

# The Collective Memories of the Famine in 1977: Indonesia's Policy on Disaster Management in the Karawang Regency

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**Abstract**—In 1977, the people of the Pedes District in the Karawang Regency of West Java, Indonesia, experienced a severe famine, due to the crop failures in every agricultural area over three consecutive seasons. Although this famine occurred more than 42 years ago, the memories still linger among those who were traumatized by the experience. Thus, the main research question is “To what degree does the collective memories of the people in a certain area affect the policymaking of a country?” In order to answer this question, this reflective study examines previous research and historical writings regarding the famine, the collective memories of those who inhabited the district during the occurrence, and the efforts made by certain groups/institutions to deal with the consequent starvation from the lack of timely government relief. Based on the results, the occurrence brought certain misery to many people living in the five districts of Karawang Regency, especially those in the Pedes District. Although the government did provide assistance through the supply of food, items, and labor-intensive projects, it was somewhat late. Moreover, such memories have made an impact on future policymaking regarding disaster management. The implication of the findings is that the ability to analyze the current situation and forecast future possibilities is much more important than only focusing on overcoming the issue itself. Such awareness should be further promoted in order to establish better management of natural and man-made disasters on a national level.

**Keywords**—Collective memories, Famine, Karawang Regency, Crop failures, Disaster management and mitigation.

## I. Introduction

Karawang, one of numerous regencies in West Java, Indonesia, is also known as the “National Granary” of the agriculturally oriented country. According to historical records, the establishment of Karawang as a granary began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when many farmers created agricultural areas within the forests and swamps of the region [1]. However, in the mid-1970s, Karawang Regency was struck by a series of crop failures over three consecutive seasons, with the last harvesting period in April 1976. The crop failures were mainly caused by a combination of planthoppers (*wereng*) and inconsistent dry and wet seasons. By early fall 1977, the desperate farmers were

forced to cultivate their crops, even though it was well past the end of the regular cultivation period in July. In October 1977, the fourth failure occurred and a famine broke out in the following districts: Rawamerta, Batujaya, Cilamaya, Klari, and Pedes [2].

For the purpose of this study, the Pedes District is the subject of focus, since it was the most affected district in the regency. According to Haji Hidayat, one of the elders who lived in Rangdu Village (and the District Head from 1945 to 1956), on September 29, 1977, the number of people who suffered food shortages in the district was 11,594. By October 11, 1977, this number rapidly increased to 17,239 [3].

At that time, the government, under the Agency of Mass Guidance Implementation and Karawang Regency's Agricultural Service, was actually aware of the possibility of crop failures and food shortages. In fact, in June 1977, Judin, the head of Rangdu Village, reported the situation to the regional government. Interestingly, Judin was soon dismissed as the head of the village. Regarding the dismissal, Tata Suwanta Hadisaputra (1976-1981), the Regent of Karawang, stated that such an action was taken due to Judin's physical condition, which made it impossible for him to continue his service. Hadisaputra also stated that it was time to find a replacement for Judin, since the end of his term was near. In response, Judin called Hadisaputra's statement “nonsense and pointless” [3], while the people of Rangdu Village saw Hadisaputra's decision as unfair and believed that Judin was actually a hero for his leadership during such uncertain times. Nevertheless, the agricultural disaster not only affected the lives of the local people, but also those of local officials.

The famine eventually spread through other districts one-by-one, due to the broken food supply chain and shortage of food reserves [4]. In this regard, various studies on famines in Southern Asia have been conducted. Some examples include Amartya Sen's *Famine in Bangladesh 1974* [5], M. R. Fernando's *Famine in a Land of Plenty: Plight of a Rice-Growing Community in Java, 1883-84* [6], and R. M. Mulyadi's *Bencana Kelaparan di Kabupaten Karawang 1977* [7], the latter of which specifically focuses on the famine in Karawang Regency in 1977. In addition to

these works, numerous studies have focused on disaster management and mitigation, such as J. Weichselgartner's *Disaster Mitigation: The Concept of Vulnerability Revisited* [8] and J. Lassa's *Disaster Policy Change in Indonesia 1930-2010: From Government to Governance?* [9]. The aforementioned research provides a critical background, especially in comprehending the topics of famine and starvation.

