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Written by Yatun Sastramidjaja and Suzanne Naafs | [Print](#)



Category:

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Youth in Indonesia are touted as the ‘flower of the nation’ on which Indonesia’s future must rest, in particular the future of the nation’s economic development. Repeating this age-old adage, in September 2013 then Minister of Youth and Sports Notodiprodjo announced a

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national youth strategy, a development agenda designed to make the most of the 'youth bulge' and 'demographic bonus' that Indonesia is said to experience. The minister's announcement is the latest in a series of policy interventions over the past decades by agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund, International Labour Organization and the National Planning Agency (Bappenas) that have designed programs to tackle youth unemployment, increase young people's human capital and put this 'youth bulge' to work. These policies often hold young people and their families accountable to invest considerable time, money and energy to turn their children into productive citizens who will improve their own and the nation's future.

It is not difficult to see why the government should focus on youth as 'key agents' of economic development. Young people between the ages of 16 and 30 (the government's definition of youth) make up 26.2 per cent of Indonesia's total population, or 62.3 million people, according to the 2010 census. This large youth population could become an advantage if education and economic policies can ensure that all these young people are put to work as productive citizens. However, these demographic conditions also present the government with the task of providing education, job training and health and employment policies for young people, and to deal with the potential political consequences if these challenges are not being met. It is perhaps too early to tell, but to date few concrete policies have come out of the strategy announced in 2013. Joko Widodo's current 'working cabinet' has no separate Ministry of Youth, and lofty intents to activate the human resource potential of young people remain hanging in the air. Meanwhile, young people face many challenges in navigating their way through uncertain employment conditions.

Young people in Indonesia are becoming higher educated, which fuels their expectations for mobility and future careers. Without a reliable social security net and widespread economic informality, many young people hope that their education credentials will be a ticket out of these uncertain economic conditions into stable employment and professional jobs. But as they make the transition from education to work, they often find the road littered with all sorts of hurdles, from a mismatch between skills and job requirements, to fierce competition, poor infrastructures, lack of connections, or dilemmas of work-family balance as they become adults.

This edition of Inside Indonesia illustrates the various challenges that young people face in trying to match their dreams and skills with the work opportunities available to them in rural, metropolitan and industrial areas. This fills an important gap in our understanding of young people's life worlds in Indonesia. While recent studies have documented the lifestyles of middle-class youth, questions about work and how young people pay for their lifestyle needs have been largely neglected. For many young people the meaning of work goes beyond consumption and lifestyle needs. They need an income to finance their education and plan for the future, attract a girl or boyfriend, fulfil their responsibilities to their families, contribute to their communities – and achieve personal goals for self-fulfilment and a meaningful life.

Michele Ford highlights some of the difficulties that young graduates face in finding reliable income and stable work. Despite increased government spending on education and recognition of young people as assets for human resource development, pathways to appropriate employment are often problematic. While limitations in the education system are part of the problem, Ford suggests that a lack of jobs in the formal economy, and widespread youth unemployment further aggravate these issues.

Despite the high youth unemployment rates, our edition shows a mixed picture that goes beyond a gloomy mismatch between educational expectations and employment realities. Young people can be very creative in making ends meet, and they tend to face the difficult pathways into work with a sense of hopefulness. Many still have faith in the expansion of the education system, middle-class growth, intergenerational mobility and national development, and they continue to espouse new aspirations for consumption and the good life. The high work expectations of educated youth suggest that they feel they are still better off than their parents, and have a sense of choice and control in negotiating their opportunities.

As **Thijs Schut** shows, young graduates who return to their village in rural Flores may find themselves in a precarious situation of continued economic dependency on family, yet feel optimistic about their role in developing their local community. For them, their university diplomas, obtained elsewhere in the big city, do not feel wasted in light of their unemployed or under-employed lives back home. It is there that they feel useful as active agents of local development, and find meaning in their

advanced skills and progressive outlook, which they put to use to battle 'village mentality'. As one of them says, 'the city is not for me'.

