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Between joy, care, and risk in the sinking city: using photovoice to understand youth resilience in North Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Urban poor communities in North Jakarta, a rapidly sinking coastal area, negotiate environmental challenges and risks daily. Most residents in these *kampungs* are young people. Despite the direct experiences of youth with flooding, their perspectives are generally excluded by top-down interventions that aim to enhance their resilience. This produces a gap between residents' lived realities and technocratic urban resilience frameworks. This study examines how resilience is understood and practiced in these settings through photovoice, which involves focus group discussions and narrative sharing with youth. Our research highlights the value of photovoice for capturing the ambiguities and messiness of lived experiences and performances of urban resilience and risk, with particular utility for researchers working with youth in vulnerable communities. Photovoice enabled us to explore how resilience is expressed through social ties, emotional responses, cultural practices, and a strong sense of place. Through visual storytelling and thematic analysis, our research expands understandings of youth resilience as an evolving, place-based concept that is embedded in everyday life. We call for more inclusive, place-based approaches to resilience that recognize how young people are already adapting, resisting, and shaping life at the edges of a sinking city.

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Photovoice; community resilience; youth; urban resilience; Jakarta

Introduction

“We call this location a waterfall because the currents from the two areas collide, resulting in a strong current. Many children swim and play in this location, one of the exciting places and enjoy fate because of the continuous flooding.” (Rani, 24 years old)

Rani, from an urban *kampung*¹ in Muara Angke, shared how a flood-prone spot known as the “waterfall” has become a playground for local youth. Her phrase “*enjoying their fate*” reveals an acceptance of flooding as part of daily life. Despite the direct, intimate experiences of youth such as Rani with flooding, their perspectives are rarely considered

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in urban planning. At the policy level, resilience is often framed narrowly, overlooking how vulnerable communities, including youth, live and negotiate resilience daily amid shocks and threats (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; Meerow & Newell, 2019; Shirleyana et al., 2021). In North Jakarta's coastal kampungs, residents face the daily challenges of land subsidence, tidal floods, and environmental degradation (Gunandar et al., 2024). They are exposed to environmental risks, economic hardship, infrastructural neglect, spatial exclusion, and other structural conditions that demand their resilience. Communities respond to these challenges through collective social practices and meaning-making, utilizing everyday forms of resilience (Betteridge & Webber, 2019; Prana et al., 2024).

Including young people in planning and decision-making is essential in urban development because they will inherit the impact of current interventions (Hagemann et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023). This is pertinent in cities like Jakarta, where youth make up the majority of the population. Youth also maintain social cohesion, which involves bridging communication between generations while managing daily routines (e.g. household chores, schoolwork, and caregiving). However, youth are rarely seen as contributors to urban resilience because they are often considered inexperienced, leading to their exclusion from policy and urban planning (Aufseeser, 2018; Frank, 2006; Osborne et al., 2017).

This essay examines how youth navigate life in the rapidly sinking neighborhoods of North Jakarta, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2024 and March 2025. We combine the participatory method of photovoice with “town-watching”, a reflective walking method enabling youth to map affective geographies of fear, joy, and memory (Viderman & Knierbein, 2020). Responding to calls for more situated approaches to urban resilience (Cai & Marks, 2021), we use photovoice to center youth perspectives, and document how youth reinterpret resilience through emotions, embodiment, and sensory experiences. The acts of reframing flooded spots suggest a form of resilience rooted in improvisation, attachment, and ambiguity which is distinguished from normative understandings that equate resilience with visible infrastructure or organized preparedness.

Using photovoice to understand youth resilience in North Jakarta

Photovoice is a participatory method that has been used to enable marginalized groups to document their own lived experiences through photography and reflection (Duffy & Rickard, 2025; Hatala et al., 2020; Hopkins & Wort, 2020; Rose et al., 2018). It has the potential to empower and transform participants into co-creators of knowledge by enabling depictions of “not only [their] community's needs but also its assets” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 373). Compared with text-based methods, photovoice enables participants to express their perspectives in a less structured manner, generating deeper, potentially more nuanced insights beyond interviews alone.

We worked with fifteen youth aged 18–25 in two neighborhoods (*Rukun Warga*, or RW) in two kampungs: RW22 in Muara Angke and RW04 in Kamal Muara (Figure 1). While Muara Angke relies on outdated infrastructure, Kamal Muara has newer state interventions like piped water, retention ponds, and sea walls. To the north lies

