Chapter 4

Subjectification vs. Objectification of the Local Community in Post-Disaster Indonesia: The Case of the 2014 Mt. Kelud Eruption

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1. Introduction

In my current research, I am investigating the dynamics of disaster recovery in Indonesia, and in this chapter, I will focus on the case of the 2014 Mt. Kelud eruption. We will be looking at the function of the local community, and particularly in disaster risk reduction or disaster management, which means their alignment with the global framework.

In the last three decades there have been three global frameworks. First was the 1998 Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World (IDNDR 1994), and then the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 (UNISDR 2005), and the last one that is still ongoing at this time is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (UNDRR 2015). All of these frameworks actually highlight the importance of the local community in disaster management. In fact, each framework mentioned the importance of community for both practitioners and academia, and they believe that the local community is very important in risk reduction, because they are the most effective, they can play a leading role, and particularly because in many cases, the assistance from external parties, such as the government and civil society can be quite late in arriving.

It can be said that local communities have a very high potential to

be the main actors in reducing fatalities and saving lives, but this raises the question of whether this proposal has genuine potential.

To support this opinion, I plan to highlight a case study from Indonesia. Similar to the global framework, Indonesia also has a disaster management framework called the Indonesian Disaster Management Law No. 24/2007. However, compared to the global framework, I found that in this Indonesian law there was a lack of acknowledgement of the role of the local community and more emphasis on institutional development. The emphasis is on the government agencies, the National Agency for Disaster Management and the local or district level disaster management agency. One section in the law states that the government and regional governments shall be responsible for sustained management and protection of the community against disaster impact.

This implies that the potential disaster-hit community is incapable and has to be protected, but in some cases the community can protect itself better than external parties. One section of the law states that everybody has an obligation to carry out disaster management activities, which could imply committee members or others, but the local community is not explicitly mentioned in the local framework for disaster risk reduction.

Figure 1. Location of Mt. Kelud. (Map by the author)

It is well-known that Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, similar to Japan, the Philippines, and other countries located within the Ring of Fire. The subject of my case study is Mt. Kelud in Java, one of the deadliest volcanoes which has erupted over 30 times in recent centuries.

The latest eruption was in February 2014. But it is worth mentioning that in 1918, the death toll was more than 5000, and in the sixteenth century, the casualties were about 10,000.

In my research, I intend to show that the local community actually has the capacity to minimize the risk of being victims of potential disasters or the hazards in their area.

The Indonesian government has classified four types of warning for chronic eruption: normal, aware, ready, and danger, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Disaster Preparedness Levels

Status	Normal	Aware	Ready	Danger	
03/02/2014					
04/02/2014					
05/02/2014					
06/02/2014					
07/02/2014					
08/02/2014					
09/02/2014					
10/02/2014					
11/02/2014					
12/02/2014					
13/02/2014				Danger: 21.15 Eruption: 22.46	
Source: PVMBG 2014, cited in Sudharmanto 2021					

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The "Normal" category is for when the volcano is inactive, or considered as not dangerous, but usually in Indonesia, the most common category is "Aware," which means that inhabitants have to be very careful.

In Table 1, you can see that from February 3 until February 9, 2015, the status was "Aware," which meant that people had to be prepared for the next phase, which is "Ready." At this stage they had about a week to prepare. When the volcanic activity increased continuously for three days, the government raised the status to "Ready," which meant that they had to be ready for evacuation. Then, after three days, on February 13, 2014, the government increased the level to the highest warning, "Danger," which meant that all precautions should be put into effect immediately. However, in many cases in Indonesia, if a "Danger" level warning is issued, it takes about twenty-four hours to respond. In other words, it takes one day and one night for the Emergency Committee to fully activate themselves and thus for the government to assist the community with the evacuation. Unfortunately, Mt. Kelud volcano erupted less than two hours after the "Danger" warning was declared. This case most certainly raises serious questions about the government's capacity in disaster mitigation for the community.

When the "Danger" level is reached, within one and a half hours, all those who live in the most vulnerable zones within five to seven kilometers of the center have to be evacuated. Around Mt. Kelud they had started to evacuate immediately, but surprisingly, even with only this short notice there were no victims due to the evacuation. Even though the government reported that four people were killed, these casualties were caused by the eruption itself, not the evacuation process, which was carried out with zero casualties. Why did these casualties occur? What are the capacities of the local community, and what did the government actually do in terms of disaster response?

The main finding of my research is that the community themselves

were the main actors in the evacuation, but when outside actors provided emergency intervention, then the community was treated as an object. Also, when the community's evacuation process was effective, it was claimed to be successful because of the military and the police. In other words, because of the role of the government, the community was objectified.

