



**Critical Conscientisation; Linking Insecurity Feelings with Structural Oppression**

**A Case Study of Fisheries Community of Saribi and Submander  
In the Island of Numfor,  
Papua province of Indonesia**

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## **Critical Conscientisation; Linking Insecurity Feelings with Structural Oppression**

### **A Case Study of Fisheries Community of Saribi and Submander In the Island of Numfor, Papua province of Indonesia**

#### **Abstract**

Many pioneers of critical pedagogy and popular education have suggested that a collective approach of critical reflection and action can help communities to develop a better understanding of their social realities and improve their well-being (Paulo Freire, 1972, Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, 1984, Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael, 2006). This approach of critical conscientisation that includes collective memory work and training for transformation, have been tested with members of fishing communities on Numfor Island in the Indonesian Province of Papua. The results of this research are presented in this paper. The testimonies of participating community members suggest a causal link between their feelings of insecurity, structural oppression, economic policies that promote selfishness and fierce competition among individuals, and their own state of chronic poverty, indebtedness and dehumanisation. Participating community members have identified their increasing dependence on government handouts and a lack of market access as the critical drivers behind the rise of jealousy, anxiety and corruption, and the decline of communal solidarity. These trends are perceived to have escalated the selling of land and the degradation of the natural resource base that are critical to their livelihoods and well-being.

#### **Introduction**

The research presented in this paper was undertaken to inform approaches to community empowerment, in particular, to shape community organisational leadership in the context of a larger programme for small scale fishery improvement in Indonesia. Based on a case study in the villages of Saribi and Submander on Numfor Island in Papua Province, this undertaking discusses the factors that have contributed to emotional insecurity, including the ways in which they are expressed, and their impact on communities self-organising capacity. The case study has enabled participating village members to critically examine their own situation and link their personal issues and feelings of insecurity to structural factors of oppression.

#### **Context**

Papua Province is located on the western half of New Guinea Island, bordering Papua New Guinea. Its inhabitants, especially the indigenous part of the population, are generally considered the most deprived and poorest segment of the Indonesian society. As pointed out in the research of Perkumpulan Satu Kata (2019), an association of local researchers, this social stigma has shaped a negative identity of both individuals and collectives, and contributed to feelings of insecurity, shame, anxiety and jealousy.

Despite its autonomous status, which includes the right to lead its own development, Papua continues to be one of Indonesia's poorest provinces (Sumule,

2005), and Numfor Island is no exception to this situation. Numfor is an atoll surrounded by coral reefs that is located on the northern coast of Papua Province, facing the Pacific Ocean. It is part of the Biak-Numfor regency which also includes the islands of Biak and Supiori. The People of Numfor are mostly of Biak origins.

Over the past decades, the people of Numfor have been facing coercive forces that have changed their identities and transformed their communal livelihood systems into a more individualistic, commercial and pecuniary local economy. This transition has increased the levels of poverty and led to social conflicts that have prevented people from organising themselves for the pursuit of a more desirable future (Perkumpulan Satu Kata, 2019). Saribi and Submander are two neighbouring villages that are located on the island of Numfor. These villages are mostly composed of poor subsistence households that struggle to pay for education and health. The local economy is highly dependent on the land and the sea. Resource degradation due to destructive and illegal fishing, deforestation and unsustainable land-use practices is a major concern. Harvests and returns from natural resources have been declining over recent decades, resulting in a perpetual dependency on imported staples and government subsidies. This predicament is made worse by limited market access. The only opportunity to sell village products is provided by an occasional stop-over boat that links these villages to buyers in the towns of Manokwari and Biak.

Unfortunately, the government cash transfer programmes and food subsidies around which village development is organised seem to have exacerbated these problems instead of providing solutions. The provision of village development funds has led to social conflict and corruption, and has become a source of stress, anger, jealousy and distrust among community members. The interviews conducted by Perkumpulan Satu Kata in 2019 indicate

high levels of insecurity and anxiety among community members for having to cope with such an unprecedented situation while also facing the deterioration of their resource base and life support systems.

### *Objective*

Building on the baseline research conducted by Perkumpulan Satu Kata (2019), this study aimed to support the community in understanding their predicament by expressing their feelings of insecurity and examining the contributing factors and their impact through a process of conscientisation. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Paulo Freire described conscientisation as the process of raising people's critical awareness of their social reality through both reflection and action so as to enable them to transform and improve their well-being.

