

## Indonesia's interfaith youths unite to save planet

Those with the greatest stake in the future take action to end the country's dreadful record on pollution

**Katharina R. Lestari, South Tangerang, Indonesia, *La Croix International*, 7 November 2019**



*Jesuit Father Alexius Andang Listya Binawan talks about climate change and its impact at a program organized by the Movement of Young People Caring for Waste. (Photo: Katharina R. Lestari/ucanews)*

Indah Lestari, 23, always takes her own tumbler and stainless steel straws when she leaves her boarding house near her campus in the city of South Tangerang in Indonesia's Banten province.

The Muslim student at Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University even makes sure to carry her eco-friendly recycled tote bag whenever she heads out to go shopping at the nearby market.

She does it all for a reason.

"Environmental destruction in Indonesia is getting worse," she said. "We can feel its impact. Jakarta, the capital, and its surrounding areas had high temperatures ranging from 35 to 36 degrees Celcius in late October.

"Not to mention the air pollution due to terrible rush-hour traffic jams. It is very annoying."

For the last few years Lestari has taken an active part in campaigns conducted by groups dealing with environmental issues and shared their messages with her friends via social media.

Last December, she attended a Youth Climate Camp held by the group Indonesia Forum for the Environment in Jakarta's Thousand Islands, while in September this year she attended a program by another group to celebrate International Coastal Clean-up Day, which is traditionally held on the third Saturday in the month.

Most recently, she was among 50 Catholic, Confucian, Hindu, Muslim and Protestant youths who participated in a two-day program held by the Movement of Young People Caring for Waste, a Catholic group dedicated to recycling waste, at the Jakarta Archdiocese-run Civita Youth Camp in South Tangerang.

A Catholic group known as Gropesh has, since being set up in 2007, introduced programs to recycle and sell non-organic waste and compost from organic waste. It also runs environmental training campaigns in schools and universities.



*Indah Lestari (left) was among 50 interfaith youths attending a two-day program highlighting environmental issues. (Photo: Katharina R. Lestari/ucanews)*

### **Agents of change**

According to Gropesh's coordinator, Birgitta Angelia, the program focuses on waste management, marine plastic debris and climate change.

These were initiated by Jesuit Father Alexius Andang Listya Binawan, a former Jakarta Archdiocese episcopal vicar and environmental activist.

"Some young people care for the environment, some remain unaware of the impact of environmental destruction," she said. "We want to create agents of change who can give examples of how to deal with environmental issues to other people in their own areas."

The World Resources Institute Indonesia says it is a country that continues to struggle with environmental issues due to unsustainable development that is harming its oceans and seas, such as marine and coastal pollution, climate change and habitat destruction.

The Jambeck Research Group at the University of Georgia in the United States rated Indonesia in 2015 as the world's second biggest contributor after China for marine plastic debris. The group said Indonesia dumped 187.2 million tons that year, compared to China's 262.9 million tons.

Indonesia has also been named the world's fifth largest emitter of greenhouse gases by the Washington-based World Resources Institute (WRI), "mainly due to the conversion of its forests and carbon-rich peatlands."

Such widespread pollution was detrimental not only to the creatures living in the ocean but also humans at the top of the food chain, said the group.

Indonesian authorities have initiated several measures to deal with environmental concerns, including the implementation of a paid plastic bag policy in which a customer is charged 200 rupiahs (1.4 US cents) per bag.

President Joko Widodo claimed during the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok, Thailand, this month that Indonesia was committed to achieving its target of reducing marine plastic debris by up to 70 percent over the next five years.

"The Earth belongs to all of us. We must work together to save it. If one person does not care about the environment, others will die," Father Andang said. "Young people, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, must act more intensively to save the Earth, which is their 'treasure.'"

### **New movement**

Novrizal Tahar, director of waste management at the Environment and Forestry Ministry, suggested one way to make progress was to change people's mindset.

"It is the sociocultural perspective that is behind the plastic waste problem. Just imagine, 72 percent of Indonesian people do not care about the issue," he said, quoting 2018 data from the Statistics Agency.

Indonesia is made up of more than 17,000 islands with 4.9 million square kilometers of land, making it the planet's fourth largest country.

Its population has risen to 270.63 million in 2019, up from 257 million in 2015, 56.7 percent of whom live on Java, the most populous island.

"Sociocultural perspective relates to habit. Thus, a habit to take care of the environment must be boosted among Indonesian people," Tahar said.

Kerri Nabasaria Panjaitan, founder of the Clean Indonesian Movement, which is devoted to fighting plastic waste, says youngsters can become forces for change.

"They can hold discussions and work out concrete action. They need to continue to speak up. Once their voices are heard, change will come," she said.

For Lestari, the recent program created an opportunity for interfaith youths to form a new movement through a new group, the Interfaith Youths Caring for the Earth Forum.

"It is time for young people to move. If it is not us, who else?" she asked.