

Urban International Conference
*Poverty in Medium and Small Cities
of Developing Countries*
Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences
UN-Habitat
Brussels, 26-28 October, 2009
pp. 247-254.

Urban Food Security in a Violent Setting. Case Study: The Town of Ambon, Indonesia

by

Jeroen ADAM*

KEYWORDS. — Urban Food Security; Conflict; Informal Economy; Ambon-Indonesia.
SUMMARY. — This article deals with the reorganization of food distribution networks in an urban context characterized by high-intensity violence. This will be described through a case study on the Indonesian town of Ambon which was subject to an interreligious conflict from 1999 until 2002. First, it will be shown how a spatial restructuring of food distribution networks unfolded. Secondly, due to a dramatic economic decline ensuing from this conflict, major parts of the population were forced to revert to income generation strategies in informal economies. Therefore, selling in new petty food markets came to serve as the most important mechanisms to cope with increasing food insecurity.

Introduction

Urban food security has long been simplified as a matter of food production. This reduction of food security to food productivity was clearly reflected in the many green revolution plans that were implemented in many Third-World countries during the seventies. Because food security was primordially understood as a rural issue, research on food security in urban contexts remained scarce (ATKINSON 1995). This gradually started to change from the eighties onwards after the work done by Amartya SEN (1981) on the political economy of famines. The insights provided by Sen and others after him shifted the general paradigm of studies on food security from issues of supply towards issues of demand. As a consequence, socially conditioned aspects of access and entitlements gained an increasing importance. Together with this renewed focus came a second shift in which food security was increasingly

* Conflict Research Group, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, B-9000 Ghent (Belgium).

studied at the household level (MAXWELL 2001). Due to this burgeoning literature which tries to understand food security as a matter of access at the household level of society, there also emerged a rising interest in urban food security. As a consequence, evidence gathered illustrated that urban residents face some specific vulnerabilities towards food insecurity. For instance, in many urban environments of the world, urban residents are more dependent on a cash economy and marketing activities that are often subject to external fluctuations (MAXWELL 1999, RUEL 2001). The implication for the food security of urban residents is that they are obliged to trade commodities or services for food and thus food security is largely defined by the interplay between income and the price of food.

Although there is a growing body of literature on urban food security, our understanding of food security in urban settings characterized by high-intensity violence remains limited as most studies are conducted in relatively stable environments. Starting from this observation, this article offers a tentative answer to the question how trade networks and petty markets are reorganized in urban contexts characterized by high-intensity violence. More specifically, it will be illustrated how petty food markets came to serve a dual function to cope with increasing food insecurity in an urban conflict zone. Firstly, due to a high level of insecurity, long-standing informal petty markets were no longer reachable for certain parts of the population. Therefore, the spatial restructuring of informal petty markets and food distribution networks unfolded as an essential prerogative guaranteeing many people a basic food security. Secondly, due to a dramatic economic decline ensuing the conflict, major parts of the population were forced to revert to income generation strategies in informal economies such as the petty marketing of food crops. In this regard, the spatial reorganization of petty food markets in a context of high-intensity violence brought about particular economic incentives for new actors to involve in food distribution, hereby trying to guarantee a relatively sustainable food security.

The City as a Battlefield: Violence and Displacement

The town of Ambon, capital of the Indonesian province of Maluku and consisting of about two hundred fifty thousand people (BPS 2007), constitutes an ideal case study to understand how sudden high-intensity violence affects traditional systems of petty food markets in relation to food security in an urban context. From 1999 until 2002, this city was subject to a high-intensity conflict between Christians and Muslims. The reasons for the out-

