



Interview with Mira Kusumarini

Executive Director of the
Coalition of Civil Society Against
Violent Extremism (C-SAVE)*

Even during armed conflict and other situations of violence, all children are entitled to their rights and protections as children without distinction based on their age, gender, religion, or whether they are associated with an armed group. Despite this, millions of children in conflict zones face discrimination, ostracization and stigmatization. This is particularly true for children affiliated with groups designated as “terrorist”, who face a range of challenges in reintegrating into society.

Civil society can play an important role at the international, regional and domestic levels in helping children formerly associated with armed groups, or otherwise affected by armed conflict, to rejoin communities. Mira Kusumarini is a professional in the peace and security field in Indonesia who works to address the problems of women and children who have been associated with armed groups, and to help them reintegrate them into society. She is the Executive Director of the Coalition of Civil Society Against Violent Extremism (C-SAVE), a collaborative network of civil society organizations.

In this interview, she discusses the challenges involved in the reintegration of children who have been associated with extremist groups in Indonesia and the stigma they face, as well as the importance of empathy in helping communities to heal.

Keywords: children, stigma, reintegration, child soldiers, armed groups, empathy.

⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮ ⋮

* This interview was conducted on 21 February 2020 by Ellen Policinski, Editor-in-Chief, and Sai Sathyanarayanan Venkatesh, Editorial Assistant of the *Review*.

You've been involved with the work of several NGOs in Indonesia through the years, working on a diverse range of human rights issues. What drives you in this line of work?

The main drive for my work is my concern around empathy. Even though empathy is so important in our social lives, it isn't a concern that most people have today. I've been working in peacebuilding activities for the past decade in Jakarta, and I co-founded C-SAVE around four years ago.

Prior to joining C-SAVE, I was working on mainstreaming social entrepreneurship, where applied empathy was used as the main driver for innovative social solutions. I started the Empatiku [My Empathy] Foundation to mainstream emotional competence and make empathy as much a priority in early education as any other academic subject taught.

In 2016, when C-SAVE was first established, we started to advocate for changes to national counterterrorism [CT] laws and policies. A proposal in the form of a problem inventory list [*daftar inventaris masalah*, DIM], was formulated against the draft revised CT Law No. 15/2003. The proposal substantiated on nine themes. In addition to putting in the DIM, the Coalition also put forward the arguments raised through different policy papers. Out of eleven substantial changes in the draft CT Law, eight proposed by the Coalition to better protect human rights were accommodated.

At the time, the media reported that several Indonesians had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State [IS] group. Indonesian activists and NGOs knew that some could have returned back to Indonesia to recruit others. However, it was not until 2017 that it was confirmed that a group of Indonesians who were associated with IS were being detained and sent back to Indonesia, mostly from Turkey. At that point there were around seventy-five returnees, and the Indonesian government had them referred to rehabilitation centres run by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

This was the starting point of C-SAVE's work with deportees and returnees who had been affiliated with terrorist groups like IS. Out of the seventy-five people that were returned, almost 50% of them were children, about 35% were women and the rest were men. Our goal was to ensure that they were reintegrated back into society so that they could go on to lead normal lives.

At the time that these deportees had been referred to the rehabilitation centres, C-SAVE learnt that there were no programmes in place for their rehabilitation and reintegration. The government and social workers working in these centres were not aware of how to deal with this issue or even how to comprehensively understand the problem. This is where we came in, as we offered to provide support to social workers in the centres. This led to us working together with the government ministries and relevant institutions to help create a standard operating procedure for the rehabilitation and reintegration of deportees and others who were returning to Indonesia. Since then, there have been around 490 people that have been through the rehabilitation and reintegration programme run by the Ministry of Social

Affairs. The Standard Operating Procedure for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Individuals Already Exposed to Radical Terrorism Ideology [SOP] is a set of step-by-step instructions compiled by the Ministry of Social Affairs to help social workers carry out complex routine operations in delivering rehabilitation and reintegration services. The SOP aims to achieve efficiency, quality outputs and uniformity of performance, while reducing miscommunication and failure to comply with related rules and regulations. The SOP contains aspects of rehabilitation delivered by the rehabilitation centres and of reintegration delivered by local governments. We, as a civil society organization, have been there to improve the capacity of the social workers and the policy framework in the centres.

Why is the reintegration of people, and in particular children, who have been associated with armed groups so important for society? What is the role of empathy in this process?

The rehabilitation and reintegration of these people is important because they are also human beings. It is important for them to return home and be able to rejoin the community and get the chance to be a normal citizen again, just like the rest of us. Children are the most vulnerable victims of violent extremist ideology. Nearly half of deportees and returnees are under 18 years of age, including toddlers [0–5 years, 48%], children [6–12 years, 42%] and adolescents [13–18 years, 10%]. Based on data from the field, these child deportees and returnees have experienced psychological trauma and have been in environments that have potentially threatened their lives and their physical and mental health.

