Choosing the Playing Field: Non-Participation in the Village Level Participatory Deliberative Forums

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Abstract
This article will address these key questions: why do the poor villagers are not participating within these formal participatory deliberative forums? and what do they do instead in claiming accountability and gain access to services and their everyday livelihood resources? Based on 10 months of village level ethnographic study in a West Java village between 2014 to 2015, this article will focus on how these village level democratic reforms are perceived and experienced by Indonesian villagers, especially by the poor, as they interact with a plethora of village level participatory democratic institutions that are become available. This article argues that despite the proliferation of village level democratic avenues, the poor villagers still regularly rely on informal means in engaging with their elites while at the same time forgo their chances to participate through the formal avenue of participation. These informal practices stem from three key rationales: the differential capacity of the poor to engage within formal deliberative mechanism; preserving their relation with their fellow elites; and increasingly competitive elites that become increasingly accountable in providing them with better access to services.

Keywords: village; governance; informality; democratization; participation.
INTRODUCTION

When I started my research in Sarindah, my original plan was to observe how the ordinary villagers, especially the poor, utilize the plethora of participative deliberative spaces that sprung up since the fall of the New Order. Yet, as I found a few days earlier when I attended the participatory planning forum, or Musyawarah Rencana Pembangunan (Musrenbang) forum, there were no poor participants in this supposed-ly participative forum, the avenue where the poor may participate in development planning and its budget allocation (cf. Sopanah 2012; Widianingsih and Morrell 2007). In addition to that Musrenbang meeting, all of other Sariendah participatory deliberative forums such as Musyawarah desa and PNPM meetings that I attended during my one-year fieldwork in that village, also shown a similar pattern: I found no substantial participation among the poor. Why is this the case?

From a very authoritarian and centralized government, Indonesia has undergone a massive democratic reform, all the way to the village level. Following the fall of the New Order democratizing village community sits high on the list of reform agenda. The newest law on village governance, known as UU Desa or Law No. 6/2015 on Villages follows on this trajectory. It significantly expands the authority and responsibility of the village government and expands the budgets it receives from the central government while putting in place extensive accountability mechanism to ensure more accountable and participatory village governance, especially towards the poor and marginalized villagers (Antlöv, Wetterberg, and Dharmawan 2016). In its core, these reforms aimed to foster democratization from below by strengthening the capacity of villagers to participate in decision making and to monitor the functioning of village heads. It centered upon the notion of bottom-up the pressure of accountability: namely the condition where the community has an active and effective role in monitoring the workings of the village government.

This reform manifested in the opening up of new participatory democratic governance institutions that are geared to empower village community: Community Driven Development (CDD) programs in the form of National Program of Community Empowerment or PNPM, Participatory Development Planning or Musrenbang system and Village Deliberative Meeting (Musyawarah Desa/Musdes). All of these village level deliberative forums, are geared to transform villages into a site of
democratic and active citizenry making, while at the same time curtail the clientelistic and suppressive practices that had characterized the functioning of village governance during the New Order (Antlov and Wetterberg 2010; Gibson and Woolcock 2008; Ito 2011).

However, evidence has shown that after substantial investment from both the Indonesian government and the donor community, this participatory deliberative mechanism showed largely mixed success. At its center, the key challenges to these participatory deliberative forums are the fact that the poor, who are targeted as the main beneficiaries of these reforms, do not actively participate within the forums. For instance, a recent study on villagers participation in Musdes had shown that the poorer and marginalized group have reported lower participation (Dharmawan et al. 2018). Years after its implementation, the village level participatory development planning of Musrenbang also still unable to provide the poor villagers with an effective space for meaningful participation (Grillos 2017). The flagship of Community Driven Development (CDD) programs in Indonesia, the PNPM shows a mixed result, especially in terms of participation from the marginalized group and creating a spillover of empowerment and good governance outside the programs (Akatiga 2010; Syukri, Mawardi, and Akhmadi 2013; Voss 2012).