However, the present study focuses on the collective memories of those who inhabited the Pedes District during this particular time period, especially in terms of the starvation, food shortages, pest outbreak, and the government's response to the disaster. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to further scientific discussions on the realm of public memory and the history of disaster mitigation.

## II. Method

The main research question is as follows: "To what degree does the collective memories of the people in a certain area affect the policymaking of a country?" In order to answer this question, this reflective study utilizes the historical writing method, which consists of four steps: heuristic, criticism, interpretation, and historiography. It also aims to understand how individuals remember their past lives, interests, and motivations, within a local and national context [10].

The first step of this method is heuristic, i.e., the process of gathering related sources for the subject of focus. In this case, the sources are the collective memories of those who experienced the famine in Karawang Regency. In order to correlate such memories with the recorded history of the event, we conducted interviews with several individuals, following Erll [10]. We also examined the coverage of the famine in several newspapers and magazines published around 1977 as well as related books and governmental archives. The second step is criticism, both internally and externally, which allows researchers to assess the credibility and validity of the sources. The third step is interpretation, i.e., the process of constructively analyzing the credible and valid sources to generate the hypothesis of the research. The fourth and the final step is historiography, i.e., the process of reconstructing the findings of the research into coherent writing, and arranging them in a chronological, objective, and scientific manner. In this regard, this four-step method will produce a comprehensive and systematic study of the famine in Karawang Regency in 1977.

## III. Results and Discussion

### A. The Memory of the Famine

In 1977, the numerous news articles and writings regarding the famine in Karawang Regency were perceived as ironic for many individuals, since the area (the so-called "National Granary") was the largest rice producer in West Java [11]. Thus, this sub-section presents and analyzes the memories of various individuals who inhabited the Pedes District at that time.

According to several individuals, the famine had caused the people to convert their staple food from rice to water hyacinth (*eceng gondok*) (Pemerintah Kabupaten Tingkat II Karawang, 1991: 3). For example, G. P. Solihin, the then Secretary of Development and Operational Control, visited the Pedes District and had a dialogue with a woman living in Pojoklaban Village, who was "harvesting" the plants. According to the book titled, *Presiden RI ke-II, Jenderal Besar H.M. Soeharto dalam Berita (Fourth Book) (1976-1978)*, after the woman, named Ombeng (age 50), was asked by Solihin concerning her activity, she stated that she harvested water hyacinth to cater the house [12]. When asked about the whereabouts of her husband, Ombeng told Solihin that her husband had left West Java for Sumatera 20 days earlier. She also admitted that she had been consuming the plants for four days. During his visit, Solihin found that most of the people in Pojoklaban Village did the exact same thing. He quickly realized the severity of the food shortages and starvation in the area [13].

Abah Ada (age 65), one of the farmers who lived in Pojoklaban Village, recounted a similar memory that the plants were becoming the new staple food for the people in his village. He stated the following [14]:

The Governor of West Java came to observe the situation in the village. However, he obnoxiously considered the phenomenon as a condition of the villagers in which we regularly consumed water hyacinths, since the growth of such plants was abundant in our area. He simply believed that we were just pretending and starving ourselves on purpose to draw his attention.

