the second elections) he was re-elected to office. The other protest stemmed from a corruption scandal related to fertilizer distribution. The fertilizer demonstrations were important because, unlike for corruption, people felt entitled to fertilizer and it affected their daily lives. These two events imply that there is some implicit social contract in Blora, even if it is not a fiscal contract per se. One common denominator in these protests was that the public had an easily identifiable public enemy, which facilitated collective action.

¹Apparently one thing he did was arrange several unnecessary study mission boondoggles for other DPRD members to different parts of Indonesia.

3.4 Fiscal Contract

Citizens in Blora do not seem to suffer from perceived low levels of contributions or a lack of ownership over district public funds. In general, participants feel they have a right to public goods and that money in the budget belongs to citizens. They also feel they fulfill their obligations as taxpayers to the government. When we asked people whether they thought they were making a significant contribution to the production of public goods (or paying for more than they get) the answers were more mixed, with several saying that they thought their payments and contributions were low. If perceptions of ownership and entitlement are generally high, then a campaign focused on increasing ownership is probably not the way to go.

3.5 Transparency and Information

Blora is an information-poor environment. Several participants in all groups offered that it is very hard to get information about what government is doing, or what their tax dollars are being used for, or about development programs. The government in Blora does not provide information on anything, either via radio or newspaper. The men's group in Randuplatung said that neighboring Rembang is much better for transparency and information.

Many said that they are interested in information but do not know how or where to obtain it from. Moreover, the problem persists at all levels of government, from village to district level. For instance in the men's group in Cepu, participants are angry because they had requested permission to mine sands from nearby Solo river, but their permission was denied by the government (and the fine was heavy). They were not given any explanation, however, and the VH did little to assist. Overall the current demand for information appears higher than the supply. This suggests that there is a moderate to high demand for information and a public awareness campaign will have an interested audience.

3.6 The District Budget (APBD)

There is wide variation in awareness of what the APBD is. Several participants spontaneously mentioned the APBD during discussions of problems in the district, or their perceptions of public services. At least one person in each group was familiar enough with the APBD to identify what the acronym stands for. Aside from that, people had very little understanding expect for one man in Cepu who complained about the late passage of the APBD last year. Several participants described the APBD in terms of ownership, for instance, it is "our money that we deposit to our leaders."

There is wide variation in interest in learning more about the APBD. Several commented that the APBD is not relevant to their daily lives and it is a waste of time to learn more. This response is not surprising; a recent survey found that 65 percent of respondents in a survey in 14 districts did not think the APBD was interesting or relevant to them. But several participants in each group were interested in learning more. Also, after going through the exercise of listing what information people are interested in about the APBD, some of the more skeptical member said they were interested now that they had a better idea of what they could learn.

There is variation in what people want to know about the APBD. To get a better sense of what information people are interested in (related to the APBD) we asked participants to say whether they were "not interested, a little interested, or very interested" in obtaining information about different expenditures and revenue related to the budget (see Table 1).

People's priors are that development expenditures are low and should be higher. To get a sense of priors we asked the groups to guess what percent of the budget is spent on different line items (see Table 2). Most groups put the share of development expenditures between 20-30 percent. Interestingly, they put corruption at around 30-40 percent. We followed up the exercise by asking participants how they felt about the share spent on development. Do they think it is too high, too low, or about right? The men's group in Randuplatung said development should be 60 percent, whereas the men's group in Ngapus said they hoped development would reach 30-40 percent.

3.7 Taxation and Revenue

Participants readily identify themselves as taxpayers. Even before asking the section of questions on taxation, several participants in the discussion of public services voluntarily offered that they pay taxes. When asked specifically about whether they pay taxes, virtually every group responded with a loud 'yes!' Participants most commonly pay the PBB, vehicle and electricity taxes. Some also mentioned the npwb (the income tax). They mentioned that they are angry that taxes are on the rise with no explanation. Another woman expressed frustration that she is still being taxed for property she sold two years ago, despite the fact that she told the village government that the property is no longer hers. While some participants did not seem interested in knowing where their tax dollars went, others did.

Taxes are not a large share of annual income. People most typically pay the PBB (land tax of around 40,000/year), vehicle tax (which probably does not exceed Rp. 100,000 per year). The average poverty line income is about Rp. 200,000 per month, or Rp. 2.4 million per year. Thirty percent of the population in Blora is estimated to live below the poverty line. While we were unable to estimate individual tax burdens in the FGD, taxes probably amount to no more than Rp. 150,000 per year, which is less than 10 percent of income of even the poorest households. At the district level, taxes and fees amount to less than 8 percent of the budget.

