




Students Environmental Activism and the SDGs: The Strategic Role of State University of Surabaya Students

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Abstract. University students are increasingly playing a vital role in environmental activism. While student environmental activism is on the rise globally, the specific strategies and contributions of university students in Indonesia towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain under-investigated. This research investigates the strategic contributions of State University of Surabaya students towards achieving the SDGs. The study explores the specific forms of environmental activism undertaken by State University of Surabaya students and analyzes how these activities align with and contribute to the achievement of several specific goals. The research employs a qualitative design with in-depth interviews with student activists in Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, State University of Surabaya. The findings will shed light on the unique strategies employed by students, their motivations for engagement, and the measurable impact of their activism on promoting environmental sustainability. This research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of student environmental activism in Indonesia and its potential to drive progress towards a more sustainable future.

Keywords: Student activism, environmental activism, State University of Surabaya, SDGs

1 Introduction

This study focuses on the strategic contributions of State University of Surabaya students towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We explore the specific forms of environmental activism undertaken by these students and analyze how their activities align with and contribute to specific SDGs targets.

Students are emerging as a powerful force in environmental activism around the world (1). This global trend highlights the growing importance of youth engagement in tackling environmental challenges (2). However, the specific forms of student environmental activism in Indonesia and their contributions towards achieving the SDGs remain under-researched. This gap in knowledge necessitates a closer examination of Indonesian student activism's role in promoting environmental sustainability.

The establishment of Earth Day can be attributed to student activism in response to a similar event. Dennis Hayes, for instance, organized teaching, rallies and demonstrations across the United States with the intention of encouraging environmental action (3). He collaborated with local governments, particularly representative Pete McCloskey of California, and their efforts resulted in more than 1,500 college campuses hosting environmental activist opportunities by 1970 (4). These events and demonstrations ultimately led to the establishment of the inaugural Earth Day in 1970, which has since become a significant annual observance, symbolizing our enduring dedication to environmental stewardship.

Younger generations of activists have become the driving force behind the environmental movement. Together, teenagers and college students have initiated legal proceedings against governments, engaged in public demonstrations, and organized large-scale voting campaigns with the objective of advancing environmental causes. For instance, Jennifer Willet, an assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Social Work, employed a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to collaborate with 15 high school students on a photographic documentation project (5,6). The objective was to capture the impact of environmental disasters in their communities. The students and Willet facilitated community discussions about the photos and drafted legislation as a means of acquiring practical experience in environmental activism. This project serves to illustrate the significance of engaging individuals in advocacy on behalf of the environment. Although Willet's project involved young people, it is evident that environmental activism necessitates the involvement of individuals from all age groups. The collaboration of young and old activists can facilitate the protection of the planet for future generations.

In the context of an appropriate environmental preservation campaign, students have the potential to play a role in improving or becoming agents of change in modifying people's attitudes towards the importance of environmental protection. While there is a growing body of literature on student environmental activism globally, there is a paucity of research investigating the specific strategies and contributions of university students in Indonesia towards achieving the SDGs. Although a significant number of university students are engaged in local environmental campaigns, there is a clear need for further research and a more focused approach to understanding how they can most effectively contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. The role of students in environmental activism has been relatively under-researched. When students do engage in environmental activism, it is often not widely publicised. Furthermore, there is a lack of attention paid to the sustainability of such activities in the long term.

The focus of youth activism is typically on topics that are close to their daily experiences and lives, with climate mitigation on a small or limited scale being the exception. Matters requiring a more systemic approach are left to other sectors. Capacity building (such as education, training and awareness raising) and social campaigning (protest actions and public engagement such as art, concerts and social media) are two most prominent forms of youth civic action among all topic categories related to the climate and environmental crisis. While some young people have direct access to policymakers, they are still constrained by bureaucratic and hierarchical structures (7). Furthermore, the involvement of young people from outside the government system in

policymaking is still uncommon due to the limited number of issues that can be discussed with the government and the assumption that young people lack the capacity to contribute effectively. Kusumaningrum et al. (7) posits that the aforementioned disparities can be mitigated by providing support to youth partners, facilitating young people in carrying out various forms of activism proportionately, strengthening the capacity of young people, fostering collaboration among young people and encouraging the creation of safe spaces for youth participation.

This research examines the strategic contribution of students at State University of Surabaya to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strengthening of this research will facilitate the development of more appropriate and measurable strategies to support the active role of students in achieving sustainable development goals in Indonesia.