Bunda Racih (age 63), the Leader of the Salam Village Forum in the Pedes District, also mentioned "the tragedy of the water hyacinth," which is perhaps the term used to remember such an unfortunate occurrence. She easily recalled the moment that the famine struck in 1977, because she had her first child in the same year. She stated the following [15]:

We did eat the plants (the water hyacinths), we did... but we ate them with rice. Rice was still our staple food. There was a time when a journalist interviewed me. He asked about what I could possibly do with the plants. I answered that I ate them. But, perhaps I should have told him that I ate them as a side dish of rice. The plants were significant in quantity around Rangdu Village, since there were many swamps. Many people were also bringing *tampah* (a tool with woven bamboo strings used to clean the swamp dirt off of the plants). Meanwhile, those who were extremely poor could only eat a handful of rice with many water hyacinths as a side dish. A side dish is supposed to be less than the main dish, but what can I say... Some even had to steal bananas out of its tree. I did not do that, but I witnessed such horrible situations.

Overall, Racih considered herself lucky, because her family was one of the successful farmers in the region. However, she was aware of how many people suffered from food shortages. She also shared the following story about one of her neighbors [15]:

There were some of my neighbors who struggled during that time. One was Mang Wacim. My family and I were trying to help him as much as we could, but things were not getting any better. We were even eating once or twice a day, instead of the typical breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was much, much different than today. At that time, we almost lost hope towards the land that was once so fertile. Our clothes were tattered. Today, even during *puso* (the inactive season), we are able to consume food and live properly. Before the 2000s, it was *puso* all of the time...

In order to seek a better living and help their families

during the famine, many people in the village decided to leave for Jakarta or Lampung [13]. In this regard, Judin, the Head of Rangdu Village, stated the following: "It did not matter if they wanted to leave the village (for a better living). I did not have the heart to see them die in vain" [16].

Perhaps, at that time, no one in the village could think of a better idea for coping with the famine and starvation than leaving for Jakarta, Bandung or even Sumatera. For instance, some of the migrants were employed as porters, used paper collectors, and other types of labor in Jakarta, while others were employed as grass cutters at various coffee and clove plantations in Sumatera [16].

One example of someone who moved to Jakarta was Haji Karsum (age 75), a farmer in the Pedes District during the time of the famine. He stated the following [17]:

1977 was really a difficult year. Our agricultural sector experienced *puso* all of the time, due to the relentless planthopper attacks. So, I went to Jakarta with some fellow farmers. Approximately 14 people left the village at that time. In Jakarta, I sold clean water in jerry cans across many neighborhoods. I remember selling each can for 150 rupiahs. However, I only lasted about a month because I could not stand living in the big city.

However, Karsum recalled that some of the villagers remained in the city and sold everything that they had in order to buy food. Some sold their clothes, while others sold the roof tiles from their shelters, just so that they could buy some cassava [13]. Karsum added the following [17]:

Before the government aid arrived, many people sold their belongings, ranging from beds to clothes. They were also willing to lose several important objects in return for food, especially rice. In this regard, they brought all

of their belongings to Rengasdengklok in order to buy rice, which was quite far from the Pedes District. Needless to say, life back then was full of endless efforts.

In general, the famine in the Pedes District was not caused by simple factors that triggered the disaster overnight. Instead, there were two major factors that caused the prolonged crop failures and eventual starvation in Karawang Regency. First, there were biological constraints such as the planthopper attacks, defective irrigation systems, and uncertain changes in seasons. Second, there was a socio-economic factor, which was caused by the government's unpreparedness in providing agricultural counseling, agricultural loans, infrastructure development, and related incentives. In this regard, both factors were interrelated, i.e., the biological constraints could have been reconciled by an effective government policy, and vice versa [18].

The inference of these two factors is supported by the facts and collective memories of those who inhabited the area at that time. Regarding the latter, the general belief is that the starvation in the Karawang Regency was not simply caused by the biological constraints, but by the government's failure to execute a proper agricultural policy. Bustanil Arifin, the Head of the National Food Logistics Agency (BULOG), justified this belief by stating that the agricultural counseling program, *Panca Usaha Tani*, especially in various coastal villages across the northern coast of Java, was unsuccessful [19]. Hadisaputra, the Regent of Karawang, also admitted that his people required an effective counseling program well before 1977 in order to prevent the famine from worsening [20].

