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Living together beyond liberal democracy: examples of local decision-making and managing resource extractivism in Indonesia

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This article combines literature and insights from three different fields: comparative political thought, comparative politics, and area studies. It highlights critical gaps in empirical democracy studies and advocates for more encompassing notions of democracy and deeper integration with post-development, ecofeminist, and democratic economic planning perspectives. Indonesia's post-reform liberal democracy has facilitated elite-driven resource extraction, allowing a small circle of oligarchs to convert the country's rich natural resources into private wealth at the expense of rural communities. This elite capture has led to widespread dispossession and environmental degradation, particularly in regions heavily exploited for natural resources. This study uses interviews, observations, and discourse analysis to examine how the term "demokrasi" has been appropriated by elites as a tool for legitimizing resource extraction and to discuss collective decision-making in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The article offers empirical insights into local critiques of top-down political and economic structures and shows how communities are cultivating alternative, collective decision-making practices. Key actors in this shift are rural women who have established platforms for political education, challenging the androcentric norms that have been marginalizing them. Against mapping the blind spots of the post-Suharto Indonesian variant of liberal democracy, we argue that more nuanced and inclusive democratic models that foreground economic decisions and include hitherto marginalized citizens can better explain autocratization while highlighting alternative paths toward democratization.

KEYWORDS

democracy, Indonesia, extractivism, decision-making, Southeast Asia (SE Asia), liberal democracy crisis, autocratization, political participation

1 Introduction

The focus of our study is the struggle of a local community in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, against resource exploitation, and how studying this and similar cases can make contributions to empirical and theoretical democracy research. We highlight the benefits of expanding beyond narrow understandings of liberal democracy and directing more analytical attention to alternative forms of collective decision-making. Our study discusses collective decision-making in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, to offer insights into how local communities, particularly rural women, challenge elite-driven political and economic structures. Specifically, we show how traditional participatory mechanisms such as

musyawarah (deliberation) and *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) serve as tools for resisting resource exploitation and reimagining governance. By highlighting alternative democratic practices that integrate economic planning and ecological sustainability, this study contributes to an emerging field: theoretically reflected empirical studies of democracy beyond liberal democracy, located at the intersection of democratic theory, comparative politics, and area studies. This field seeks to reinvigorate empirical democracy studies, which has for several decades mainly focused on liberal iterations of democracy and their promotion without seriously incorporating questions of economic planning and the finite character of natural resources. Since the early 2000s, empirical democracy research has relied heavily on democracy indices which measure political procedures and their outcomes against pre-defined ideals of liberal democracy and discuss their possibilities of expansion. The so-called crisis of liberal democracy in the mid-2010s, marked by events like Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, and the rise of strongman leaders and nationalism, has raised questions about the ability of established theoretical and empirical democracy studies to address these developments (Selk, 2023, p. 96).

Scholars across different fields have been conducting research on democracy beyond the liberal procedural and institutional focus by studying various understandings of democracy, inter alia in different languages and historical contexts. In political theory, the relatively small field of comparative democratic theory studies notions of democracy outside the Western canon (Schubert and Weiß, 2016; Dallmayr, 2017; Weiss, 2020). In comparative political science, some scholars have used a focus on language and context-sensitive qualitative methods to study various notions of democracy (Schaffer, 1997, 2000, 2014; Hu, 2018). A loosely connected network across sub-disciplines has been bridging the theoretical-empirical divide and discussing the multivocality of democracy in relatively young journals such as *Democratic Theory* and *The Annual Review for the Sciences of Democracy*, and in the "Loop," a blog published by the European Consortium for Political Science (The Loop, 2024). Within this impetus, this article heeds the call for "finding better role models for democracy" (Gagnon and Beausoleil, 2023, p. 8). Its contributions thereby lie in (1) providing empirical details about ongoing discussions among local communities in Central Sulawesi about the limits and inadequacies of liberal democracy, and in (2) demonstrating how local communities seek to counter the top-down discourse and practices of liberal democracy by cultivating local alternatives of collective decision-making practices, and in (3) pointing at ways in which empirical work on such iterations of deliberative democracy can improve established scholarship on democratization and autocratization. The empirical material highlights gaps in the field of empirical democracy studies and illustrates the urgency of connecting this field to debates in the field of post-development studies, ecofeminism, and democratic economic planning. The central political actors in our case study are rural women who have been creating alternative structures for political education and engagement, aiming to reshape and challenge the prevailing androcentric structures.

Indonesia's variant of liberal democracy has continued authoritarian patterns that enable elites to transform the country's rich resources into private wealth (Hadiz, 2003; Robison and Hadiz, 2004), while disadvantaging large parts of the population, particularly rural communities affected by extensive resource exploitation. Large parts of the empirical research on democracy in Indonesia throughout the 2000s and 2010s concentrated too heavily on liberal institutions—such as elections, the Constitutional Court, and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)—overlooking the persistent, underlying use of state structures by political elites and the impact of these dynamics on the wider population. More refined analytical concepts of democracy that foregrounds economic questions cannot only help explain the causes of autocratization but also help identify potential avenues for democratization. To develop such concepts, cases such as the one we discuss below offer useful empirical material.

We argue that democracy research can only meaningfully describe and explain autocratization and democratization with concepts of democracy that include (1) economic planning that redistributes resources equitably, (2) ecological sustainability, and (3) the empowerment of marginalized voices, for instance as in our case study rural women. Without these items, democracy research is reduced to a small set of institutions and elites and thus analytically insufficient.

We show that the Indonesian term "demokrasi" has for a long time been part of state parlance. As such, the term "demokrasi" has also been used as an instrument for resource exploitation on the part of elites. Consequently, among some, the term has thus lost some of its credibility for emancipatory efforts. To understand Indonesia's democratic stagnation and its new autocratic tendencies, we need to understand how the promises of "democracy" were broken in the 2000s and 2010s.

Observers categorize Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, as a "compromised" variant of liberal democracy (Mietzner, 2024). Since the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998, Indonesia made substantial progress in democratization during the 2000s and early 2010s but this progress stagnated due to persistent political corruption, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the resurgence of authoritarian practices. Indonesia's gradual, almost incremental autocratization developed under a President, Joko Widodo (usually called Jokowi), who many observers originally considered as a pluralist and a hope-bearer when he became president in 2014. Many saw in the former businessman without close ties to the Soeharto era elites the potential to develop an alternative to the old military networks. But instead of steering the country toward more democracy, Jokowi integrated into the existing oligarchic structure (Winters, 2011). In recent decades, a number of increasingly competitive oligarchs have been exploiting the state structures and parties for their own interests (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019).

The words "democratization" and "democracy" have several conflicting meanings in this context. The term "democracy" is ambivalent and multivocal, meaning different things to different people, with meanings changing over time and depending on the situation. We outline some of these meanings below. After a brief discussion of our methodology and the scholarly fields we seek to contribute to, a section the genealogy of the term "democracy" in Indonesia will substantiate the multivocality of the term "democracy." After that, we will discuss Indonesian repertoires of concepts for living together and delve into our case

study to demonstrate how local communities In Poso seek to counter the top-down discourse and practices of liberal democracy with their own deliberative practices.

2 Methodology

This article presents preliminary findings from a pilot study aimed at contributing to the field of empirical democracy research. Qualitative fieldwork in political science encounters structural challenges at multiple levels (Kapiszewski et al., 2015; Busse et al., 2023); however, examining local initiatives holds significant potential to both question and enrich theoretical frameworks. We rely on semi- and unstructured conversations, experiences during several years of NGO work, analysis of school textbooks, and ethnographically inspired fieldwork. Two of our authors are from Indonesia and the other spent significant periods in the country and conducted research in the national Indonesian language. Our research is conducted in close proximity with our case study: one of us, Lian Gogali, is the founder of the Institute Mosintuwu, established in 2008 as part of a post-conflict peace effort in Poso in Central Sulawesi. She has a double role in this article, as both a researcher and an interlocutor. Where it is indicated below, she shares primary source material and an immediate, first-hand account of efforts to counter top-down decision-making in her region. This collaboration allows us to blend multiple perspectives on local decision-making processes. The interviews and conversations were held in English and Indonesian in 2022 and 2023 in Makassar, Berlin, and online.