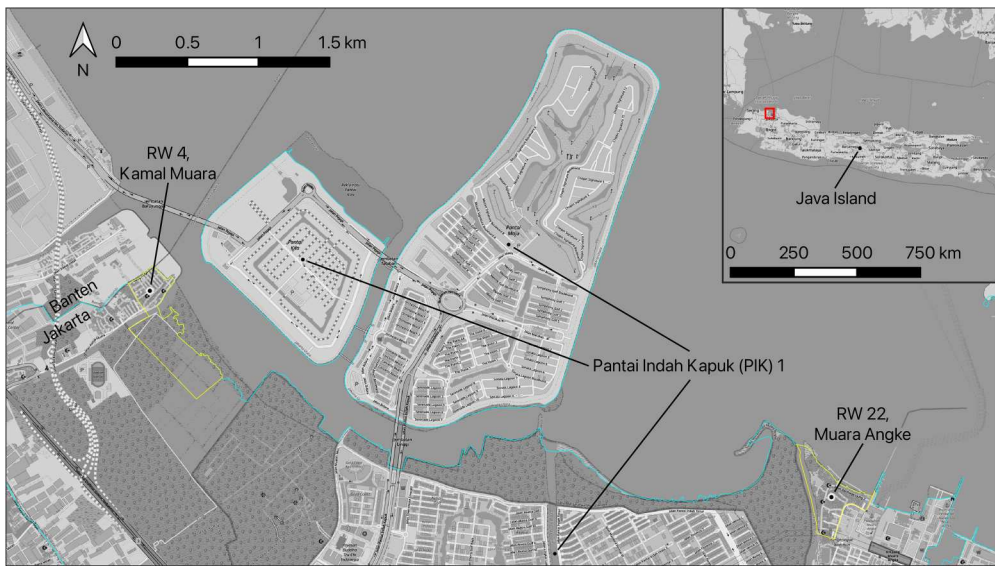


Figure 1. Map of study sites: RW04 Kamal Muara and RW22 Muara Angke in Penjaringan, North Jakarta. Credit: Asa Muhammad.

the reclaimed island, Pantai Indah Kapuk (PIK), featuring high-end real estate and gated communities.

We undertook the photovoice method in two sessions. In October 2024, we asked youth to share stories from the photos considered meaningful in a WhatsApp group. In the weeks following the briefing, however, the youth mostly shared videos, and we were unable to build reflection and observe the emotions evoked. The dynamic changed in March 2025, as we began with a group briefing and guided participants with questions to map walking routes in their neighborhoods. Using smartphones provided by the research team, participants photographed places that evoked feelings, while engaging in informal conversation that elicited narrative reflections. After the second session, we provided a portable photo printer so participants could select and print images. This materiality created a reflective moment: the limit of 20 prints required participants to be selective. These photos were then arranged on shared boards and captioned (Figure 2). Collective interpretations and thematic narratives emerged through a follow-up discussion. Throughout the process, we used visual and textual triangulation by linking images, participant reflections, and fieldnotes, to deepen interpretation. Analytic memos were developed to explore how these practices reflected youth experiences of resilience, spatial exclusion, and emotional adaptation. Photovoice proved particularly suitable for engaging with youth with limited time and resources, and enabled us to see and hear spatial injustices in their everyday environments, while illuminating the emotional dimensions of inhabiting those spaces.

Joy, play, and the reimagination of risk

In North Jakarta's flood-prone kampungs, the youth did not simply endure disruption, but reimagined it. The participants described spaces shaped by risk and neglect as sites



Figure 2. Participants in Kamal Muara sticking the printed photos onto the board.

of joy, improvisation, and a sense of belonging. In Kamal Muara, for instance, they photographed a bamboo hut they called *Bale Knock*.² Perched at the kampung's edge, facing the elite development of PIK, *Bale Knock* serves as a gathering space that is part social hub, part informal park, and part resistance site. Youth meet there to talk, celebrate Ramadan, or simply rest. "We grill, we mokel [break the fast early], we just chill," one participant said. The name itself is playful and locally invented, encapsulating how the space had been symbolically claimed.

Youth shared that they often swim from *Bale Knock* across the channel to PIK (Figure 3), crossing into one of Jakarta's most exclusive gated communities, although the private security guards always warn them to go back: "We swim to PIK a lot. Sometimes we get chased by security, but we're used to it. We always make it back." Figure 3 illustrates their ambivalent feelings toward PIK, framed by the rows of moored boats near their settlement. Swimming together evoked joy and a sense of freedom, yet it was simultaneously marked by sadness and frustration, as they were reminded of their exclusion from these spaces. These ambivalent emotions highlight the affective politics of urban inequality, where joy and resistance coexist in everyday practices. The act of swimming blurred boundaries between the kampung and gated communities. Their method, which involved using cork floats and wrapping dry clothes in plastic, demonstrates both physical adaptation and symbolic resistance, as the youth push back against the social and physical barriers dividing their kampung from the city's elite spaces. In doing so, they claim a sense of control and visibility in a landscape from which they are often excluded.



Figure 3. Participants captured PIK Island from Kamal Muara.



Figure 4. *Curug Eceng* (Left) and *Waterboom Gang 1* (Right).