Departing from this puzzle, this article will address these key question: why do the poor villagers are not participating within these formal participatory deliberative forums? and what do they do instead in claiming accountability and gain access to services and their everyday livelihood resources? Based on 10 months of village level ethnographic study in a West Java village, Sariendah¹, between 2014 to 2015, this article will focus on how these village level democratic reforms are perceived and experienced by Indonesian villagers, especially by the poor, as they interact with a plethora of village level participatory democratic institutions that are become available. This article argues that despite the proliferation of village level democratic avenues, the poor villagers still regularly rely on informal means in engaging with their elites while at the same time forgo their chances to participate through the formal avenue of participation. These informal practices stem from three key rationales: the differential capacity of the poor to engage within formal deliberative mechanism; preserving their relationships with their fel-

¹Not the village real name. I adopt this village pseudonym from Antlov’s original research in the same village. For complete manuscript of the research (see Antlov 1995)
low elites; and increasingly competitive elites that become increasingly accountable in providing them with better access to services. Based on these findings, I argue for more analytical attention to the informal forms of everyday politics in the village community, especially within the analytical discourse of local level democratization (cf. Kerkvliet 2009; Kerkvliet 1990).

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is written based on a study on the findings of ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted in the village of Sariendah, a village in Majalaya Subdistrict, Bandung Regency, West Java Province. It is situated in the area of Priangan Highlands, South of West Java. This rather unassuming and typical West Javanese village is the same village that was studied in the late 1980s by Hans Antlov in which he did micro-level ethnographic research on village level politics from 1986 and several other short visits in the early 2000s (Antlov 2003, 1995). By studying a village whose politics and governance have also been studied extensively thirty years ago, I exploit a unique opportunity to document and analyze the changes that the democratization process has brought to Indonesia’s villages. Over the course of 10 months, I observed closely how everyday village governance is practiced and experienced from the perspective of both the local elites and the ordinary villagers of Sariendah. In all, over the course of my 10 months of main fieldwork period and 3 months of revisits, I conducted 3 participatory poverty assessments, 5 focus group discussions (FGDs), 20 unstructured group interviews and about 200 interviews with 15 key respondents and around 30 villagers.

VILLAGE LEVEL DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE PARADOX OF PARTICIPATION

Since the beginning of the democratic reform in Indonesia, the village-level democratic reform in Indonesia has always been rooted in a neo-institutional perspective of “good governance” agenda. Based on this developmental thinking, democratic reform should focus on fostering active participation by its citizen to monitor and claim accountability towards its elected officials. It is assumed that through the provision of such participatory space, the poor and marginalized will be able and, and more importantly; willing, to actively participate in everyday village governance. It also serves as a training ground for the poor to learn and
adopt the rights-based and evidence-based discourse in their everyday contestation with their local leaders (Gibson and Woolcock 2008; Rao and Sanyal 2010).

Following this assumption, this neo-institutional perspective of development agenda stipulates that through active participation in village level deliberative forums, village community may become a site of vibrant civil society that possesses ample of positive social capital (Nakagawa and Shaw 2004). This positive social capital, that encompasses trust, networks, and norm of reciprocity, may, in turn, increase the village’s capacity in solving a community problem and serve as a solution to village governance problem (Bebbington et al. 2006; Jha, Rao, and Woolcock 2007). In turn, through this process of participation, certain citizenship practices that support well-functioning democracy; such as an active and critical engagement with the village elites and active participation within deliberative planning, can be produced. Hence, participation—or more specifically active participation—within specific formal deliberative forums in itself, becomes the goal of the level democratic reform (Parfitt 2004).

However, mounting research has cast doubt on the effectiveness of this formal participatory deliberative mechanism, especially in terms of providing space for the poor to hold their elites accountable to their needs (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Cornwall and Fujita 2012; Fox 2015; Harriss-White 2005; Hickey and King 2016). At the same time, as the opening story suggests, the poor still regularly utilize informal means in negotiating with the elites, and choose not to participate within these deliberative forums. This findings is not unique as a wide body of empirical evidence that indicate the persisting utilization of informal practices by the poor and marginalized villagers in dealing with their elites, despite the widening of formal participatory deliberative spaces (Cammarak 2007; Cornwall 2002; Jenkins and Gaventa 1982; Rodgers 2005; Subadevan and Naqvi 2017).

