

SEI Asia Podcast miniseries: “Optimizing Urban Food Systems Resilience”

Episode 02: Building resilience in food systems by preserving local knowledge

By Sofia Cavalleri and Khairunnisa

00:00:34 - 00:01:00

Welcome everyone to SEI Asia podcast series on optimizing urban food resilience, I’m your host, Sofia Cavalleri, research associate at the Stockholm Environment Institute, Asia Office. In today's episode, we will be talking about how to localize the sustainable food systems as part of our initiative to make circular food systems more accessible to a wider audience.

00:01:01 - 00:01:23

Sofia: We are very pleased to have Khairunnisa from Bakudapan here joining us in this podcast episode. Bakudapan is a research group based in Indonesia that works on promoting local foods.

Hi, Nisa! Could you please share a little bit with our listeners about yourself and what Bakudapan is doing?

00:01:24 - 00:02:04

Nisa: Hi Sofia, thank you for having me. Hello everyone, my name is Lisa. I'm currently working as independent and researcher and creative worker also at the same time, I'm the founder of Bakudapan Food Study Group. So as mentioned by Sofia, Bakudapan is a collective of eight members based in Jogja, so I'm one of the members. The other members we have Elia, Gatari, Liesta, Meivy, Monika, Shilfina and Silva. All of us came from different backgrounds and interests, but we have the same interests on food and mainly our work on research.

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Nisa: We're doing research but using on food both as field in itself and as an entry point to explore broader sociopolitical issues in the world today. We're working on research practices but also experimenting with different methods on doing research so that's Bakudapan.

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Sofia: So the theme for today for this series is food. So, food is more than just a transaction. It carries deeper social, economic, political, cultural meanings and historical implications as you mentioned. So

when we talk about food access, we touch upon the concept of access to resources and also access to power. This is connected not only to food security, but also to put sovereignty.

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Sofia: The global peasant movement La Via Campesina has defined “food sovereignty” as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Nisa, you have done some very impressive work on local food systems with the Bakudapan. What is your take when it comes to food sovereignty?

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Nisa: The question itself, it's become our current reflective topics in our group, so we realize that this term of food sovereignty itself has rarely been taken from the notion of the local knowledge. So as Bakudapan, we realized that the term sovereignty is not rooted from the community and how they leave and how they work. Also when we think about the access and the space for the community to define their own food and agricultural systems are not yet feasible in recent times.

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Nisa: Within the context of the community that we encounter the main challenge right now is the freedom to plan and to eat what they used to have before those. Let's say in quotes, who have higher power created certain rules on what the farmers should plan or should eat. For example, we believe each region has their own soil condition that makes specific crops become their staple food. For example, in Jogja, there's community, in Gunung Kidul that consume cassava or yam, and in other parts of Indonesia they consume sago and many more.

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Nisa: We understand it's their staple food but then it's disturbed by the nations' agricultural regulations and policy. Let's say in this case what we all know together is price. They become dependent on rice before they already have their own staple food and now, they need to distinguish all their staple food and change it into rice field. And this is the fact that is currently happening in most indigenous communities in Indonesia.

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Sofia: Super interesting, so in the past two or three years, but coupon has been involved in some applied research on edible weeds in particular. One of your key questions as a subgroup has been, how is food sovereignty built by common people. So, Nisa, have you discovered anything interesting with this research in particular?

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Nisa: Interesting that what I say earlier about food sovereignty is actually related to what I'm going to explain now that the food sovereignty is built by the common people and the answer is totally yes. As the government, we thought that has failed them and therefore they built their own system to sustain their life. It's their effort to preserve and archive their local knowledge, and it should be done by the community itself, and it has become their main drive to be persistent in their work to preserve and archive their own knowledge, because who else will do this.

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Nisa: And in relation to preserving local knowledge, edible weeds become one of the examples on how mainstream knowledge has alienated the local knowledge on edible weeds because they used to be a common knowledge that was frequently practiced and consumed by everyone.

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Nisa: Nothing is really special about it compared to now they have new label as superfood or healthy food, but usually it used to be common plants or common crops that we found in our backyard, in the streets, in abandoned land and many more. It's easy to find because they grew everywhere.

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Nisa: But however, as massive development happens in the city area. The mainstream crops also started to plant it everywhere and then knowledge of edible weeds gradually disappear. We cannot really stop them because there's massive [interventions] from outside.

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Sofia: Yes, so it's connected to history power, and you touched about upon the point of common knowledge. I was also thinking about the concept of circular food systems. What do you think about local food knowledge including the edible weeds that you just mentioned? How can they help us achieved circularity in food systems?

00:07:51 - 00:08:24

Nisa: In terms of how to achieve circularity in food system for edible weeds, they can help this problem, but then we further note that edible weeds, we cannot fully rely on it because as we know, edible weeds cannot be commodified. We cannot really plan them. Edible weeds grew by themselves. They have their own rule we can't really modify them to grow in certain area as we try to plant them, and it's not successful because they always grow outside their designated area.

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Nisa: From that [time] on, we realized they are literally everywhere, so we really need to try to discuss it again about the local knowledge on how to use the edible weeds, because you can really find it everywhere. Even now, when you go out, you can see on the streets. There might be some plants that you can eat, so we need to start to discuss again about the knowledge itself.

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Sofia: Yes, absolutely. And by we, which means common people as well. We understood that it is very challenging to promote the preservation of local foods and how can we people, especially younger generations maybe preserve for this local food knowledge?

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Nisa: It's really challenging to invite younger generations to preserve local food knowledge, but it's not impossible. Based on Bakudapan's experience we met different communities that really strive to invite [the] younger generation to participate on preserving local food knowledge.

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Nisa: For example, Sekolah Pagesangan, which is located in Jogja, they live far from the city so the main challenge for inviting younger generation is the temptation or of working in the city area to find jobs, to leave their hometown and to leave their village to find a better life. Sekolah has been working diligently and is one of the great initiatives that managed to start empowering younger generation to stay in their village to work on their land to preserve knowledge on how to produce and plan local plants and local food knowledge using different methods such as through education and continuously initiating activity that always includes them in the process.

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Sofia: This is a very inspiring bottom-up example, so moving on to some top-down kind of instruments. What kind of policy support instruments do you think is needed to effectively preserve local food knowledge?

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Nisa: In terms of policy, I might not be in the right position to suggest a simple policy to preserve local food knowledge. I believe that we need to come together from different individuals, communities, and stakeholders to preserve the local food knowledge. Only one option or one thing that we can do together is a policy that can help and protect the land of indigenous communities because at the moment that's the real or the main challenge that affected by indigenous communities in recent times.

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Nisa: Whether in the city area or in the rural area, they face direct threats of getting affected from their own land, where without land they cannot live. They cannot preserve their knowledge or practice their knowledge, so we need to think that land is the most important thing when we talk about preserving local food knowledge as land becomes the best necessity of it.

00:11:55 - 00:12:24

Sophia: Now we know more on the importance of promoting local foods to achieve food sovereignty and the circular food systems.

Thank you so much, Nisa, for your contribution to SEI Asia podcast series on optimizing urban food resilience. Good luck with your exciting work with Bakudapan. For our listeners, please stay tuned and subscribe to SEI Asia podcast channel and follow Bakudapan.