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Family planning in Indonesia: A source of far-reaching controversy; A rejoinder to Breman and White

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 152 (1996), no: 1, Leiden, 148-151

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# Family Planning in Indonesia: A Source of Far-Reaching Controversy

## A Rejoinder to Breman and White

In response to my review of the book *Development and Social Welfare: Indonesia's Experiences under the New Order* in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151-3 (1995:459-61), Breman and White suggest that the review was used largely as a vehicle for venting my dissatisfaction at the criticism and critics of the Indonesian family planning programme. In point of fact, one third of the offending review is devoted to the subjects of population and family planning, and two thirds to a discussion of the structure of the book and an indication of its contents. Clearly, a standard-length review of a book containing nineteen papers and representing even more authors can never be comprehensive and satisfying to all (the reviewer herself included). As demographic change and family planning are important items indeed of Indonesia's New Order policies and development planning, they deserve especially close attention. I wish to point out in this connection that it was not me but White who first drew Breman into the discussion, referring to him as 'a prominent Dutch sociologist'.

The second point I would like to discuss is the repercussions of the controversy about family planning in Indonesia for the crisis in the bilateral relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands. For a sound judgement on this matter, it is imperative for the events referred to by Breman and White to be placed in their proper chronological order and historical context. Hence the following recapitulation of events.

1990

– Indonesian press reports appear about coercion, and notably about men allegedly being threatened with forced sterilization in rural Bandung. The case is investigated by an Australian team (for whose report the interested reader is referred to Hull 1991).

– Articles by Breman appear in *Onze Wereld* (Breman 1990a, 1990b), which are both one-sided and, on several points, incorrect. A telling example of the latter is Breman's mistaking the tetanus immunization injections for women at marriage (as part of the neonatal tetanus prevention programme) for compulsory contraceptive injections. The letters of several Indonesian and Dutch experts reacting to these articles are printed either in a drastically reduced version or not at all. Breman, for

his part, does much to spoil the chances of a serious debate. Instead of admitting his mistake about the compulsory contraceptive injections, he reacts by ridiculing his critics or casting doubts on their integrity. My own ill-fated response to Breman's second article is consequently published in the information bulletin of the World Population Foundation in the Netherlands (Niehof 1991).

### 1991

– *February*. The Netherlands delegation to the bilateral discussions on development assistance informs its Indonesian host that there has been a decision in The Hague to suspend all cooperation in the field of family planning because of reports about coercion. The Indonesians are surprised and angry at this decision for two reasons. Cooperation between the two countries in this field is long-standing and has developed through a process of mutual consultation. An official Dutch mission sent to Indonesia to evaluate bilateral assistance to the Indonesian family planning programme has moreover written a positive report on this programme only six months previously. Although this report also contained some critical comments on the quality of the programme, these were followed up by the Indonesians without any problems. To make matters worse, the Indonesian President has received a UN award for his country's successful population policy not long before.

– *May*. The Hague sends the Postel-Holzner mission to Indonesia to review family planning cooperation in the light of the new official Dutch guidelines as laid down in the policy document entitled *Wereld van verschil* (World of Difference). Though the mission is politely received, the Indonesians are puzzled. What is there to discuss when a decision has already been taken and projects have been stopped? It amounts – unlike the Australian approach – to a trial after the verdict. The accusation in the report of this mission that 'concern for women's health was totally absent in the mental framework underlying the family planning programme' adds fuel to the flames of the Indonesians' indignation at the Dutch handling of the issue.

To correct Breman and White in this connection, I would underline that I was never officially consulted by this mission, which indeed surprised me at the time.

– *September*. The WIVS study day on the subject of population and family planning in Indonesia is held. Though most interesting, it is too late to have any policy impact, in view of the decision by The Hague in February. Moreover, the event attracts a primarily academic audience, which does not carry much political weight anyway.

– *November*. The Dili massacre.

1992

– *January*. In The Hague the decision is taken to resume cooperation in the field of population and family planning.

– *March*. Indonesia decides to renounce all development assistance from the Netherlands.

Being employed at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, I had firsthand information on the communications between the governments of Indonesia and the Netherlands on the subject, and know that the Indonesians explicitly cited the way The Hague had decided to suspend family planning cooperation in February 1991 as an example of what they found reprehensible about the Dutch approach to Indonesian-Dutch bilateral development cooperation.

What followed was a dramatic exodus of Dutch experts and their families from Indonesia, a loss of jobs for many more Indonesians, and a premature end to many promising projects.

I am not saying that the Dili affair did not play a major role in the crisis, or that Dutch criticism on this subject was unwarranted. I only wish to make it clear that the family planning controversy definitely contributed to the deterioration of the bilateral relations, culminating in the crisis.

To come to the issue of coercion, I wish it to be understood that I, too, feel that rumours about coercion and intimidation should be taken seriously and investigated. My point is, however, as I have indicated before, that one should distinguish between policy and implementation. In the Indonesian family planning programme, coercion is neither officially sanctioned nor tolerated. In this it differs in principle from India's population policies particularly in the 1970s and from China's present population policy. Therefore incidents involving coercion, such as the alleged 'insertion of contraceptive devices at gunpoint', should be dealt with in Indonesia itself, instead of being discussed at international workshops with a view to discrediting the programme as a whole in the absence of further evidence.

So-called safaris have been a major bone of contention in the debate, and understandably so, as these can be very intimidating. However, safaris serve a variety of purposes in a country with a poor infrastructure and limited resources, as I have explained in the paper referred to by Breman and White. Why they find this explanation an 'intriguing defence' of the institution is beyond my comprehension.

As for my 'usual [?] attack on "feminist" critiques of Indonesian family planning', I have dealt with this question in a subtler way than is implied by the phrase quoted. Furthermore, I did so not for the sake of polemics but from a genuine concern about the possible negative consequences of propagating particular Western feminist views for the accessibility of contraceptive means to Indonesian women. The reader may judge for her-

or himself by consulting the sources which Breman and White have kindly listed.

I used the terms 'period piece' and 'historical document' with reference to the book in question, finally, because it reflects a chapter in Dutch-Indonesian relations which was closed in March 1992. The period covered by the book coincides with an era in the bilateral relationship which was dominated by Dutch development assistance to Indonesia. Most academic cooperation was funded by the Dutch development budget, with many graduates finding employment through or in development cooperation. This is now no longer possible. An example is the discontinuation of the Indonesian Studies Programme, which among other things provided opportunities for a considerable number of Dutch students to do M.A. and Ph.D. research and practical course work in Indonesia, as well as fellowships for Indonesian graduates. Nor is it possible for Indonesians to benefit from the WOTRO fellowship programme for graduates from developing countries any longer, because the budget of this programme is funded by Dutch development assistance. Although it may be true that Dutch-Indonesian cooperation can still take place in *some* fields, the conditions have changed irreversibly. For academic cooperation between Indonesia and the Netherlands in particular, the lack of funding possibilities now imposes a serious constraint.

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