Here, this article argues that to dismiss these informal practices—simply as a democratic deficit may miss the true dynamic of democratization in a postcolonial society like Indonesia (Berenschot, Schulte Nordholt, and Bakker 2016). Instead, it is imperative to understand the rationale and the capacity of villagers to engage with the village government apparatus and participate in village deliberative forums. In doing so, this article draws from the insight of everyday politics in rural society (Kerkvliet 2009; Scott 1976, 1986). It lends from the argument
that the absence of “contentious collective action”, which in this case can be seen from the active participation within formal deliberative avenue, does not mean the absence of contestation and conflict (Auyero, Lapegna, and Poma 2009). This analytical perspective also argued to look beyond the formal participatory spaces and mechanisms and instead of looking on how the actors utilize a plethora of actions and practices in their everyday lives, including informal practices and institutions (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Harriss-White 2005; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Rodgers 2005). Indeed, Kerkvliet (2009) argues that to understand village society it is essential to understand its everyday politics and its (localized) logic, which in many cases is located outside the realm of formal political institutions and activities as many everyday conflict and contestation in the Southeast Asian context mostly manifested in a less organized and less visible acts of resistance (Kerkvliet 1990; Scott 1986; Wulford et al. 2009).

In analyzing these everyday politics, this article will utilize the concept of “political repertoire” as the main analytical framework. The political repertoire here can be defined as the “whole set of means [that a group] has for making claims of different types, on different individuals” (Tilly 1986:2). In essence, repertoires indicate sets of strategies that an actor has and may deploy to meet his/her objectives. Small, Lamont and Harding (2010) posit that political repertoire is essentially based on two premises: first, that every individual has a list or repertoire of strategies and actions in their mind that they can select and deploy on specific occasions, towards a specific person; and, second, that the individual is also constrained by his/her available repertoire and unlikely to engage in action unless the strategy to execute is already part of their repertoire. Dela Porta (2015) further argues that individual repertoire is continuously shaped by everyday experience and, thus, repertoires are handed down and reproduced over time.

Based on this analytical lens, there are two important elements in understanding villagers’ political repertoires of engagement. First, it has to take account of the historical and political trajectory of state formation. Recent meta-study by Mansuri and Rao (2012) on participatory development suggests that it is imperative for any study of participation to be located within the specific historical and cultural context of that society (see also Fox 2015; Hickey and King 2016). One salient feature that shapes rural politics in Indonesia, is its legacy of authoritarianism and indirect rule. Started from the late colonial period all the way
to the New Order regime, resource allocation was arranged around a patronage structure of local elites at the village (Ito 2011; Van Klinken 2018; Schulte Nordholt and Van Klinken 2007). During the New Order, loyalty and obedience to the local elites who served as the “clients of the state” became the main requirement for villagers to gain access to state resources and services (Antlov 1995; see also Parker 2003; Vel 2009). Consequently, resource allocation was located outside the concept of formal entitlement and deliberative planning and instead based on direct personal reciprocity with the village elites (Antlov 1995; Cammarak 2007).

The second conceptual element is the political opportunity structures where the poor villagers live. This political opportunity structure is determined by the current prevailing political, economic, and cultural structures that shaped the power relation within the rural community (Martin 2014; Williams et al. 2011). There are several features that characterize contemporary Indonesia rural society: first is the sharp inequality between socioeconomic classes that characterized many rural communities in Indonesia (Breman and Wiradi 2002; Pincus 1996; White 2014). Second is the intertwining of kinship in village governance, which in many cases trumped the effectiveness of formal institutions in everyday village governance (Knudsen 2013; Meillassoux 1973). There are also persisting social norm that suppresses active participation by the villagers, especially among the poor and women (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Harriss and Jeffrey 2013; Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker 2012). All of these aspects increase the social cost of active participation within formal village level deliberative avenues, rendering them irrelevant. Consequently, this prevailing political opportunity structure shapes the political repertoire of the poor which as I will argue shortly may include ranges of informal and clientelistic practices (Robins, Cornwall, and Von Lieres 2008; Scott 1986)