Due to the limited scope of the initial empirical work, this article cannot supplement our co-writer's observations with citations by other involved activists. Instead, we supplement her account with secondary sources and think that our discussion of her work and case makes an important contribution to developing questions for a "Truly Comparative Empirical Research on Democracy" (Mohamad-Klotzbach and Osterberg-Kaufmann, 2024) by highlighting questions about the relationship between established concepts of democracy and collective decision-making processes on the ground.

3 State of the art: limits of liberal democracy

Many scholars and commentators agree that real-existing democratic systems have been in crisis, and increasingly, scholars are raising concerns that the crisis also affects our theoretical and empirical frameworks (Selk, 2023). One aspect of this crisis is the increasing specialization and the growing divide between theoretical and empirical work in parts of the social sciences, which also concerns the study of democracy, along with the decline of methodological pluralism, and the marginalization of political philosophy and political theory within the larger discipline of political science (DiMaggio, 2018).

The end of the Cold War and the End of History narrative in the 1990s and early 2000s accelerated a sense of triumph and, as part of it, a surge in democracy promotion research that still informs much of the empirical scholarship on democracy and sidelines more nuanced perspectives. As authoritarian regimes collapsed, scholars and policymakers focused on understanding and promoting democratic transitions. What the IR-scholar Kurki (2010) observes for the democracy promotion literature in International Relations is also true for scholarship in comparative political science: narrow liberal-procedural concepts of democracy are the benchmark in empirical democracy research (Osterberg-Kaufmann et al., 2023). Here, especially in empirical democracy research, definitions of democracy usually follow Schumpeter's (1942) minimalist elite competition and Dahl's (1971) Polyarchy, listing electoral integrity, political participation in the form of voting, joining political parties, and engaging in civic activities, civil liberties as well as checks and balances as the core items to measure democracy. This "Schumpeterian-Dahlian definition of democracy" (Kurki, 2010, p. 367) is predominant, despite decades of nuanced criticism from within other areas of the discipline and related social sciences using mixed or qualitative methods (Pateman, 1970; Desrosières, 1998; Anderson, 2009, p. 68; Giannone, 2010, p. 68; Muller, 2019).

Since the late 1990s, various democracy measuring indexes such as Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, and Polity IV thrived in their assessments of the state of liberal democracy across the world. In the mid-2010s, the ambitious "Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)" Project in Gothenburg promised to expand this focus and to collect data on electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy, but despite their vast and interesting data, the publications for the most part have been reproducing the narrow focus on officially formalized liberal-procedural and institutional aspects (Wolff, 2023). Despite criticisms against the narrow scope, these indexes with operationalizable and measurable items remain dominant in empirical democracy studies and also carry into new generation of studies on autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). As scholarly attention has shifted from the conditions of democratization to questions of democratic resilience and autocratization, the bulk of this literature continues to use the familiar indicators. Here lies the key problem of contemporary empirical democracy research: if our yardstick is too short, we will not be able to understand the conditions that boost and hinder phases of democratization and autocratization.

A heterogenous range of debates often subsumed under "radical democracy," including scholars such as for instance Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière, Miguel Abensour, and Chantal Mouffe, emphasize openness and instability of democracy and also its tensions with some aspects of liberalism. Democracy, in this sense, encompasses not only the outcomes of collective decision-making but also the procedures themselves as well as the conditions under which people participate. The emancipatory potential of these approaches lies in emphasizing the changeability of the political structures of real-existing democracies. Compared to the relatively neat and operationalizable concepts of democracy that dominate contemporary mainstream empirical political science, this much broader approach to democracy as collective decision-making with emancipatory and inclusionary aspirations shifts the allow investigating collective decision-making outside officially formalized institutions and procedures.

Since the mid-2010s, sparked by growing disillusionment with mainstream political institutions and the inability on the part of mainstream political science to sufficiently explain the right-wing

populist turn in politics in Europe and the US, many scholars have turned to deliberative democracy. This field searches for more inclusive and participatory models of governance focusing on citizen councils, assemblies, and mini-publics (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019; Curato et al., 2019, 2022; Geissel, 2022; Willis et al., 2022; van der Does and Jacquet, 2023). Scholars have built on the theoretical foundations of deliberative democracy and conducted studies on citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting. This field holds the potential to address two significant problems of mainstream empirical democracy research: it can address the role of ordinary people in decision-making processes beyond elections and it can help to also consider economic planning, as some of the most famous cases concern participatory budgeting in South America. Some scholars have explicitly linked environmental concerns and participatory budgeting (Cabannes, 2004; Epting, 2020). There is also increasing interest in how digital technologies (Kreide, 2016) and global perspectives, particularly from the Global South (Banerjee, 2022) can enhance or challenge deliberative practices. However, much of the literature continues to center on the procedural dimensions of deliberation and critics have long highlighted the dangers of tokenistic participation and pseudo-inclusion (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006; Bang, 2009; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). Connected to this growing interest in participatory budgeting is the revival of scholarship on democratic economic planning (Devine, 2020; Hahnel, 2021; Banerjee, 2022)

One key question remains unsolved: how can empirical democracy scholarship include deliberative processes *outside* of formalized councils and procedures and include the theoretical conceptions of democracy as a way of life beyond elections and procedural-institutional aspects, especially at a time of an increasingly fragmented public sphere?

Two main sets of literature are promising in this regard: First, ethnographically and socio-linguistically inspired political science, such as Frederik Schaffer's research on the term "demokaraasi" among Wolof speakers in rural parts of Senegal (1997) and among people speaking Tagalog in Quezon City in the Philippines (2014) and Wedeen's (2008) work on deliberative practices in Yemen. Another example is Hu's (2018) research on "*Popular Understanding of Democracy in Contemporary China.*" They shift the focus away from formal institutions to daily practices and language. One of the common patterns across their findings is the importance of socio-economic questions. Second, we find promise for expanding and invigorating empirical democracy studies by integrating scholarship on resource extractivism and on democratic economic planning Economic planning is not central to theoretical and empirical democracy research, nor are immediate socio-economic conditions. Our work in Indonesia shows that concepts of liberal democracy such as individual freedom and autonomy are too limited to grasp topics such as resource extraction and environmental exploitation. Private interests often clash with the public interests of environmental protection. The principles of individual freedom and autonomy within liberal democracies tend to lead to the privatization of environmental concerns (Eckersley, 2004, p. 94) while environmental protection necessitates public interest and the formulation of long-term strategies rather than short-term solutions (Birch, 2023, p. 98–100). These topics are of extreme importance to politics in Indonesia, as the country is one of the world's key supplier of several critical resources, including palm oil, coal, nickel, and tin. The economic structures have since colonial times benefited elites rather than people on the ground, and concepts of liberal democracy with their focus on elections and civil rights are insufficient to address wider questions of resource extraction, environmental damage, and social justice. This is not surprising if we acknowledge the historical circumstances: concepts of liberal democracy came to fruition during the period of industrialization in the nineteenth century, tethering it intrinsically to the politics of a certain kind of prosperity (Persson and Besley, 2011). Prosperity in this reading emerges when a state builds the capacity to collect revenues, provide public goods, and enforce property rights. These functions allow economic growth to occur within a stable environment, reinforcing both economic and social progress. This perspective is a macro-economic one which we argue needs to be supplemented with political-economic questions on the meso- and microlevels.