2 Methods

This research employs a qualitative design (8), utilising in-depth interviews with student activist at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, State University of Surabaya. This approach enables researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives, motivations, and strategies employed by student activist in conducting environmental activism. The interviews are designed to reveal how the contributions of student activists can have an impact on achieving specific goals in the environmental context of their campus environment.

This study examines the specific forms of environmental activism undertaken by students at State University of Surabaya and analyses how these activities align with and contribute to the achievement of several specific goals. State University of Surabaya students are involved in various initiatives related to environmental activities, one of which is the planting of mangrove seedlings at Sontoh Laut Tourism in Surabaya City. The BEM Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, in collaboration with students belonging to the Social Studies Learning Forum, Geography Student Association, and Green Research Community, initiated environmental awareness activities with the objective of enhancing environmental literacy, motivating participants to engage with environmental issues, fostering awareness of the importance of environmental protection, and encouraging the millennial generation to prioritize environmental concerns. A detailed examination of these activities will demonstrate the extent to which students can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals, including environmental protection, increasing public awareness of environmental issues, and promoting sustainable consumption patterns.

3 Results and Discussion

The environmental activism of student organizations (Ormawa) at Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Surabaya State University has yielded positive outcomes and has contributed to the advancement of environmental sustainability. The environmental activism activities undertaken by Ormawa demonstrate the contribution of students to

environmental stewardship. One of the activities carried out by the Student Executive Board (BEM) of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences is the planting of mangrove seedlings in the Anjungan Village Asem Rowo Surabaya. This activity represents a tangible manifestation of student engagement with environmental sustainability. The planting of mangrove seeds by involving elements of the Surabaya student population and volunteers has a positive impact on the sustainability of the mangrove ecosystem and supports the realisation of the sustainable environment in accordance with the concept of SDGs. Furthermore, the environmental activism of the Ormawa has resulted in tangible actions aimed at the management of waste banks within the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. It is noteworthy that the management of waste banks carried out by student activists has been successful in forging collaborations with external parties beyond the University of Surabaya. This condition is in accordance with the initial study in 2020, where there were 110 'Z generation' respondents surveyed. More than 80% have high climate awareness (9). Young people's participation has an impact that influences activism among their peers. In line with global trends, youth climate activism has also become the spearhead for urging and monitoring environmental policies (10). This study is in line with the development goals of the SDGs, especially SDGs-13 related to climate action, SDGs-4 related to quality education, and SDGs-17 related to partnerships for goals. Basically, this study emphasizes the role of young people, especially students, in achieving sustainable development (11).

Based on interviews with students engaged in environmental activism, this study identified challenges and opportunities for environmental activism, both waste bank-based and through Ormawa in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. The main motive for environmental activism driven by one of the members of the student organization (BEM) is derived from his personal experience as an environmental activist outside the campus. He frequently engages in activities related to environmental activism, including volunteering with the *Masyarakat Relawan Indonesia* (MRI) community. The most tangible outcomes of these activities have been the establishment of numerous social networks with stakeholders and fellow environmental activists, as well as with communities engaged in environmental issues outside the campus. These networks have been formed due to shared concerns about environmental conditions.



Fig. 1. BEM, FBI, HMP Geografi, and Green Research Community Tangible Actions in Anjungan Village Asem Rowo (2024)

The endeavours of environmental activists to cultivate awareness and influence students to become more environmentally conscious are driven by their aspiration to extend activism beyond the campus setting. One of the tangible outcomes of the BEM has been the planting of mangrove seedlings in Asem Rowo Village. The activity was carried out in collaboration with several organizations within the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, including the *Forum Belajar IPS* (FBI), *Himpunan Mahasiswa Prodi Pendidikan Geografi* (HMP Geografi), and the Green Research Community. In addition to collaborations within the university, the mangrove seedling planting activities have also involved external parties, including volunteers from the MRI, Surabaya volunteers, *Rumah Zakat* volunteers, and the local Environmental Office. The environmental activism activities were successfully carried out and are expected to increase the awareness of State University of Surabaya students regarding the importance of protecting and preserving the surrounding environment. The activity is noteworthy for its departure from the conventional lecture format and its embodiment of the environmental activism movement in practice.