Regarding the correlation between the biological constraints and the socio-economic factor, Karsum and Racih had their own opinions. Racih stated the following:

*Puso* is generally caused by various pests such as harvest mice, caterpillars, and planthoppers... At that time, we did not have a forum to gather and discuss the problems that we faced in the rice fields. There were also no regular observations by the government. However, counseling was provided well after the occurrence, while the use of urea as a fertilizing agent was only approved in the 1990s.

Karsum agreed with Racih by stating that in 1977, less efforts (e.g., pesticide spraying and fertilizer application) were carried out by the people to cope with the pest outbreak, since they were believed to be dangerous if applied without assistance by an instructor from the Ministry of Agriculture or by someone from a local agricultural service. Karsum also stated the following:

Siba (the agricultural aircraft for pesticide spraying) did the spraying from above. So, whenever the spraying started, no one was allowed to go outside. They even said that the

chemical agent was blinding. Even all of the birds went down.

Moreover, Racih added the following:

It was used once because there were so many caterpillars in the rice field... But, from 1977 to the 1980s, we barely received counseling, even though we desperately needed it.

However, we also gathered different points of view from other individuals who lived in Rangdu Village. For example, Haji Imron was a farmer in the village who complained about how the spraying agents, such as Basudin, Teodan, and Furadan, were not effective for exterminating pests. In addition, an officer from the Regional Office of the Department of Agriculture in West Java stated that there was a possibility that the spraying agents were fabricated by certain individuals. The officer also stated that the perpetrators were apprehended in Bandung, but released with no charges. The artificial pesticides were also found in Bandung and Lampung [13].

Despite the efforts of the New Order administration in developing the agricultural sector, they obviously failed to establish a solid and robust policy for supporting the thriving natural resources in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the collective memories of those who inhabited the area during this disaster can encourage us to picture the situation and learn from the mistakes.

### *B. The Memory of the Mitigation*

The ongoing food shortages at the time were often the main topics of discussion by the Economic Stability Board in Bina Graha. In fact, Bustanil Arifin, the Head of BULOG, was frequently invited by President Soeharto to explain the recurring phenomenon. Then, with plans to stabilize each region affected by the famine, the president promoted labor-intensive projects to the local farmers, so that they could earn additional income and purchase discounted food through BULOG. The president also instructed the governors of various regions in Bina Graha to increase the capacity of their granaries in order to prepare them for the upcoming cultivating season [21].

Hence, this sub-section provides insights into how the people perceived the government's actions in tackling the famine in Karawang Regency. According to G. P. Solihin, the president was very concerned about the occurrence, which affected numerous districts in Karawang Regency [22]. In addition, Suryo Wiyono, an aquatic plant specialist at Bogor Agricultural University, stated that President Soeharto clearly had certain interests in Karawang Regency, since it was the largest contributor to Indonesia's food supply or at least to West Java's supply [1]. Wiyono added the following:

Soeharto considered Karawang Regency as the 'front page' of Jakarta. Karawang was the main supplier of rice for the busy and ever-growing capital city. Therefore, Soeharto put more concern on Karawang, and even stepped in

himself. Interestingly, if the famine occurred in Indramayu or in Middle and East Java, he would have assigned the Minister of Agriculture to resolve the problem.

In general, the starvation and food shortage in Karawang Regency required immediate attention. Thus, President Soeharto instructed all of his state officials to prioritize the issue. According to G. P. Solihin, the president had the food shortages calculated until the upcoming cultivating season in April 1978, with the requirement of 2,625 tons of rice for at least 50,000 individuals (i.e., an average ration of 250 grams per day). Meanwhile, Sudharmono, the Minister for State Secretariat, allocated 21 million rupiahs to purchase anti-pest rice seedlings as well as 18 million rupiahs to purchase secondary crop seedlings to be planted as the second crop during the dry season. Moreover, the government pushed the villagers to join the labor-intensive projects in the Pedes and Rawamerta Districts, with 78 million rupiahs and 600 tons of rice allocated as the reward. Finally, Subroto, the Minister of Mining and Energy and the head of the projects, explained that the work would include digging 135,000 and 861,000 cubic meters of land to create a secondary and tertiary canal, respectively. Each laborer was paid approximately 300 rupiahs for the work [23].