Our case of villagers in Central Sulawesi seeking to counter private and national economic planning with local and public deliberations has the potential to provide such a necessary supplement. Political science scholarship usually addresses these and similar initiatives worldwide from a lens of social movement studies whose findings and debates have not sufficiently been transferred into democracy studies (Gagnon and Beausoleil, 2023). Some scholars are working on connecting these fields, but the literature is still empirically thin, especially with regard to sustainability and environmental questions. Political ecologists have since the 1970s sought to understand the political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment (Shiva, 1988; Femia, 1993, p. 47; Gaard and Gruen, 1993; Bryant, 1998; Gaard, 2011; Böhm et al., 2012; Löwy, 2020). These perspectives have had very limited influence on mainstream political science and public debates, but the growing attention to climate change in the late 2010s and early 2020s has brought these issues to the forefront, offering a window of opportunity for empirical democracy studies to integrate them in order to expand *and* refine its concepts. Similarly, post-development studies question the very notions of progress and growth, as they may not necessarily improve human wellbeing. Instead, they explore alternatives to GDP-focused development and emphasize subjective wellbeing and community values (Radical Ecological Democracy, 2017) and often advocate for participatory and bottom-up development approaches (Matthews, 2004; Kopf, 2022; Schöneberg et al., 2022; Demaria et al., 2023). These perspectives, just as other analyses of grassroots democratic initiatives (Stout, 2010), have thus far had minimal impact on the field of empirical democracy studies. Like other empirical analyses of grassroots democratic initiatives, our case study allows highlighting some of the connecting points between these fields, such as the centrality of the question of resource extraction and exploitation, and urges empirical democracy studies to develop ways of taking complex local processes of deliberation and action into account in their debates on how to measure and how to protect democracy.

4 Findings

4.1 The genealogy of Indonesian democracy narratives

The case of Indonesia, by political scientists considered as a "compromised" variant of liberal democracy (Mietzner, 2024) and an example of a backsliding one (Slater, 2023), allows us to take a close look behind and beyond the liberal notion of democracy in one of the world's largest countries. In this section, we trace the genealogy of the term *demokrasi*, which has long been an important element of state parlance but also of civil society actions. This tracing helps explain how many Indonesians use the term *demokrasi* and how this use differs from established empirical democracy research.

Throughout Indonesian history, *demokrasi* has meant different things. The term itself and related concepts that describe various different mechanisms of decision-making in different parts of the archipelago, such as *musyawarah* (deliberation), *mufakat* (consensus), and *perwakilan* (representativeness) have always had a central place in the official state philosophy and public debates. In the early post-independence days after the Japanese had left after their defeat in World War II, the Indonesian struggle for democracy was a central element of the anti-colonial struggle against the returning Dutch. The country's first President, Soekarno, and vice-president Hatta publicly discussed their increasingly divergent understandings of *demokrasi*. The founding fathers of the young Indonesian Republic merged local terms and Western notions of democracy—more those from the left than from the liberal tradition—and initially received US-American support for their anti-colonial fight.

The founding fathers of the Indonesian republic, Soekarno, Hatta, and Tan Malaka asserted that the longstanding democratic traditions of decision-making in Indonesian villages (*desa*) is the essence of Indonesian democracy (*village democracy—demokrasi desa*). During the initial stages of establishing a conceptual framework of democracy in the early days of independence, President Soekarno, Hatta and Tan Malaka contended that Indonesian democracy was unearthed from traditional society, with the nation envisioned as an idealized village (Hatta, 1966; Dwipayana and Ramadhan, 1989; Yustinianus, 2005; Malaka, 2019).

Hatta, the first vice president of Indonesia, held that the local version of Indonesian democracy is practiced in the village where there is a village-governance and decision-making system. Outside the village, he found, feudalism and autocratic governments—often aristocratic—reign. Hatta described three characteristics of village democracies: First, he highlighted the habit of doing meetings (*rapat*) where people discuss (*musyawarah*) and reach consensus (*mufakat*). Second, he emphasized the right to gather to conduct protests and to criticize the policy. Third, he stressed the collectivity, the sense of belonging and sense of mutual help (Hatta, 1953, p. 56). Many Indonesians agree that elements of these structures and of *adat*, customary law (Von Benda-Beckmann and Von Benda-Beckmann, 2005, 2011; Duile, 2023) have endured the colonization, bureaucratization, and modernization of Indonesian life.

In 1945, Indonesia proclaimed independence. It was another 4 years until the Dutch accepted Indonesian independence. Western support for the young country waned soon after that, not so much because Soekarno morphed the Parliamentary Democracy into his "Guided Democracy," but because in the 1950s, support was growing for the Indonesian Communist Party. "Guided Democracy" treated the official Indonesian state philosophy, the *Pancasila* (lit. five principles) as a panacea for the new and unstable republic and centered on Soekarno as the leader. Soekarno envisioned *Pancasila* and his Political Manifesto as the identity of Indonesian citizens in the continuous struggle against neocolonialism and imperialism (Abdulgani, 1945, p. 159). The *Pancasila* and the related *Demokrasi Pancasila* would later be cited by different regimes and actors throughout Indonesian history in different ways. After a nebulous coup attempt in late 1965, the right-wing military general Soeharto seized power. The large-scale anti-leftist massacres of 1965 would alter state and society for the coming decades (Cribb, 1990, p. 16; Robison and Rosser, 1998). Soeharto received Western support and would lead the developmentalist military "New Order" regime for 32 years, until protests in the wake of the Asian economic crisis triggered his resignation in 1998. During the New Order, discourses of mutual aid and consensus (*mufakat,* see below for a more detailed discussion of the term) largely served to suppress any attempts of anti-authoritarian resistance. Soeharto used the called his government a "Demokrasi Pancasila." Once Soeharto stepped down in 1998, the ruling elite promised to involve the masses via reformed election processes and lifted the restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. At the time, the democratization industry (Guilhot, 2005) was in full swing, and foreign funding contributed to shaping national debates on values in the new post-reform Indonesia, which has been characterized by rapidly growing political competition amidst rapidly rising inequality (Robison and Rosser, 1998; Hill, 2021, p. 88; World Bank, 2021). However, the competition is mainly confined to oligarchs, many of whom are from the same families as the New Order oligarchs (Winters, 2011, 2017, p. 177).

The term "democracy" has been fairly uncontroversial, except for the occasional dismissal launched by state actors and amplified by the media against protesters for pushing "demo-crazy" (see e.g., Winarno, 2019). What instead occupied heated debates was the term "liberalism," either directly in intellectual debates about "*liberalisme*" or indirectly when debating socio-economic policies and the rights and responsibilities of the state. Menchik's (2016) book "*Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*" shows how religious and political elites reject liberalism while simultaneously affirming democracy, tolerance, and pluralism. Part of the background to these debates form two notions of citizenship that are in tension with each other: the liberal understanding of citizens as bearers of rights on one side, and the notion of citizens as being inferiors and in a hierarchical relationship with a power-holder. The Indonesian constitution focuses on the duty of the state rather than on the rights of citizens (Li, 2007, 2014). Formed as a republic to emancipate the newly emerging Indonesian citizens from the Dutch colonizers, not from monarchy, monarchical traditions of the "benevolent ruler" ideal were continued rather than interrupted. Today, remnants of this

can be seen in museums showing portraits of previous rulers who wore golden ear extensions to demonstrate their willingness to listen to their people (*rakyat*).

In the post-1998 period, with the rapid dissemination of the vocabulary of human rights, many Indonesians discovered the discourse of rights for themselves. Since then, there has been a blended notion of citizenship, marked by internal tensions between the liberal understanding of citizens as bearers of rights and the notion of citizens in a hierarchical relationship with a power-holder.

With the discourse of rights did not, however, come a widespread discourse of political participation. Democratization in Indonesia was, as in many other places, first and foremost an electoral democratization, reduced by its elites to a procedural rather than a substantive understanding. A study conducted in the late 2010s exposed the discrepancy between notions of democracy among politicians on one side and the electorate on the other (Aspinall et al., 2020): when Indonesians called for democracy in 1998, they expected much more than they would later receive.

For many Indonesians today, the term democracy still holds promises of collective decision-making and of emancipation, but for many others, it has become associated with corruption, elite wealth defense, and extractivist state structures. Thus, political practices labeled *demokrasi* might be less democratic in an encompassing sense of the word "democracy" than practices of communal decision-making that avoid the term, as exemplified below.