break of this communal conflict have to be sought in a process of profound political transformation that started after the fall of the authoritarian New Order in May 1998 (BERTRAND 2004, VAN KLINCKEN 2007). Of particular importance in this regard is the long-standing competition between a Protestant and a Muslim power block to access positions in the state bureaucracy. Although this competition had always been at play, in particular the fall of the Suharto-led New Order in May 1998 pitted these two rivaling networks against each other and ultimately resulted in a harsh and long-term conflict. One of the most prominent manifestations of this interreligious conflict was a massive forced migration. It is generally estimated that about one third of the total Moluccan population became internally displaced at the height of the conflict (MASON 2001, ICG 2002). In particular the town of Ambon was subject to a dramatic mass migration that finally resulted in the creation of a monoreligious Muslim and Christian part with a border that could hardly be crossed for years. Geographically, Muslims were pushed aside in the inner town near the harbour and the important Mardika market. The Christians, on the other hand, occupied the surrounding hills. By early 2001, these large-scale evictions came to an end, resulting in a military deadlock with a fixed frontline between the warring parties (fig. 1).

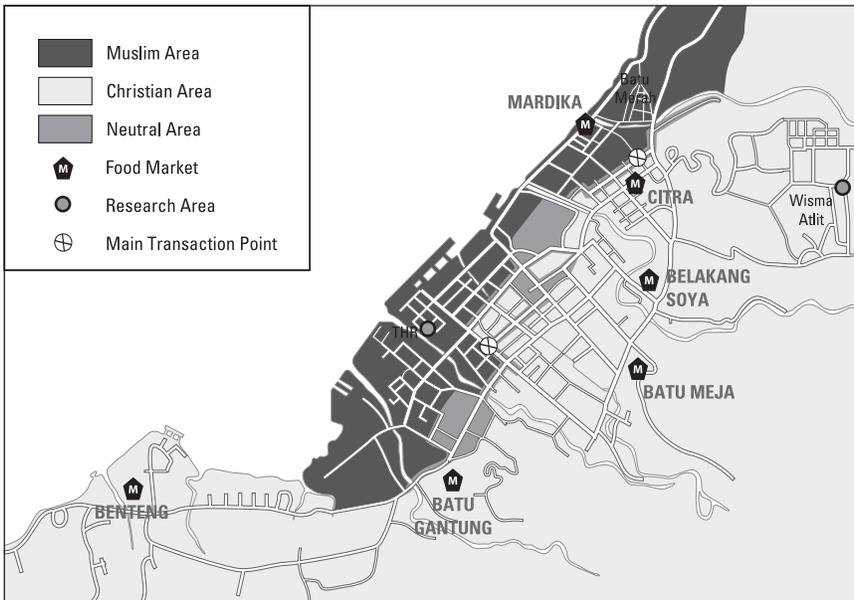


Fig. 1. — Religious composition and petty trade in the city of Ambon (1999-2002).

Food Distribution in Ambon

Coming to grips with issues of food security in Ambon, it is essential to differentiate between primary staple food such as rice and foods such as fresh vegetables and fresh fish, containing essential micronutrients. During the conflict there never was a serious threat to become deprived of essential staple food. As Ambon is the political and economic centre of the Moluccas, the town became the main operating base for NGOs and government agencies working in the region. Consequently, rice reached the town relatively quick following the start of the violence. This points to one of the specificities about urban food security in an environment characterized by high-intensity violence. Urban residents tend to have a direct access to food aid and only in few cases become threatened by hunger. However, as the food aid merely consisted of basic staple food, urban residents in Ambon still faced vulnerabilities in terms of access to fresh foods.

Evidently, a context of high-intensity violence and massive forced evictions brought about a fundamental reorganization of the networks distributing these foods. Of particular importance in this regard is the location of the *Mardika* market which traditionally served as the focal point for the distribution of high-quality foods such as fish, meat and fresh vegetables (see fig. 1). These foods were both imported and locally produced. The imported crops were brought by ship to the harbour of Ambon and were then further distributed by middlemen to urban street merchants. The local food crops were largely produced by the Muslim Butonese community living on the island of Ambon but originating from neighbouring Sulawesi. Their focus on the cultivation of vegetables instead of perennial crops goes back to the fact that the migrant Butonese community in Ambonese customary law, holds a secondary position in which they can only obtain insecure users' rights (BENDA BECKMANN 1990). As a consequence, they cultivate short-term crops that do not require a strong financial investment and are therefore less risk-prone in case ownership over the land becomes contested. These vegetables were then sold at local markets such as the important *Mardika* market, most of the time by urban Muslim residents. In some cases, Muslim Butonese also sold their produce directly at the market in Ambon without the interference of these middlemen.

