

## Commentary

# Lessons From Jakarta

Babar Mumtaz

*Development Planning Unit, University College London, UK\**

So there I was, almost two months in Indonesia, working for UNDP/Habitat in the Ministry of Housing trying to set up a system for low-income households to access housing finance, and I had yet to see a slum! Oh I had seen one from the 38<sup>th</sup> floor of this apartment I was taken to by an estate agent when I first arrived. But from that height it wasn't real. I had caught the odd glimpse as we drove past on elevated highways. But I hadn't been into a low-income settlement, and for me that was almost like having withdrawal symptoms! Not that I can't live without a regular dose of squattlements – but I couldn't see how I could be expected to work to help people improve their living environments when I hadn't even seen how they lived. I'd had NGOs and CBOs come and visit, beg or bludgeon their cases for assistance, I'd had the Minister tell me what was needed, but I had yet to see one. We had gone along to see low income housing settlements on some of the other islands, but they turned out to be villages, and when it came down to it, fairly substantial. No, those weren't the people desperate for housing – not according to my expectations, any way.



So, after much cajoling, a meeting was set up and off we went to a place called Penas, in North East Jakarta. A few days ago, we wanted to invite someone from Penas to come to a meeting we had arranged to have with some local community organisations, and when my colleague asked if the office car could be used to deliver the invite, I jumped at the chance. Only, I had to stop at the bank to change some money, seeing as how it was on the way. So I went in, and as usual it took longer than I had thought. Came out, and paged the car. After about 15 minutes and no response to three further calls over the p.a. system, I decided to go look for my self and set off down the ramp to the car park. Everybody (or everybody that can afford to have a bank account and drive to the bank) has a “Kijang” – a monster of a four-wheel drive dreamt up by Toyota (and if it isn't actually a Kijang, it's another four-wheel drive). So there I am, walking up and down the car park trying to see which is ours. Another 15 minutes of that, and I give up. Come back to the lobby, try paging once again, and even I have to admit that I have been left stranded. Nothing for it, but to hail a taxi and return to the Ministry without having seen Penas.

So, there we are, chatting happily while the driver negotiates his way through thick and thin (thick mostly) of Jakarta traffic. Luckily its not rush hour – though when exactly that isn't, I have yet to establish. Having set off late (yes, as usual) after over an hour's driving, I manage to persuade my colleague to ring and tell the Penas chaps that we will not keep our appointment. He does so, but only by ringing our office secretary and asking her to do so. Another half an hour, and the car comes to a stop in the car park of what looks to me like another Ministry-looking building. I am right. We are lost. How can that be, I ask. The driver had left me

---

\* Reader in Housing Studies, Development Planning Unit, University College London, UK. Email: b.mumtaz@ucl.ac.uk

stranded while he went off with this other chap to deliver the invitation: why can't he now take us there? Initially they tried not to have heard me, and went on humming and hawing. Only later was I informed that in fact the driver never made it to Penas because there was too much traffic, and the messenger was dropped off to go by foot.

There then followed another hour and half of wild-goose-chase as we went from pillar to post, looking for Penas. I kept asking why we didn't use the mobile phone. Too expensive, Yes but how long is this going to take and aren't we wasting fuel? So, in the end we did ring, and were given instructions that took us next door to the original building where we left the car and walked down a narrow path between two walls and emerged onto Penas. It was the stench from the river – a fast flowing, black sewer – that was the real give-away. The close to the banks were 2-metre high walls, except that they were not always quite close enough to the banks to stop a row or three of ram-shackle (and some not so ram-shackle) structures to sneak in between the walls and the river itself. In parts, there was even a wide enough road, but it wound its way between and betwixt the houses as best as it could. Often reduced to less than a meter, but never quite disappearing. Most of the houses fronting on to the road were shops or manufacturing establishments of some kind, and the road itself was multi-purpose, serving as living room, play room, laundry-drying yard, bicycle and motorcycle parking and of course access way.

Dodging children, drying clothes, projecting overhangs (a natural corollary to being at least a head taller than everyone else, is that what they can walk under, is exactly eye-level for me), we made our way in an ever-growing conga. And of course, a thousand eyes noted our progress. Luckily, here as in so many other countries, I don't immediately attract attention as a foreigner, but our procession was clearly not quite an every-day event, and so the object of curiosity. And then we were there. A not quite 2-metre by 10 metre rectangular room, devoid of all furniture except for mats on the ground and graffiti on the walls. Mainly someone trying to practice writing the word DIMS – but not making any obvious progress (or maybe I was not reading it in the right sequence?). There were about 8 or 10 men sitting against the two walls. There was no entrance door, but instead a wooden stoop served as a shoe park. Everybody stood up and there was hand-shaking all round, and then we all sat down, almost 20 of us.

As so often happens, I wished I had kept up with my duties as a Muslim. Amongst other things (I am convinced) praying five times a day keeps the body supple, and teaches you how to sit, legs folded neatly crossed in front of you. I can manage a very loose, space-consuming version, but for no more than about 5 minutes. After that I have to uncross, unfold, repack and rearrange my legs every 5 minutes, and that surely and excruciatingly gradually reduces to about a minute. There is an acceptable variant, where you fold one leg flat and prop the other one up – but that's very informal – but I can manage only marginally longer sit-still times using it, but find it slightly less painful. So, while all around me, everyone else sits listening to the discussion, I fidget. Not helped by being only able to follow but one word in five.

