

A Partnership for Governance Research: Michele Ford & Surya Tjandra

Australian Principal Researcher Dr Michele Ford is a senior lecturer at the Department of Indonesian Studies, University of Sydney. Indonesian Principal Researcher Surya Tjandra lectures labour law at Atma Jaya University and is completing a PhD at Leiden University. Both are experienced researchers. Their study considers the influence of civil society organisations on policy making in decentralised Indonesia.

Surya first met Michele in 1999 when she interviewed him as part of her doctoral research. They have maintained a professional relationship ever since. However, prior to receiving AIGRP funding they had not had the opportunity to work closely together. When Michele first learnt of the research grant scheme she approached Surya to find out if he was interested in partnering on research. They were able to meet in Jakarta to discuss the scope of their proposed research project. The resulting proposal received funding in the pilot funding round in late 2006.

A research partnership

Surya and Michele took collaboration seriously. They worked in tandem on all aspects of the project and conducted every interview together. As Michele put it, "there was no hiving off or quarantining parts of the research". Where tasks could not be fairly shared, they chose to draw on their respective strengths. Surya has taken the lead on the processing of first cut findings, and while both researchers will be heavily involved in the drafting of academic articles and other outputs, Michele will take responsibility for the final writing up.

Both researchers agree that robust communication was key to success, particularly discussions held at the outset of the project as they developed a shared concept of good research practice and set out the project's parameters and workplan. Intellectual debate was a feature of the partnership, Surya described how their differing opinions led to "discussion, which brings even more understanding and broadens our perspectives". Research ethics was one hot topic of debate between principal researchers—a discussion stimulated by the limits and processes imposed by Sydney University's ethics clearance. In fact, conversations around research ethics were a prominent feature of the fieldwork phase, both between principal researchers and with other researchers and informants.

Equality was important in the success of the partnership. Their collaboration was enhanced by a very equal relationship, with both researchers similar in age and experience. Michele and Surya have strong respect for each other. For Surya, "the Michele factor is also important ... she's kind of a brilliant teacher and researcher, as well as a compassionate friend, with deep understanding about Indonesian people and their complexities." A desire to really work together is also necessary. As Michele commented, "You have to have an open mind and a desire to experience how someone else undertakes research."

But it was not always smooth sailing. "Collaborative work is always challenging," says Michele. Honesty was crucial to overcoming obstacles and both principal researchers were committed to speaking up. Surya explained "What I'm most happy with the collaboration is that we could be open to each other. I could communicate everything that bothers me quite frankly, and vice versa." Commitment was also important especially as collaboration can be time-consuming. Michele believes that "to get the best value out of collaboration you have to be prepared to invest".

Benefits of collaboration

The team believes their research outputs have been enriched by collaboration as each principal researcher brought a different disciplinary lens to the project. Collaboration also helped the research by making data collection easier. Michele and Surya's complementary networks meant they didn't have to work as hard to develop contacts on the ground, and having two interviewers meant that the interview process was less tiring and the quality of the data collected was extremely good. For Michele, having Surya in interviews gave them extra depth, as "we could play different roles". The partnership has also provided an opportunity for Surya to extend his international academic networks by funding him to come to Australia in September to present research findings. The team will use this time to write up the project together.

Surya and Michele believe that the AIGRP provides a unique opportunity for new kinds of partnerships between Australian and Indonesian researchers. Surya, who has worked on a number of major collaborative research projects within Indonesia, feels the project has provided him with a special opportunity because it has enabled him to "learn a lot about doing research in its very real sense, which I believe I could share with others too". For Michele, the project "met my best expectations". Although she has a long history of researching in Indonesia, and has employed Indonesians as research assistants, she had never before had the opportunity to collaborate on an equal basis with an Indonesian researcher. She describes the research partnership as an opportunity to overcome the academic imperialism that can define Australian and Indonesian academic interactions. In her opinion, this sort of deep collaboration yields much richer results than more traditional forms of research relationships where an Indonesian researcher conducts fieldwork for an Australian-led project. "The AIGRP provides a qualitatively different opportunity—there isn't any other scheme that helps you to do this".