

# Indonesian Grassroot CSOs as the Pillar of Local Democratic Resilience: Examining Its Capacity, Sustainability, and Legitimacy

## Summary

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are one of the most important actors in boosting democratic resilience at the local level. Its roles include assisting the government program and criticizing local government policy. However, in Indonesia, the grassroot CSOs still faced huge obstacles to contributing to establishing adequate democratic resilience at the local level. According to this research, the most common problems that each local CSO must face are a lack of internal capacity, uncertainty about funding resources, and mutual suspicion between them and the local government.

## Background

At this time, Indonesia is experiencing a setback in democracy. Some call it democratic decline, democratic regression, or democratic backsliding; others call it the shrinking of civic spaces. All these terms indicate one thing: the fragility of democratic resilience in Indonesia. The arguments of scholars regarding the erosion of the enforcement of the democratic system in Indonesia are at least supported by various quantitative research results on democracy that show a decline in Indonesia's score. Varieties of Democracy data from V-Dem shows a decline in Indonesia's score from 2017 to 2022 in all categories, such as the Liberal Democracy Index (LCI), Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), Liberal Component Index (LCI), Egalitarian Component Index (ECI), Participatory Component Index (PCI), and Deliberative Component Index (DCI).

Table 1. Varieties of Democracy data from V-Dem from 2017 to 2022 in all categories

| Year | LCI   | EDI   | LCI   | ECI   | PCI   | DCI   |
|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2017 | 0,506 | 0,667 | 0,726 | 0,661 | 0,619 | 0,901 |
| 2022 | 0,43  | 0,59  | 0,7   | 0,47  | 0,6   | 0,89  |

Another example can be taken from data from the Economic Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. Indonesia's democracy score dropped dramatically from 2015 to 2021. In 2015, Indonesia's average score reached 7.03, while in 2021 it plunged to 6.41. This qualifies Indonesia as a "flawed democracy," which is defined as a country with free and fair elections that, despite many problems, respects its citizens' basic freedoms. The Democracy Index developed by the EIU itself has five indicators, namely electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

Based on the data from V-Dem and EIU above, it can be observed that one of the factors that has a significant influence on the quality of democracy in a country is the political culture and political participation of the people. Political participation is not meant to be limited to the number of civilians contesting as candidates in the general election or the number of voters who come to the polling stations every general election, but also the participation of civil society in being actively involved in programs run by the government, including assisting with the implementation process, contributing ideas, or

overseeing the running of the government. Civil society that is actively involved in government programs usually organizes itself into civil society organizations (CSOs). CSO is defined as a collection of diverse interest groups and social organizations that are strong enough to provide some autonomy and protection to individuals from the authoritarian and hegemonic tendencies of states (Azis, 2018). CSOs have various types. Based on the scope of their work, some CSOs work at the national level, while others focus on the grassroots level. CSOs that work at the grassroots level are usually referred to as “grassroots” CSOs, which are defined as self-organized groups of individuals pursuing common interests through volunteer-based, non-profit organizations that usually have a low degree of formality but a broader purpose than issue-based self-help groups, community-based organizations, or neighborhood associations (Radu, 2012).

The involvement of CSOs is very important for the creation of democratic resilience in Indonesia. Democratic resilience is the persistence of democratic institutions and practices that can be measured as the continuation of democracy, without substantial or sustained declines in its quality, that is, the avoidance of autocratization (Boese et al., 2021). As explained at the beginning of this essay, there has been a significant decline in the functioning of the democratic system in Indonesia. Thus, strengthening CSOs, particularly at the grassroots level, can be regarded as the best cure for strengthening democratic resilience, which in turn can overcome the severe infection that the democratic system has suffered. Active political participation by the community can encourage the restoration of Indonesia’s democratic system, both procedurally and substantially.

Then, if we realized the significance of their role in democratic resilience, what concrete steps could be taken to strengthen them? Before providing concrete input, the author will first identify the various challenges faced by grassroots CSOs in Indonesia today. Based on the results of research conducted by the Resilience Development Initiative (RDI), there are at least three main challenges that must be faced by grassroots CSOs: the capacity of CSO

members to manage their organizations, the uncertainty of funding sustainability, and low legitimacy in the eyes of local governments.

### **Grassroot CSOs Challenges**

RDI conducted research with 111 interviews and 274 individuals in 16 districts across six Indonesian provinces in July 2022. The six provinces and 16 districts include Banten (Tangerang, Serang), West Java (Bandung, Bogor, Garut), Central Java (Boyolali, Surakarta, Wonosobo), East Java (Malang, Jombang, Jember), West Kalimantan (Singkawang, Mempawah), and South Sulawesi (Makassar, Pangkajene Islands, Bulukumba). Based on this research, we can see the pattern of challenges faced by many grassroots CSOs in Indonesia, which include capacity, sustainability, and legitimacy.

### **Capacity**

Many grassroots CSOs face problems related to their human resource (HR) capacity. In fact, HR is one of the most important elements in every organization. The effectiveness or failure of an organization’s performance, whether or not organizational targets are met, and the progress or stagnation of an organization highly depend on its members or staff. RDI found that many grassroots CSOs still do not have sufficient capacity to set clear targets and indicators.

Based on RDI’s observations, it was found that grassroots CSOs rarely had clear and well-defined targets and indicators. Many grassroots CSOs exist solely due to the initiative of their members. The targets applied also tend to be normative and do not include quantitative indicators that can be measured. This is at least reflected in the unfamiliarity of grassroots CSOs with strategic plans, work plans, and other planning documents that require quantitative measurement.