Turns out that because we were so late, they had already been informed about our project (by the chap who had come to meeting in the Ministry) and had had their discussions. They came from four or five different settlements and from legal rights groups. They listened, but more out of politeness. At one point, a man poked his head into the room, followed by another who had a huge black video camera perched on his shoulder. A brief animated discussion followed. Apparently this was an NGO with an assignment to go film everyday life in the slums. He was assured that this was not an everyday occurrence and though he thought that since he had chanced upon it, he ought to be allowed to film, he left, taking his Cyclops with him. The other interesting thing was that gradually the lone smoker was joined by another five from around the

room. Normally perhaps only five of the men (and presumably the one woman) would not be smoking, this was the middle of Ramadan, and smoking was one of the pleasures (or foods?) given up during day light. Given the size of the room, and the fact that the only ventilation was the missing front wall, we were all smoking, albeit second-hand smoke.

The meeting broke up, without any real consensus or follow-up being suggested, but perhaps that would have been expecting too much. Finally, then, we went out (it took me a good four or five minutes to stand straight on my legs again) to have a look-see around the settlement. Hardly had we gone twenty paces, when the first of the raindrops hit. This is the rainy season, but there hadn't been any rain for the last week or so – or at least not in Jakarta – and the sky had been a bright blue when I had last seen it. But it was very hot. A sure sign that rain clouds would build up. The drops, which started off as a slow staccato drum beat on the mainly tin roofs, soon became a fine drum roll and then a roar. While I was still wondering what we would do – we had been walking largely under the cover of overhangs and awnings – but these were about to give way to open sky as the road (now fast becoming a river in its own right, was no longer flanked by structures on both sides – umbrellas appeared as if by magic. I got one of the biggest. Its obvious advantages were easily offset by the fact that in many places the path was so narrow that one was forced to tip the umbrella on its side. This not only exposed one to the rain, but worse, to the waterfalls cascading off the gutter-less roofs.

Engrossed in such matters, I didn't realise we had come to the end of the settlement. Well actually we hadn't. Just to the end of the settlement on this bank of the seweriver. There was more on the other. The crossing was over a rather tenuous bridge, not altogether lacking charm. There was a certain minimalist Japanese resonance in the structure and a grace that would be the envy of many a civil engineer. It was when I was halfway along it and turned to let someone share my umbrella that I realised that there was no handrail on the side that I was now moving towards. The horror of falling into the rushing flow some ten feet below was dizzying. The wooden surface of the walkway, never too firm in the first place, was now quite slippery. Luckily I survived. There and back as we beat a hasty but we would like to think, dignified retreat to our Kijang. Mysterious hands appeared to whisk the umbrellas away as we got in. In fact we were quite drenched through. But at least the water was warm.

On the drive back, we reviewed the visit and the meeting. So, I asked, what do you think we should do for Penas?

Well, said my colleague, actually we should move them away from there.

Why?

Look at how dirty the river is. These people shouldn't be living there. That's the trouble. People live where they shouldn't, and then they spoil the river. Look at the rivers in Europe...Bjut here, even if we moved these people away, they would only come back.

So, why move them? In any case, moving them wont change the river. The pollution is coming from way upstream, all along.

Yes, but its also liable to flooding.

So maybe we should do something about the flooding? Build a decking over the river. That way we could create extra space.

What? Surely you don't mean that! We can't have people living over the river.

Why not?

It's not part of our tradition.

But living in concrete boxes, and in 50 story buildings is? And driving around in cars – since when has that been part of your tradition?

Yes, but living over a river!

OK. Sewer. There are all sorts of buildings that have sewer pipes running under them. For that matter, there are probably underground rivers flowing under some buildings that we don't even know about. Hey, if did this all along the river, we could sell some of the new "land" created and make enough money to pay for it all.

That sort of thing is all right for Europe. We are too poor. We cannot afford that. Any way rivers are for natural beauty. Riverbanks are for people to walk along, and to enjoy themselves. And these people have no right to be there, in any case. If we improve their situation it will only encourage other people to do the same.

What, settle along the river? Hardly! All the riverbanks are already built upon. So, what then? We leave them where they are, as they are?

No. Remove them. That's the only way to improve their living conditions!

We were stuck. Not only was the conversation going nowhere, the traffic had also brought us to a standstill. Jakarta's traffic is like that. Either chock-a-block, gridlocked - "mached" is the local word for it - or thundering past, like bats out of hell. Its quite frightening, especially when a midi-bus comes hurtling at you, passengers bulging out of it. At the sight of a potential customer, they'll then stop dead, nearside lane or not. The passenger will run across the traffic and squeeze on. The same procedure is carried out in reverse to drop off passengers, in mid-flow. You avoid a suddenly-braked bus, swerve past it, only to be confronted by a proverbial little old lady who has just disembarked (perhaps having gone miles beyond her destination) standing bewildered as she takes stock of where she is. Slightly more frightening are the big buses. Who know they have the size to bully their way through anything. They do have the dents and scars to prove that Jakarta's drivers are not always as able to calculate the size of vehicles or the openings they can go through. None more so than the drivers of the buses that are the worst afflicted. They belong to a company called "Steady Safe". The name is boldly painted on the side, high enough above the traffic-tide mark to remain spotless.

Generally cars are on the new side, and do not carry the scars of battle that one feels they must have endured. Perhaps it's because of the chain of "Bengkel Majik" shops dotted across the country. No sounds come from them, and high walls protect them. You take your mortally wounded vehicle to them, and they throw a huge drape over it. Prayers are chanted and magic invoked. You come back a few days later, and provided that your enemies haven't invoked stronger magic, and you've avoided the evil eye generally, they throw back the drapes, and there, by magic, is your car. Spotless. Gleaming, even.

Typical Jakarta.