**THE CASE STUDY VILLAGE: SARIENDAH**

Back in 1986, during Antlov’s first research, Sariendah was already a relatively modern and urbanized village, with relatively easy accessibility and semi-urbanized areas especially along the main provincial road that runs through the middle of the village. It is a quite populated village, with 15,978 inhabitants in 2015. It is located 31 kilometers away from Soreang, the capital of Bandung Regency, and about 40 kilometers from
Bandung City. Currently, approximately more than half of the residents of Sariendah work in non-farms sectors, such as factory laborer, trading and other petty service sectors, thanks to Majalaya status as one of the centers of Indonesian textile industry (Keppy 2001). It was started by the colonial government since the late 1800s and at the height of its production in the early 1900’s; Majalaya was a major supplier in international textile and garment product market (Keppy 2001; Breman and Wiradi 2002). Now, despite the industry’s decline as a result of the flood of cheaper imported products, especially from China, there are still approximately more than 200 factories in Majalaya Subdistrict, with 5 mid-size factories within the Sariendah village administrative borders alone. However, all of these factories are currently laying off workers, or operate in half capacity or below.

Through his research in this village almost 30 years ago, Antlov concluded that the New Order ability to sustain their power is not through direct coercion, but through the creation of local elites that are loyal to the state (Antlov 1995). Through the proliferation of quasi-state social organization at the village level, such as PKK women organization, army-affiliated Siliwangi Youth, and Golkar affiliated KNPI, New Order created an authority structure that ensures villagers and its elite’s sole loyalty to the central state. The allocation of funds and resources revolved around this structure of state patronage, creating a class of local elites that mostly only accountable to the supra village political entities rather than to the rest of the community (Antlov 1995; cf. Parker 2003; Vel 1986)

Since then, a lot has changed in Sariendah. I started my fieldwork in September 2014. It was the time just after the general election and the newest village law, Law 6/2014, has been passed at the national level, but have not been implemented at the village level. There are at least three changes that are currently taking place within the village context, thanks to the democratic and decentralization reforms. First is the rising importance of the village in the national development plan, marked by more funds and programs that are flowing to the village.²

²In 2015, the Village Funds, which is national government transfer to village budget in the revised National Budget (APBN-P) is Rp. 20,7 trillion, adjusted from Rp. 9 trillion in original National Budget. This constitutes 3.7% of total national transfer to local government. The central government has committed to further increase this share to 10% in 2017. This means village all over Indonesia will see a marked increase on their budget. (apnnews.com accessed 2 October 2015)
Based on the village budget data, Sariendah total managed budget has been steadily increasing from Rp845 million in 2009 to projected Rp2 Billion in 2015. The amount of central and local government transfers to this village also has been increasing, from Rp688 million to Rp1.5 billion in 2015. Together with these funds, ranges of social programs are also flowing to the village, thanks to the increasing social welfare budget at the national level (World Bank 2012).

This village-level democratic reforms also followed by the strengthening of bottom-up accountability mechanism through community-driven development initiatives in village governance. It aimed to foster democratization from below by strengthening the capacity of villagers to participate in decision making and to monitor the functioning of village heads. At the village level, including Sariendah, this reform manifested in the opening up of political space through the new establishment of new participatory democratic governance institutions such as National Program of Community Empowerment or PNPM, Participatory Development Planning or Musrenbang system and Village Deliberative Meeting (Musyawarah Desa/Musdes). In this way, these reforms were aimed at transforming villages into sites of democratic and active citizenry-making, while at the same time curtailing the clientelistic and suppressive practices that had characterized the functioning of village heads during the New Order (Antlov and Wetterberg 2010; Gibson and Woolcock 2008; Ito 2011). In short, it aims to turn villagers from passive and subservient clients into active citizens.

Second, in terms of village governance institutions, there is more balance of power and stronger accountability mechanism between village governance institutions. The newly empowered BPD (village council) provides more aggressive control over the new village head Antlov et al., 2016). LMD who were once the arms of central government in dictating programs and policy implementations was disbanded, and its counterpart LKMD was revised into LPMD, an independent body which responsible in village programs implementation and whose members are elected democratically. Within this arrangement, formally there is more control and oversight within village governance while at the same time provides the village with more authority in planning and executing their own programs. The RT/RW neighborhood governance system that was one of the linchpins of New Order village governance, however, survives and as I will argue later, rise in importance within village governance and service provision (Kurasawa 2009).
Third, with the proliferation of direct election system in 2004, the village has also become much more important for political candidates as the electoral field become more competitive (Aspinall and Rohman 2017; Mietzner 2013). The campaign machinery of all political candidates, from the national level to village head elections, need now to aggressively gather votes all the way to the neighborhood level through the use of *tim sukses* (*timses*/success team), a group of influential figures that are able to sway villagers votes towards certain candidate (Aspinall 2014). As the importance of village level timses grows in importance in winning political elections, demands for a good village-level vote broker, especially one who knows how to work the electoral masses, is increasing. These village-level vote brokers are filled by the village activists such as PKK cadre, head of RT and RW. They build their reputation as a capable vote broker by being accountable to the villagers, such as brokering access to services, claiming accountability to the village elites and solving a plethora of community problem (Berenschot, Hanani, and Sambodho 2018). Their ability to gather and retain “masariil”--and hence their quality as vote broker--, is contingent on this ability. In short, there is now more incentive for the village elites to be accountable to the villager’s demand.

