

## **IH351 Examining the roles of NGOs and government in improving natural resource management in Indonesia**

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Indonesia has undergone a momentous change in government over the past decade, moving from a dictatorship under President Suharto which lasted from 1966 to 1998 to a functioning democracy in the present day. The Suharto era is justifiably described as corrupt and militaristic, with major events including the invasion of East Timor in 1975 which resulted in the deaths of approximately one third of East Timor's population between 1975 and 1999. The political stability of Indonesia was assured through sharing positions of prime authority responsibility within the Suharto family and close friends, resulting in frequent instances of corruption, embezzlement and other illegal activities. His overthrow in 1998 reflected a public desire for greater transparency in government, which resulted in key changes including the devolution of power and authority away from the centre of government in Jakarta to lower levels of government including provinces and districts. At the same time, increasing freedom of speech and other liberal policies have resulted in the post-Suharto era being referred to as the period of '*reformasi*' (reformation).

The reallocation of power and authority to lower levels of government is crucial and far-reaching with respect to natural resource management and conservation. Whereas previously, decisions would be made in Jakarta on all matters relating to resource management throughout the country, these are now the responsibility of local levels of government, which was designed to assure greater transparency and accountability in decision-making. However, the various pieces of legislation designed to enact these changes are contradictory, confusing and often poorly understood, leading to many examples of conflicting policies and failures to implement conservation measures. Furthermore, local government in Indonesia is now increasingly self-financed, as allocations of money from central government have been reduced in line with reformation policies. This means that the pressure to exploit natural resources and mineral wealth is increasing, with local government standing to reap more financial benefits and developers lobbying hard for permission to undertake these activities. Finally, the issue of corruption has not gone away in the post-Suharto era, as many government officials are both poorly paid, susceptible to bribes by well-financed developers and other lobbyists and often see no wrongdoing in accepting such bribes.

In this situation, the role of non-governmental organisations is increasingly influential in determining if local governments allow increased exploitation and degradation of natural resources or whether they exercise their ability to conserve such resources. NGOs are now widespread throughout Indonesian society and are increasingly well-connected domestically and internationally to well-resourced and powerful overseas-based NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund, both of whom are well-established and active in the Wakatobi. These organisations often seek to be perceived as acting at the local level through working directly with resource users and local decision-makers, in line with wider principles of sustainable development.

One research topic within this project can therefore focus upon the capacity of local decision-makers and stakeholders to take on roles relating to marine resource management, conservation, tourism, fishing and other maritime-based activities. It is often assumed that this capacity for equity, democracy and fair play exists within local communities and that these will in turn act in wider

interests of all community members, although evidence for such altruistic behaviour is very limited. A large number of local community groups exist at the local village level in Indonesia, including women's groups, faith-based groups, trading groups, cultural groups, youth groups and so on. These can be used as the focus for research into whether the potential for greater local accountability and equity in resource use is reflected in reality, along with an examination of the networks through which such decisions are made.

The interaction between local and overseas-based NGOs is also an area of interest within this project. Studies can focus upon how village-level NGOs interact with one another and with other Indonesian NGOs to overcome barriers of information, expertise and skills in promoting their interests. The roles of overseas-based NGOs, which may share the same conservation goals as local NGOs but often seek to implement these through very different mechanisms, will also be of direct relevance to the project. This reflects contrasting interpretations of 'conservation' and 'development' between NGOs which is of direct relevance to the future trajectory of conservation and resource management at the national level.

The project could include a focus upon government activities at the district (*kabupaten*) level, as the Wakatobi district is one of the few examples in Indonesia where the boundaries of the district government are identical to those of the national park. Such district governments are often referred to as '*kabupaten konservasi*', implying that district level governments prioritise conservation in their policy-making. This would involve one-to-one discussions with key government officials and an awareness of policy analysis techniques and would generate valuable new information relating to conservation policy and practice within Indonesia.

Similar to project IH350, research methods will involve interviews, focus group activities and problem-solving exercises with a wide range of participants. The ability to integrate and triangulate information and to think creatively about appropriate questions will be central to students' ability to succeed in this project. Furthermore, a good working knowledge of the structure of Indonesian government and conservation policies will need to be gained through a reading of relevant literature prior to the field expedition commencing.

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