Yet, by and large cities work as magnets for young people looking for work, since rural economies have little to offer for them. In their article, **Akatiga and Ben White** point out how technological change and a trend towards corporate, large-scale farming make it difficult for rural youth to eke out a living in smallholder rice farming. Faced with a range of structural barriers that prevent them from accessing land, many opt to leave the village in search of a future outside of agriculture. Despite these difficulties and the image problems surrounding agriculture, it is not rural life per se, but the lack of jobs that compels young people to try their luck in the city. Many would still like to become a farmer, and dream of returning to their village once they have made enough money to start their own farming businesses.

Between rural and urban economies, industrial zones are another magnet for young people – in particular young men – looking for work. Yet even in the heavy industries that drove Indonesia's economic development in the 1970s and 1980s, opportunities are declining. As **Suzanne Naafs** shows, access to jobs in the industrial estate in Cilegon has become increasingly difficult, as entry requirements are raised and competition from migrant workers is growing, while clientelism remains an obstacle for those lacking the right connections. But young men struggling to secure a position in big companies like Krakatau Steel-Posco do not give up. In the past fifteen years, some positive gains have been made by the local government and NGOs to put pressure on companies to adopt more transparent hiring policies and accommodate young graduates from Banten. When young men do land a traineeship, if not a job, this becomes a huge source of pride for themselves and their families.

Another competitive job market is the bureaucracy with its coveted civil service jobs. In Indonesia, middle-class hopes for a stable income and secure future have typically rested on a job as civil servant, which guarantees life-long employment and an early pension. Civil servant life is often passed down from generation to generation, as parents pressure their children to follow in their footsteps. However, due to high entry requirements and stiff competition, most of the thousands of applicants each year will not make it into the bureaucracy. In the past decade, as

Wenty Minza points out, competition has grown as decentralisation has changed the ethnic constellation of the region. In Pontianak, Malay families thus see their traditional stronghold of government jobs declining. This leads young people to reorient their work aspirations towards self-employment and entrepreneurship. Forced to rethink their future, young people find alternative avenues for employment, often in a string of irregular jobs, and thereby also find a new sense of pride in their ability to make ends meet on their own terms.

Considering the growing uncertainty of employment in any of the traditional fields – from agricultural and industrial work to civil service – the government has made a push to open up and promote a new field of work: the creative economy. **Kathleen Azali** shows how recent campaigns to promote entrepreneurship in creative industries specifically target a population of highly-educated, mobile and tech-savvy urban youth, who are vaunted as the generation that will make Indonesia fit for regional and global competition. To some extent, the campaigns match these young people's self-image and aspirations for cosmopolitan careers, where they can apply their entrepreneurial spirit and networking skills and put their preoccupation with social media to use. But the alluring images hide the precarious conditions characteristic of creative work, where irregular freelance projects with 'flexible' hours are the rule. Beyond the trendy campaigns, the government pays little attention to professional needs. Still, many young creatives persevere, hoping for their breakthrough in the creative economy.

These articles show that young men and women share similar conditions in the labour market – youth unemployment, informality and a push towards self-employment – but expectations about the kind of work they do and the ways they respond to the conditions are gendered, as Naafs' article on heavy industries as a male domain also shows. **Ariane Utomo** goes deeper into the gendered dimensions of career expectations, showing that the male breadwinner model continues to be prevalent among highly-educated youth. Despite a stated preference for a dual earner household, Utomo finds that both young women and men expect working women to prioritise their families and become primary care givers once they have children. But none of the gendered work models are uncontested, as public debates on modern work-family balance and, ultimately, the meaning of work, are steadily intensifying.

The articles in this edition show that young people's orientations about work and education are shaped by young people's personalities, as well as their gender, class, education and life backgrounds. It is clear that young people prove to be quite resourceful in getting by and defining their own criteria for a meaningful work existence. But it remains important to look at the bigger picture and ask when and how issues of work and unemployment come up in young people's lives. Government policies for education and employment often exhort youth and their families to be entrepreneurial and invest in education and human capital development. When young people's work aspirations are marred by uncertain prospects, we should look beyond individual experiences to question the broader power relations and the role of governments and companies in facilitating young people's pathways into work. Young people in Indonesia need adequate policies and infrastructures – rather than fancy campaigns or sweeping national strategy proposals – to develop that human resource potential into real opportunities.

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