### **Method**

#### *General approach*

The study adopted an ontological approach that promotes the collaboration between the facilitator and the participants to examine the reality of their daily lives. Previous interactions between the participants and the facilitator provided the foundation for an effective collaboration. The communities were informed in advance about the objective of this undertaking, namely, to uncover why and how their reality became the way it is. The study was based on a sample of ten volunteering participants, equally divided by gender. The feelings expressed by these participants were duly taken into account. As pointed out by Yin (1994) and Hammersley et al. (2009), case studies examine details within a specific context and may therefore be limited with respect to their representation of the wider situation.

#### *Training for Transformation (TfT)*

The TfT method is rooted in training manuals for community workers that were

published by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel in 1984 (Nazombe, 2010). Starting in Kenya, Hope and Timmel developed and assembled practical and accessible training materials for leadership development in response to the struggle of marginalised people against apartheid in Southern Africa in the early 1970s (Hope and Timmel, 2014).

TfT manuals contain a number of tool sets, including the problem posing tool which was used in this case study. This method suggests the use of a code, which is defined as a concrete representation of a familiar set of problems, as a basis for a deeper, stepwise analysis (Hope and Timmel, 1984). This case study used indebtedness as a code for a deeper analysis of the local situation.

### *Collective Memory Work*

The collective memory work method was introduced by Friga Haugg and others in the 1980s, when it was developed in the context of feminist research and empowerment (Clark, 2009). Haugg's approach emphasised the relevance of experience in shaping personalities. Crawford et al. (1992) later strengthened this approach by elaborating theories on the intersubjective analysis of memories.

Based on the suggestion of Onyx and Small (2001) this case study adapted memory work method to include men, who experience economic, social and political pressures that are quite similar to those experienced by female community members. As argued by Clark (2009), by sharing stories with others within a group and between groups, each person can recognize common social and cultural threads that can help to weave individual stories into a larger fabric and deeper understanding of social realities. Clark's argument also resonates with the point made by Reed (2014) that authentic and honest personal stories can inspire political engagement.

The case study encouraged the use of story-telling in line with the oral traditions of Papuan societies, although Haugg emphasized the use of writing and visualization in her own research (Clark, 2009). The process started with an instruction for men and women to form a group of their own, followed by twenty minutes of silence to recall meaningful sounds and associated memories from their childhood. Another twenty minutes were allocated to sharing these personal memories within the group, followed by an intergroup discussion.

### **Findings**

Each method generated some distinct yet interconnected findings.

#### *Training for Transformation (TfT)*

The group selected indebtedness as a basis for a deeper analysis. It displayed shared feelings of shame, guilt and hopelessness associated with the state of being indebted. Some of the participants testified that they had unintentionally taught their children to lie to debt collectors so as to delay payments. Thus, dishonesty became an accepted part of their interactions with others, contributing to the erosion of the social fabric of the community. Others mentioned that they are indebted to a level at which they can no longer hope to have any freedom in their lives. A couple testified that they had to surrender their land, that is, the basis of their livelihood, to an outsider to whom they were indebted without any clear tenure agreement.

The group analysed the main economic and social systems that created and perpetuated their indebtedness. Without the necessary capital, assets or means of production to improve their well-being, they had to borrow money to procure fuel, fishing gear or other necessary inputs to pursue their livelihoods, and make ends means. Having had almost no access to market could easily trap the community in a vicious cycle of indebtedness. Another factor that is equally

driving indebtedness is the broken trust and lack of solidarity among the members of the community which prevents them

from organizing and taking collective action to improve their situation.