**VILLAGE LEVEL PARTICIPATIVE DELIBERATIVE FORUM IN SARIENDAH:**
**CHOOSING THE PLAYING FIELD**

In one evening in mid-October 2014, I sit in the living room of Sariendah village councilwoman house, together with 5 Sariendah women belonging to the poor households. That evening, I organized a group discussion with these women to gain insight about their engagement, experience, and perception about the village-level deliberative forums. Indeed, that evening, after introducing myself and the topic of our discussion, we begin our discussion. From these 5 women I talked to that evening, only one had attended a village-level meeting within the past year. Two others had attended one several years ago, while two other women, had never attended any village-or hamlet-level meetings. When I asked the woman who ever attended any of these formal meetings, she told me:

“*Boro-boro* [I’m run off my feet]. How can I attend the meeting? Even as we speak my children are left unattended. In the morning I have
to leave to go to Majalaya to pick up the goods which I peddle. I have to be quick because, if I arrive too late, the housewives will have already used all their daily allowances (laughter). When I get home, I must cook for the children, if I have earned enough, that is.

Other women agreed, telling me that it was simply impossible to attend regular meetings if you had to work at two jobs and take care of the house and children. “If we didn’t work for the day and attended a meeting instead, how would we eat (that day)?” she asked me, puzzled. Like Bu Lela and Bu Ina, I know for a fact that the poor do work long hours every day. With most of the poor villagers working as a casual day laborers, as farmhands, peddlers, and construction workers in the market in Majalaya, routine engagement is simply very difficult. As one of the women quipped to me: “Only the rich can chat the whole day. For (the poor like) us, we just work, even if we virtually work ourselves to death.” Furthermore, opportunities to attend are not always equally distributed. Although formally some of the meetings should be open to the public, many villagers never receive an invitation or, more importantly, feel as though they have been invited (Dharmawan, Pattinasarany, and Hoo 2018).

“But these meetings only take place occasionally. Right? Maybe only once every few months. Is time really an issue?” I probed further. They were at first silent, but then it became obvious that there are other, arguably more fundamental factors for their non-attendance: they do not see its direct relevance, especially to their everyday lives. Bu Lela explicitly expressed her skepticism about the relevance of these village meetings to her: “What for? If I need help to go to the hospital, I go to the (PKK) cadre or if I need money when I have to buy food, I go to my neighbor or family, or just ask for credit at the shop. What could I get from going to a meeting like that?” Bu Ina added. She continues by claiming that these meetings were not worth going to. “Ah, what it is for (attending meetings), if we’re not careful, we might say the wrong thing and eventually be called sok tau (Mr. Know-it-all). That would actually make it harder to get help from others. Better, if we are just good to them [the elites]” referring to her fear of offending the village elites who she, and her peers that afternoon, deemed as very important to their everyday livelihood.

Eventually, towards the end, one of the woman eventually provided some semblance of a summary to our long discussion that night: “ya…,
the point is (pokoknya); if we need anything, we only need to be good to the likes of the village council women .., isn’t that true ma’am?” This was followed by a wide smirk towards the BPD council woman, which caused a burst of laughter from the other women, followed by their nods of approvals. The BPD council woman, who was sitting not far away and intently listening, responded with laughter, and said in a humbling tone to me “well, I’m just trying to help here.”