4.2 Indonesian repertoires of living together

Indonesia boasts a large variety of local and national terms for mutual aid, collective decision-making, and various networks of collaboration and interdependence. In this section, we discuss key terms to illustrate how democratic practices are frequently labeled with terms other than "democracy" or local equivalents like *demokrasi*. On the national level, there are two fundamental principles underlying the concept of village democracy that the founding fathers referenced. Firstly, decision-making is based on *musyawarah*, usually translated as deliberation or consultation, and *mufakat*, usually translated as consensus or unanimous consent, where individuals have the opportunity to voice concerns and objections (Hatta, 1966; Latif, 2014, p. 123). Secondly, there exists a strong sense of collectivism and communality, characterized by the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance).

Musyawarah is also part of the Pancasila, the official Indonesian state philosophy. It commits Indonesians to Pancasila's fourth pillars: "Democracy guided by the inner wisdom of deliberation (*musyawarah*) and representation (*perwakilan*)." *Musyawarah* is rooted in Arabic (*syura*) and refers to deliberation (Bosworth et al., 2012; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). *Mufakat* stems from the Arabic noun "muwāfaqa," which can be translated as "conformity" or "compliance" in English. The respective verb in Arabic is *wāfaqa*, translatable as to succeed, to go well, and to adapt to something. The term is also used in other languages, for instance into the West African Haussa, where it can be translated as to cooperate. Generally, the word refers to the state of being in agreement, harmony, or alignment with a particular standard, principle, or expectation, and often carries connotations of adherence and congruence with prescribed guidelines or norms within a given context.

Musyawarah mufakat is a traditional decision-making concept in which participants use deliberation and discussion to reach a consensus known as "*mufakat*." Ideally, in the end, the entire community shares a common aspiration. This process is designed to ensure that the voices of the minority are heard and not marginalized simply because of the majority's numerical advantage. However, Soeharto used the concept of *musyawarah-mufakat* to exert control and stifle dissent, often through covert means involving pressure and with money-politics. The Soeharto regime also employed *musyawarah* as a means to exert control over the rural sector development agenda. During this period, *musyawarah* functioned as a tool to ensure the populace's compliance with the authoritarian regime (Koentjaraningrat, 1967). After the fall of Soeharto, the local political culture, exemplified by *musyawarah-mufakat*, has played a significant role in the successful democratization of Indonesia in post-Soeharto era (Kawamura, 2011). Many Indonesians see as one advantage of *musyawarah-mufakat* that everyone has veto power without giving power to a numerical majority (Anggita and Hatori, 2020).

As noted above, elites have often used the term to suppress challenges to authoritarian rule. However, the widespread use of this and other terms referring to consensus-building and communal decision-making suggests that it would be an analytical loss to discard these terms. Instead, a thorough analysis bridging conceptual questions and practices can help to better understand the limits of liberal democracy as well as explore democratic potential beyond electoral procedures.

The centrality of consensus-building is what these key concepts of the Indonesian repertoires of living together share. In the rural context, *musyawarah* and *mufakat* usually imply discussion and compromise for the common interest rather than competing interests (Logsdon, 1978). "As an ideal, *musyawarah-mufakat* is presumed to be possible because even when conflict is present, a village has a cooperative spirit and basic unity, a shared value of harmony in the public interest that might mitigate the demands of particular interest" (Logsdon, 1978, p. 96). The emphasis of consensus has also been highlighted by scholars in other contexts, for instance by the Kenyan philosopher Reginald M. J. Oduor, who examines the failure of liberal democracy in many African countries as a failure of the liberal variant of democracy rather than a failure of democracy itself, citing the communalist milieu of African societies and the importance of consensus (Oduor, 2019, 2022).

"*Gotong royong*" is another key Indonesian term. Stemming from Old Javanese, it describes two or more people carrying or doing something together (Suwignyo, 2019). The concept embodies the implementation of harmonious relationships among individuals, nature, and spirituality, while strengthening social cohesion and individual prestige. *Gotong royong* can also be translated as "mutual assistance." The term carries a dual meaning as both a cultural category and an element in the state ideology of Indonesia. Some highlight how it facilitates collective action and how it is part of a wider system of indigenous knowledge, practices and beliefs, which ought to be taken into account in development

programs and policies (Slikkerveer, 2019). Others, more critically, show how elites have used the concept "*gotong royong*" for state intervention in rural society, and how the concept serves as a cultural-ideological instrument for mobilizing village labor. The Indonesian anthropologist Koentjaraningrat (1967) categorizes the complex nature of *gotong royong* into several expressions: mutual help, communal service/contribution with a sense of prestige and loyalty, cultural and kinship obligation, and an ethos or spirit for collectivism.

With these characteristics, *gotong royong* has mobilisational potential. For instance, in 1808, the Dutch cited the concept in their mobilization of villagers for the construction of the Trans-Java road. During the early years of independence, the term underwent a transformation from labor collectivism to social identity, exhibiting both the mobilization of labor and a sense of solidarity (Suwignyo, 2019). In his classic article on the concept, the anthropologist Bowen (1986) argues that the phrase became a key element in the Indonesian system of political and cultural power through three continuing processes: (1) the motivated misrecognition of local cultural realities; (2) the construction of a national tradition on the basis of those misrecognitions; and (3) the inclusion of state cultural representations as part of a strategy of intervention in the rural sector and the mobilization of rural labor. Village responses to these interventions, Bowen states, range from compliance to (passive) resistance, and they are shaped by local ideas of legitimacy and obligation. The result is a process of interaction between state and local representations, commands, and practices. In official parlance and in many daily conversations, *gotong royong* is portrayed as an element of national Indonesian culture and as a philosophy of life that considers collective life as paramount. Many Indonesians perceive it as a long-standing Javanese expression, even though it is likely not a traditional but relatively modern term (Bowen, 1986, p. 546–547).

Together, the concepts *gotong-royong* and *musyawarah* constitute a notion of collective decision-making and action, wherein decisions reached through *musyawarah* are executed in the spirit of *gotong-royong*. *Gotong royong* also is a way for the local community for self-autonomy and self-help as well as to form of resistance for social resilience and to strengthen the local economy (Suwignyo, 2019), as our examples below illustrate. In large parts of Indonesian society, bureaucratization has replaced local traditions, including practices formerly conducted through *musyawarah* and *gotong royong*, but in rural contexts, the ideals of consensus and collective action endure. Various concepts in other Indonesian local languages have very similar meanings, such as *rembuk* in Javanese and Malay (Effendi et al., 2015) (lit: discussion for decision making) in South Sulawesi called *tudang sipulung* (Faisal, 2020) (lit: sitting together), in Maluku called *Mbolo* Weki (Suwandi, 2019) (lit: sitting together in a circle to discuss). In the Bugis-Makassar tradition, there is a local practice called *tudang sipulung*, which literally means to sit together. *Tudang sipulung* emphasizes deliberations mostly between the King and people, and, in contemporary Indonesia, between the local government and members of the public.

People usually consider decisions reached through the aforementioned *musyawarah-mufakat* system binding. In South Sulawesi, the Buginese Lontara manuscript, speculated written in the fourteenth century (Jukes, 2019), this commitment to collectively reached decisions manifested in the proverb: "the ultimate decision of a power rests with the will of the people (in the hands of the people):" *massolong pawo, mangelle pasang* (Mattulada, 1974). In Maluku, there is a long historical tradition of democratic discussions called Saniri or similar translation with *Musyawarah*. The system sets rules for how power and tasks are divided among village groups. Villagers call this system *Saniri Hena* or *Saniri Aman*, meaning the Village of Deliberation or Musyawarah Village. This old system shows common elements with modern ideas of separation of power and vertical accountability mechanisms. Historical sources indicate that the villagers selected their leaders through community deliberation (*musyawarah-mufakat*) for a fixed period 5 years, before the Dutch colonizers absorbed the villages into their bureaucratic system based on colonial feudalism. Later, the bureaucratization under Soeharto regime further weakened the practice, as did the introduction of electoral democracy (Cooley, 1969).

