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Trapped in Motion: Youth, Waithood, and the Governance of Mobility in Indonesia's Industrial Periphery

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Abstract. In the context of globalization and regional industrial transformation, increased capital and labor mobility have not always translated into equitable opportunities for young people to secure employment. This paper explores the paradoxical dynamics in Indonesia's industrializing regions, where young people face limited prospects despite their physical mobility and digital connectivity. Drawing on the frameworks of Mobility Justice and Waithood, and supported by Appadurai's notion of the "capacity to aspire," this study investigates skill mismatches between local youth and FDI-driven labor demands, the "modernity trap" in rapidly urbanizing areas, and grassroots responses such as community mutual-aid networks. This paper investigates how structural barriers, institutional neglect, and policy fragmentation create a mobility paradox for Indonesian youth who remain economically excluded despite their physical mobility and aspirational capacity. Public governance strategies including youth-inclusive planning, adaptive vocational education, and equitable labor policies are proposed to transform mobility into justice-oriented empowerment. Findings carry broader relevance for other Global South contexts experiencing similar development challenges.

Keywords: Youth Mobility, Waithood, Mobility Justice, Public Governance

1. Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has catalyzed unprecedented flows of capital, information, and labor across national and regional boundaries. Southeast Asia, and particularly Indonesia, has experienced rapid industrial transformation driven largely by foreign direct investment (FDI). While such mobility is often celebrated as a catalyst for growth and inclusion, many young people in Indonesia find themselves trapped in a paradox: they are physically mobile and aspirational, yet excluded from meaningful employment and stable futures. This study investigates this "mobility paradox," examining how structural mismatches, policy fragmentation, and institutional neglect disproportionately affect youth.

Indonesian youth embody a dual identity: as 'waithood subjects' trapped in delayed social and economic integration, and as 'self-constructing agents' who engage in informal labor, migration, and community networks. By focusing on youth in industrializing regions—particularly those influenced by export-oriented investment—this paper seeks to understand the barriers they face and the agency they exercise, concluding with justice-driven governance proposals for more inclusive futures. The

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Indonesian case is instructive for understanding mobility-related injustices in the Global South, where urbanization and economic modernization often fail to deliver on their inclusive promises.

2. Literature review & theoretical framework

2.1. Mobility justice

The concept of Mobility Justice reframes mobility as a sociopolitical construct rather than a neutral technical process. Sheller [1] argues that mobility is always shaped by power, privilege, and access. In contexts of uneven development, being mobile does not guarantee fairness or opportunity—it can, paradoxically, reinforce inequality. In Indonesia, youth mobility is often characterized by precarious labor migration, exclusion from formal employment sectors, and dependence on informal networks.

2.2. Waithood

Honwana [2] introduces Waithood to describe the prolonged transitional phase in which young people are stuck between childhood and adulthood, often due to structural unemployment, high education costs, or housing inaccessibility. In Indonesia, waithood manifests not only in economic inactivity but also in spatial displacement and civic disengagement. Unlike in Western narratives, the waithood of Indonesian youth is less about individual failure and more about systemic barriers.

2.3. The capacity to aspire

Appadurai's [3] notion of the "capacity to aspire" adds a forward-looking cultural dimension. Aspirations, he argues, are shaped by social experiences and access to pathways. For many Indonesian youth, aspiration is not lacking, but the means to realize it are. This paper uses these three frameworks to explore how youth mobility is structured, obstructed, and contested in industrializing regions.

3. Analysis: structural barriers to youth employment in FDI-driven regions

The analysis centers on three interrelated themes: youth-industry skill mismatches, urban development and exclusion, and grassroots responses such as mutual aid networks. This approach enables critical reflection on structural barriers and informs the governance-focused discussion that follows.

3.1. Misaligned growth: the FDI–skills disconnect

One of the most persistent contradictions in Indonesia's industrial development lies in the disconnect between foreign direct investment (FDI)-driven growth and actual employment outcomes for young people. In 2022, Indonesia attracted over US$45.6 billion in FDI, with manufacturing—particularly in metal processing, automotive assembly, and mineral-related industries—accounting for a significant portion of this capital inflow [4]. However, rather than absorbing labor in a broad-based manner, many of these sectors demonstrate what Nababan and Purba [4] term "anomalous and regressive" labor absorption. In other words, despite rising productivity and output, youth employment rates either stagnate or decline.