Survival Strategies in Times of Crisis: Selling Food to Eat

Quickly after the outbursts of first riots in the beginning of 1999, the area where the *Mardika* market and the harbour was situated became a zone that

was no longer reachable for Christians. As a consequence, Christians — consisting of half of the urban population — became deprived of their traditional access to food. In contrast to many other parts of the world (MAXWELL 1999, TINSLEY 2003, ASHEBIR *et al.* 2007), attempts to start cultivating crops in small gardens remained utterly limited due to the high level of enduring violence, mass migration movements and a high population density. As a consequence, Christians were forced to set up alternative trade networks with the Muslim part of the population. At a first level, alternative systems of distribution between the Muslim and the Christian population came into being. These transactions came to be known as *tangan ketiga* or ‘third-hand transactions’. Important in this regard is that the total dependency of the Christian population on these trade networks for their basic food provision made them extremely vulnerable to acts of extortion. In many cases, the army had to be paid to provide the necessary protection in order to make the transactions possible. In other cases, extortion networks attempted to monopolize the food trade between Muslims and Christians, hereby reaping the profits and pushing up the prices of food crops in the Christian areas.

At a second level, once these food crops reached the Christian area, these were then further distributed by small-scale merchants. As a consequence, there emerged a plethora of new markets or so-called *pasar kaget* (casual/accidental markets), which then further distributed these food crops through informal petty trade. All the food petty markets on figure 1, which are situated in the Christian part of town, came into being shortly after the outbreak of the conflict. The access to these newly established petty food markets came to serve as one of the primary ways to cope with an increasing food insecurity. As sketched in the introduction, food security in urban areas is largely determined by the interplay between the level of income and the price of food. The mere existence of food markets is therefore not the sole prerequisite guaranteeing a sustainable level of food security and a decline in income is directly translated into a rise in vulnerability to food insecurity when alternatives to meet food demand from own production are confined. This was clearly the case in Ambon where a second shock induced by the outburst of violence which heavily affected food security was a general fall in the income for major parts of the population. This was further aggravated by an already declining economy due to the Southeast Asian financial crisis and its grave national spin-off to Indonesia. In the whole of the province of Maluku, 40 % of the entire workforce employed in the industrial and manufacturing sectors lost their job (MAWDSLEY 2005). Due to this near-implosion of the formal economy, major parts of the population in Ambon

faced a vast decline in their income, which was translated into increased food insecurity. Many people in Ambon tried to deal with this higher level of food insecurity by increasing the income through alternative income generation strategies in the informal sector of the economy (ADAM & PEILOUW 2008). The most important example of the growing importance of the informal economy in the town of Ambon was the rising popularity of petty trade. Whereas before the conflict Ambon had one petty food market, at the height of the conflict there existed around a dozen of these markets or *pasar kaget*, particularly in the Christian part of town. In this regard, selling food to eat became one of the foremost mechanisms to cope with an increasing food insecurity.

Conclusion

This article aims to offer a preliminary answer to the question how trade networks and petty markets are reorganized in contexts of high-intensity violence considering their primordial role in urban food security. As a case study, I have focused on the town of Ambon that from 1999 until 2002 was subject to chronic violence and was divided between a Christian and Muslim part that could not be crossed for years.

Because cities are often the operating base for food aid agencies working in conflict regions, urban residents have a very direct access to food aid and only in few cases become threatened by real hunger. However, as food aid merely consists of basic staple food such as rice, urban residents still face vulnerabilities in terms of access to fresh foods of higher quality, containing essential micronutrients. In the meantime, urban residents face some particular vulnerabilities because their opportunities to use subsistence strategies are limited. This is particularly true in cities that are plagued by high-intensity violence. This implies that urban residents in conflict-torn cities become increasingly dependent on food markets for the provision of their fresh food crops.