We learnt that one important skill that enables children to be able to return to society is empathy – not only the children’s own empathetic skills, but it was also important for the social workers to work on their empathetic skills in order to understand the children’s situation and to be able to help them in a more efficient manner. Our goal has always been to ensure that these deportees and returnees are able to return to their local communities and live normal lives. It is important to harness empathy as a skill, as it serves as the backbone to ensuring the return of deportees and returnees back to society.

The goal is not to de-radicalize individuals rather, the first step is to fill the gap in their social skills by including empathy as a basic competency, and to equip them with other relevant social skills so as to enable them to return to society. Therefore, we provide empathy training for social workers, in addition to the other trainings in communication and other skills.

Ensuring the rights of children affected by armed conflict is complex. What are some of the challenges that children associated with armed groups face when they return to their communities?

As you rightly mention, dealing with children affected by armed conflict is a multi-dimensional issue. One aspect is related to how to best protect these children. Many of these children were brought to Syria and indoctrinated by their parents. We have

a Law on Child Protection in Indonesia,¹ according to which children are to be under the supervision of their parents. This can pose a challenge where that's not in the best interests of the child, which must be of primary importance.²

Another issue we noticed was that the children who were brought to Syria and back had been exposed to situations which left them traumatized. When they arrived at the rehabilitation centres, we examined them and found that most of them had faced traumatic situations, whether during their time in the detention centres or simply due to separation from their parents, or other situations that caused trauma.

Yet another challenge that we've noticed in the past three years is that there is insufficient legal protection for children who, of course, are victims of armed conflict, but who have also allegedly committed criminal acts under the domestic legal system. One such case that I can share is that of two children, one aged 14 and the other aged 15 or 16, who had been sent to the rehabilitation centre. They behaved well in the six months that they were there, and based on this, the rehabilitation centre officials assessed and recommended that they were ready to be sent home. Instead, however, the police sent them to court, where they were sentenced to six months and nine months of imprisonment respectively, without considering the six months they had spent at the rehabilitation centre. We are currently advocating for alternative, restorative justice measures for these children and others in a similar situation.

There are also challenges once children are back home. C-SAVE helps children have access to schooling, but unfortunately, society and the community often discriminate against these children, claiming that the schools which receive these children are "terrorist" schools. So, it's clear that there are a lot of challenges faced by these children, including legal, social, psychological and protection issues.

What about children who are separated from their parents? What specific challenges do they face?

There are two main scenarios for child returnees who have been separated from their parents. The first is where children who still have parents stay together with their parents. The second is where children don't have parents or any family to go to. In the latter case, according to the Indonesian Law on Child Protection, the government is responsible for the protection of the children and for finding a place for them to live. In these circumstances the government often sends the children to Islamic boarding schools to ensure that they get an education. These schools are accepting of these children and provide them with a place to live, education and the means to survive.

1 Undang-Undang Tentang Perlindungan Anak (Law on Child Protection), No. 23/2002, available at: www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=63103.

2 It is important to note that Indonesia is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration under Article 3. Indonesia is also a party to the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict, which provides further guarantees and protection for children affected by armed conflict.

***What is the local community's perception of these children once they return home?
What can be done to encourage communities to accept these children?***

When these children reintegrate into society, they face the social stigma of having been affiliated with terrorist groups. They also face discrimination among other children when they play, and from people who know that they have been to Syria or Turkey and have been associated with an armed group.

Civil society can empower community members to make sure that these children do not feel left out or different from the others. By being alienated and stigmatized, this gives rise to the opportunity for these children to go back down the wrong path and to re-enter the so-called terrorist groups. Therefore, it is vital that civil society and community members act as front-line protectors to ensure that these children are safely reintegrated back into society.

Based on our experience, we have come to realize that it is not in the best interests of the child to raise public awareness around who they are or where they come from because spreading of such information could be counterproductive. Instead of opening up opportunities for them to start their new life, it could give rise to further stigmatization. So when C-SAVE works with the community, we ensure that only key leaders of the community know the identity and past of these children. We prepare them to be front-liners by equipping them to understand early detection measures of possible re-recruitment by armed groups as well as preventative measures with regard to the stigmatization of these children. This provides them with tools for understanding, tolerance and empathy with the children. We encourage communities to promote their social activities in a more inclusive manner so as to build social cohesiveness, resulting in the improvement of the resilient capacity that the local community possesses in dealing with such individuals who have been affected by armed conflict. We have community discussions to raise awareness about the risks of violent extremist ideology. For the discussions, we use animated videos on what the CT Law has to say to protect people. We also broadcast short videos telling the life stories of former returnees or deportees. We work with local religious leaders, especially women *ulama*, to hold discussions with *majelis ta'lims* [women's religious groups] on how to translate religious teachings into concrete actions applying empathy, promoting tolerance and improving social activities for the good of others.

Empathy is the core skill in building community resilience capacity, and this is what we try to achieve through our engagement with the local community. Empathy should be exercised through action. We encourage different community groups to come up with creative initiatives for their social activities. For example, religious groups of women in the local community run prayer activities and, every Friday, do what they call a "Clean Friday" – a day on which they encourage people in the local community to clean out their house, the road and the environment. This is one example of how empathy can be translated into a concrete activity.