The weakness of grassroots CSOs in planning has implications for the financial aspect. The lack of ability to make long-term work plans can have an impact on the reluctance of donors or other funders to support the realization of grassroots CSO programs. In addition, some

grassroots CSOs have weaknesses in their reporting and budgeting systems. Others already have that system, but it is still very basic.

### ***Sustainability***

The second aspect that poses a challenge for grassroots CSOs is sustainability and the mobilization of funding resources. Two sources of funding for CSOs are donors and INGOs. Donors and INGOs generally set standards on administrative documents that must be completed and fulfilled by beneficiaries' CSOs, such as standard operating procedures (SOPs), strategic plans and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans. Some grassroots CSOs were found to not have these documents at all, while others did but still needed a lot of improvement.

Apart from donors, another source of funding for CSOs comes from private companies through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Based on RDI's findings, many CSOs have yet to explore the possibility of collaborating with the private sector. In fact, many CSOs operate in the same area as companies that have an obligation to implement CSR programs. According to Government Regulation No. 47/2012, companies that have an obligation to carry out CSR are those that carry out business activities in the field and/or related to natural resources. The referred companies include companies engaged in mining and plantations. Several small CSOs that have tried to access this funding say they are facing difficulties.

Another source of funding that can also be accessed by CSOs comes from the government. Presidential Regulation No. 12/2021 has opened up space for grassroots CSOs to work together with the local governments and their agencies in procuring goods and services. This mechanism is commonly referred to as "Self-management Procurement Type III" (Swakelola Tipe III). However, the implementation of this cooperation mechanism is still not optimal due to the lack of knowledge from both the grassroots CSOs and the government. Both parties still see it as something "new."

Derived from these problems, the note-worthy fact is the inability of grassroots CSOs to make connections with and collaborate with funders

who are interested in supporting them. Apart from external funding, several CSOs were found to have managed to survive by crowdfunding, donating, and running their own small business enterprises. By independently funding their organization's operations and activities, CSOs can remain independent and reduce their dependence on donor or government funding to ensure sustainability.

### ***Legitimacy***

Another problem that surrounds grassroots CSOs is their legitimacy in the eyes of the government. In fact, one of the main roles of CSOs is to oversee the running of the government and advocate for government policies based on the interests of the community. The main reason for grassroots CSOs' lack of legitimacy in the eyes of local governments is a lack of strong internal and external capacities.

Many grassroots CSOs are hesitant and not confident about engaging with external partners. This low self-confidence is mostly experienced by newborn grassroots CSOs. This is one of the inhibiting factors for the establishment of collaborative governance between local governments and grassroots CSOs.

Despite their self-confidence, grassroots CSOs do not yet have sufficient knowledge and experience to convince local governments. For example, many grassroots CSOs have not been able to carry out stakeholder analysis, implement social accountability tools, conduct system evaluations, or make policy briefs. In fact, these abilities are essential to being able to gain legitimacy so that they can relate equally to local governments.

In addition to the two internal capabilities described above, the weak legitimacy of grassroots CSOs in the eyes of local governments is also caused by two external factors, namely the lack of mutual trust between grassroots CSOs and local governments and preparations for the 2024 general election. Many local governments see CSOs as actors who potentially hinder their programs because they can only criticize. This makes the government reluctant to be open to involving CSOs in the development process and other work programs they carry out.

Another factor is the fact that in 2024 Indonesia will hold the 2024 General Election, which includes elections at the national and local levels. Local elections are the most decisive moment for the sustainability of the relationship between CSOs and local governments. Although currently there are CSOs who have succeeded in establishing good relationships with local governments and their agencies, this can change instantly if there is a change of leadership at the local level. If this is true, then grassroots CSOs will have to rebuild their network with the local government from the beginning. Of course, this is not a problem if local leaders have the same side as their predecessors, but it will be a big challenge if they have different interests.

### ***What's Next?***

Various strategic and tactical steps are needed to strengthen grassroots CSOs in Indonesia. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but the identification of the problems above can at least be a worthy guide to be tested in order to strengthen the democratic resilience in Indonesia. All parties (central government, local government, INGOs, donors, and national and international CSOs) must have a systematic and sustainable program to increase the capacity of grassroots CSOs. Education and capacity building on the substance of issues, administrative details, and technicalities in a systematic and sustainable manner can reduce the capacity gap between grassroots CSOs and national CSOs.

To ensure the sustainability of the organization's funding, self-financing, such as crowdfunding, and the establishment of MSMEs themselves are the best options. This self-funding mechanism can reduce the dependence of grassroots CSOs on other parties and ensure the independence of grassroots CSOs to run programs in accordance with the values and visions they believe in, not the commands and interests of the funders. Therefore, support from various parties is needed so that grassroots CSOs also have good entrepreneurial skills, including the ability to produce and market a product or service.

Finally, a joint commitment is needed between grassroots CSOs and local governments to realize collaborative governance. Grassroots

CSOs must be willing to improve themselves by learning new things. Increasing the capacity of grassroots CSOs can increase their confidence to engage with local governments. On the other hand, local governments must also commit to involving grassroots CSOs in their programs. If a sense of interdependence between local government and grassroots CSOs has been built, the succession of local leadership will not affect the good relationship between the two.

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# Disclaimer

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent the views of RDI or its editorial committee.

# Further Reading

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