Yet, access to food markets is limited or even totally blocked for certain parts of the population. In Ambon, this was the case for the Christian population as both food production and food distribution were largely dominated by the Muslim part of the population. As a consequence, alternative networks and food petty markets were established. This food was then further retailed through numerous informal petty markets in which people at the lower class level of society became involved. The total dependence on these alternative trade networks put the Christian population in an extremely vulnerable

position towards certain networks that attempted to monopolize and extort these transactions. On the other hand, in an apparently contradictory way, the involvement of people in these alternative food petty markets came to serve as one of the foremost ways to cope with an increasing food insecurity. The conflict in Ambon induced an overall economic decline which ultimately increased food insecurity for a majority of the urban population. To cope with these financial problems, people took up alternative income generation strategies in the informal economy such as retailing functions in food petty markets. These newly established markets therefore came to serve as a dual function to cope with increasing food insecurity as both an essential provision of food and a way to increase the income to be able to buy the necessary food crops.

REFERENCES

- ADAM, J. & PEILOUW, L. 2008. Internal Displacement and Household Strategies for Income Generation: A Case Study in Ambon, Indonesia. — *Social Development Issues*, **30** (2): 78-90.
- ASHEBIR, D., PASQUINI, M. & BIHON, W. 2007. Urban agriculture in Mekelle, Tigray state, Ethiopia: Principal characteristics, opportunities and constraints for further research and development. — *Cities*, **24** (3): 218-228.
- ATKINSON, S. J. 1995. Approaches and Actors in Urban Food Security in Developing Countries. — *Habitat International*, **19** (2): 151-163.
- BERTRAND, J. 2004. Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia. — Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 278 pp.
- Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Provinsi Maluku 2007. Maluku Dalam Angka 2007. — Ambon, BPS Provinsi Maluku, 365 pp.
- BENDA BECKMANN, F. (VON) 1990. Ambonese Adat as Jurisprudence of Insurgency and Oppression. — In: KUPPE, R. & POTZ, R. (Eds.), Law and Anthropology. The Hague-Boston-London, Martinus Nijhoff, *International Yearbook for Legal Anthropology*, **5**: 25-42.
- International Crisis Group (ICG) 2002. Indonesia: The search for peace in Maluku. — Brussels-New York, ICG Asia Report No. 31, 35 pp.
- MASON, J. 2001. Shadow Plays. The Crisis of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Indonesia. — Washington, US Committee for Refugees, 44 pp.
- MAWDSLEY, N. 2005. Pembangunan Ekonomi Lokal, Sumber Daya Alam dan Penghidupan, Maluku Utara, Maluku dan Sulawesi Tengah. — Jakarta, United Nations Development Program (http://www.undp.or.id/programme/cpr/documents/LED%20and%20NRM_Final_Apr%202005-pdf_INA.pdf).
- MAXWELL, D. 1999. The Political Economy of Urban Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa. — *World Development*, **27** (11): 1939-1953.
- MAXWELL, D. 2001. The evolution of thinking about food security. — In: DEVEREUX, S. & MAXWELL, S. (Eds.), Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bourton Hall, ITDG Publishing, pp. 13-32.

- RUEL, M. T. 2001. Urban Challenges to food and nutrition security: A review of food security, health, and caregiving in the cities. — Washington, Food Consumption and Nutrition Division Discussion Paper No. 51, 129 pp.
- SEN, A. 1981. Poverty and Famines: An essay of Entitlement and Deprivation. — Oxford, Clarendon Press, 276 pp.
- TINSLEY, J. 2003. Urban Agriculture and Sustainable Livelihoods. — *Peace Review*, **15** (3): 295-299.
- VAN KLINKEN, G. 2007. Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia. Small town wars. — New York-London, Routledge, 180 pp.