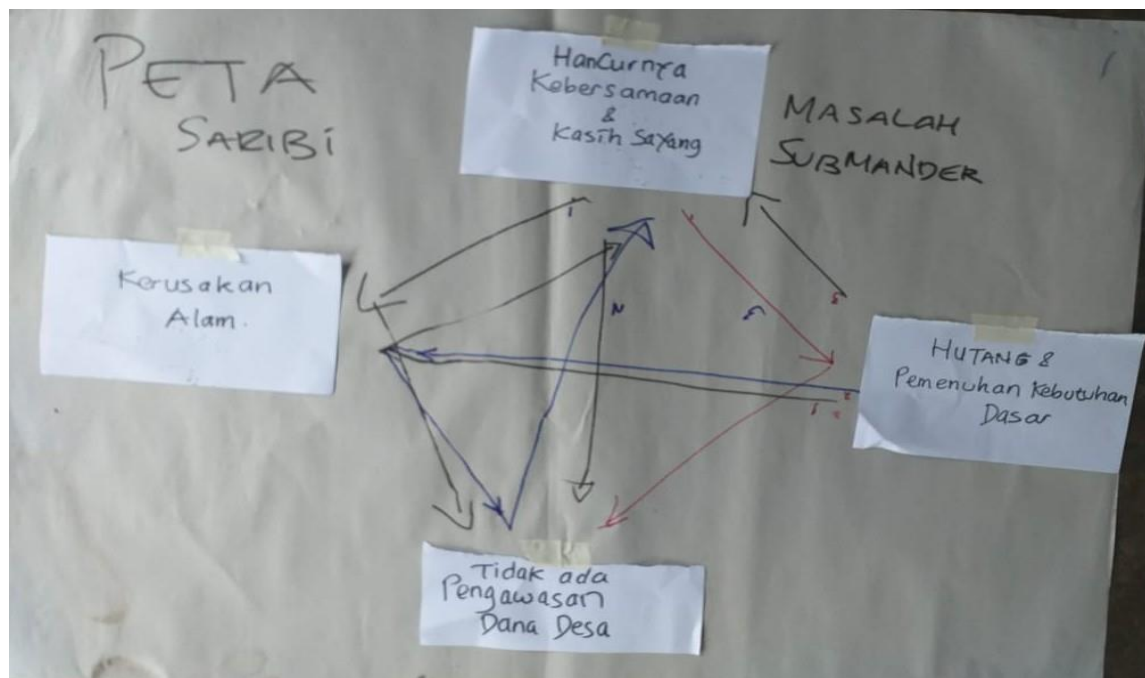


Figure 1. A simple causal loop diagram on the factors of oppression created by the participants of the case study

The participants have been able to identify and understand how various factors interact to create these predicaments. They concluded that the state of indebtedness is a major source of their own anxiety and shame that continues to erode the moral basis of their families. At the village level, this dynamic results in massive corruption, the selling of land, and the degradation of their natural resource base and life support systems. The result of these mutually reinforcing trends is a serious existential crisis.

#### *Collective Memory Work*

In the women's group the sounds of nature had strong connections with individual and collective emotions and memories. Each female participant remembered the sounds made by the sea waves, the birds and the leaves in the forest and the garden, all of which triggered pleasant memories and emotions that stood in stark contrast to their current feelings of insecurity. The

recollection of the sounds generated by the leaves in the garden and in the forest brought back joyful memories of being in nature when growing up and feeling safe in it. It created memories of an abundance of food and the associated feeling of safety, which stood in contrast to the current situation where forests and gardens have been degraded by unsustainable and destructive land-use practices. Another shared memory was how they would play in nature while being nude without any fear of being sexually abused. The group claimed that this situation has now changed to the extent that young girls are scared of being left alone and anxious about their sexuality.

A shared memory in the men's group was the sound of their parents, especially of their mothers, and the feeling of security that it once bestowed on them. A man shared the memory of his mother comforting him and imitated the vocalisations that she had used when putting him to sleep in her arms. Together

the group remembered and sang an old lullaby.

## Discussion

Poverty as human reality has existed from time immemorial. It is an evident of an inability to meet fundamental human needs (Banks, 2016) both physical as well as psychological therefore is multidimensional. There have been various emotional costs of being poor, such as the feelings of inferiority and shame that manifest themselves in the form of anxiety (Underlid, 2007) and distrust. It distorts one's perception of self-worthiness (Rosado, 2006) as the state of being poor is attached to particular social perceptions and values. People fall under the category of being poor are perceived as incapable of determining their own destiny. All of these understandings are, to varying degrees, evident in the results of the case study. The level of anxiety that the people of Numfor are suffering is not exceptional but a wider societal phenomenon of Papua. Anthropological research on the highlanders studying in the outer island such as at the university in north Sulawesi discussed the feeling of shame among the students who, because of their inability to comply with a modern standard of living, are perceived as backward (Munro, n.d). This perception came about because of a long process of change in the societal self-realisation that began at some point in history. It has been shaped systematically from the time of pacification, marking the beginning of a systemic deconstruction of the Melanesian self (Rutherford, 1997) which has been advanced by protestant reforms of European Christianity. The protestant sect of Calvinism appears to be of particular relevance to the situation in Papua, to where it was imported during the period of Dutch colonialization. Calvinism has been held responsible for the promotion of participatory democratic structures, as well as the advancement of capitalism (Brink and Hopfl, 2016). Capitalism came and grew in Papua through colonization that began with the arrival of

Dutch merchants and was advanced through the spread of Christianity by two German missionaries, Ottow and Gessler, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The early stages of Christianisation, during which Papua was referred to as the land of evil (Rumere and Onim, 2005), lawlessness and cannibalism (Hitt, 1962).