Collective decision-making often takes place in designated public spaces. Similar to the function and the architecture of the Athenian Agora (Lang and Camp, 2004). Indonesian villagers use town squares for multiple functions, including assemblies. A compelling example can be observed in Donggo Mbawa, Bima, a region in the southern part of Indonesia, where there exists a designated space known as *uma leme*, where the entire community gathers for deliberations (*mbolo weki*) and discussions on public and important matters. Similarly, villages in the Maluku region have *baileo* and in Western Sumatera there are *Balairung* (lit: place of discussion), in Java there are *alun-alun*. They all shared similar characteristics: a public house without walls and only a roof with wooden pillars and a big hall without chairs. The open space signals and facilitates transparency, inclusion and equality.

In terms of democratic space, Indonesian villages thus have a clear advantage over larger cities, which are, as cities globally, characterized by shrinking public space in the face of increasing commercialization and privatization of space (Chen and Szeto, 2017; Hou and Knierbein, 2017; Terwindt and Schliemann, 2017; Turan, 2017). The current political system, however, leaved the potential of these places largely untapped: few local politicians organize public deliberations.

Another key concept in debates about living together is *kerukunan*, which can be translated as harmony. It encompasses the idea of fostering unity, tolerance, and understanding among individuals and communities. *Kerukunan* goes beyond mere tolerance; it emphasizes the active promotion of mutual respect, acceptance, and cooperation among people of different backgrounds. Social harmony here extends beyond interpersonal relationships and also encompasses a harmonious rapport with nature and the environment (cf. Großmann, 2022) Social harmony and unity (*mattau-seuwapi tauwe rilalempanuwa*), based on Buginese tradition, for instance, is the precondition for the people's prosperity, marked by the fertility of the rice fields (*tanranna nasawe-ase*). Social divisions will result in failed crops and unlucky periods (*nakasak pattaungang*). Hence, there is social punishment for those breaching the rules of harmony (Rahman, 2007).

State and civil society actors often cite *kerukunan* as key for maintaining social cohesion and preventing conflicts. Social harmony and various local practices local decision-making practices are disseminated through the school curriculum,

particularly emphasized in the subject of local content (Muatan Lokal). On the national level, in 2006, the Minister of Religion and the Minister of the Interior, Maftuh Basyuni and Muhammad Ma'ruf, respectively, issued the Joint Regulation No. 9–8 on Regional Head and Deputy Head Duties for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony. The joint ministerial regulation itself refers to government national development policies being designed to—among other things—"increase internal and inter-religious harmony" (*peningkatan kerukunan inter dan antar umat beragama*) as well as preserve "religious harmony [as] an important part of national harmony" (*kerukunan umat beragama merupakan bagian penting dari kerukunan nasional*). At the same time, these concepts also have the potential to counter state authority, such as in our case discussion below.

5 Discussion of case study: Central Sulawesi

Our case discussion of villagers in the Poso regency in Central Sulawesi provides empirical details on democratic practices on the ground and points at similarities to democratic struggles elsewhere, for instance in Latin America. The area of the Poso regency covers an area of 7438.55 km^2 and has a population of around 250,000 people (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). The principal town lies is also called Poso, and lies on the coast, linking sea trade with riverine routes into Poso Lake. Poso's economy is largely rural and community-based, with a significant reliance on agriculture, fishing, and small-scale trade. The region benefits from its natural resources, with Lake Poso and the Poso River providing fish, and the surrounding fertile land supporting crop cultivation, including cocoa, coffee, and rice, which are important for both local consumption and trade. Agriculture remains the main livelihood for many residents, with smallholder farms being typical.

Fishing plays a significant role in Poso, Indonesia. The lake and river ecosystems provide important sources of fish for the local communities, contributing to food security and income generation. Traditional fishing methods are often employed, and fish are typically sold in local markets or used for subsistence. In Poso, as in other regions of Indonesia, both men and women participate in fishing activities, though often with different roles. Men are typically involved in the physical aspects of catching fish, especially in offshore and boat-based fishing. Women, on the other hand, frequently engage in shore-based activities like processing, selling, and repairing fishing equipment. However, in some cases, women also go out to fish alongside men, especially in smaller-scale fisheries where they contribute to household and community livelihoods (Nurizky, 2021). Often, the work of women in the fishing industry are not properly acknowledged, as the state only counts only households that are "headed" by a fisherman as fishing households. Several initiatives work toward strengthening the role of women in this industry (Ends, 2020). Scholarship runs the risk of further perpetuating the mechanisms of invisibilization and needs to engage with on-the-ground practices underneath or behind official state approaches.

Due to the rising influence of the timber and mining industries, the region's economy is rapidly developing as we discuss in more detail below. Within this restructuring, some initiatives seek to get actively involved in the decision-making processes. We suggest to read these practices as collective decision-making and community-based democratic economic planning. Villagers take the decisions collectively in a complex deliberative process that itself is not rigidly institutionalized but constantly adapts to changing circumstances. The process as outlined below takes place in a rural setting, where modern bureaucratic institutions work side-by-side with long-standing hierarchies, and where demands of the global energy market increase pressure on the population. We describe a network of women who questions the top-down national development plan and counters it with developing alternative visions that center on the interests of the local population. The process contains elements of consensus, but also does not shy away from confrontation where interests collide.

This example, as described by our interlocutor, shows how local communities evoke traditional concepts and practices to counter pro-elite economic development. The case also shows how more in-depth ethnographic fieldwork could help discover practices and mechanisms of local collective decision-making and contribute to debates on democratic economic planning. In this section, we first give some background of our case, then outline how this case exemplifies typical problems of Indonesia's variant of liberal democracy, and then elaborate on the local practices that seek to counter these problems through practices that are not commonly labeled as democratic, but in our view relate to radical democracy in the sense that they question the very procedures and parameters of established political decision-making.

Our case analysis focuses on the Mosintuwu Institute, a community organization in Central Sulawesi. The Mosintuwu Institute grew out of post-conflict peacemaking efforts in the mid-2000s. The conflict in Central Sulawesi after 1998 was a multifaceted social upheaval characterized by violence and discord that arose from historical grievances, economic disparities, and political marginalization. The fundamental sources of the conflict included competition over land rights, socio economic imbalances, and a history of unequal power dynamics. Lian Gogali, the founder of the Mosintuwu Institute, who in this article has the double roles of researcher and interlocutor, experienced and studied the conflict as a young researcher focusing on the politics of memory of women and children. She interviewed hundreds of women and children in various evacuation sites and found that women were key actors in the peace building process and in interfaith communities. At the same time, Lian Gogali found that the media were further spreading the narrative of religious violence. She countered this by organizing inter-religious circles where she encouraged women to share stories of mutual support rather than conflict. Seeing women in Poso as the most untapped resource for religious tolerance and peace, she founded the Mosintuwu Institute. "Mosintuwu" means "working together" in the local Pamona language. At the core of the institute are education efforts. Since 2010 the women's schools has educated more than 600 local women, such as housewives and fisherwomen, many of whom had only very few years of formal schooling. The school embraces the idea of providing essential meeting spaces for the community. Its primary goal is to encourage community members to come together, engage in conversations, express their frustrations, anger, and grievances, and actively listen to each other. Afterward, the focus shifts to a critical analysis of economic, social, and political issues, including

a deep dive into the framing of the Poso conflict. The aim is to unravel prejudices and grudges, ultimately building trust, and to strengthen collaboration and solidarity. The curriculum at the Women's School focuses on peace activism, community and household involvement, gender dynamics, political engagement, effective communication, community service rights, as well as economic, social, and political rights, sexual health, reproductive rights, and the principles of a solidarity economy. It supports women in transforming themselves from victims to survivors and to agents of change.

