



Post-disaster economic development in Aceh: Neoliberalization and other economic-geographical imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 and a subsequent Memorandum of Understanding ending three decades of armed conflict has opened up Aceh to international aid, trade, ideas and potential investment. For Naomi Klein in her (2008) book *The Shock Doctrine*, such disasters have been exploited systematically in processes of neoliberalization. Based on fieldwork in Aceh and Jakarta, this paper shows that while neoliberal elements are present within important economic-geographical imaginaries in post-disaster Aceh, they are intertwined with and exceeded by other imaginaries. We draw attention to the theoretical importance of a fuller understanding of such imaginaries, their origin and reach, content and the actors and mechanisms associated with their promulgation. The paper recounts four economic-geographical imaginaries of the future of Aceh: (1) Aceh as newly (re)opened to overseas investors; (2) Aceh as a site of revivable trade connections to the Malay and Islamic worlds; (3) Aceh as a self-governing economic space; (4) Aceh as a united territory of diverse cultures and districts. The first of these is most closely associated with processes of neoliberalization but is exceeded by the others which, taken together, unsettle any singular script of a “disaster capitalism complex” at work in the reconstruction of Aceh.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we focus on questions regarding the uneven patterns and processes of neoliberalization. Following [Larner and Le Heron \(2002\)](#) and [Leitner et al. \(2007\)](#), we argue for the importance of examining imaginaries associated within accounts of neoliberalization. The empirical case we examine is that of strategies of economic development circulating in post-disaster Aceh. These economic development strategies are accompanied by major economic-geographical imaginaries in the reconstruction of Aceh, especially after three decades of armed separatist conflict (1976–2005) and the tsunami of 26 December 2004. Such economic-geographical imaginaries speak to something of a deconstruction of the recently ‘imagined community’ of post-colonial Indonesia ([Anderson, 1983](#)).

Our study takes place some years after the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed as a basis for cessation of the armed conflict between armed separatist Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) rebels and Indonesian government forces. From this vantage point there

is the prospect that the ‘economic dividend’ of Aceh’s autonomy may be little more than a figment of various imaginations. We use the term economic-geographical ‘imaginaries’, then, in relation to the disjuncture that exists between imaginings for Aceh and any substantive analogues they have in terms of economic development practice. In this, we draw from the recent work of Jessop and Oosterlynck who explore the ‘path-shaping potential of economic imaginaries (in their different forms and varying content)’ in an effort to ‘explain why only some economic imaginaries among the many that circulate actually come to be selected and institutionalized and thereby come to co-constitute economic subjectivities, interests, activities, organizations, institutions, structural ensembles, emergent economic orders and their social embedding, and the dynamics of economic performance’ (2008, p. 1156). Our discursive preference for economic-geographical ‘imaginaries’ thus offers a useful tool for framing post-tsunami, post-conflict developments in ways that may not be easily explained by market logic or global capitalist forces.

National government concessions to demands for regional autonomy after the fall of President Suharto and the subsequent physical destruction of the tsunami extended the horizons of political and economic possibility in Aceh. However, by the same token, Aceh is no *tabula rasa* for processes of neoliberalization as a result of the activation of a global “disaster capitalism complex” ([Klein](#),

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2007). While the tsunami did reshape the military, political and socio-economic dimensions of “governable spaces” in Aceh (Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007), complex geo-histories continue to channel economic-geographical imaginaries of Aceh.

In this paper we draw mainly from some thirty semi-structured interviews conducted in Banda Aceh, Jakarta and Singapore between December 2007 and January 2008. In addition we relate the interview material to a number of Indonesian legal documents, NGO reports, as well as local, national and international media coverage. We begin by further specifying imaginaries via a ‘meso-level’ analysis of: the content of imaginaries; their transmission via a diversity of agents and mechanisms; their constitution and appeal to audiences at multiple geographical scales, and; how mobile imaginaries rub up against those associated with the relative fixity of state territoriality. Next we discuss four important economic-geographical imaginaries at work in the process of reconstruction: (1) Aceh as newly (re)opened to overseas investors; and (2) Aceh as a site of revivable trade connections to the Malay and Islamic worlds; (3) Aceh as a self-governing economic space; and (4) Aceh as a united territory of diverse cultures and districts. In this discussion, we move from considering an imaginary inflected with the most mobile and neoliberal of policy norms and ideals to imaginaries that are less so. In a concluding discussion we reflect on how consideration of economic-geographical imaginaries questions the veracity of the singular script of neoliberalization within the context of post-disaster Aceh.

2. Neoliberal and other economic-geographical imaginings

Presently, economic development strategies for many places are bound-up with hegemonic processes of neoliberalization (Leitner et al., 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Neoliberalization is a global, although geographically uneven, process involving “multiple determinations” (Harvey, 2005, p. 9) and significant contradictions between neoliberal practices and doctrine. There is a sense here in which neoliberalism can inhabit the present as ‘a concrete embodiment of its abstract description’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 38). As a result, there is the potential for local experiences to be accommodated uncritically to abstract theory and for imaginaries that exceed and contest those of neoliberalism to be overlooked.