Nevertheless, environmental activism in State University of Surabaya continues to face significant challenges and weaknesses, particularly in the areas of student support and campus structural institutions. Not all students are inclined to relocate and are therefore disinclined to engage in environmental activism activities. The findings of an interview with one of the research sources indicate that students are more interested in activities such as demonstrations and other organizational activities that are not directly related to environmental issues. This is because students may consider activities related to the environment to be less appealing when presented on their social media platforms. In contrast to action activities such as demonstrations, students are more inclined to participate in these activities because they enable them to demonstrate their commitment to activism and to present themselves as active members of an organization on their social media profiles. It can be observed that only a limited number of students are genuinely interested in participating in environmental activism activities, given their awareness and concern for the environment. The lack of robust institutional support for environmental activists at Unesa presents a significant challenge to the effective implementation of their initiatives.

With regard to the aforementioned statement, the conceptualisation of environmental activism is less substantiated by studies pertaining to the natural environment. This is attributable to the absence of institutional support for the provision of open discussion forums dedicated to the examination of environmental concerns. The campus exhibits a lack of attention to the significance of open discourse and research pertaining to environmental concerns. To date, the campus has primarily engaged in academic research. Indeed, it is imperative that students be provided with the opportunity to engage in studies and open discussions pertaining to environmental issues, with the aim of fostering concern for the condition of the surrounding environment. Those engaged in environmental activism often encounter a lack of support from the campus, particularly in the form of inadequate funding for activities from the faculty. The campus structural institutions are less inclined to provide financial support for environmentally oriented activities to Ormawa. Activities conducted by Ormawa, particularly those pertaining to environmental activism, tend to receive less attention from the Faculty. When the

Ormawa wishes to undertake activities pertaining to environmental activism, it encounters difficulties in obtaining the requisite funding. This presents a significant challenge to the efficacy of environmental activism at State University of Surabaya, as the campus is expected to provide financial resources to support such activities. However, it is notable that the campus structural institutions have demonstrated a lack of attention to this matter.

To date, the environmental activism movement undertaken by one of the student organizations in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences has not been supported by scientific studies. One of the reasons for this is the scepticism towards theory and the preference for the practical aspect, which is pursued directly in the field outside the campus. The value of scientific studies lies in their capacity to foster awareness and understanding of environmental issues among students. It is not sufficient for environmental activism to be limited to direct practice, it is also necessary to campaign for environmental issues through scientific studies, joint discussions, or focus group discussions (FGDs) (12). It is possible to cultivate students' awareness of the environment through scientific studies and joint discussions. Environmental activists from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences must ascertain the initial views and opinions of students regarding the environment. Scientific studies can facilitate the acquisition of new ideas from students about what they require and what they must do to enhance their concern for the surrounding environment.

A current phenomenon at State University of Surabaya is the apparent lack of student interest in environmental activism. Students tend to favour activities that can be uploaded to social media, such as demonstrations that demonstrate their presence on campus as campus organizers. Furthermore, contemporary social movements initiated by student organizations tend to be more vocal in expressing criticism through social media than taking tangible action within the community. The shift in the space of movement and paradigm of student organizations that are more active on social media can be described as 'slacktivism' (13). The concept of slacktivism can be defined as an activist movement conducted through social media that does not result in significant changes in real life, but has high levels of participation in virtual spaces (14,15). In the context of the State University of Surabaya student organization, this can be observed in the form of a greater focus on social media-based social movements, which has led to a decline in student interest in environmental activism activities.

4 Conclusion

The findings of the research conducted to date are as follows. The environmental activism undertaken by student organizations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, State University of Surabaya has yielded favourable outcomes and has had a discernible impact on environmental sustainability. These environmental activists endeavor to cultivate environmental awareness and inspire students to prioritize environmental concerns by integrating external activism into the campus environment. One of the tangible actions undertaken by the BEM of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences is the planting of mangrove seedlings in Asem Rowo Village. The activity was conducted in

collaboration with several organizations within the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, including the FBI, HMP Geography Education, and the Green Research Community. Nevertheless, environmental activism at State University of Surabaya continues to confront significant challenges and shortcomings, particularly in terms of student engagement and the support of campus structural institutions. Additionally, the concept of environmental activism is not as strongly endorsed by environmental-related academic disciplines. This is due to the absence of institutional support for open discussion forums that examine environmental issues. The campus exhibits a lack of attention to the significance of open discourse and research concerning environmental matters. Additionally, there is a dearth of student engagement with environmental activism. Students tend to prioritize activities that generate interest on social media, which may contribute to a reduced inclination towards activism.

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