

Limits to growth: Sustainable development or resilience

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In 1972, a team of scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William W. Behrens III, produced the World3 model to simulate the relations between world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion. The small but powerful book, *Limits to Growth*, provided computer generated models of what might happen to the world, an overshoot and collapse or a rather stabilized world.

For the study's 40th anniversary, Volkswagen Stiftung, which supported the project in the 1970s, held two events in Germany, a winter school gathering of 60 young researchers in Visselhövede to revisit the ideas proposed in 1972 and a symposium in Hannover to reflect on what has happened in 40 years and what needs to be done.

Many of the global issues discussed throughout the winter school and the symposium made me contemplate about what is happening at home in Indonesia. One of the main points for reflection comes from one of the authors, Meadows, on sustainable development.

He maintains that sustainable development, with the assumption that the rich (country) can continue to live as they are while the poor (country) strive to catch up with minimum risks for the future, is no longer achievable.

He insists that what we need to do is prepare to adjust our lifestyles with the reduction of sources. Therefore, the word resilience has apparently become the next buzzword, replacing sustainable government, at least for some parts of the world.

Meadows defines resilience as "the ability to absorb a shock and quickly regain the ability to perform essential functions". While sustainable development assumes that order exists and the current system works, resilience assumes the existence of chaos where the current system does not work. There is no one universally accepted way of defining the word resilience but in the simplest way of defining it, a resilient society would be a society that can survive a crisis and function again, maybe not as it was before the crisis, but enough to sustain the life of the society.

Looking at our society today, natural disasters and economic crisis are just two of the many situations that require us to build a more resilient society. We need scenarios to survive the conditions and bounce back.

We, Indonesians, have the potential to be set up as a resilient society. I was told how after the earthquake in West Sumatra a few years ago, a foreign institution came with tents for the victims. In certain areas, the tents were "useless" since most of the victims were immediately assisted and accommodated by relatives and neighbors.

We can also be proud of the resilience of our women. In Aceh, post 2004-tsunami, women displayed their potential in the recovery process. As for the issue of food scarcity, we have also witnessed people seek alternatives to replace staples during the economic crisis.

In short, our society already possesses this self-supporting mechanism, which if developed further will enable us to go on after crisis or chaos.

If this practice can be applied to the bigger picture of development and resource management and is adapted to the government's development policy, we might have a chance to take a short breath before continuing to worry about the future of our children.

Resilience is also required in responding to changes. Last year, the government developed the Master Plan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia's Economic Development (MP3EI). This is a perfect example of how a developing country is striving to reach the level of developed countries, a feature of sustainable development.

But, what if this does not work? What if the effort also accelerated the depletion of the finite resources that are the core of the majority of the economic corridors developed by the master plan? Then it is quite possible that we are also accelerating collapse. This is a type of resilience that we might not yet be ready to face.

For so long we have been pampered with the varied and abundant resources, including the wide range of produce items. However, the recent scarcity of soy beans and soaring beef prices should be considered a wake-up call for us to shift toward food scarcity.

It was quite a shocking experience when tempeh and tahu (tofu), which usually belong in the low-cost food category, suddenly disappeared from the market. Soy beans did come back to the market, but there is no guarantee that the problem will not occur again, possibly with other produce items.

For all those reasons, resilience is worth promoting so that the next generation has a better chance to survive because as argued by Meadows, a resilient system will eventually be sustainable. It is now up to society to act, and we do not need to wait for the rest of the world to take the lead.

As Meadows states: "There are global problems like climate change that require global actions, and there are universal problems that can be dealt with locally." Identifying and acting on the universal problems that we can deal with locally would be a good starting point.

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