



The Discourse on the Role of NGOs in Indonesia's Public Policy Process

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the discourse surrounding the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the public policy process in Indonesia. After the collapse of the New Order regime, the role of NGOs has become increasingly prominent in various stages of the policy process, from advocacy, formulation, implementation, to policy monitoring. However, the dominant discourse in Indonesia tends to reduce the political role of NGOs to only two main domains: community development and empowerment and humanitarian assistance. Using a post-structuralist approach and reflective document analysis, this study identifies distinctive characteristics in the discourse on the role of NGOs in Indonesia. Although the role of NGOs in the public policy process is very significant, their political dimensions are often not widely recognized, both by the general public and public policy academics in Indonesia. This condition actually opens up opportunities for NGOs to maneuver more flexibly in institutional and social spaces, influencing policy decisions while maintaining an image of neutrality in the wider political realm.

Keywords: NGOs, Policy Process, Discourse, Indonesian Politics, Indonesian Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become important actors in the political and public policy landscape of Indonesia over the past few decades. Their role is not only limited to providing social and humanitarian assistance, but also includes the production, dissemination, and advocacy of ideas that shape socio-political dynamics in Indonesia. NGOs often act as initiators of social movements that push for policy change, even when their programs and ideas are at odds with the government.

However, the discourse in Indonesia tends to reduce the role of NGOs to only two main functions, namely humanitarian aid and community empowerment. This view ignores the political dimension and strategic role of NGOs in the public policy process. In fact, the international definition, as adopted by the UN, emphasizes that NGOs also play a role in advocacy, policy monitoring, and increasing community political participation. In practice, NGOs in Indonesia are active in various stages of the policy process, from advocacy, formulation, to monitoring policy implementation. They are not only implementers of social programs, but also intellectual actors who shape and debate public policy ideas. Recognition of this role is important so that policy analysis does not become shallow and incomplete.

However, studies on the political role of NGOs in Indonesia are still relatively limited, especially in public policy studies. Many studies emphasize more on humanitarian and empowerment functions, while NGO involvement in politics and policy processes has

less attention. In fact, especially after the New Order era, NGOs have shown a significant role in encouraging democratization and fighting for the interests of marginalized communities.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine the discourse on the political role of NGOs in the public policy process in Indonesia. The focus of the analysis includes the terminology and concept of NGOs, the relationship between the state and NGOs, and the representation of the role of NGOs in public policy literature. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the construction of the discourse on the role of NGOs while opening up a wider discussion space about their contribution to the dynamics of Indonesian politics and policies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a post-structuralist discourse analysis method to understand the construction and representation of the role of NGOs in the public policy process in Indonesia. Primary data were obtained through a systematic library study of academic documents, policy reports, literature related to the role of NGOs in Indonesia, and publications from UNDP and the UN. This approach was chosen because of its ability to reveal how the meaning and role of NGOs are formed and debated in various socio-political texts and narratives.

Data analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis techniques that focused on three main aspects: (1) terminology and concepts of NGOs in the Indonesian context, (2) relations between the state and NGOs, and (3) representation of the role of NGOs in Indonesian public policy literature. The research is reflective and interpretive, taking into account the historical and socio-political context of post-New Order Indonesia. Through this approach, the research is expected to provide theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of public policy and the role of NGOs in Indonesia, while also opening up a wider discussion space regarding the political and social dimensions of NGO activities that have so far received little attention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NGOs Terminology in Indonesian Context

NGOs in Indonesia are heavily influenced by political history and power dynamics, especially since the New Order era. The term “NGO” itself is less popular in everyday conversation; people are more familiar with the term Non-Governmental Organization (LSM) or Community Social Development Institution (LPSM). The choice of this term is inseparable from efforts to avoid the anti-government connotation attached to the term “non-governmental organization”, especially during the New Order era which was repressive towards organizations considered to be against the government. As a result, NGO has become a more widely accepted and used term, both for national and international organizations.

Regulation of NGOs in Indonesia is also greatly influenced by state policies that tend to limit their space for movement. Since the enactment of Law No. 8 of 1985 concerning Community Organizations (Ormas), the government has included NGOs in the Ormas category, which indirectly facilitates supervision and control of their activities. Although after the reformation the use of the term NGO began to increase, regulation and supervision are still carried out through the Ormas legal umbrella, such as Law No. 17 of 2013 and Permendagri No. 57 of 2017. The unclear definition of Ormas in this regulation is often criticized because it opens up space for the state to stigmatize and strictly supervise NGOs.

The impact of these regulations and stigmas is the emergence of negative perceptions towards NGOs, especially at the regional level. NGOs are often suspected of being involved in corrupt practices, extortion, or exploiting social issues for personal or political gain. Negative labels such as “uniformed thugs” are often attached, thus worsening the image of NGOs in the eyes of the public. To avoid such supervision and stigma, many NGOs choose to

use more flexible and informal terms or forms of organization, such as forums, clubs, associations, or discussion groups.

Despite facing various challenges, NGOs in Indonesia continue to play an important role in social development, policy advocacy, and strengthening civil society. Flexibility in the use of terms and organizational forms allows them to adapt to regulatory changes and socio-political dynamics. In addition, historical experience shows that the role of NGOs has existed long before independence, with significant contributions in the fields of education, social, and the struggle for independence through organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama.

