IDEAS Indonesia
Re-Building a Nation by Building Trust Among Its People

The IDEAS program (Innovative Dynamic Education and Action for Sustainability) emerged from the United in Diversity Conference in Bali in 2003. Attended by 400 national and global leaders who gathered in support of Indonesia’s sustainable development, the conference was spearheaded by Cherie Nursalim, who is a primary co-founder of United in Diversity (UID) Forum and Executive Director of Giti Group, a Singapore-based industrial conglomerate. UID serves as an educational platform and a catalyst for trust-building and cooperation among business, the public sector, and civil society.

Ms. Nursalim knew of similar work done by MIT Sloan’s Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge in a program called ELIAS (Emerging Leaders Innovate Across Sectors) – an initiative that brought together global companies, NGOs, and governments in developing countries – and arranged for three participants from Indonesia to attend. The experience of these first three people – a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Trade, a CEO of a media company, and the Executive Director of UID – led to the development of the larger IDEAS program. Part leadership training and part spiritual transformation, IDEAS is designed to help participants from drastically diverse backgrounds put aside their differences and learn to work together toward a common goal of building a better future for Indonesia. “I learned to reframe problems as opportunities, to see and respond to root issues, not symptoms; and I learned how not just to work with diversity, but also to see it as essential to solutions,” says Sri Agustina (Srie), who is Head of Center for Small and Medium Industries at the Indonesia Ministry of Trade.

Since its first democratic election in 2004, Indonesia has seen remarkable economic growth and political stability. However, the preceding centuries’ legacy of bad governance and high unemployment, and the devastating natural disasters and acts of terrorism in recent decades continue to erode trust and good will, particularly between government, private business, and civil society. Luckily, Indonesian people are friendly by nature and are open to working together, given an opportunity.

The program participants, or Fellows, are drawn from every sector of society – government officials, civil-society leaders, business executives, academics, lawyers, media moguls, journalists, grass-roots activists, members of non-governmental organizations – as well as from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, the cohorts are limited to thirty people, ten from each major sector, to foster close collaborations. Over the course of a year, IDEAS Fellows spend thirty days in classroom and experiential education sessions. They learn the new social technology called “Theory U” based on...
the work of Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge; systems dynamics – a method of solving challenges presented by complex systems – a concept first introduced in the 1950s by the MIT Sloan Professor Jay Forrester; and “bridging leadership,” an approach developed by the Synergos Foundation, a US-based non-profit that is kindred in spirit to UID. “The tools, the application, the action learning that’s what we are building on. Then we add the relational dimension, the capacity to empathize, capacity to relate, and capacity to transform challenging and critical relationships,” explains Scharmer.

The program is delivered both in Indonesia and Cambridge and incorporates action learning, drawing on MIT Sloan’s unique approach that integrates theory, real-world practice, and personal reflection. Fellows develop and build prototypes of the kinds of change projects they mean to undertake in their chosen areas. Subsequently, they are expected to continue to apply the approach to wider and wider sets of issues, scaling up their prototypes, and thereby creating positive change that would affect the whole country.

The program is working. One pilot project has helped to end corruption in a region with an initiative designed to be a model for the entire nation. Another pilot led to a reorganization of a large national bank to start offering financial services to previously underserved low-income population. Yet another pilot resulted in boosting Indonesian national pride among the country’s youth. Over the years, the IDEAS Fellows have created a powerful network of leaders committed to transformation and equipped with the knowledge and practical tools to do so. “An effective leader is a leader that can sense and shape the future, visualizing emerging possibilities. And that’s what we try to teach people,” says Scharmer.

Business leaders credit their experience with IDEAS as a contribution to financial growth. “During this time, our company has reached the one billion market cap for the first time – and I think this IDEAS process really was part of that,” says Chris Chan, CEO of GT Tires. Another IDEAS Fellow V.P. Sharma, Vice President and Director of “MAP” (operating over 300 brands in Indonesia, including Starbucks) attributes his company’s recent extraordinary growth to the changes in management style – especially the practice of deep listening and prototyping – that he learned during the ten months of training and practice. “We had high expectations, but what has resulted was even more inspiring. We have been humbled by what the faculty have created, the support of the amazing team at Exec Ed, and the Sloan senior management. It’s a very deep friendship,” notes Nursalim.

Thanks to the program’s far-reaching positive impact, it has become increasingly popular and the Fellows nomination waiting list is now well into the hundreds. IDEAS Indonesia has been featured in many talks and presentations given by Cherie Nursalim at economic development conferences around the world. It is also the subject of an upcoming book by Dr. Jane Pratt, an environmentalist and former Chief of Environmental Operations and Strategy at the World Bank, “The Start of Something Big! or: How to Change the World One Country at a Time.”

“I learned to suspend judgment. Before, I also was cynical and distrusted the government. But after knowing the good will of so many government people here, I learned that if you commit, no one can stop you. I hope I can continue with commitment to make a better life for my family, for my community, and for my beautiful country of Indonesia.”

Arief Patramijaya
Famous in Indonesia as Patra M. Zen
IDEAS Fellow