In an interview with an activist from Jakarta on May 4, 2015, he said:

"…the truth is that the community were the subjects [actors], but when other parties provided emergency intervention, then the community was objectified. Also, when the community evacuation process was successful, it was [claimed] because of the military-police [government]. The community was the object. As far as I know, the success was due to the community themselves. They had their own initiatives and evacuation plans, and performed self-evacuation before the state system implemented their evacuation mechanism……. The [evacuation] system was not contradictory; the government was late, but it was claimed [as a successful evacuation]."

In this case, the success of the evacuation was due to the community themselves because they had their own initiative, made their evacuation plan, and evacuated before the State's system could be put into operation.

The activist actually criticized the government for two things. Firstly, they claimed success because of their own role in evacuating inhabitants living near the crater, and secondly, because they had made the local community an object.

2. Subjectification vs. Objectification

To clarify, subjectification is possible when someone becomes the subject or actor in a scenario, while objectification refers to when a

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person or people are acted upon by others. In this case, the community was treated as the object. For example, in philosophy, particularly regarding gender, objectifying women undermines their agency, treating them as passive objects rather than individuals with distinctive capabilities. (Papadaki 2010).

In the community development approach, objectification and subjectification can have both positive and negative aspects, but in the context of my case study, objectification is negative, and subjectification is positive.

Regarding subjectification, we can say that in this study the members of the community perceived themselves as the subject because they were the actors and considered this as one of the reasons for having zero victims during the evacuation procedure.

There is also a theory that if you have become the subject, not only your own actions as an individual but also your interaction with others is very important (Heller 1996). In this case study, the key to success was the established networks within the community. Thus, the collective action of the local community and how the local community used the information flow were important factors for having zero victims.

The Jangkar Kelud community established its Disaster Risk Reduction Committee base in 2008, just one year after the mountain erupted for the seventh time. They agreed that they needed to strengthen their local capacity in order to network with each other and with another community-based Disaster Risk Reduction organization in Jogja near Mt. Merapi, one of the deadliest volcanoes in Indonesia, so that they could exchange their knowledge and experience. This organization, the Pasak Merapi Jogja, visited the Jangkar Kelud disaster risk reduction community in 2008 to train them on how to do community-based activities and answer technical questions. Then, in return, in 2010, when Mt. Merapi erupted in Jogja, the Jangkar Kelud community volunteer team went to Jogya to help them.

This is what we can call learning by doing.

Then Mount Kelud erupted in 2014. At that time there were 2,473 volunteers associated with the Jangkar Kelud organization, and they played a crucial role in the evacuation of more than 86,000 residents from the three villages within the craters of Mt. Kelud. In this case they actually worked closely with the government.

The PVMBG runs the monitoring post of the Kelud, so this belongs to the government. They are conducting simulation drills in the villages of Jangkar. One of the challenging times to organize disaster response is in the evening. This collective action in the form of real evacuation drills and simulations is an example of subjectification.
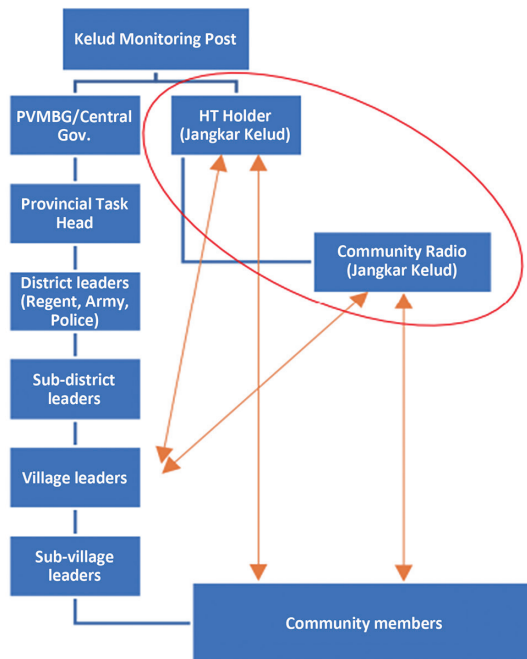

Figure 2. Subjectification: Information Flow
Source: Sudharmanto 2021, modified by author

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Figure 2 shows the flow of information. The monitoring post near the mountain belongs to the government. In the flow on the left side, if there is any seismic activity, they report it to the government first. And then from the central government in Jakarta it has to go to the Provincial Office of East Java in Surabaya, then the regency government, then the sub-district leaders, then the village leaders, then the sub-village leaders and finally to the community members. The right side shows the community-based initiatives. They are the key actors because they can simplify the information flow and make it faster. In fact, some of the members of the Jangkar council work at the Kelud Monitoring Post, so they have access to the network and can pass information directly to the village leaders, who broadcast it on the Jangkar Kelud community radio. They can also contact the community members directly.

