

All those floods: Did urban planners ignore the environment?

Upon watching and reading news about floods hitting Jakarta, Semarang and Manado, down to medium cities and small towns in various parts of Indonesia recently, all parties must feel ashamed.

It is not only government officials who should be embarrassed, but also developers, legislators, scientists and researchers, as well as the architects and planners who have contributed to environmentally unfriendly places to live.

It seems most urban planners have tended to ignore the environmental capacities of areas and ecological footprint assessments.

Jakarta is the worst example. Official data says remaining public green open spaces in the capital are at a level of only 9.8 percent, while the Spatial Planning Law mandates every city to set aside a level of 20 percent for public green open space and 10 percent for private space.

Jakarta has violated the law. The brand of Jakarta as a city of a thousand malls, is embarrassing and heartbreaking given that much of its population lives under the poverty line. A lot of luxury skyscrapers in the form of malls, supermalls, department stores, plazas and hotels have encroached upon urban parks and even graveyards.

Conurbation management of the area popularly known as Jabotabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi), which evolved into Jabodetabek with the inclusion of Depok and then Jabodetabekjur (plus Cianjur), is a good starting point for the integration of the systemic and holistic development of Greater Jakarta.

However, as is the case in Pancasila, its weakness lies in the implementation or execution. The Puncak area in Bogor, for example, has clearly been defined as a conservation region or water catchment area, in order to prevent rainwater from flooding Jakarta directly. But the reality shows that villas, restaurants, cafes, shops and hotels are scattered across the hills of Puncak.

The illegal development of Puncak took place without strict developmental control. There are allegations that public officials messed up the licensing. Only when floods devastated Jakarta in 2013 and 2014 did officials hurriedly demolish the villas in Puncak on the grounds they had not built permits. It is well known that the owners of those illegal villas are mostly rich people from Jakarta.

To correct long-standing mistakes, Jabodetabekjur should be empowered so that it holds a strong position, power and authority to manage the whole region harmoniously. Big floods hitting Jakarta will worsen if business is gone about as usual.

Closer cooperation between Jakarta and surrounding cities such as Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi and the neighboring provinces of West Java and Banten, should be encouraged using "stick and carrot" or "incentive and disincentive" mechanisms. In the city of Jakarta itself, since some areas lie below sea level, floating buildings or flexible housing resting on pillars could be introduced.

The transportation system should not simply rely on land transportation, but also on water transportation systems. In residential areas located above sea level, residents should be required by law to make infiltration wells, rain-harvesting equipment, and "biopores" to store water.

Public officials should also consider a moratorium on commercial building construction, especially new skyscrapers such as malls, supermalls, offices and hotels. High-rise buildings should be permitted only for rented flats and owned flats for low-income communities, to realize the program of "A thousand towers" once echoed by former vice president Jusuf Kalla.

Simultaneously, elevated housing needs to emphasize the importance of a moratorium on underground water extraction, which obviously has resulted in a decrease in ground water levels and continuing land subsidence.

So far, urban and regional development has been more oriented toward land rather than water. The term commonly used in urban planning is "land use". Natural scenery is also commonly called "landscape". Rarely do we hear the terms "water use" or "waterscape".

We often hear about the "green movement" promoting a green planet, green country, green city, green architecture, green interior, green company, green banking, etc.

But due to extraordinary floods in our coastal cities, it is about time to recommend a "blue movement" in urban and regional planning.

While the law requires every city in Indonesia to set aside 30 percent of its area for green open space, a new law is needed to oblige cities that have rivers to designate at least 5 percent of the area for open blue spaces or water bodies.

No less than 13 rivers flow into Jakarta but open blue spaces only account for less than 1.5 percent of its total urban area. Therefore, the rule regarding the demarcation line of the river, which is now widely violated, must be reinforced. The principle of "one river, one plan, one management" should be applied consistently.

Progressive thinking about the establishment of the "coastal belt" along Jakarta's coast is also worthy of supporting and should be implemented soon. Although it is costly, it is certainly much cheaper and more rational than the proposed offshore dam or giant sea wall.

The coastal belt is also more environmentally friendly, not harmful to the shoreline and will not hinder harbor and fishing activities. It will instead help maintain the ecological balance and serve multi-function activities such as fisheries and water recreation.

Other efforts to save Jakarta from heavy flooding are population control and changing the culture of littering. People have to be educated to treat the rivers as their front yards, instead of their backyards.

All parties concerned must do their best to prevent urban floods from worsening in the near future. Devastating floods should teach us all a lesson, but first of all we expect the government (both central and local) to show strong political will to implement conurbation planning as soon as possible.

We should keep in mind that planning without action is daydreaming, while action without planning is a nightmare. So far, urban and regional development has been more oriented toward land rather than water.

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