The structural causes of this paradox are rooted in both supply-side and demand-side mismatches. On the supply side, Indonesia's education system struggles to produce graduates with the digital,

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technical, and soft skills that modern industries require. Brown and Jones [5] highlight a chronic imbalance in which the output of vocational institutions exceeds actual labor demand in certain fields, particularly in low-end technical roles, while falling short in areas such as data analytics, automation, and coding. As a result, even in FDI-fueled regions with apparent job creation, youth often find themselves funneled into informal, unstable, or low-wage work.

On the demand side, foreign companies operating in Indonesia frequently prefer to import senior technical staff or rely on capital-intensive production processes that do not require large numbers of entry-level local workers. This is exacerbated by a lack of coordination between regional governments and industrial investors, resulting in missed opportunities to align educational pipelines with sectoral labor needs [6]. Thus, while FDI inflows are celebrated at the macroeconomic level, they do not translate into inclusive labor absorption at the micro level—particularly for younger demographics.

The implications are twofold: first, youth are left underemployed or excluded entirely from the formal economy; second, the credibility of education-to-employment pathways is undermined, reducing the incentive for continued schooling. In regions like West Java and Banten, where industrial parks physically border rural communities, this exclusion is even more stark. The promise of jobs becomes spatially visible but structurally unattainable—a classic case of mobility without access.

3.2. The urbanization paradox: connectivity without inclusion

Closely tied to industrialization is the process of rapid urbanization. Cities like Jakarta and its surrounding corridors, including Bekasi and Tangerang, have become magnets for rural youth seeking work and a better life. These urban belts, fueled by state infrastructure spending and FDI-backed industrial zones, project an image of modernity through upgraded roads, expanded transit, high-speed internet, and smart-city initiatives. Yet this material visibility masks a critical access problem.

As reported by the Resilience Development Initiative [7], youth unemployment in urban Indonesia stands at nearly three times the national average. Many of those who do find work are concentrated in informal service roles—food delivery, domestic work, freelance digital labor—with little protection or upward mobility. This phenomenon constitutes what can be described as the "modernity trap": young people are drawn into cities by the visibility of development and the narratives of opportunity but ultimately remain confined to precarious margins.

One contributing factor is the uneven urban spatial structure. Industrial and commercial hubs are often inaccessible from low-income housing zones due to a lack of affordable transport or zoning restrictions. Meanwhile, urban development continues to prioritize infrastructure that serves investment interests rather than the basic needs of labor migrants. Furthermore, the expansion of digital economies in these cities has introduced a new layer of exclusion: while youth increasingly rely on platforms for income (e.g., ride-hailing, social commerce), these jobs often fall outside legal labor protections and offer little long-term security [6].

The result is a double dislocation. Not only are youth excluded from formal employment channels, but their daily urban lives are fragmented across long commutes, temporary gigs, and precarious housing. Thus, mobility—both physical and digital—becomes a source of burden rather than empowerment.

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3.3. Vernacular governance: the rise of youth mutual aid

Faced with institutional failures, Indonesian youth are increasingly turning to informal, community-based solutions to bridge gaps in employment, training, and financial security. One prominent trend, especially in semi-urban and peri-industrial areas, is the formation of peer-led mutual aid groups—informally known in some regions as "Fada-style" networks. These collectives operate under a model of vernacular governance, through which youth organize rotating savings schemes, skill-sharing workshops, emotional support networks, and small-scale entrepreneurial incubators.

Although these networks vary in structure and reach, they share a common ethos: self-reliance and collective care in the absence of effective state support. They recall the model of Bina Swadaya-inspired community self-help, though adapted for modern, urbanized youth contexts [8]. For example, in parts of West Java, such groups have created informal training programs in basic coding, graphic design, and micro-entrepreneurship, enabling members to access online gig work or sell products through e-commerce platforms. Similar informal networks have been documented among platform-based transport workers in Jakarta during the COVID-19 pandemic: these workers used WhatsApp groups, peer cash-sharing schemes, and skill exchanges to cope with income fluctuations and lack of formal labor protections [9].

