Migration in an Age of Change: The Migration Effect of Decolonization and Industrialization in Indonesia, c. 1900–2000

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Introduction

This contribution focuses on migration in Indonesia between 1930 and 2000, a period in which the country underwent substantial political and economic change. Between 1930 and 2000 Indonesia not only gained independence from the Dutch (in 1949), after Suharto took over power from President Sukarno in 1966 it transformed from being a largely agricultural society, to an increasingly industrial economy with a (relatively) advanced manufacturing industry operating in a global market. Colonial rule, decolonization, and industrialization, the three phenomena that to a great extent shaped Indonesia in the twentieth century are all factors that have a potentially strong effect on population movements. These factors are not only likely to influence the overall size of population movements, they also have the ability to change patterns of migration and transform the characteristics of the migrant population.

The literature shows that, of these three phenomena, the migration effects of industrialization are the most unequivocal. Industrialization, regardless of context and timing, is almost without exception accompanied by an unprecedented increase in urbanization, mainly as a result of in-migration from rural areas. Because of the sheer magnitude of this transformation, industrialization is commonly regarded as the key driver of overall migration levels in the modern era. Recent research for Europe has shown that the transition from the ancien regime to the industrial era was not such a clear break as the influential mobility transition postulated by Zelinsky would have it. Nevertheless, the experience of both the early industrializing countries in Europe, as well as many ‘late-comers’ elsewhere illustrate that industrialization universally leads to booming levels of urbanization and as a result in nearly all cases to an

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1 Hill 2000; Hill & Narjoko 2010.
2 Riddell 1980.
overall increase of population mobility. The latter applies to both internal migration and in-migration from outside national borders.4

In contrast, the migration effects of colonial rule, and to a lesser extent the subsequent process of decolonization, are much more ambiguous and make such generalizations more difficult. Although it is not the intention of this contribution, which concerns primarily the Indonesian case, to theorize the general effect of colonial rule and decolonization on migration as such, a few words on the possible consequences of colonization and its consequences for population movements may still be relevant. With regard to colonial rule, it is obvious that both in terms of quality and quantity of population movements, much depends on the colonial policies (i.e. the institutional framework) and the colony’s intrinsic characteristics, e.g. a colony’s physical and economic geography. Pertaining to the relative quantitative effects of colonial rule, there is some consensus however. It has been argued—most strongly in the path-breaking work of Australian geographer Graeme Hugo—5 that late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonies generally had lower levels of population movements than the European countries by which they were ruled. This was mainly because at a time when in (Western) Europe the process of industrialization was generally in full swing (or had already reached an advanced level), most of their colonies still had a largely agricultural character. The core of Hugo’s argument is that in contrast to most European countries, late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonies could not undergo a mobility transition, a process which is indeed closely related to industrialization and rapid urbanization. After all, as Hugo argues, colonial policy was aimed primarily at exploitation of natural resources and the production of commodities assisting or supporting industries in the home countries, not at establishing production of finished products away from the economic core. In other words, the introduction of new technologies (or the improvement thereof) commonly only benefited the colonizer. In sum, the lopsided growth of cities vis-à-vis overall population growth, which characterized Europe in the industrial era, did not occur to the same extent in most colonies. Nevertheless, as will become clear from the Indonesian case, increasing levels of urbanization were not a completely uncommon feature of pre-Second World War colonies.

With regard to the characteristics of the migrant population in colonies, it is certainly much more difficult to make general statements as they could vary significantly between colonies.6 Still, there are ‘colony-specific’ aspects

5 Hugo 1980.