

Peer Review

Review of: "Kampung Pelangi Semarang: Its Success, Decline, and the Current Status of the Rainbow Village"

Ariva Sugandi Permana¹

1. Department of Civil Engineering, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Bangkok, Thailand

I rate this paper as 3.5 Stars (comprehensive in story, but doesn't over sustainable solutions)

Kampung Pelangi: Not a Sustainable Solution, A Review

Kampung Pelangi Semarang, or the Rainbow Village, has gained recognition for its colorful makeover, but it serves as a poignant example of superficial urban intervention rather than sustainable urban development. While it initially symbolized transformation, it also highlights significant challenges and shortcomings in tackling urban poverty and slum conditions in Indonesia.

Superficiality as a Symptom-Cure Approach

When I look at Kampung Pelangi, I can't help but see it as a classic example of a "symptom-cure" approach. The bright, colorful houses do create an immediate visual impact and might even uplift the spirit of the community in the short term. But when I think about the deeper, systemic problems of slums—issues like overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and environmental degradation—it's clear to me that a splash of paint doesn't solve much. It feels like the city authorities are putting a vibrant mask on what remains a dire reality.

This isn't just about Kampung Pelangi; it's a pattern I see in many Indonesian cities. Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and, of course, Semarang all share a similar story. These cities have grown organically, shaped by chaotic and often unplanned development. You can see the difference when you compare them with planned cities. The lack of cohesive city planning is obvious, and it's no surprise that solving these entrenched problems is incredibly difficult. But even so, I can't help but think there has to be a better way than resorting to what is essentially a cosmetic fix.

Political Pragmatism Over Sustainability

One of the reasons I believe Kampung Pelangi exists is because of the nature of political leadership in cities like Semarang. It's a familiar story: limited financial resources, weak leadership, and a lack of political will combine to make it almost impossible to implement long-term, sustainable solutions. Instead, city leaders tend to focus on short-term projects that are highly visible, like Kampung Pelangi. These kinds of initiatives are pragmatic and cost-effective, but they don't tackle the underlying issues.

I understand the pressures these leaders face. With a maximum of two five-year terms, their political timelines don't align with the kind of slow, steady progress that sustainable urban development requires. But I can't help but feel frustrated that this pragmatic approach ends up perpetuating the cycle of superficial fixes. A colorful slum might grab headlines and attract tourists, but it doesn't change the fact that residents still live in challenging conditions.

Decline of Kampung Pelangi: A Missed Opportunity

The decline of Kampung Pelangi really drives home the limitations of this approach for me. In the beginning, it seemed like such a success story. Tourists came in droves, local businesses benefited, and the village became a point of pride. But that initial success didn't last. Later, the novelty had worn off, and the challenges started piling up. Internal conflicts within the community only made things worse, and then the pandemic dealt the final blow.

It's sad to see, but it's also a clear indication of what happens when projects like this are rolled out without long-term planning. For all the fanfare and excitement, Kampung Pelangi has struggled to sustain itself. I think that this could have been avoided if there had been a more comprehensive strategy from the start—something that looked beyond the paint and considered the deeper needs of the community.

A Critique of Scholarship on Kampung Pelangi

When I read papers or articles about Kampung Pelangi, I often find myself disappointed. The authors do a great job of documenting the transformation, the challenges, and even the progress in some cases. But I feel like these works focus too much on the aesthetics and the immediate impact of the initiative. They celebrate the story of a colorful village without digging into the bigger questions about sustainability.

To me, this lack of depth is a problem. These papers don't offer solutions for the real issues facing Kampung Pelangi and similar communities. Instead, they often end up perpetuating the narrative that cosmetic changes like this can somehow solve urban poverty. I don't agree with that. I think we need a

much more rigorous and holistic approach to these issues—one that goes beyond celebrating surface-level success.

A Call for Holistic Solutions

For me, the story of Kampung Pelangi is a reminder that we need to aim higher. Aesthetic interventions have their place, but they can't be the end of the story. If we're serious about solving the problems of slums and shantytowns, we need to think about rebuilding and retrofitting these areas. We need to develop compact cities, provide basic infrastructure and amenities, and, perhaps most importantly, educate residents about sustainable living.

I understand that these solutions are expensive and complicated. They take time and require strong political will—things that aren't always easy to come by. But I believe they're necessary if we want to create lasting change. Kampung Pelangi, for all its flaws, could serve as a starting point for these kinds of conversations. It's a case study in what works, what doesn't, and what we need to do differently in the future.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.