What in the early 2000s began as a peace initiative has since grown beyond the notion of peace as the mere absence of conflict (Purwanto, 2017; Morse, 2021; Kenzu, 2022; Mukrimin and Acciaioli, 2023) and now works toward a more encompassing notion of peace. Johan Galtung, the founder of peace studies, early on made the point that "positive peace" is constantly changing and emphasized the importance of revealing the subtle mechanisms of structural violence and exploring the conditions for their removal or neutralization (Galtung, 1969). In this sense, the activists of the Mosintuwu Institute have since begun to reach beyond the circles of women who attend the education programs. The women, in their role as agents of change, reach out in their own rural communities, share their insights, and seek to convince others to question official narratives of development.

As elsewhere in Indonesia, growing resource exploitation puts pressure on rural communities. Indonesia's economy depends on the extraction and export of natural resources, with extractive industries comprising around 25% of total exports and ranked 4th in the world based on the production value of its metallic minerals and coal (Ministry of Energy Mineral Resources Republic of Indonesia, 2021; U.S. Geological Survey, 2022). Indonesia has the largest nickel reserves in the world and accounts for 30% of global nickel production in addition to being a major producer of tin, coal, gold, and copper (U.S. Geological Survey, 2022). The contemporary extractive regime, characterized by the extensive extraction and export of unprocessed natural resources (Gellert, 2019) continues practices from the New Order era (Acosta, 2013). Under the Soeharto administration, an alliance between multinational mining corporations, the military, Soeharto's family and friends, and domestic tycoons promoted "resource nationalism," the idea that Indonesia's national resources should be exploited and used to benefit the Indonesian people. As discussed above, the shift of ownership typically benefits these elites rather than wider populations, and the New Order was no exception. Local farmers and fisherfolk rarely reap benefits, especially compared to local and regional elites, who can profit enormously from industrial mining and refining projects. A well-documented example is the Gosowong Gold Mine project in North Halmehara in the Moluccas, which stands on the lands of the indigenous Pagu people (Tran, 2021). In 1997, the national government issued Presidential Decree No. B. 143/Pres/3/1997 to grant PT Nusa Halmahera Minerals (NHM),[1] a joint venture between the private Australian mining company Newcrest and Indonesian state-owned mining company PT Antam, a permit to mine gold on over 29,000 hectares of Pagu land without consent from locals. The company built a gold mine, a sedimentation pond, and two waste dumps, causing major impacts to the health and safety of local communities. Since construction began in 1997, over 5,000 people have been afflicted with mercury poisoning, skin diseases, and death, as well as causing major problems with water shortages and pollution for others in the community (Tran, 2021). Waste from the mine has contaminated the Gulf of Kao, making seafood unsafe to eat and decimating clean water supplies. The Pagu people's cultural life has also suffered, as development of the gold mine destroyed a portion of the sacred Toguraci forest used to bury their dead and contributed to the eradication of animals and plants which the Pagu people rely on for their subsistence lifestyles. In 2012, hundreds of Pagu sang and danced as part of a protest in front of NHM offices (Tran, 2021). Police beat protestors with wooden beams and arrested several of them. Violence intensified when NHM involved the special police force BRIMOB (Mobile Brigade Corps) to harass protestors. As the dust settled in 2012, four members of the local community lay dead, either shot by security forces or beaten by police (Kilkoda, 2015). There is no evidence suggesting that anyone was held accountable for their death. Although the episode attracted more attention and legal pressures on NHM grew, the mine remained operational and corporate social responsibility efforts on the part of NHM continue to be directed toward local elites. In 2020, new legislation forced Newcrest to sell its share of the mine to Indonesian holding corporation PT Indotan. There is no evidence suggesting that working conditions improved after that (Kabarmasa, 2023). Across Indonesia, extractivism is characterized by alliances between multinational corporations and Indonesian elites against local villagers (Sinclair, 2024). Local management often thwarts activists from building international alliances and corporate development programs contribute to de-escalating local activism. In very recent developments of the early 2020s, new laws roll back environmental protections and liabilities for corporations and powerful individuals, signaling a shift toward criminalization and outright opposition, moving away from co-optation (Negara et al., 2024).

State involvement in business has been the norm rather than the exception. On the island of Sulawesi, where Poso is also located, the Buginese businessman and politician Jusuf Kalla is a central figure and embodies the connections of the state and the local economy relying on resource extraction. Kalla expanded his family's textile business into automotive, industry, heavy equipment, energy and other businesses in the 1970s and added asphalt and transportation/logistic business in the 1980s and property and real estate in the 1990s. Then, he became a politician and twice assumed the role of vice-president, once between 2004 and 2009 under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and once between 2014 and 2019 under Jokowi. Poso Energy, a subsidiary of one of Kalla's groups, is part of the growing industry of renewable energies. Other sectors and regions show a similar connection between the state and business (Warburton, 2023).

In addition to the powerful palm oil industry and the growing industry of renewable energies, the established mining industries for gold and tin, nickel mining and refining are rising fast due to global demand for electric vehicles. Nickel is a central component of electric vehicle batteries, and production in Indonesia doubled

1 Perseroan Terbatas (PT) refers to a form of business structure or legal entity type in Indonesia. PT is also known as a Limited Liability Company (LLC) in Indonesia and can be a publicly-listed entity or a privately-owned entity.

from 2020 to 2022.[2] The beginnings of large-scale nickel processing in Indonesia came during the administration of former President Yudhoyono, who courted Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative to establish the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) in Morowali Regency in Central Sulawesi (Tritto, 2022). This massive complex sprawls out over 2,000 hectares and includes coal-fired power plants, housing complexes (for Chinese workers), an airport, a hotel, 11 smelters, and two high pressure acid leach facilities. Tensions about the migration of Chinese workers are compounded by poor working conditions. Environmental issues also arise from the facilities, which produce toxic waste that is difficult to dispose of Morse (2021). Meanwhile, the Jokowi administration is eager to continue attracting investment in nickel refining, even as the local communities face degradation of their traditional lifestyles and the destruction of their natural environment while benefits are reaped by foreign investors and Indonesian elites.

The development of Indonesia's new capital city "Nusantara" in nearby Kalimantan has further accelerates these tendencies. The context is further complicated by the history of violent conflict which authorities used to create security and development policies geared toward their own interests. In the Poso coastal area, since 2012, hundreds of hectares of garden areas in the mountains have been abandoned due to security operations. Farmers were scared of shootings by security forces and of being suspected of collaborating with the police against the East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT) group. More than a dozen farmers have been killed over the years, both by terrorist groups and because of stray bullets and suspicions from security forces. After the conflict and violence in Poso, security policies legitimized the deployment of troops at various points in Poso district. In the name of creating post-conflict job opportunities, residents were forced to give up submerged rice fields and gardens without fair compensation. Many young villagers now flock to the nickel mines, causing communities to intensify discussions about their economies and their future.

Our interlocutors in the region tell us how the Poso region has been affected by the drastic changes. A total of 21 villages around Lake Poso have experienced the negative effects of the construction of two giant dams. The rice fields and gardens were submerged because the lake water was dammed by the Poso Energy hydropower dam, resulting in crop failures and farmers being unable to cultivate their fields. Locals have always regarded the lake as a living entity, referring to it as "beliau," an honorific third-person singular pronoun used for highly esteemed individuals. This culture is now threatened, affecting locals in very material ways. Due to the low water level, traditional fishing has become almost impossible. Similarly, the Wayamasapi tradition of catching masapi fish (eels) using a bamboo fence shaped like an escalator has vanished due to dredging in the area. Meanwhile, the Palm Oil Company managed by ASTRA PT Sawit Jaya Abadi 2, a subsidiary of PT Astra Agro Lestari controlled 8,900 hectares and removed another lake, Lake Toju, which was owned for hundreds of years by five villages in the East Pamona sub-district (Lahay, 2022). Thousands of hectares of rice field are lost. The residents of the villages of Tiu, Petiro, Kamba, Poleganyara, Taripa, Labuadago, who previously owned land and benefited from the Toju lake, are now oil palm laborers (Sigit et al., 2023).

