



Indigenosity in the empowerment of construction laborers: A case study of the Indonesian Construction Labour Union (SBKI) Gunung Kidul

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Received: 23 Jun 2023.; Revised: 7 Agus 2024; Accepted: 28 Agus 2024

Abstract: This study aims to explore the role of local wisdom in the empowerment of construction laborers, focusing on the Indonesian Construction Labour Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul, using a qualitative approach. The findings show that these labor communities organically empower themselves through local traditions such as *guys rukun* and *gotong royong*, which not only build social solidarity but also strengthen labor organizations. Initiatives that emerge from within the community, both through labor rights advocacy and other empowerment activities, show that construction workers are able to utilize their local resources and potential to achieve welfare. This strong indigenosity within the community serves as important social capital in building organizational foundations, supporting advocacy processes, and empowering the community. The success of this empowerment initiative emphasizes the importance of respecting indigenosity in community development and demonstrates that communities can develop their own potential without the need for excessive external intervention. This indigenosity can ultimately serve as a model for other communities facing similar challenges.

Keywords: Local wisdom, Labour union, Community empowerment

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran indigenositas dalam pemberdayaan buruh kuli bangunan, dengan fokus pada Serikat Buruh Konstruksi Indonesia (SBKI) di Gunung Kidul. dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa komunitas buruh ini secara organik memberdayakan diri melalui tradisi lokal seperti *guyub rukun* dan *gotong royong*, yang tidak hanya membangun solidaritas sosial tetapi juga memperkuat organisasi buruh. Inisiatif yang muncul dari dalam komunitas, baik melalui advokasi hak-hak buruh maupun aktivitas pemberdayaan lainnya, menunjukkan bahwa buruh kuli bangunan mampu memanfaatkan sumber daya dan potensi lokal mereka untuk mencapai kesejahteraan. Indigenositas yang kokoh dalam komunitas ini berfungsi sebagai modal sosial yang penting dalam membangun fondasi organisasi, mendukung proses advokasi, dan memberdayakan komunitas. Keberhasilan inisiatif pemberdayaan ini menegaskan pentingnya penghargaan terhadap indigenositas dalam pengembangan masyarakat dan menunjukkan bahwa komunitas dapat mengembangkan



potensi mereka sendiri tanpa perlu intervensi eksternal yang berlebihan. Indigenisitas ini akhirnya dapat menjadi model bagi komunitas lain yang menghadapi tantangan serupa.

Kata kunci: Kearifan lokal, Serikat pekerja, Pemberdayaan masyarakat

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, with its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, presents a complex social landscape that reflects a wide array of traditions, values, and norms passed down through generations. A key element within this context is indigeneity, which refers to the existence and identity of local groups with distinct cultures, traditions, and values (Ananta et al., 2005; Purwanto, 2022; Suryatni et al., 2023). This study focuses on the phenomenon of indigeneity in the empowerment of construction laborers, specifically through a case study of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul, Indonesia.

Gunung Kidul, located in Java, is not only known for its natural beauty but also for its strong and deeply rooted local traditions and culture. The community in this area lives in harmony with their environment, upholding traditional values such as mutual cooperation, assistance, respect, and honor. Therefore, indigeneity in this context reflects the continuity of local values and norms that have been embedded in the daily lives of the people of Gunung Kidul.

Despite the strong cultural diversity and values rooted in Gunung Kidul, a significant portion of its population works in the informal sector. Informal workers, both in Gunung Kidul and across Indonesia, face numerous challenges and complexities (Sihombing et al., 2011; Stevia Lukmanasari & Soemardi, 2016; Torrido et al., 2023; Widiyanto, 2018; Widowati et al., 2022). As is well known, informal workers make up the majority of the labor force in Indonesia. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in February 2023, informal workers accounted for 83.34 million people, representing 60.12% of the total workforce. Meanwhile, the number of formal workers stood at 55.29 million (KOMISI IX DPR RI, 2023). Additionally, a rising trend has been observed in temporary employment within the informal sector over the years. From 2016 to 2019, the percentage of workers in precarious employment was 26.61%, 30.10%, 30.16%, and 30.81%, respectively. In 2019, 30.81% of the workforce, or about 30 out of every 100 employed people, were in temporary or insecure jobs (Widowati et al., 2022).