If we compare how the flow of information is managed in Figure 3, either by government or the community, it really makes sense to use the community-based flow on the right side, and this is what played a crucial role that led to zero victims. The government claimed the success, and barely recognized the part played by the community, or gave them any credit for their disaster preparation activities. They published a book titled *A Community Experience in Managing Mount Kelud Eruption: Story from the East*, describing how community collaboration and disaster management is actually not a new concept, but has been proven as a best practice, particularly by this case study.

However, this is not always the case, and there are some examples of what I call objectification where the community becomes the local object. I found this information on the Internet. In an example from Detik News, the title says that the performance of the government in managing the disaster is worthy of appreciation. If you read this news, it seems as if the central government coordinated well with the local government, and the local community affected by the volcanic eruption

also cooperated well. It is made to appear that it was the government who managed the evacuation, when in fact it was the other way round. It was the Jangkar Kelud Disaster Risk Reduction Committee who understood and practiced the evacuation process and initiated it by themselves. The following are reports taken from various news media:

- "The seismic activity of Mt. Kelud increased tonight until it sent out a cloud of hot volcanic ash. 200,000 people who live within a radius of 10km from the crater started to be evacuated tonight." (DetikNews, February 13, 2014)
- "The Regency government of Kediri, East Java, had evacuated all of their people who lived within the radius of 10 kilometer from the Mt. Kelud crater, which erupted on Thursday (13/02) night." (Republika, February 14, 2014).
- "The President of the Republic of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono appreciates steps conducted by the local government in the emergency response to Mt. Kelud volcanic eruptions, East Java." (Kompas.com, February 17, 2014)

The reports put emphasis on the community as the object that needed to be evacuated and ignored the significant efforts of the community itself. In addition, the Indonesian president praised the local government's response to the impact of the Kelud eruption, and the activity of the Kediri Regency Committee in minimizing the impact of the eruption was stressed. These media reports make it seem as if the government is working hard to save 200,000 people. Here we can see again that the emphasis is on the community as the object that needs to be assisted and even though government assistance, if there was any, came too late, the government was portrayed as the savior of the people. There was little or no recognition by the media of the role of the

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community in saving their own lives.

However, if you ask the people of Kelud, the negative views of the government and its objectification of the community are revealed. One newspaper reported.

- The people in Kelud trust in nature more than the government (SindoNews, 13/02/2014).
- People believe the signs from nature more than the government.
- Options for evacuation sites were not realistic (open space, not safe).

It was reported that some of the contingency plans drawn up by the government were not realistic. For example, evacuation sites prepared by the government, such as utilizing open spaces, are very dangerous, because the hot ashes will fall directly on them. They also designated the school, although the roof was unsafe. The local people were aware of all these facts, and consequently put more trust in the signs of nature that they could see directly with their own eyes, much better than the government itself.

3. Lack of Appreciation of the Local Community

I observed that these misjudgments by the government have given rise to the discussion on how the government objectified the local community in the case of the volcanic eruption.

- The first issue is its use of a top-down approach, where the information flow goes from the central government to the provincial government, then the district, then the sub-ministry, then the village leaders, then the sub-leaders, and then to aid recipients subjects the local people to objectification.
- The second issue is that shifting responsibility from the

community's action as an affiliate partner to aid recipients subjects the local people are subjected to objectification. Instead of their views on local matters being listened to and appreciated, they are overlooked and excluded from the plans.

- The third issue is that instead of their local knowledge, skills and networking ability being appreciated and heard, they are treated as helpless individuals in need of assistance from outside agencies.

However, in conclusion, getting the central authorities to recognize the beneficial roles of the local community is easier said than done.

The capacity of local communities is highlighted in the global framework of disaster risk reduction, but its appreciation is lacking in the Indonesian disaster management framework. The Indonesian government focuses more on government capacity and treats the local community as weak, which explains the existence of objectification.

The case of the Mt. Kelud eruption confirms the argument above, with much praise for the government's efforts but little recognition of the local community and non-state actors.

For better disaster management, the local community needs to be treated as equals (subjectification) and included in the policy making process. Each actor/agency has its own role in saving lives and building resilience to cope with disasters or hazards.

I hope that it is clear from this brief chapter that the objectification of local communities in Indonesia in the case of making contingencies plans definitely exists, and it has not only had a negative effect on safety but has resulted in a loss of trust in the government, as well as ignoring valuable input that could improve hazard management.

The intention of my research is to improve disaster preparedness and planning and ultimately save lives by drawing attention to the need

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to make the local community the subject of local policymaking, not the object, and to modernize the outdated top-down system of governance to bring Indonesia more into line with the global trend.

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