Substantial body of literature has highlighted how the contemporary village governance still excludes much of the village’s poor in decision making (SMERU 2011; Akatiga 2010; Williams, et al. 2003). However, as my discussion with the Sariendah women suggest, this exclusion does not happen one way as the poor are also actively excluding themselves from these formal avenues of deliberation (cf. Cornwall 2002; Ito 2011). Here, I can at least identify three rationales from the perspective of the poor, on why they favor informal and personalized interaction with the elites rather than routinely, and actively, participating within the village formal deliberation avenues. First, as the discussion suggests, participating within formalized avenue is simply hard both in terms of logistics and their personal capacity. One female poor villager told me that it is impossible to attend a regular meeting, while you have to work two jobs and taking care of the house and kids. With most of the poor villagers working as casual day labor, such as farmhands, construction workers or anything that they can find at the local marketplace that day, routine engagement is simply very difficult.

In addition to this logistical challenge, in line with previous studies, the poor villagers are constantly facing difficulties in expressing their views in public forum, especially the one that requires certain pre-acquired skills and knowledge (Labonne and Chase 2011; Dill 2009). The heavily bureaucratic and technical, and in many cases full of jargons, had made the poor villagers overwhelmed, and even ashamed to participate within these forums. In their own word, they “could not understand what they are talking, not a bit of it” Likewise, other woman told me how she could not follow what had been shown on the board at the last meeting and had been confused by “the numbers and the boxes“, her way of referring to the figures and tables. “How can we participate (in the discussion) if we can’t even understand what they are talking about?” she added in frustration. As a result, participation fatigue, a condition where the beneficiaries of participatory initiatives
lose motivation to engage further because the process is deemed no longer beneficial to them, sets in (Refstie and Brun 2016).

In Sariendah, this participation fatigue manifest in the local Sundanese term of *belikan*, which means that once you got disappointed over certain engagement or experience it is just doesn’t make sense to go through it again. One villager complained about the last Musrenbang meeting she attended that she sacrificed too much time, money and energy; while didn’t get any direct/concrete material benefits in the end. One village program proposal that she liked and hoped to be implemented, the proposal for feeding programs for toddlers who belongs to the poor household, never manifested. In her words “all we got is just the sore (tiredness)”.

The second rationale has a more relational dimension: the social cost of confronting their elites directly within a public sphere and the limitation of the language of claims that they can invoke. As the discussion suggests, the main concern of the poor for actively participating within these formal deliberative forums is the risk of upsetting their relationship with their elites. Preserving good relationship with the village elites is an important part of poor livelihood strategy as they rely on their elites in securing their access to information about welfare programs, employment opportunity or access to basic service like a hospital (Berenschot et al. 2018; Hart 1986). In Javanese cultural universe, the notion of not losing face and not being shamed, especially in public, is very important etiquette (Keeler 1987). Therefore, being too aggressive and vocal in public forums like these deliberative forums may run the risk of being marked and singled out as a trouble maker, or in the local Sundanese term being dicirian. In Sariendah, being *dicirian* may mean loss of respects and more importantly loss of precious social network and relation.

Yet, this delicate and complex political opportunity structure in Sariendah does not mean the absence of contestation or the poor engagement in everyday politics of Sariendah. On the contrary, I found that the poor villagers are active participants of Sariendah everyday micropolitics. By tapping to the political repertoire toolbox that they have, the poor navigate this political opportunity structure by forging their own practices in dealing with their elites. Here, there are several methods that I found the Poor villagers in Sariendah regularly utilized: First is by using community social events as an avenue of the claim. During one discussion with a group of woman from a poor household,
one of the women told me how she successfully makes her case to the village head in a wedding reception. She told me that she specifically chose this setting because it “may help to “reminds” the village head that we are still related and have the same relative, and he will be ashamed if he keeps ignoring my request”.