Overall, the government gave serious attention to the famine in Karawang Regency, with Vice-President Sultan Hamengku Buwono instructing the officials to supervise the rehabilitation process [24], even if it was somewhat late. Such a phenomenon was captured in the collective memories of those who inhabited the area at that time. For example, according to Abah Ada, his village was abruptly enlivened by the arrival of various media crews who aimed to cover the latest situation in the area. He stated the following [14]:

There were so many reporters at that time. The reporters and cameramen were all over the place. They (pointing at the neighboring house) used to live there.

Similarly, Racih stated the following: [15]:

As the aid started to arrive, the news coverage still focused on how we consumed grass for food, even though it was actually water hyacinth. I remembered that it was the year of 1977, because I was married and struggled hard for the sake of my family. We desperately needed the aid. Eventually, they came in with trucks filled with rice, sugar, salted fish, and mung beans. I remember so many people cheering 'Help is coming! Food is here!' Everyone ran toward the trucks, even me. I handed my child over to my neighbor, so that I could run to fetch some valuable items. I even received some clothes. Over the following weeks...months, I don't know...the aid was more frequent and it was seriously helpful.

Karsum added the following [17]: "Ministers, governors, reporters...they were all coming by

helicopter. The aid arrived every week. We received clothes, food, and even money.” Moreover, Ada recounted that the aid even came from college students [14]:

The crop failures only occurred two times in Pojoklaban, instead of four. The failures, however, did not result in starvation because we had received the necessary aid from both the government and college students. We were also offered jobs from those who helped us. Regarding the aid from the college students, the people of Pojoklaban traveled to Karang Jati by foot to collect the aid that was at Karang Jati Village.

This information by Ada was confirmed, since there were at least 10 college students from the Faculty of Agriculture at Padjajaran University who came to the Pedes District. In an interview with *Kompas*, Dr. Ir. Gunawan Satari, the Head of the Community Development Council in West Java, stated the following [25]:

The arrival of 10 college students in the district was approved by the university’s president. They were expected to step in as evaluators who could warn the local government to act efficiently and work with integrity.

Finally, aside from supplying immediate aid to the affected people in Karawang Regency, the government promoted labor-intensive projects, which Ada also joined [14]:

I was getting used to working in the field. I loved what I was doing back then, but what can I say... There was an opportunity to work as a laborer for the construction of one of the main bridges into Cilebar Village. I am proud that I was one of the workers.

#### IV. Conclusion

This reflective study examined previous research, historical writings, the government’s actions, and the collective memories of various individuals regarding the famine in Karawang Regency in 1977. Based on the findings, the occurrence brought certain misery for many people living in the five districts of Karawang Regency, especially those in the Pedes District. In fact, they struggled to make ends meet by converting their diets, consuming plants that grew in the local swamps, selling whatever they had in order to buy food, and even migrating to larger cities to earn an income. Through the interviews, it became apparent that such memories were still painful and emotional, even though they occurred more than 42 years ago.

The findings also indicate that, although the government did provide the necessary aid and promote labor-intensive projects, based on the recommendations of the Economic Stability Board in Bina Graha, such assistance was somewhat late. In fact, the government aid to Karawang Regency only began after several cases of starvation were revealed by the local and national media. The implication of the

findings is that the ability to analyze the current situation and forecast future possibilities is much more important than only focusing on overcoming the issue itself. Such awareness should be further promoted in order to establish better management of natural and man-made disasters on a national level. In this regard, we are reminded of the following phrase: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

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