The Relationship Between NGOs and the Indonesian Government

The relationship between NGOs and the Indonesian government during the New Order to the Reformation era was complex and dynamic, influenced by the authoritarian political context and the dominant development paradigm. Initially, NGOs focused on their functional role as implementers of development and community empowerment programs, especially in the health, education, and microeconomic sectors, by adopting a modernization paradigm that emphasized social transformation through increasing the capacity of high-achieving individuals. In the face of strict supervision by the authoritarian regime, NGOs chose a cooperative strategy and avoided open political activity, so that their role was more as a complement to government programs than as agents of political change. However, towards the end of the New Order, NGOs began to adopt a more vocal advocacy role in fighting for democracy, human rights, and social justice, although their scope of movement remained limited by state regulation and supervision.

The identified NGO–government relationship models reflect three main patterns: high-level partnerships that focus on joint development with the government; grassroots mobilization that emphasizes advocacy and political awareness of communities; and grassroots empowerment that emphasizes resistance and the formation of autonomous groups as a form of resistance to state hegemony. These findings show that NGOs not only play a role as implementers of socio-economic programs, but also as important actors in the democratization process and oversight of public policies, although they often have to navigate strict political boundaries. The implications of this study emphasize the need to strengthen the capacity of NGOs to play a more effective strategic role in advocacy and equal partnership with the government to support inclusive and socially just development governance.

The Role of NGOs in Indonesia's Public Policy Process

This section examines how the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is conceptualized and represented in the academic literature on politics and public policy in Indonesia. Rather than reiterating the broad and well-established functional roles of NGOs—which have been extensively covered in various studies—this section specifically analyzes how social science and policy studies frame the position and influence of NGOs within the public policy process. By doing so, it seeks to uncover the dominant narratives, assumptions, and limitations in existing academic discourses about the political and developmental significance of NGOs in Indonesia.

In political science literature, NGOs are frequently portrayed as political actors that interact with the state, society, and the broader political structure in complex and strategic ways. Scholars such as Mansour Fakih (1995), Vedi R. Hadiz (1997), and Michele Ford (2009) have critically examined the political role of NGOs, particularly in the context of Indonesia's democratic transition and post-authoritarian development. These scholars highlight the capacity of NGOs to function as agents of political mobilization, policy advocacy, and resistance to state hegemony. Within this body of work, NGOs are not seen merely as service providers or developmental intermediaries; rather, they are understood as entities engaged in the struggle over power, representation, and legitimacy in the policy-making arena.

Mansour Fakih (1995), for instance, underscores the emancipatory potential of NGOs, especially those rooted in grassroots movements and critical of the dominant development

paradigms. He conceptualizes NGOs as part of civil society actors that can challenge structural inequalities and promote participatory democracy. In this sense, NGOs are positioned as counter-hegemonic forces that have the potential to reshape policy discourses and influence state accountability mechanisms.

Similarly, Hadiz (1997) approaches the study of NGOs from a political economy perspective, situating them within broader networks of power, patronage, and class relations. His work reveals how the effectiveness and autonomy of NGOs in influencing public policy are often constrained by their entanglements with elite interests, donor dependency, and co-optation by state actors. Hadiz's analysis cautions against romanticizing NGOs as purely democratic agents and instead calls for a more nuanced understanding of their embeddedness in Indonesia's socio-political and economic structures.

Ford (2009), on the other hand, has focused extensively on labor NGOs and their engagement with state institutions and transnational networks. Her work illustrates the strategic and often confrontational roles played by NGOs in advocating for labor rights, influencing labor policies, and organizing marginalized workers. These political studies collectively provide a critical lens through which the role of NGOs in public policy can be understood—not just as passive implementers but as actors involved in the dynamic processes of policy formulation, negotiation, and contestation.

In contrast, much of the public policy literature tends to adopt a more functionalist and developmentalist perspective on NGOs. Within this framework, NGOs are often portrayed as agents of community empowerment and humanitarian development. They are seen as partners of the government in service delivery, capacity building, and the promotion of good governance at the local level. This perspective highlights the complementary roles that NGOs can play in addressing development challenges, particularly in areas where state capacity is limited or absent.

In this vein, NGOs are commonly associated with programs aimed at poverty alleviation, health care delivery, environmental conservation, disaster response, and education. The emphasis in this literature is often placed on efficiency, participation, and innovation, with NGOs being credited for their ability to reach marginalized communities, tailor interventions to local needs, and foster community participation. While this view acknowledges the contributions of NGOs to policy implementation, it tends to understate their political agency and the broader implications of their engagement in policy advocacy and governance.

The public policy literature also often frames NGOs within the logic of partnership and collaboration with the state, particularly in the context of decentralization and democratization reforms. While this narrative recognizes NGOs as legitimate stakeholders in the policy process, it sometimes risks reducing them to technocratic actors whose legitimacy is derived from their utility to the state rather than from their representational claims or rights-based advocacy.