In Sariendah, the notion of family is indeed still very strong, as almost all resident have a familial relationship with each other, including between the elites and the poor. Therefore, the villagers, especially the poor, mostly invoke this notion of familial relations in rationalizing their claim for better service or access to certain welfare programs (cf. Vom Hau and Wilde 2010). Here, the language of the claim is important. One villager told me about how it is more effective to invoke the notion of decency and pity in dealing with the elites. In one unfair farmhand’s arrangements, a man from a poor household who works for one of the elites, told me that he managed to claim for better work arrangement through gossiping with other elites (a PKK cadre who are close to the elite circle and the BPD chairman’s family) on how he was treated unfairly. On doing so, he told me that his main argument was “if he has a heart he will not treat me this way” to invoke her sympathy towards him while at the same time shame the head of BPD. Later on, the cadre did talk to the BPD head and convinced him to give the man a better deal, in which he eventually did. Rather than doing it on the ground of rights or specific programs within the formal avenues that arguably have less resonance, it is much more strategic for the villagers to invoke their familial relation to claim for resources (Tsai 2007).

Another mechanism of claim that the poor utilize to lay claims over their elites is through informal jokes and everyday quips (cf. Hossain 2010; Tsai 2007). One day, as I was walking with one of the RW chairman and a PKK cadre, we passed a group of women who were sitting on a porch having their late afternoon chat. Spotting us, one of the women joked: “Ah, how are you, ma’am? We haven’t seen you around here lately. It is a rare occurrence (numben) for you to drop by.” From this very first sentence, I could see that my companion was beginning to get uneasy. After some chit-chat, one of the women asked the head of the RW: “Ma’am, when shall I receive my son’s birth certificate, I’m growing old waiting for it!” She said this with a giggle. The other woman, seeing one of her group making such remarks, followed up by asking about their own problems, ranging from administrative article work to the hand-out from a programme which she had been promised
but had not received. At one point, a lady emerged from a house across the street and joined in, half shouting in her efforts to put the RW head some questions. The exchanges seemed like friendly, everyday banter. However, for the RW head, it was actually quite embarrassing, especially as it happened in front of me, a person whom she considered her guest. She was noticeably less enthusiastic afterward.

Third, in Sariendah, engaging in a personalized relationship with certain elites as a patron proved to be quite beneficial for the poor. This is due to today’s village governance scheme which essentially enables the elites to continue serving as a gatekeeper of service or welfare programs (Fougères 2009; Pattenden 2011). Indeed, almost all government and NGO’s programs—including the one that is participatory and empowerment centered such as PNPM—comes to Sariendah; will most likely recruit the established elites to become the program’s administrator. The subsequent implementation also runs through the preexisting social structure, rather than transform it that further empowers the position of the elites as they have more resource to dole out to their client via their patronage networks. Consequently, from the perspective of the villagers, claiming directly to the elites through personal relations becomes much more strategic because of the ability of these elites to directly direct or divert the funds to them.

Yet, thanks to the increasingly competitive and open political field, there are more incentives for these elite to be accountable to the demands of the poor villagers (Aspinall and Rohman 2016; cf. Fossati 2016). As I mentioned earlier, the current electoral system has created a high demand for village-level political brokers who can mobilize voters towards a certain candidate during the election. Consider the typical five-year political cycle: there are at least six political elections on the village level and these provide a lucrative market for a capable vote broker who can garner voter’s loyalties for the running candidates. Here, engaging in service brokerage, by facilitating access to services and social programs for the villagers, enables them to acquire a reputation as a capable leader who can deliver concrete benefits (Aspinall 2014; Berenschot 2019). This is very important as their ability as vote broker to sway voters is largely contingent on their capacity to provide the “glue” of the Indonesian electoral system: cash, goods, jobs, contracts, or other material benefits for the electoral masses (Aspinall 2015). In this case, the best vote broker is the one who can deliver service and
resource with utmost accountability, thus gain reputation and loyalty of more villagers.

From the side of the villagers as a client, the pluralization of the village elites has opened up more channels for the ordinary villagers to gain services and challenge the village head and his circle of governing elites. If in the past, the only way for ordinary villagers to gain access to state programs and services was through maintaining patronage relation with Golkar’s clients, today villagers have more options to choose between a more diverse set of village elites to become their patrons (Berenschot and Sambodho 2017). Villagers may align themselves with the most effective and accountable patrons, while non-performers are being punished and discarded as irrelevant. In Sariendah, there are at least forty-five PKK cadres and additional fifty RT and RW officials who are engaged in brokerage activities, albeit with varying intensity. The upshot of this increasing competition is that clients have more choice of brokers and thereby increase the brokers’ exposure to the pressure of accountability and responsiveness. When I asked one of my respondent about how she chose an elite to serve as her broker when she needed help, she answered: “Ah, as far as I am concerned, I don’t want to go to just any old cadre. No, of course not, I look for the best”. This was the reason she claimed she never went to her own RW PKK cadre nor to her own RW or RT heads all of whom, she thought were lazy and untrustworthy. Dismissing them, she went to one of the most prominent broker who was actually from a different RW, because she deemed her to be more responsive and having concerns about her family more at heart.