The large number of workers in the informal sector, as previously mentioned, warrants further investigation into the nature of their work, regulations, and practices. The concept of informality, which emerged in the 1970s, has left these workers vulnerable. Key arguments suggest that informal labor refers to production and jobs within unregistered companies. Furthermore, informal jobs often operate outside of local labor protection regulations (Noeraini, 2015). As a result, informal workers often lack the protections and guarantees they deserve. Indonesia's labor situation is further complicated by the increasing informalization of the formal sector, particularly in the rise of contract and outsourcing work. This issue is especially pronounced in the construction sector, where informal construction workers, or "*kuli bangunan*," face significant challenges related to wages, job safety, and social security (David Sinaulan, 2019; Maulana, 2020; PUTRI, 2009; Torrido et al., 2023).

Informal construction workers play a vital role in property development and building renovation processes. Unfortunately, despite their crucial contribution, they rarely receive serious attention. They are often noticed only in the event of a work-related accident that goes viral, with public criticism frequently blaming the workers for negligence. Few realize that informal construction workers are among the most vulnerable due to their informal employment relationships (Widianto, 2018, p. 12). According to Widianto (2018), these workers bear the brunt of losses in informal employment relationships. A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Nairobi, Kenya, highlighted how informal construction workers are deprived of basic rights, including work contracts, social security, health insurance, and worker entitlements such as sick leave. This situation is not much different from what is happening in Indonesia. In terms of welfare, construction laborers belong to the lower socioeconomic class, with incomes far from sufficient. They often do not work continuously throughout the month, further worsening their financial situation (Deny, 2019).

Slamet Rely Raharjo, the Chairman of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunungkidul, explains that informal construction workers represent the lowest tier in the construction sector's hierarchy. Typically, formal construction companies outsource the recruitment of laborers to vendors or contractors, who then hire informal construction workers. The wages for these workers are often negotiated between the foreman or contractor and the employer, based on what is commonly referred to as the

"standard wage for laborers," rather than the regional minimum wage or a living wage. In addition to low wages, these workers face unstable work hours that can change without notice, and they are not covered by any form of accident insurance, despite the inherent risks of their work (fieldnote, 2023).

These vulnerabilities led informal construction workers in Gunungkidul, a district in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), to form the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) as a response to the precarious conditions they often face. The organization serves as a platform for labor empowerment, aiming to improve worker welfare through various advocacy efforts and other initiatives (fieldnote, 2023).

This study focuses on the empowerment of informal construction workers in Gunungkidul, considering their critical yet often harsh and challenging role in the construction industry. It is important to recognize that empowerment extends beyond economic improvement; it also involves capacity building, rights protection, and social justice. In this context, the traditional values embedded in the Gunungkidul community can be seen as a strong form of social capital that supports the empowerment of these laborers.

The case study of SBKI Gunungkidul provides an in-depth look at how indigeneity contributes to the success of empowerment efforts. The active participation of SBKI members, thematic education programs, actions against rights violations, and creative economic initiatives will be explored in detail to illustrate the tangible impact of the local values upheld by the community.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method using systematic descriptive analysis to illustrate the efforts of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunungkidul to improve the welfare of construction laborers. Descriptive qualitative research aims to describe specific phenomena, events, or occurrences by gathering data through observation, processing information, and drawing conclusions (Noor, 2014, pp. 34–35).

Data collection techniques include observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with informants. The researcher used purposive sampling to select informants, choosing 4 SBKI officials—consisting of the chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, and head of education—and 4 SBKI members. Observations were conducted by attending SBKI-

organized activities, while interviews and documentation were carried out both in person and through WhatsApp communication. Additionally, the researcher conducted triangulation to compare responses and facts from the informants. This process was undertaken to strengthen the accuracy and consistency of certain opinions or arguments presented.

RESULTS

Traditions and Values of Construction Workers in Gunung Kidul

The traditions and values that thrive in Javanese society, particularly in Gunung Kidul, are not merely cultural legacies but also reflect a rich social heritage passed down through generations. Construction workers in Gunung Kidul are deeply intertwined with the traditions and values of the broader community. In their daily lives, the people of Gunung Kidul have embraced traditions that create a strong foundation of social solidarity (Listyawati & Purnama, 2020). These traditions are not just ceremonial; they are tangible expressions of caring, empathy, mutual assistance, and communal cooperation (fieldnote, 2023).