Such concerns, we believe, are justified in connection with one influential account of how disasters, natural or otherwise, have presented unique opportunities for processes of neoliberalization to penetrate otherwise less pervious political and economic environments. Klein (2007) posits the existence of a disaster capitalism complex associated with ‘orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities’ (Klein, 2007, p. 6). In the case of Sri Lanka, for example, a 200 m buffer zone established along the east coast of the country after the tsunami enabled a USAID-organized tourism industry to acquire and develop beach-front land which had previously been home to poor fishing communities. In the months before the tsunami, Sri Lankans had rejected a World Bank-approved shock therapy program through strikes, protests and at the polls. However, the post-tsunami reconstruction plan was entrusted to a newly-formed body, the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation, which was comprised of ‘the country’s most powerful business executives from banking and industry’ (p. 396), including five members who had direct holdings in the beach tourism sector. According to Klein this ‘second tsunami’ of neoliberalization affected other countries, including Indonesia. For us, Klein’s rendition of the spread of neoliberalism exemplifies the challenges of understanding the specificities of neoliberalism without interpreting its seeming ubiquity and hegemony in such a way as to reify it (Barnett, 2005; Castree, 2006). While others have

drawn attention to the diverse origins of neoliberalism (Larner, 2003), in this paper we pay attention to the uneven processes of neoliberalism. More specifically, following Larner and Le Heron (2002) and Leitner et al. (2007), we concentrate on the content of imaginaries, the actors and mechanisms by which they are promulgated, their geographical range and mobility when set against the relative fixity of the territorial claims of states.

Leitner et al. draw attention to how neoliberalism articulates with its contestations arguing that there is a the need ‘to take seriously the sociospatial imaginaries of those who may find themselves at variance with neoliberalism’ (2007, p. 11). Attention to imaginaries is important since Klein sees the diffusion of neoliberalism not as an economic process but as a political strategy (in Klein and Smith, 2008, p. 582). Leitner et al. (2007, p. 8) define imaginaries, noting how ‘neoliberalization and contestation in their various guises entail imaginaries (ideals, norms, discourses, ethics).’ Neoliberalism has been something of a definitional moving target with the “Washington Consensus” short-hand definition of neoliberalism in the 1990s (Williamson, 1993) being a moment of alignment among the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank (WB). In Indonesia, too, neoliberalism has been interpreted differently at particular junctures in history. For instance, from being commonly associated with IMF and World Bank loans to Indonesia in the aftermath of the 1999 Asian economic crisis, neoliberalism had become a ‘dirty word’ and ‘political slur’ in mainstream political parlance by the time of the 2007 global financial crisis, despite the relatively minor impact of the economic crisis on Indonesia (Bunnell and Miller, 2011). Leitner et al. go on to contextualize the process of neoliberalization in which there is a ‘vast variety of imaginaries and practices of all political hues that not only practice resistance but also are resilient to and rework neoliberalism’ (Leitner et al., 2007, p. 5). Further specification of the content of imaginaries is necessarily an empirical enterprise and one that we move onto later in the paper.

It is important to consider how neoliberal and other imaginaries operating ‘within and beyond the state’ (Leitner et al., 2007, p. 8) are constitutive of new governmental forms and economic spaces and subjects (Larner and Le Heron, 2002, p. 759). Here, attention to the differential role of private sector, state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and mechanisms by which ideas and practices are diffused to and translated within particular host environments (Acharya, 2004) is warranted. In post-tsunami Aceh, the private sector played a powerful role in the large-scale reconstruction effort, especially in the first 2 years after the disaster (2005–2006), when some 250 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) collectively allocated US\$3.7 billion for approximately 1500 projects and pledged another US\$3.1 billion. Of these allocated projects, the majority were funded by donor organizations (US\$2 billion) and NGOs (US\$1.7 billion), while the Indonesian government contributed US\$1.2 billion (Miller, 2009, p. 179). In this sense, post-disaster Aceh has fundamentally diverged from Indonesia’s broader political economy over the past decade, which has been dominated by discourses about the realignment of state political, economic and administrative powers and responsibilities between Jakarta and the regions as part of the post-Suharto processes of democratic decentralization (Bunnell and Miller, 2011). Though Aceh received “special autonomy” as part of this national trend (first through Law No. 44/1999, and then via Law No. 18/2001), democratic decentralization lacked substance within the context of Aceh’s armed separatist conflict against Jakarta and only started to have meaning for practical purposes after the initiation of the 2005 Helsinki peace process (Miller, 2009, p. 186).

Neoliberal and progressive policy agendas have often coexisted, with intergovernmental organizations and INGOs playing quite different roles in shaping patterns of incorporation of nation states

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