Being subjects to Dutch colonization, the people of Numfor have shared similar oppressive and traumatic experience. This gave rise to the Koreri countermovement which opposed the merits of obedience and discipline promoted by the early Christian missionaries (Ooesterwald, Rutherford, 1997).

During World War II the islanders were exposed to severe violence under Japanese rule. The NGO Pacific Wrecks (2019) describes how the island's demography changed when Japanese military brought in forced labourers from East Java and other parts of Indonesia. Following the Japanese rule, the American military occupied the islands and continued the system of oppression.

Following the end of world war, the Papuans fell under the administrative authority of the Indonesian government retaining and exercising the values and practise of oppressions. Rosado (2006) concluded that oppression is the result of the combination of power and prejudice, which creates an interlocking system of domination and control which the government of Indonesia is successfully enacting through the practice of controls over the means of production, the distribution of resources, immigration, and the institutionalisation of social norms and values (Pouwer, 2019). The government's extractive based economic growth policy is strongly associated with practise of colonisation (Stott, 2011), further, compromises local economy and well-being of its majority ordinary people. Coupled by lack of public service and the dysfunctional system of rural economy, the colonisation of the psychic space remains unchanged despite its development agenda.

The participants reflections and analysis of indebtedness links their emotional brokenness with the structural and systemic failures of life supports system. The mentioned of guilty feeling having to encourage their children to tell a lie to the debt collector signaling a disassociation between the state of individuation or ability to tell right from wrong and the external pressures. All in all, reinforce the feeling of shame and inadequacy over the lack of economic progress and by that creating dependency. Those who are in a position of insecurity and inferiority, inevitably tend to be dependent on other people to discard the devastating emotions (Van De Kolk, 2015) and therefore almost have no incentive to be critical about their reality (Freire, 1996, Hope and Timmel, 1984).

Paving a way to chronic dependency, the government enforcing the policy of rural cash transfer programme injecting excessive amount of cash to rural communities. Despite the seemingly endless effort to improve the monitoring system of the implementation of cash transfer programme in Indonesia, the level of corruption among the village government remains of concerns (Antlov et al, 2016). Furthermore, the case study supports the observation made by Hossain et al. (2012) that lack of oversight mechanism to the cash transfer programmes in this context have negative impacts on communities and their social cohesion and that lack of social cohesion reduces a community's capacity for problem solving (Field, 2008). The participants of the case study concluded that such interventions only serve to perpetuate their anxiety and preclude the re-building of a sense of identity and the trust that would allow them to organise and mobilise.

The study has demonstrated that a better understanding of the structural nature of oppression can lead to a critical examination of the underlying political-economic factors, and a proactive development of countermeasures such as the identification of the investments and

assets that would be required for a more constructive engagement of the communities of Saribi-Submander in the market economy. This recognition and understanding are the first steps towards transformative action and positive change (McIntosh and Carmichael, 2016). Reed (2014) suggests that a recognition of emotions such as fear, anger, hope and love can be a starting point for social movements and empowerment. Shared emotions can derive power within and power with to gear up political and social activism (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1996).

## Conclusion

The communities of Saribi-Submander seem emotionally insecure and inflicted with a negative self-image due to a long history of oppression. This hampers human development and the creation of social capital that would be necessary to mobilise community members to improve their well-being and escape poverty. Further, the communities are confronted by a limited access to markets and corrupt village governance, including a lack of transparency in the management and disbursement of seemingly excessive village development funds. Borrowing funds from local money lenders to make ends meet has unwittingly reinforced their emotional insecurities and negative self-image and trapped them in a state of perpetual indebtedness and under-development. High levels of anxiety, shame and hopelessness seemed to have reinforced high levels of dependency on a small elite of patrons who managed to secure control over government subsidies. This has created jealousy and distrust among community members, which further reinforces the trap, the decline of their living standards, and the degradation of their natural and social environment. The joint analysis of the psychological issues of community members points to the existing political and economic structures and development policies conceived by the centre, including village cash transfer programmes, as major contributing factors.

The application of conscientisation methods has enabled the participating members of the community to recognize and understand the underlying structural causes of their situation and the ways in which they impact their lives. The poverty and oppression, and the resulting negative emotions and self-image experienced by the people of Saribi-Sukmander are not the inevitable outcome of geography or culture, nor are they the unintended side-effects of history or economic development. They are deliberate creations of human beings, which means that humans can change them if they are able to muster the will, courage and strength to do so.

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