

Learning spirit from the hill of trash

The sun has yet to rise when Tika Lindawati is ready to go to work with a big basket on her back. Slowly, the 10 year old girl climbs a mountain of trash in front of her hut.

One thing she is afraid of is slipping off. Accidents in the trash disposal area is what child scavengers fear the most in Sumur Batu trash disposal area, Bantargebang, Bekasi, West Java. They risk slipping off and being buried in trash because of one wrong step. Sometime ago, a middle-aged man slipped off and was buried in trash and in less than an hour, his whole body was burned by the methane gas coming from the trash.

A scrapper car (Becho) moves around to pile trash up to a height that even an adult cannot reach so Tika must move fast to collect bottles, gallon caps and used cans that have been recently unloaded from trash trucks. Once the basket on her back weighs about five kilograms, she walks down to pile her "harvest" in front of her hut. After taking a short break, she returns to the trash hill.

"When the Becho is here, I move away. I'm scared of being crushed. The Becho is very noisy," she told the interviewer some time ago.

When the sun is right above her head, Tika takes off her basket and prepares herself for school. She goes back to her hut, takes a shower, has lunch, and runs quickly to Tunas Mulia Nature School, some 200 meters away. School starts at 13:00 and ends at 16:00. She is now in the 4th grade.

From her school, she can see adult scavengers busy collecting recyclables. Some of the children shared their experiences that day before school got started.

Tika told her friends that she was not lucky that day. She could not reach the fresh trash from the trucks and as a result, adult scavengers got the "good" trash. "I received leftovers because I was afraid of the Becho," she told her school mates.

Unlike ordinary schools, Nature School has no walls, tiles, roof, or strong building structure. It is made up of eight local stage houses with pillars as high as an adult's back, wooden floors, bamboo fences and sago palm leaf roofs. The size of each building is 8x10 meters. Students attending elementary, junior and senior high schools learn in groups depending on their grade. Today, 230 child scavengers attend this school.

Tika, who has been studying at Nature School since she was seven, has never attended a formal school. Her parents, Kawi, 58 years old, and Mimin Mintarsih, 39 years old, wanted to take her to a formal school in their home town in Karawang, West Java. However, due to financial difficulties, they had to take Tika to live in the scavengers' huts.

Nature School is the only place for Tika to get an education. It may not be an ideal school but she is at least able to gain some knowledge. "The important thing is that she can read and write," explained Mimin. She will leave it to Tika to decide her own future.

For Mimin, Tika, the third of her four children, is very helpful. By collecting trash, she can make some money for the family, although it is not that much. In one day, Tika typically earns Rp.10.000 to Rp.15.000 from selling scraps. She gives all her money to Mimin for their daily needs.

Similarly, other scavengers like Ujang, Engkos and Imron Sulaeman, aged 12 to 13 years old, wake up early in the morning to climb trash mountain. They carry baskets to collect scraps and sell them to collectors. They earn Rp.300.000 per month but they give it all to their parents. "The money will be used to build a house in our hometown, in Karawang, West Java," explained Imron.

Imron attended Tambaksari 2 Elementary School in Karawang but only up to the third grade. After his parents' divorce, Imron followed his stepfather, Imam, to the Sumur Batu disposal area in Bantargebang, Bekasi. There, he became a scavenger.

Before attending Tunas Mulia Nature School, Imron worked from 07:00 to 17:00. He was eight years old at the time. When he was on top of trash mountain, there was no time for a break; he didn't even have time for lunch. "Only breakfast and dinner," he said.

Imron has been working as a scavenger since 2003 to help his parents. Now, they have a modest stone house in his village.

Imron is in the 7th grade at Tunas Mulia Nature School. He has achieved good results so far, and is ranked second best in his class. Since studying in the Nature School, his working hours have reduced; he works in the morning until noon and goes to school after that.

Feel no pain

One time, Imron was very sick. He was vomiting a lot and his body was weak, so he remained in his hut located near the disposal area. He was 13 years old and didn't know what to do. He hoped he could close his eyes, rest, and be cured when he opened his eyes in the following morning.

His condition, however, persisted for days. Without any help from adults, Imron didn't understand that he was sick and Imam also didn't know what to do about his step son.

Imam thought it was because Imron used to play under a big tree before dark, and not because of exposure to methane gas from the trash in Sumur Batu. "My father said I played under a haunted tree," said Imron.

Imron still does not understand the risk of getting sick from exposure to trash. He does not know about the gas that produces carbon dioxide emissions. He cannot imagine it at all. "My father once told me that trash is dangerous, but I never wear anything to protect my nose or mouth," he said.

Scavengers never use masks, they only use shirts to protect their heads from the sun. While skimming through trash piles as high as 10-15 meters, Imron sometimes injurs his foot by stepping on nails or a piece of glass or bottle. He treats these accidents lightly; after stepping on glass once, he just went down to his hut, applied some iodine and covered it with cloth before returning to work. "When I'm injured, I only apply some betadin," he said when asked what type of medicine he usually uses.

In general, scavengers don't care how many times they vomit in a month, or if they had diarrhea or respiration problems. Kawi, 58 years old, only considers himself sick when he coughs blood. Even then, he would refuse to go to a hospital; he only takes generic medication from Bantar Gebang clinic (Puskesmas). "If I am still strong enough to collect trash, then I'm not sick," he said.

Kawi is Tika Lindawati's father. Kawi also considers it normal for his daughter to have a sore throat or cough. "It's normal for her to have a headache. So far, Tika has never gotten sick," he said.

Tika is very skinny and pale, but her parents consider it normal because she collects trash every day from morning until noon, before going to school. "Her body looks weak, but she is strong enough to carry trash," said Mimin Mintarsih, Tika's mother.

For Ujang, Engkos and Imron, Nature School is the only place to gain knowledge for a better future. Through this school, they hope to continue their studies to a higher level.

Founder of the Nature School, Nadam Dwi Subekti, said the presence of his foundation is to facilitate child scavengers access to formal education. To earn recognition for their teaching methods, the school applies two standard teaching modules set by the Ministry of National Education.

First, they take part in the Package A standardized exam for elementary school students and Package B for junior high school students, with legitimate certification. Second, a small number of students with good performance receive scholarships to attend a formal school in Bantargebang sub-district. So far, 10 students have received scholarships to study at Almuttaqin Vocational School in Bantargebang, majoring in accounting.

The Nature School is committed to developing teaching methods and an educational format that enables students to adapt to formal schools. "I hope these child scavengers can compete with other students from formal school in terms of knowledge," Nadam explained.

Tika, Ujang, Engkos and Imron now enjoy the benefits of the Tunas Mulia Nature School. Before it opened, they could not count well but now they are good with numbers and multiplication. They can also now read and write well.

For Tika, Nature School is everything. The school treats child scavengers well and understands their difficult lives.

When she grows up, Tika wishes to repay her teachers' kindness by further developing the Nature School. "I want to be a teacher and teach in Nature School," she said enthusiastically.

This article is the first article on child scavengers in West Bekasi, West Java from a series of two in-depth articles written by Hamludin of TEMPO media group and published by tempo.co and Koran TEMPO on 6 and 7 November, respectively. The article is part of the ILO's media fellowship programme on child labour and education, jointly conducted in collaboration with the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Jakarta and six selected leading, national mass media. The media fellowship programme was part of the campaign conducted by the ILO through its Combating Child Labour through Education Project, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.