Crucially, these initiatives are not merely acts of survival but forms of political agency. By organizing outside formal institutions, youth reassert control over their developmental trajectories. These networks also function as informal social safety nets, especially for those who are excluded from family or village support due to migration. However, their informality limits scale and sustainability. Without legal recognition, access to public funding, or integration into broader economic planning, they risk becoming fragile stopgaps rather than systemic solutions.

Nevertheless, these youth-led responses illustrate both the failure of formal governance and the latent capacity for self-organized resilience. They offer valuable models that could inform participatory governance reforms, especially if municipal authorities were willing to engage with and institutionalize these grassroots practices.

3.4. Synthesis: the logic of exclusion and the need for justice

Across these three dimensions—FDI misalignment, exclusionary urbanization, and informal mutual aid—a common logic of structural exclusion emerges. Youth are mobile, educated, and aspirational, yet face persistent barriers shaped by uneven access to skills, infrastructure, and institutional inclusion. The concept of "waithood" [2] becomes particularly salient: mobility does not lead to adulthood, but instead to prolonged liminality, where aspirations are delayed and dignity denied.

Moreover, as Appadurai [3] argues, the "capacity to aspire" is a function of social and material access. For many Indonesian youth, especially those on the periphery of industrial zones, this capacity is structurally inhibited. Their dreams of advancement collide with closed systems—employment pipelines that bypass them, cityscapes that exclude them, and policies that ignore them.

This analysis underlines the importance of justice-oriented governance. If youth are to meaningfully participate in and benefit from Indonesia's economic growth, then public institutions must do more than facilitate capital flows—they must redistribute access, recognize grassroots capacity, and build infrastructures of inclusion.

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4. Discussion: justice-oriented policy directions

4.1. Public management interventions: a justice-oriented approach

Addressing the mobility paradox demands a shift from rhetorical inclusion to structural justice. A multi-pronged, justice-oriented public governance model includes:

Participatory Planning: Establishing youth councils and embedding them in municipal and vocational decision-making processes to ensure generationally relevant planning.

Adaptive Vocational Training: Developing co-designed curricula with local industries that reflect current and future labor market trends, particularly in digital, green, and service economies. Such training must move beyond basic certifications to cultivate long-term capacity.

Redistributive Mechanisms: Introducing targeted policy instruments such as short-term public youth employment schemes, procurement preferences for youth-led enterprises, and subsidized housing initiatives in urban and peri-urban zones.

These interventions align with the Mobility Justice framework [1] by emphasizing the right not just to move but to access economic and social opportunity on equitable terms.

4.2. Reconstructing social capital and expanding aspirational space

Urban governance must also go beyond infrastructure provision and focus on social inclusion. Cities can facilitate the development of youth hubs, co-working labs, and digital civic spaces that promote peer learning, grassroots organizing, and entrepreneurial experimentation. These spaces help youth bridge informal networks and formal institutions, mitigating the effects of "waithood" [2] and creating pathways to active citizenship.

Informed by Appadurai's [3] concept of the 'capacity to aspire,' these inclusive environments can amplify youth agency, transforming mobility from a vector of displacement or delay into one of justice, empowerment, and possibility.

5. Conclusion

Indonesia's experience with rapid industrial transformation and foreign investment influx lays bare a crucial paradox: increased physical and digital mobility does not necessarily yield equitable opportunity for youth. Instead, young people remain structurally mobile yet economically immobile—trapped between outdated education systems, exploitative labor regimes, and fragmented governance. Through the theoretical lenses of Mobility Justice and Waithood, this study identifies systemic constraints that entrench youth dislocation: skill mismatches, exclusionary urbanization, and institutional inertia. Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives such as mutual aid and "Fada-style" organizations exemplify youth resilience, but cannot substitute for structural reform. To convert mobility from aspiration to transformation, governance must become intentionally justice-oriented. This includes not only rethinking vocational training and entrepreneurship narratives, but also centering youth in planning, redistributing institutional resources, and investing in inclusive spaces of aspiration. In this sense, addressing youth mobility is not only a developmental task—it is a justice imperative.

Future research may benefit from comparative analysis across Southeast Asian economies or longitudinal studies of how digital platforms are reshaping class-based experiences of waithood. Ultimately, solving the mobility paradox requires recognizing youth not as a problem to be managed, but as partners in reimagining inclusive development.

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