The principle of "*gotong royong*," or communal cooperation, is a fundamental pillar of Javanese life and is particularly vibrant in Gunung Kidul. The community does not merely coexist physically; they also cultivate close emotional bonds. The concept of "*guyub*," or harmonious living together, has become an integral part of daily life, where diversity is respected and unity in diversity is celebrated.

A core value within this tradition is mutual care and assistance. When a member of the community faces difficulties or disasters, those around them promptly offer support. This reflects a spirit of solidarity that permeates everyday interactions. This unity is evident not only in times of hardship but also in moments of joy, such as traditional celebrations or religious events, where the people of Gunung Kidul come together to celebrate.

Among construction workers, there has long been a strong sense of camaraderie among colleagues and the community. This tradition of solidarity is clearly evident in the mutual support provided during construction projects. Each member, with enthusiasm, bolsters one another, forging a strong bond.

"We have always been close as workers. Whenever there is a job, we share information, and at the workplace, we regularly cooperate and help each other" (Slamet, 2023).

The commitment to sharing information about job opportunities is at the heart of their solidarity. When construction projects arise in certain areas, members of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul quickly mobilize to inform their colleagues. They share information not only through meetings but also in warm and friendly ways. Some even visit nearby members' homes, fostering a sense of togetherness (fieldnote, 2023).

Moreover, they often employ creativity to disseminate job news. If a member is unreachable, they utilize neighborhood networks, passing messages through phone calls. This action embodies the spirit of gotong royong, which has become a hallmark of SBKI. Over time, this tradition of guyub has evolved from mere practice into an inseparable part of SBKI's identity. The familiarity, mutual support, and unique communication methods establish a solid foundation for their journey toward becoming a robust and respected labor union organization.

Formation of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union in Gunung Kidul as an Empowerment Effort

The Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul was first declared on March 10, 2017, and is based in Playen, Gunung Kidul, Yogyakarta. SBKI is an organization comprising construction workers and their supporting sectors across the Special Region of Yogyakarta. It is a labor union grounded in Pancasila principles, advocating for democracy, independence, and equality, functioning as a unified body of its member unions to embody true solidarity and brotherhood. It operates free from interference by the government, state institutions, political parties, or any business organizations (SBKI bylaws document).

In the opening statement of its declaration, it is stated:

"We, the construction workers, are part of the Indonesian labor movement. Our workplaces are dangerous, threatening our lives and providing no guarantees for our future. Our hands, which build the buildings, must also change our fate. And organization is the tool to make that change. Today, with faith in strength and solidarity, we declare our instrument of struggle: the Indonesian Construction Workers Union."(SBKI document)

Before becoming an official labor union, SBKI already had a tradition of camaraderie among its members. This is demonstrated through mutual support in construction projects, where they share information and form groups when job opportunities arise in specific locations. They inform each other directly by visiting nearby members or by passing messages through neighbors' phones (Interview with Slamet, 2023).

As of 2023, SBKI has approximately 53 construction workers as members. That same year, SBKI underwent a membership and leadership verification process with the Gunungkidul Labor Office after its initial registration and received an official registration note in 2017. As a recognized organization, SBKI has garnered attention from the government, receiving assistance such as BPJS employment benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, labor discussions, and information on specific training opportunities, although these remain quite limited (Interview with Agus, 2023).

SBKI's Emphasis on Member Independence and Internal Strengthening

In practice, SBKI emphasizes the importance of independence among its members. This focus on independence is reflected in the obligation for members to pay dues. These dues are utilized by the organization as a fund for advocacy activities and collective development. The logistics from these funds are also applied when a member faces misfortune, serving as social aid (Interviews with Regi, Singgih, and Chandra, 2023).

Strengthening the internal organization of SBKI is a primary need. SBKI enhances the skills of existing and prospective members through various divisions, such as the education division, which holds thematic educational sessions once a month; the organizer division, which identifies potential new recruits and opportunities for expansion; the media and propaganda division, which campaigns for the rights of construction workers; and the advocacy division, which organizes joint learning activities and practical sessions on legal foundations for defending the organization (Interviews with Slamet and Chandra, 2023). The division of responsibilities is seen as effective because it prevents all tasks from falling solely on the chairperson (Interview with Sigit, 2023).