In response to these developments, a network of women, many of whom took classes in the Mosintowu Institute, strive for local and communal decision-making to counter the top-down development. They counter the political model of representative democracy as practiced by the Indonesian state with local formats of deliberations. Using their own personal networks in their own villages, the women highlight to their neighbors and fellow community members that the current Indonesian economic system has results in resource exploitation that serves far-away elites and disadvantages local communities.

Lian Gogali reports the action they began taking in the mid-2010s:

"The Mosintuwu Institute held its first Poso Women's Congress in March 2014. It involved 450 women from 70 villages in 14 sub-districts in Poso Regency. This congress produced 135 recommendations for six topics, namely Women's Rights to Public Services; Protection of Women and Children; Women's Political Participation in Village Development; Women in Cultural Customs; Women Building a Solidarity Economy; and Women Building Peace. 135 recommendations addressed to the Poso District Government, village governments, and civil society organizations, as well as recommendations to the women activists themselves. We also raise awareness among our graduates about attempts to co-opt them.

The Congress also addressed a number of recommendations concerning the protection of women and children to the National Commission for Eradication of Violence against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*) and to the Women's Empowerment and Family Planning Agency at the District Government, urging them to not neglect rural areas and to conduct intensive discussions on the role of customary institutions with a gender justice perspective in responding to violence against women and children. Twenty-three recommendations concerned increasing women's political participation in village development, for instance through quotas and through increased transparency of the budget planning. The congress called for support for an economy based on solidarity, for instance in the form of organic gardening and communal land use. The congress urged village government officials to work toward managing resources such as plantations and forests for the welfare of villagers, not for the benefit of investors and rulers. As part of this effort, the women took a close analytical look at their own villages and found that their villages faced significant deep-seated and rapidly worsening problems. Many found that their villages were "sick" in this sense: The current development system prioritizes physical development such as road construction or culverts, which are easily visible but do not go through a process of discussion with the community. There is a deliberation system for the village medium-term development plan, but it is only attended by a group of village elites so that the voices of ordinary villagers are not heard. There is a tendency for development to be prioritized for supporters of the village head or the village head's family. Decision-making is not conducted through a process of geo-social-spatial recognition of the village, so development results are not sustainable. Women are involved in village planning meetings, but in addition to being less than a quarter of the total number of participants, women's

2 https://www.statista.com/statistics/260757/indonesian-mine-production-of-nickel-since-2006/

voices are often not considered. The presence of women often only fulfilled the attendance quota.

In our meetings, many participants voiced that they find the decision-making within their villages flawed. In 2016, during the Women's School Festival and the graduation ceremony for the 3rd batch of the Women's School, the graduates collectively decided that a key purpose of their education was not getting ready for the job market, but to instead dedicate themselves to society and to improving their own villages. This would eventually materialize in "Village Reform Teams" that would systematically spread their views in their own communities across various villages.

Even before that, during the 2014 Congress, our discussions resulted in a number of successful initiatives. For instance, we registered successes in fighting violence against women and children: 21 perpetrators of violence were imprisoned with a maximum prison sentence of up to 16 years, following advocacy actions by female school graduates. Police officers have become more agile in dealing with cases of violence against women and children after receiving criticism from the women's and children's shelter team. In 2018, the Mosintuwu Institute together with the women's and children's shelter team signed a cooperation agreement with the Poso Resort Police in handling cases of violence against women and children in Poso Regency (Timparosa, 2018). The signing of this collaboration urged the police down to the sub-district and village levels to seriously respond to reports of cases of violence against women and children fairly.

In the same year, the Mosintuwu Institute helped organize a community which later called itself the Lake Poso Guardian Alliance (APDP; Aliansi Penjaga Danau Poso) consisting of fisherfolk, farmers, laborers, religious leaders, and traditional leaders (Rainforest Alliance, 2019; Morse, 2020). The community has been organizing cultural actions against the destruction of the environment, the elimination of culture and the exclusion of the poor by hydropower while demanding justice for farmers. As part of this initiative, people tell tales and legends about Lake Poso as a way to remember the local ancestral wisdom in managing nature. Nature and humans in this perspective are equal.

This emphasis of local culture is part of a wide phenomenon that other scholars have described as a "local turn" facilitated by Indonesia's wide scale decentralization of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Tamma and Duile, 2020). As part of this "local turn," indigenous activists seek to establish good networks with politicians, influential authorities, and other activists in the hope of influencing local regulations. This turn to the local also manifests itself in the language that people use: Instead of using the language of "empowerment," the people seeking to protect Lake Poso use the term "*pakaroso*" which means "strengthening each other" in the local Pamona language. The website of the feminist art workers group Peretas, who have collaborated with the Mosintuwu Institute, offers a discussion of this political-linguistic move. In their explanation, the term counters "*maroso,*" a slogan appropriated by the local government. This term means "strong" but without necessarily representing the spirit of mutual strengthening. Several grassroots actors have thus countered this term by promoting "*pakaroso*" as a counter term, which "underlines the inadequacy of strength without mutual strengthening, a spirit only the grassroots carry" (Peretas, 2019).

In a similar way, some of the people confronting the government also do not call their protests "protests" but prefer to emphasize the local tradition of *megilu*. In this old ritual, locals express grievances on the shores of the lake (Ryan, 2021). Elders who participated in the resistance preferred using this concept to emphasize that they were not simply rejecting development but sought in active part in shaping it. *Megilu* is used as a word that represents critical views and prayers are offered openly on the streets using cultural rituals. In this view, these gatherings and protests are not about humans wishing to protect the environment but understanding humans as a part of the entire ecosystem. The revical of *megilu* began a door-to-door campaign to ask the community to participate and then sit together to discuss the case. In the discussion process from village to village a joint forum was formed which was later called the Lake Poso indigenous people. The first *Megilu* was held on 22 November 2021 involving more than 500 farmers and fisherfolk from 15 villages around Lake Poso. In this pain, after providing a critical view, the indigenous people of Lake Poso carried out a cultural ritual which resulted in imposing a fine on the company for destroying the culture of Lake Poso and destroying the environment. The second *Megilu* was held on December 11, 2022. In this *Megilu*, the indigenous people of Lake Poso performed a traditional ritual to summon their ancestors to punish environmental destroyers (Ryan, 2021). Lian Gogali explains: "The use of this local term facilitates the identification of the local community with the resistance movement. Similarly, we avoid religious connotations that carry the potential of division and cooptation. Instead, we foreground traditional rituals and customs to transgress any boundaries that outside forces might wish to enhance and exploit."

These actions resulted in more publicity for the struggle and prompted the local government to pay more attention to the local communities. But on the other hand, Lian Gogali reports that some fisherfolk withdrew from the alliance because the respective company coopted or threatened them. People connected to the Mosintuwu Institute discussed in their communities how the current Indonesian political and economic system uses and affects rural communities and have diagnosed a structurally impoverished economic, social, cultural and political situation. As a consequence of these troubles and encouraged by previous successes, a group of women from different villages founded the mentioned "Village Reform Teams" and "Village Reform Schools." Women from various villages use these spaces to further their education, discuss current challenges, and share their visions for addressing them. These groups primarily consist of local women with backgrounds in farming and fishing who are increasingly experiencing shifts in their economic structures. While men are welcome, the groups are predominantly made up of women of diverse ages. During meetings, participants critically unpack the concept of development by re-evaluating its language and creating their own definitions of prosperity. This approach aligns with various global movements in activism and scholarship that seek to redefine prosperity, from Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics*, which balance human needs within ecological limits to degrowth proponents Giorgos Kallis and Jason Hickel advocating for scaled-down economies that reduce consumption and emphasize community wellbeing (Hickel and Kallis, 2020) and other approaches. The topics and

visions discussed in our case study show parallels with the debate centering on the concept of *Buen Vivir* ("Good Living"), which is informed by various indigenous perspectives from the Andean region that center on the redefining a good life as moving beyond anthropocentric capitalism. This perspective calls for replacing the focus on economic growth as an end in itself, with principles of caution and sufficiency. As Acosta and Abarca (2018, p. 138) explain:

> "We need to dismantle organizational schemes that champion anthropocentric privileges, which cause the greatest inequality and lead to the planet's destruction through environmental exploitation and degradation. Therefore, economic goals should be subordinated to natural systems' laws, respect human dignity and aim to improve the quality of life for individuals, families and communities. Nature and its diversity cannot be sacrificed. We have to recognize that humans are part of Nature and cannot dominate, commodify, privatize and destroy it."