This broker competitiveness is what Fox (1994) identify as “semiclientelism”, as opposed to the traditional “authoritarian clientelism” where the power of the patron goes unchallenged. Instead, within the competitive political environs, the patrons do need to heed the demands of the clients, as the clients have options to choose and shifts between patrons. This political context creates an accountability mechanism between the elites and the villagers, albeit based on a clientelistic notion. It gave the villagers some leverage as a client to demand better services or shift to another patron that they deemed more accountable. Therefore, from the point of view of the poor, I found that maintaining this delicate relationship with the elites is much more important than to participate in the formal avenue of deliberation (cf. Williams et al. 2003).
CONCLUSION

This article highlights a nuanced and complex dynamic of interaction between the poor and the village elites which transcends the engagement within formal and institutionalized political spaces. As this article shows, the analysis of village level democratization in Indonesia has to go beyond the analysis of formal institutions or formal participation, but also gain insight of the informal, everyday politics by its citizens. Based on my findings, Sariendah’s poor are well aware that these deliberative spaces are still operating within the context of pre-existing power relations in the village and are not insulated from the wider pattern of power relations between the poor and the elites. It thus largely renders the formal deliberative spaces irrelevant as an avenue for the poor to advance their claims and/or to resist abuse by the elites (see also Rao and Sanyal 2010; Veron, Corbridge, Williams, and Manoj 2003). Instead, the poor mostly engage in personalized informal negotiation with brokers through exchanges of material reward or engage in a clientelistic relationship, as part of the client’s effort to fulfill their attendant obligations to the power holder.

Yet, to say that these poor villagers are devoid of political agency is misleading. On the contrary, I found that Sariendah’s poor villagers are among the most active participants of Sariendah’s everyday micropolitics. Inaction is not an option for them as they have to constantly engage in everyday negotiation with a plethora of contending elites to secure personal favors in order to secure employment, gain access to welfare programs or even simply to obtain a small loan to buy food. In doing so, they utilize an assortment of political notions and discursive strategies available within their political repertoire “toolkit” (Swidler 1986). For instance, the Sariendah’s poor villagers’ decision to invest in a personalized relationship, while forgoing the opportunity to formally engage in the participatory deliberative forums, is not simply based on desperation or outright subjugation by the elites, but on a sober and largely rational strategizing based on the prevailing power relation context of Sariendah.

Similarly, in making claims to their elite: it is often framed as a plea for the elite class and the mediators to care (peduli) about them; and not about demanding an equal standing or equal access to livelihood resources. Here, the absence of rights within this discourse is conspicuous but rather unsurprising. Yet, based on my findings, it makes much more sense for the poor to claim according to social obligations: while
the notion of (formal) rights is barely comprehensible and has almost no relevance in the Sariendah community; the notion of social obligations such as how the rich have to take care of the poor by benevolence and charitable acts, is definitely ample (cf. Li 2014). Therefore, instead of having to justify their rights using a foreign vernacular of rights through an equally alien and, for example, formal deliberation process; this localization makes claims more accessible as the villagers can always lay claims based on the notions of kinship and deservedness; notions they can always articulate rather skillfully. All of this, I argue as part of their strategy in choosing the “playing field” on which they want to engage.

Therefore, rather than being puzzled as to why the poor do not utilize formal avenues of deliberative democracy, or why rights-based claims do not emerge and are not utilized more often, the analytical effort should focus on understanding the prevailing social contract that governs the contestation and negotiations between the actors in the village (Hickey and King 2016). This includes understanding the prevailing incentives and disincentives, understanding its political actors and discovering the notions and norms that are most relevant because any meaningful improvement for villages like Sariendah will not come from the simple enactment of a particular policy or law, but from the ability of their citizens to challenge and contest the predatory practices of their elites in everyday village politics and governance (cf. Hickey 2012).

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