Regarding economic activities, SBKI has its own approach. It implements a program for creative economic activities that are collective in nature, aimed at providing additional income outside of construction work. This is particularly beneficial during months when construction project orders are low. These productive economic activities are designed to help members who are currently unemployed to still support their livelihoods or generate extra income for their daily needs (Interviews with Slamet and Agus, 2023). As a member, Regi expressed enthusiasm for this program, stating, “*We can be creative with the tools provided by the organization, such as a simple lathe and chisels. We can make decorative beds, wooden crafts, and other items to sell*”.



Figure 1. cultural atmosphere in the organization

Cultural Emphasis on Solidarity and Mutual Assistance in SBKI

Culturally, SBKI prioritizes gotong royong (communal cooperation) and mutual assistance among its members. In practice, many members frequently visit one another, fostering strong bonds of solidarity. For example, when Sigit, the Vice Chair of SBKI, was renovating his home, fellow members came together to assist with the repairs. The majority of these members volunteered their time not for monetary gain but out of a strong sense of social solidarity (Interview with Antok, 2023). This spirit of cooperation is especially evident during community events, such as *rasulan* (local cultural traditions) in Gunung Kidul, where members actively participate in a rotating manner (Interview with Jimi, 2023).

In addition to internal cooperation, SBKI has also been involved in various social activities. Some of these include repairing a damaged bridge connecting villages, fixing a local mosque, and helping a low-income family in the Ngleri Lor hamlet (Interview with Slamet, 2023). Regarding these social initiatives, Kamijo remarked, *"In our mutual assistance efforts, we may not be wealthy, but we can achieve this together, and it's also a way to introduce SBKI more widely to the community"* (Interview, 2023).

Collective decision-making is always emphasized in SBKI's activities and programs. Agus stated, *"The SBKI movement has a distinct character. Everything must be based on mutual agreement; no one can act independently. We assign members to attend certain events with the aim of sharing what they learn. We also organize our programs and activities to ensure our movement is structured"* (Interview, 2023). Such principles have been crucial in several instances of resistance against subcontractors or employers that SBKI has faced.

Some notable actions taken by SBKI include sealing one bank in Srandakan, Bantul, due to unpaid wages for a week, demonstrating at a government project because wages were embezzled by a contractor, and going on strike after an injured member was not compensated by their employer. In all these cases, SBKI achieved significant victories: wages were eventually paid, and the employer took responsibility for the workplace injury (Interviews with Sigit, Singgih, and Jimi, 2023). Regarding SBKI's actions, Slamet explained, *"When dialogue fails, we mobilize others to take action. We've organized quite a few demonstrations. We've sealed banks and pressured contractors to be accountable. For the welfare of workers, we must fight fiercely to ensure we are compensated as agreed, as is standard in construction work"*.

SBKI's Educational Programs and Networking Initiatives

SBKI also runs regular educational programs within the organization, aimed at both members and leaders. The training sessions are tailored to the organization's needs, focusing on thematic issues relevant to labor. The goal is to provide comprehensive knowledge about the discussed topics, enabling members to understand the challenges they face in detail and find appropriate solutions. This educational initiative falls under SBKI's education division (Interview with Chandra, 2023).

The program typically includes monthly discussions on specific themes, incorporating a relaxed format. Additionally, one of the education division's initiatives is to participate in external training that aligns with SBKI's objectives (Interview with Slamet,

2023). Some of the external training programs attended include sessions with the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in Solo, occupational safety training with the SERBUK Federation in Karawang, and training with workers in the electrical sector in Kaliurang (Interview with Chandra, 2023).

Furthermore, SBKI places significant importance on building networks. The organization recognizes the need for connections with others, as these relationships strengthen SBKI's capacity. Given that SBKI focuses on construction workers, support from other organizations with similar advocacy is crucial. Networking decisions are made during organizational meetings, including determining affiliations, agreeing on collaborations, and seeking guidance from more experienced labor organizations. The aim of these networks is to connect SBKI with entities that can bolster its capacity as a construction labor union capable of addressing the issues faced by its members.