Participants routinely over-estimated the share of taxes in the district budget. Groups identified taxes as ranging from 20 to 40 percent of the APBD. The actual share is about eight percent. Overall, it appears that people systematically overestimate the share of taxes, which implies that learning the truth could potentially have the adverse effect of reducing their connection to the APBD.

People do not really know where their tax dollars go. On one hand participants know that the APBD includes their tax dollars. On the other hand, they often say they do not really know how they are used. There was wide variation in caring about where their taxes go. Many said that for them paying taxes is enough and they don't care more. But several said they do want to know where their taxes go.

People do not think government handles their tax dollars well. Participants are not satisfied with how government manages their tax dollars, but they do not know what to do about it. They also do not think they can stop paying taxes, so exit is not an option.

3.8 Gotong Royong

I originally included this section because I was interested in whether people's gotong royong contributions could be used to increase their perceptions of their tax burdens. We only did this module with two groups (the women in Cepu and men in Ngapus).

Gotong royong is voluntary but there are social sanctions for non-participation. Most participants described gotong royong as a voluntary thing, especially for those who will benefit directly from the project. In other words it is considered a duty and an obligation for households that will benefit directly. Burdens are divided

among those who will directly benefit. In theory everyone has to do their share but sometimes if villagers are lazy then the more diligent have to take on their allocation. There are no official punishments for not doing gotong royong, but people in the village are less likely to help those who do not participate.

People can see gotong royong as a tax. In the men's FGD in Ngapus, Yuda described gotong royong as a tax. The participants said they had not thought of it that way before but they could see the connection.

3.9 Culture and Accountability

The FGDs revealed several interesting insights about Javanese culture that affect the actions and outlook of ordinary citizens when it comes to accountability.

The New Order still clouds how people view accountability. In name Indonesia has been a democracy since 1945. Suharto described his government as a democracy. Even then government was presented as being: "from people, to people, by people" (this quote came up in several groups). While people know what democracy and participation means, they might not really understand that this means they need to take actions to secure good governance from politicians. Under the New Order, people still had a low level of information but the government did a relatively good job of providing for people without the people having to be vigilant or demanding in return. It is not clear whether they understand the shift in their obligations required by real democracy.

The concept of 'nrimo' is still very present in people's lives. We asked several questions about the role of nrimo in people's daily lives because it is a cultural concept often linked to acceptance and inaction. We did this discussion with only two groups (men in Cepu and men in Japah). Participants defined it as the philosophy of trying as hard as you can but then if you don't succeed it's god's will. We related nrimo to the floods in that part of Cepu a few years back, when people said the government did not care to help them. Interestingly, after we raised the topic several participants referred to it later in their discussion of attitudes towards district government. For instance, one participant said that if the village head doesn't care about something they just revert back to nrimo. In sum, nrimo does not seem to prevent ordinary people from trying to take action but rather is what they fall back on when their attempts are not successful.

3.10 Bupati Elections

Participants in all groups expressed dissatisfaction with the current bupati (Yudhi Sancoyo). When asked why, participants typically say that the previous bupati did good things for the development for the district, but that stopped when Yudhi became bupati. The men's group in Ngapus said Yudhi made several promises but so far there are no visible results. If he has had good programs they are not aware of them.

People seem reluctant to discuss their specific vote choices. There is a strong understanding that the vote choice is secret and does not have to be discussed publicly. This is something to keep in mind for post-treatment questions. People automatically get suspicious if you ask questions about who they plan to vote for. They think you are with a candidate or a campaign. We had to reassure them several times that LPAW is non-partisan.

People overwhelmingly vote on the basis of religiosity, personality and programs. When asked whether a village head endorsement made a difference, participants roundly responded that it did not, and they were going to make independent choices. Participants also did not think that party ID mattered much in their choice. At this stage it was still too early to discuss in-depth who the opposing candidates would be, but some were aware of Warsit (who has allegations of corruption against him), and Abu Nafi, who is a popular religious figure affiliated with NU.

People recognize that the election outcome can have a direct impact on the quality of their lives.

Participants recognize that a good bupati will make their lives better. They are not apathetic about these elections.

3.11 Political Action

People want to do something but are unsure of what to do. There was eagerness to do something but a feeling of powerlessness.

People express suspicion and distrust of NGOs. There is a deep skepticism about NGOs. NGOs are seen as being easily corrupted and in seeking social support only insofar as it furthers their goals. NGOs are often corrupt and try to get money from development projects or through government contracts. They are not seen as representatives of the people. To assuage concerns about LPAW, Yuda referred to LPAW's independent funding and its MOU with the bupati. Only after learning a substantial amount about LPAW did participants confirm they would support its effort.

There is also co-optation in the media and reporters expect bribes to cover stories. This was only discussed in the men's group in Blora