The creative ways that youth reclaim urban space were not isolated incidents. They were shared practices shaped by common experiences of exclusion, flooding, and everyday survival. In Muara Angke, participants pointed to a flooded road segment, opposing the overflow of tidal currents from the drainage system (Figure 4). They described how children play in this spot during floods, treating the dangerous current as an improvised amusement park. In the same road corridor, another sunken area becomes Waterboom Gang (alley) 1 during heavy rains, echoing the name of Jakarta's commercial water park (Figure 4). "*Free tourist attractions that are always crowded (with kids) during floods*", as described by one youth. These narratives revealed ambivalent emotions: while floods could be reframed as moments of thrill and communal play, they also evoked an embodied sense of resignation, captured in their remarks, "*Well, what else can we do?*" Such ambivalence highlights how joy and resignation are entangled in everyday adaptation, reflecting the affective dimensions of living with flooding.

These acts of place-naming during the discussion were more than jokes. They represented how youth redefine environmental risk as shared experience, turning disorder into ritual, instability into memory. They reframe flooded streets and infrastructural failure as sites of leisure and identity. This suggests a form of resilience rooted in improvisation, attachment, and collective joy, reflecting a refusal of the idea that kampung life is simply about coping with threats and risks.

Kampung transformation with care and empathy

Another dimension of youth resilience emerged through empathy, especially for older generations whose lives were shaped by the shifting geographies of state-led adaptation. Youth repeatedly pointed to how recent infrastructure projects in Kamal Muara have reshaped their kampung's physical and social landscape in ways that complicated everyday life, especially for women and the elderly. Their stories revealed that resilience is relational and grounded in intergenerational care.

In Kamal Muara, for instance, construction of the seawall has altered the daily routines of elderly women who work as green mussel shell peelers, a labor intensive but vital source of income for older and widowed women. "*Now that the shelling area is higher [following the seawall construction], they have to walk farther and climb more. It is tiring for them,*" one participant explained (Figure 5). Others photographed the elevated areas and discussed how access to these new zones is unsafe for older bodies. Their photos were not just documentation, but also expressions of concern. As one caption read, simply: "*This is not made for them.*" These accounts underscore the complexities of seawall construction: while it may offer protection for the wider community, it simultaneously exacerbates the vulnerabilities of the already-marginalized.

Several participants photographed their own homes, or their grandparents' elevated floors and patchwork repairs (Figure 6). During the discussion, they spoke about the physical labor involved in staying in place, including rebuilding after floods, raising floors, clearing mud, and paying for repairs. These adaptations were framed not as heroic acts, but as necessary burdens absorbed quietly by older generations. One participant pointed to a photograph of their grandmother's room, saying, "*This is why I stay. I don't want to leave her.*" Their comments highlight the important role that



Figure 5. Green mussel peeling place.

youth play in caring for elders. Amid this awareness, the participants also voiced a need for more inclusive planning. Several discussed how decisions were made without consultation, or how government projects suddenly arrive, displacing informal gathering spaces and altering daily routes. “*They build without asking,*” one youth



Figure 6. The house of a participants' grandmother.

remarked. *“They just come. We adapt later.”* In these narratives, resilience took shape as a shared emotional experience, tied to memory, proximity, and responsibility. Youth were not only thinking ahead, but also taking care of the present struggles of other vulnerable groups.

Reflection and implication

In this short essay, we have drawn on our research to offer insights into how youth in North Jakarta experience and express resilience. While the sample size was small, owing in part to the difficulties of maintaining participation over time, the findings nonetheless offer rich, grounded insights into the contradictory experiences of youth who are forced by structural conditions to be resilient. Youth perspectives reveal how resilience is not just about coping with risk, but also generating meaning and maintaining connections in unstable environments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a growing body of work that centers on actor-based, affective understandings of resilience. Youth emerge as observers, interpreters, and critics of uneven adaptation processes. Their actions and reflections suggest that resilience is embodied and cultural, shaped as much by feelings and memories as by material conditions. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how creative and flexible tools can engage youth as co-producers of knowledge. It also highlights the importance of designing research that adapts to the realities of participants' time poverty, spatial exclusion, and emotional labor.

This approach could be further developed as a model for evaluating community resilience over time. Repeated participatory sessions can help track how relationships to space, risk, and care evolve, while enabling communities to reflect on what is gained, lost, or endured. When integrated with more conventional planning tools, this method makes resilience assessment more inclusive, relational, and responsive to lived experiences.

Notes

1. An urban kampung is a typical informal settlement in cities in Indonesia that represents the characteristics of rural settlements socially, economically, spatially, and culturally. These include strong ties between the community members and poor infrastructure conditions.
2. The term is a localised slang adaptation: "Bale" is derived from balai, the Indonesian word for a pavilion, but stylised to sound more casual or youthful. Meanwhile, "Knock" does not carry its English meaning here—it is used purely for stylistic effect, giving the name a playful, edgy tone that reflects the group's identity.

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Ethics

This research obtained ethical approval from the King's College London GGS Research Ethics Panel (LRS/DP-23/24-42357). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Research participants have been given pseudonyms throughout this essay. The team obtained research permits from the National Research and Innovation Agency of Indonesia.

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