Ecuadorian and Bolivian politicians have responded to broad support for *Buen Vivir* embedding these concepts in their constitutions. Ecuador's 2008 constitution incorporates *Buen Vivir* as a guiding principle, granting nature legal rights and prioritizing community-led, ecologically conscious development. Bolivia's 2009 constitution also adopts *Buen Vivir* (under the term *Vivir Bien*) as an ethical principle. The two constitutions handle the concept quite differently, illustrating the range of possibilities of translating these ideas into legal frameworks (Gudynas, 2011). In a similar manner, Lian Gogali states:

> "We redefine prosperity as a condition where the village community without exception has a peaceful and fair social life and without violence, an economy that meets the needs of the community, natural resources are managed fairly and sustainably, a clean and sustainable environment, preserved customs and traditions, and healthy political dynamics where in daily life the community holds the values of justice, humanity, equality, and local wisdom. The economy we develop is a solidarity economy, managing natural resources in solidarity with fellow human beings. Such an economy criticizes an anthropocentric model of economic development that ignores nature as an equal part of the ecosystem of life. We believe in taking from nature, returning to nature, and developing economics in a shared community."

In addition, she highlights the local specificity of defining prosperity:

> "Each village has its own indicators of prosperity. These indicators are discussed together by women's groups and village governments in the Village Reform School classes. Consequently, the village prosperity indicators for each village are different. For example, in Pinedapa Village, people were troubled by the lack of a waste management system and worked toward a waste management system that protects the local natural environment. Another example is the food source indicator: quite a few villagers concluded that their village is "prosperous" if the villagers' food sources come from within the village itself rather than having to be brought from the outside."

What our case study and our connecting it to democracy studies emphasizes is not only the conclusion/product of these debates on redefining prosperity, but also the process/procedure:

Lian Gogali tells us about their emerging procedures:

> "We map what we have with an encompassing understanding of economy that also includes the environment and the socio-cultural life of our residents. Since 2020, the Village Reform Teams have been taking stock, conducting a "food census," understanding their own organic gardening better, and then strategizing about how to best protect and expand the prosperity they already have. Therefore, each village defines their own prosperity in terms of what they want to preserve and what they need to improve. With this encompassing perspective, we build confidence in the socio-economic potential of our villages. We develop natural farming, organic fertilizers, village markets and nature-based crafts along with tree planting activities as a joint mechanism for economic products that are in solidarity with nature."

The Village Reform Teams, focused on concrete action, seek to improve the existing structures rather than upend them. We can apply Arturo Escobar's key distinction between "alternative developments" and "alternatives to development" (Escobar, 1992) to understand the different scales and ambitions in this example. In their daily activities, the Reform Teams' ambitions emphasize feasibility, as Lian Gogali's account shows:

> "Village Business Teams work towards creating jobs in the villages; Women's and Children's Safe House Teams carry out anti-violence campaigns and support victims of violence. The Media Teams report on events in the village, the Community Service Advocacy Teams advocate against injustices, and the Children's Creativity Teams organise space for play and creativity for children. Examples of successes are the newly set-up village market in the village of Salukaia and the brick business set up by Mrs. Yuspina in the Taliwan village, which reduced unemployment and prevented young people from having to work on palm oil plantations. Mrs. Hadrah set up a waste bank in Tokorondo village. Mrs. Nengah organised Muslim, Christian and Hindu women to jointly manage coconut oil. In Trimulya village, Mrs. Widya has been advocating for rice services for the poor. Women have organized mobile libraries for children in 15 villages. Around 200 women became active leaders in their villages. Some became village heads, others were part of village council bodies, heads of government affairs or village secretaries."

These examples illustrate the ways in which women in the villages participate in political decision-making and political action in ways that current democracy studies approaches can barely grasp with their focus on elections and liberal institutions, and how villagers attempt to counter top-down decisions on economic development and exploitation of their living environments with

their own businesses and socio-economic planning. At the same time, the larger debates and education efforts show that beyond reforms, the villagers address fundamental questions of structuring state and society, as Lian Gogali's account illustrate:

> "In 2022, our network of women began supporting villagers in countering the official development plans with their own village books. The books serve to document the vision that villagers have for their own living together. The communities write the books themselves: 15 different work groups in each of the 80 participating villages regularly meet and tackle topics related to education, healthcare, and food sovereignty. They discuss the sustainable community development plans guided by concepts of mitigation, adaptation, and climate justice and disseminate their ideas mainly through events and open discussions, and through their radio program. The books serve as a reference for the annual village meetings (*musrembang*) and for monitoring and evaluating any policies decided during those meetings. The long-term idea is that during the village meetings, the community should control the representatives, rather than the representative taking decisions for the community."

Beyond the earlier described concrete actions, this account illustrates the encompassing ambitions of some of the reformers, as well as their commitment to self-organization and self-determination. These examples raise a longstanding yet still relevant question: what are the limits and possibilities for sustainable economic efforts within a national and global political economy that heavily depends on resource exploitation? Alternatives to Development as it is—a radical shift in how we understand progress rather than minor reforms to the dominant model—are likely to gain importance as the prevailing fossil-fuel-dependent economic structure reaches its limits.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined discourses on and practices of collective decision-making in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia to highlight gaps in contemporary empirical democracy research. Liberal democracy as practiced in Indonesia has facilitated elite-driven resource extraction and allowed a small circle of oligarchs to convert the country's rich natural resources into private wealth at the expense of rural communities. We traced how the term "demokrasi" has been appropriated by elites as a tool for legitimizing resource extraction, diminishing its credibility among affected communities.

Our case study of the work by rural women in the Poso region exemplifies how local communities seek to counter exploitative political-economic structures that primarily benefit elites at the expense of local populations. The villagers' collective efforts to counter this arrangement ranges from modifying the processes of political decision making through deliberation formats to initiatives concerning local economic reforms and ambitions discussions on how to refine prosperity in ways that highlight the place of humans as part of nature and show similarities to Latin American discourses on *Bon Vivir*.

This study contributes to two growing areas of research: empirical studies that explore democracy beyond liberal paradigms and cross-disciplinary scholarship on indigenous governance and participation. Our study challenges the preeminence of liberal democracy and advocates for a more nuanced, expansive understanding of democracy, one that includes considerations of economic planning and long-term environmental impacts. Specifically, our findings underscore how integrating community-led economic planning and long-term ecological sustainability into democratic processes addresses immediate inequalities and beyond that also reimagines democracy and political participation as inherently tied to socio-environmental wellbeing. The example of the solidarity economy initiatives led by women in Poso highlight the potential of locally-led decision-making in for building more inclusive and sustainable societies. This approach to democracy empowers marginalized actors as in our case rural women as key political actors.

Our case study's emphasis on redefining prosperity and using simultaneously traditional and potentially innovative participatory mechanisms shows parallels to similar efforts in communities globally that resist exploitative economic systems which are historically tied to liberal democracy. They both point at the importance of socio-economic explanations of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy as outlined above and hold the potential for understanding the conditions and prospects for encompassing democratization.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because our data largely consists of ethnographic notes which are typically not made available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to saskia.schaefer@hu-berlin.de.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because institutional ethical approval is currently only formally required for studies with vulnerable participants at our institution. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements because written consent is currently not required for our type of research. We informed all participants of our research and anonymized any names. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because our conversations were held in informal ethnographic settings and no data was obtained that included information about identifiable individuals.

Author contributions

SS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review &

editing. MS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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