

What are the most significant issues impacting urban life within Indonesia?

The “urban jungle” was the dominate backdrop for a July 2012 adventure in Indonesia. One of the many lenses used to observe life within this archipelago in southern Asia was that of urban life. Such an inquiry would be complex within many of Earth’s locations and is even more complicated inside of one of the more populated cities on the planet. While the character of urban life within every city will have its own unique issues, there are often many more similarities regardless of such uniqueness. Although issues pertaining to socio-economic diversity and perceived governmental corruption impact urban life within Indonesia, based upon short-term and informal observations of Bandung and Jakarta it appears that the greatest influence on urban life within the archipelago comes from the quantity and quality (or lack thereof) of transportation infrastructure.

One of the stark realities that can be instantly observed within Indonesia’s urban centers is significant socio-economic based stratification. Grand mansions surrounded by tall walls and gated driveways sit adjacent to rows of shanty homes within a regional slum. Such unambiguous differences might be less noticeable if Indonesia’s cities were laid out, whether by de jure or de facto circumstances, in recognizable zones similar to Ernest Burgess’s “concentric zone model”. One might think that with such glaring disparity that animosity between socio-economic classes would be not only present but rampant. And yet, based on the limited exposure available during a two-week exploration of Bandung and Jakarta, such animosity did not seem to be prevalent. Perhaps these observations were clouded by a phenomena associated with Ramadan. However, it seemed that the commonly held religion, Islam, had created enough of kindred spirit that potentially divisive issues, like socio-economic class, are not significant obstacles for social interaction. And yet this socio-economic divide still influenced Indonesia’s urban development. More often than not, it seems as though transportation infrastructure routes followed the creation of zones of most interest to the rich and/or powerful (government

buildings, universities, elite shopping centers) rather than being designed with a primary goal of helping the flow of traffic throughout the city.

An additional factor that was observed during the all too short exploration of Bandung and Jakarta was the issue of political corruption and its influence within urban life. At some point in nearly every conversation of any substance with students, teachers, or others within the community the issue of political corruption was typically presented as a rationale for the status quo. Politicians accept or demand bribes in order to help guarantee some form of action or inaction. The issue of corruption appears to be rampant throughout the sundry levels of Indonesia's federalist style government. At the municipal level, corruption is used to explain why some regions of a city have better electrical grids or sewage treatment than do others. Corruption is also linked to the presence or lack thereof of law enforcement personnel. It seems that municipal political corruption can serve as a significant barrier to productive development for the overall benefit of the local community, the city as a whole, and ultimately the country.

The primary factor which seems to provide the most substantial influence on urban life within Indonesia is that of infrastructure, especially those components of infrastructure linked to transportation. Often times it appeared as though the transportation infrastructure within urban Indonesia was woefully inadequate. Distances which were rather short "as the crow flies" could take anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours to get from the point of origin to the destination. For instance, the distance from the international airport in northwest Jakarta to the Park Hotel just southeast of the city center is approximately 37 km (or 22.7 miles) and yet it took over two hours to travel this distance. This problem was not primarily due to the overall quality of Jakarta's transportation infrastructure; much of this route was on a nice, fairly modern "interstate" highway development. The problem was more related to the quantity of infrastructure. While such routes might be deemed "nice", they are simply not plentiful enough for the vast size of the population of Indonesia's cities.

Cars, trucks, busses, and motorcycles cram themselves together so as to create six to eight “lanes” of traffic within a path that is otherwise designed for orderly flow within four striped lanes. In many locations throughout each Jakarta and Bandung the roads are not well cared for, loaded with potholes, and twist and wind between buildings, etc. Additionally, these routes do not seem to consistently provide a logical and organized path of flow for traffic into or out of pivotal locations within the city.

While some may question the claim of traffic infrastructure as being so important of a characteristic so as to such a significant impact on a city, please consider all of the other issues which are complicated due to inefficient traffic flow. Ambulances, fire trucks, police cars, and other such vehicles are not able to legitimately provide the emergency services upon which so many people rely. Necessary resources which must be hauled via automobile from place to place (i.e. food, clothing, and medical supplies) are delayed within such a traffic situation. Many of the productive aspects of life within a city are compromised when the quantity and quality of transportation infrastructure is inadequate for the needs of the people.

There are many other factors which impact the overall life within Indonesia’s urban areas, including: age stratification, gender issues (especially equality), conditions of housing, industrial development, and justice. Within the constraints of the two-week excursion and from the limited observations based solely in Jakarta and Bandung, it was difficult to make a thorough investigation of that which truly impacts Indonesia’s urban life especially using any quantifiable data. Regardless, that which was observed supports a conclusion that socio-economic diversity, perceptions on governmental corruption, and, most pointedly, the quantity and quality of transportation infrastructure impact life within urban Indonesia.