Another example is the activities raising awareness of the importance of vaccinations for children by local health groups in the community. This is done to counter the narrative of radical groups who claim that vaccines are *haram*. As a local community, the spread of such misinformation is detrimental to everyone, especially babies and infants, and empathy definitely plays a role in countering these harmful narratives. We encourage these types of activities to promote empathy.

There is a narrative in the media about “violent extremism” and “radicalization” of children, who are sometimes even labelled “terrorist children”. What are the risks of this type of narrative?

This is another issue faced by the children. How the media frames the narrative is very tricky and, unfortunately, the news coverage by some media outlets does not consider the impact of their narratives for the future of the children. We have noticed that the narrative impacts not only the returnees and deportees, including children, but also the wider society. For example, when they are interviewed by a national TV company, the objective of the programme is to educate the public on lessons learned from the experience of the returnees – how they are trapped and recruited. Unfortunately, however, most of the audience puts the blame on the returnees, and a preconceived notion of wrongdoing is thrust upon them by way of severe social sanctions such as stigmatization and alienation. It is indeed not easy to control the viewpoint of the entire audience base, but this is a challenge that all of the media should consider so as to bring the least negative effects upon these returnees. Since this is national media coverage, the nationwide spread of hatred towards the returnees has severe and drastic implications.

To address this, we hosted media trainings and discussions with the media to encourage empathetic news coverage, keeping in mind the future of the children and considering the impact on the wider society, where there is a risk that some people will single out children who are identified or come forward in the media, or blame them. When we educate the media, we first have a discussion with them raising the issue in light of the perspective of the children and the perspective of the audience. When the media approaches us to do interviews of deportees or returnees – mostly of adults, but sometimes children as well – we ensure that the interview is done only on a voluntary basis. When they agree to be interviewed, informed consent papers must be signed by the person interviewed and the media representative. This provides some regulations and agreements around what can be reported in the news based on the interview. These are some of the steps that we take to “educate” the media.

Looking ahead to the future, what are the steps that need to be taken to ensure that affected children can overcome stigma, rejoin society and live a normal life? Are there any particular “success stories” that give you hope?

Moving forward, we’ll be focused on addressing all those challenges that I had previously mentioned: working to strengthen the legal protection of children, including finding alternative justice measures and working with the police, judges,

the government and other stakeholders to ensure that there is strong legal protection for these children. Second, we would like to ensure that the community is a safe space in which the children can be accepted and be able to live their normal lives without stigmatization. We're working closely with the communities on improving their capacities, their resilience and their empathy in order to build trust and social cohesion, so that when these deportees and returnees are rehabilitated into society, there is not a negative perception towards their acceptance. Thirdly, in the very near future we want to focus on children without any family or parents. We know that there are hundreds of Indonesian children in Syria right now, in the refugee camps, who have no parents, so we need to prepare the ideal home for these children when they return.

An example of a successful measure would be the handling of the children associated with the 2018 Surabaya bombing in East Java province. After the bombing, they were rejected by their community and they could not return. Now, they live and study with other local children in the Islamic boarding school. When they first came to the rehabilitation centre, they were considered radical, indoctrinated by their parents, and they themselves were very traumatized. Through our efforts they recovered from the trauma and were ready to go home, but because the community had rejected them, the government needed to find another place for them. The government was able to identify an Islamic boarding school that was willing to accept them, and now they are slowly but steadily joining the community there.

To put it into perspective, in Indonesian cultural contexts, Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, have an important role in contributing to the education of the children in terms of both formal and informal education, including religious education. For child deportees and returnees, there should be a social reintegration mechanism to ensure that there are families who will take care of these children, that the society will accept their return, and that there are opportunities for re-socialization. In the specific case of orphans, unless their extended families take care of them, there are institutions such as Islamic boarding schools that provide care and education on a residential basis outside the family home. They provide full-time care and education based on Islamic principles.

We do face several challenges in our work, but we have found solutions and are constantly looking to ensure that the best interests of the children are maintained and that they have a chance for the future.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

To re-emphasize something that I said before, we have concerns about these children being turned over to the courts. We're working with police and prosecutors to develop common understandings and better treatment for children.

We are also planning to review the existing policies relating to the legal protection of the children, and to work closely with law enforcement for the system to be in the best interests of the children. A current challenge with the correctional system is that many cases of child recruitment occur within the prisons. Concerns

regarding the implementation of Law No. 8 of 2012 on the juvenile justice system are related to a punitive approach that is still pursued by law enforcement despite the law's emphasis on restorative justice.

Indonesia's juvenile justice system is already progressive. In 2012, the House of Representatives passed a law on the juvenile justice system which prioritized diversion, increased the age of criminal responsibility from 8 to 12 years, and encouraged the use of restorative justice practices. The law was enacted in 2014. The law states that children should not be in prison, except in exceptional circumstances. However, many Indonesians are still unaware of the legislation and the importance of providing children with special protections, especially in the case of children who have been forced to commit crimes by others such as their parents or other external influences. This should be taken into consideration by the juvenile justice system, and we're constantly working to ensure that it is.