The benefits of networking include access to valuable relationships for specific needs and vice versa (Interviews with Slamet, Sigit, and Agus, 2023). Some of the networks that SBKI has engaged with include the United Workers Communication Forum (FKBB) in Yogyakarta, a Facebook group for construction workers, and the Info Kuli dan Proyek group on WhatsApp (Interview with Sigit, 2023). These networks significantly assist SBKI by providing information about construction job opportunities, solidarity initiatives, and updates on wage variations across different locations (Interview with Singgih, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This research reveals that the traditions and values upheld by construction workers in Gunung Kidul are an essential part of the cultural and social wealth of Javanese society. Traditions like *gotong royong* (communal cooperation) are not merely symbolic; they play a significant role in fostering social solidarity and a communal work ethic. This solidarity is reflected in the habits of mutual assistance and the sharing of job opportunities among workers. The establishment of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul represents an empowerment effort focused on solidarity, independence, and equality. SBKI strengthens social bonds through various initiatives, such as advocacy, training, and collective economic activities, which help the community face challenges without relying on external assistance.

The community of construction workers demonstrates an organic capacity for empowerment, driven by strong local traditions (Izudin et al., n.d.), such as *guyub rukun* (harmonious living) and *gotong royong*. These traditions not only embody social solidarity but also serve as a solid foundation for the formation of organizations that strengthen and empower workers.

In the absence of prolonged external intervention, this indigenous knowledge and local wisdom have proven to be key drivers in the empowerment processes among workers. This is evident in various initiatives that emerge from within the community itself, both through advocacy for labor rights and other empowerment activities. This process illustrates that the community of construction workers does not solely depend on external aid but is capable of leveraging its local resources and potential to advocate for their own welfare (Suryani et al., 2023).

The organizations formed among the workers serve as an important platform for coordinating various empowerment efforts. With this organization in place, the collective strength of cohesion and *gotong royong* (communal cooperation) enhances social cohesion through mutual trust among members, making the workers' community increasingly effective in achieving shared goals (Hamiru et al., 2023; Indrawadi et al., 2022; Sukmawati, 2017). This indicates that the traditions of *guyub rukun* (harmonious living) and *gotong royong* are not only cultural legacies but also effective adaptive strategies for addressing the challenges faced by construction workers.

The strong indigenous identity within the construction workers' community in Gunung Kidul functions as a vital social capital in building the foundation of the organization (Kurniawan & Halim, 2022; Sukmawati, 2017). Traditions such as *guyub rukun*, *gotong royong*, and other local wisdom serve as social capital that supports advocacy and empowerment processes. These processes require active participation and a strong sense of empathy among members, ultimately fostering social welfare. Furthermore, the cohesion and togetherness cultivated within the community provide emotional warmth that contributes to mental well-being (Berry, 2009).

The success of empowerment initiatives originating from within the community underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting indigenous identities in community development processes. It also demonstrates that overly intensive external intervention is often unnecessary, provided the community has the space to develop its own

potential. Ultimately, this indigenous identity not only serves as a source of strength in empowerment efforts but can also serve as a model for other communities facing similar challenges.

CONCLUSION

This research provides deep insights into the crucial role of local traditions and values upheld by construction workers in Gunung Kidul. These traditions and values are not merely preserved as cultural heritage; they have evolved into essential elements for building social solidarity and empowering the community. Gotong royong, at the core of social life in this Javanese region, is understood not just as a ceremonial form of togetherness but as an active social mechanism that strengthens emotional bonds among workers. Other communal values, such as mutual trust and close cooperation, play a vital role in creating an environment that respects each individual and provides necessary support.

In this context, the establishment of the Indonesian Construction Workers Union (SBKI) in Gunung Kidul emerges as a significant response to the need for an organization capable of coordinating various empowerment efforts. SBKI not only reinforces solidarity among its members but also fosters independence and equality, contributing to the improved quality of life and well-being of construction workers. Through SBKI, various initiatives such as labor rights advocacy, skills training, and collective economic activities have been implemented, demonstrating that this community can optimize its local potential to face various challenges without relying excessively on external assistance.

The research also highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting indigenous identities in sustainable social development processes. Traditions like gotong royong serve not only as primary drivers of community empowerment but also as a solid foundation for achieving lasting well-being. The experience in Gunung Kidul shows that local strength and potential can be key assets in achieving progress, even amid various challenges. Therefore, external interventions should be directed at supporting and strengthening local initiatives rather than replacing the effective role of indigenous practices.

Overall, this study emphasizes that in the context of social development and community empowerment, local traditions and values play a significant role. By empowering communities in ways that align with their culture and values, it is hoped that a society will emerge that is not only economically independent but also socially and

emotionally resilient. This conclusion serves as a call to stakeholders to continue supporting and facilitating local practices that have proven to positively impact community well-being.

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