This discursive tendency in policy literature is somewhat limiting, particularly given the historically significant and normative role that NGOs have played in shaping Indonesia's public policy landscape. NGOs have not only functioned as service providers but also as critical actors in strengthening democratic governance, advocating for marginalized communities, and ensuring policy responsiveness. Their contributions to policy change, transparency, and citizen participation are well documented, particularly in the post-Reformasi period.

In the context of Indonesia, NGOs have played a substantial role in both policy advocacy and policy monitoring. Their involvement spans multiple policy domains, reflecting both their normative commitment to democratic values and their functional role in policy processes. Several key examples include:

a. Advocacy for Anti-Corruption Policies

Corruption has long posed a significant challenge to governance and democratic consolidation in Indonesia. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have played a vital role in advocating for robust anti-corruption frameworks and promoting a culture of accountability. A prominent example is the Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), a civil society organization that has consistently worked to enhance transparency in both the public and private sectors. ICW's activities include investigating corruption cases, publishing critical policy analyses, and mobilizing public opinion in support of anti-corruption reforms. One of

ICW's most notable contributions was its role in advocating for the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, or KPK) in 2002. Since its inception, the KPK has become a central institution in Indonesia's anti-corruption architecture, although its independence and authority have been challenged in recent years. ICW continues to play a watchdog role, especially in light of recent attempts to weaken the KPK through legislative revisions.

b. Advocacy for Environmental Policies

Indonesia's environment faces critical threats from deforestation, illegal mining, and unsustainable agricultural practices, especially in the context of palm oil plantation expansion and extractive industries. Environmental NGOs have been at the forefront of advocating for policies that prioritize ecological sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and the protection of indigenous communities. One of the most prominent environmental NGOs is Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI), also known as Friends of the Earth Indonesia. WALHI has led numerous campaigns against environmental degradation, illegal logging, and land grabbing, often confronting powerful corporate and political interests. Its advocacy efforts were instrumental in pushing the Indonesian government to impose a moratorium on the issuance of new forest concessions in 2011. Although the moratorium has had mixed results in curbing deforestation, WALHI's role highlights how environmental NGOs can influence state policies, mobilize transnational networks, and hold both government and corporations accountable.

c. Advocacy for Women's Rights Policies

Gender justice and women's empowerment have constituted a major focus of NGO advocacy in Indonesia, particularly in the post-Reformasi period. Various women's rights organizations have contributed to shaping legislative and institutional reforms that address gender-based violence and promote women's political and social participation. The National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan), although a state institution, works closely with NGOs and grassroots women's groups to advocate for gender-sensitive policies. A landmark achievement in this area was the passage of Law No. 23/2004 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence, which was the result of years of sustained advocacy by women's organizations, including both NGOs and independent activists. This law represents a significant legal recognition of domestic violence as a public issue rather than a private matter and laid the foundation for future gender equity advocacy, such as the campaign for the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill (UU TPKS), which was finally passed in 2022. NGOs continue to press for effective implementation, increased budget allocation, and cultural change to support gender justice.

d. Advocacy for Labor Rights Policies

The labor sector in Indonesia is marked by a series of structural challenges, including precarious employment, low wages, limited union representation, and minimal protection for informal workers, who make up a large portion of the workforce. Labor-oriented NGOs have actively advocated for stronger legal protections, fair employment conditions, and greater social security for all workers. A significant case of recent labor advocacy was the mobilization against the Omnibus Law on Job Creation (UU Cipta Kerja), passed in 2020. This controversial law was criticized by labor groups for weakening workers' rights, reducing severance benefits, and facilitating exploitative outsourcing practices. NGOs such as the Trade Union Rights Centre (TURC), along with trade unions and civil society coalitions, led protests, engaged in policy dialogue, and brought public attention to the regressive aspects of the law. Although the legislation was enacted, NGO advocacy succeeded in galvanizing public discourse on labor issues and has continued to monitor its implementation and call for judicial review. This example underscores the critical role NGOs play not only in proposing alternative policies but also in acting as institutional counterweights to pro-market reforms that risk undermining social protections.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the discourse on the role of NGOs in the public policy process in Indonesia is closely related to the dynamics of political power, especially during the New Order era which limited the meaning and function of NGOs to empowerment and humanitarian assistance, and created a very limited framework of relations between the government and NGOs. However, this limitation did not completely eliminate the role of NGOs; even under pressure from an authoritarian regime, NGOs remained active in politics and the policy-making process, acting as intellectual actors that encouraged the birth of other critical organizations such as labor unions. After the fall of the New Order, the proliferation of NGOs further strengthened their role in politics and public policy, not only as proposers of policy ideas, but also directly involved in the formulation, implementation, and supervision of policies. However, public discourse and policy literature in Indonesia still often marginalize the critical role of NGOs, limiting their discussion to the functions of empowerment and social assistance, so that the political influence of NGOs is more recognized by critical intellectual groups outside the mainstream. The dominance of development and empowerment narratives, as well as the lack of explicit political discourse, actually allows NGOs to play a more flexible role in political and policy processes, utilizing existing institutional and social space to influence policy decisions while maintaining the perception of neutrality amidst the broader political landscape.

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