



## Interview with Gita Syahrani & Fito Rahdianto (Koalisi Ekonomi Membumi)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work.**

**Gita Syahrani:** My name is Gita Syahrani. You can call me Gita. Our organization is the Earth-Centered Economy Coalition, Koalisi Ekonomi Membumi or KEM in Indonesian. We are a coalition of cross-sector, cross-experience, and cross-interest organizations. The common goal is to help Indonesia reduce its reliance on extractive industry and large-scale conventional monoculture. We have 32 organizations as members. We help to strengthen actors in the value chain to offer an alternative economic solution.

The umbrella is the responsible bioeconomy as part of the government's national development plan, for the long-term, short-term, and mid-term. We want to make sure that the responsible element stays intact. We work with regional and national governments, with the companies themselves, and with the financiers. We want to strengthen the value chain to reach 100 jurisdictions connected with at least 100 business entities on responsible bioeconomy, but also mobilize resources of \$200 million by 2028 in the form of transaction financing support and investment.

That's the coalition in a nutshell. I'm part of the executive board, elected by the members. [The executive board] works on day-to-day management and convening, and Fito leads the secretariat. The executive board and the secretariat team combined form the management team, the backbone of the coalition.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you get these organizations together and what is the relationship between the coalition and the government?**

**Fito Rahdianto:** The coalition started informally during the G20 in Indonesia in 2022. Several government agencies invited several founding members of the coalition to create a document called Sustainable Investment Guidelines. It became part of the official documents of the Ministry of Investment.



The founding members then realized we needed to work together to solve systemic challenges and created the coalition. The coalition has a legal basis with the secretariat as an independent entity, that differentiates us from others.

We think it's important to work with the government. Several organizations are working towards the same vision. Some want to decrease the extractive industry and large-scale monoculture plantations. We work on what happens after the decrease and work with the government in discussing mechanisms and collaborating on projects. We help the Indonesian planning agency by giving feedback on their bioeconomy documents.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Why is it important that it's a legalized coalition versus a non-legal coalition? How does that make a difference in the context of this sector or the context of Indonesia?**

**Gita Syahrani:** From a governance perspective, the legal standing allows us to have a legitimate partnership with third parties, especially the government. During the G20, the coalition was created so organically that it looked like the government was part of it. We want to have independence as a non-government coalition that works in partnership with the government; with a legitimate status to build a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or partnership agreement and be separate from government decision-making, while still providing recommendations and solutions.

With a growing membership, we need a good governance structure. One of the functions of the coalition is to strengthen the members and the relationships among them, including through resource mobilization. We also want to improve re-granting and not just strengthen the coalition-only operation, but support the members in playing their role.

From the governance perspective, we need to be more structured because we quickly grew from eight founding members to 70 members. It's a working coalition, not a talking coalition.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is the coalition fighting for and what makes a responsible element in a responsible bioeconomy?**

**Gita Syahrani:** It's about reducing reliance on extractive and monoculture, and suggesting an alternative. The alternative needs to be something that highlights why the forest is better protected than destroyed, based on innovating around biodiversity and how it can be a value-added commodity and service opportunity linked to the global value chain. It can have merit in terms of economic significance, it's not a cutesy solution, it's a valid solution the government needs to take into account.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you give me an example?**



**Gita Syahrani:** Cocoa, coffee, coconut, non-timber forest products, bamboo, ecosystem services, and aquaculture. We focus on those seven. It might look like something that's already happening but it's important to package it into a valuable solution for the government. For context, the GDP of Indonesia from the extractive industry is 11%. If you want to reduce that by only 1%, you need to contribute and showcase an alternative economy from derivative industries.

Non-extractive can stand a chance. That's around \$500 billion to \$800 billion within two years. We need to define a proof of concept that works for the next three years with the ability to scale until 2045. That's why we decided to look at those seven commodities and four different sectors as the recipients of those commodities; the food and beverages sector, the health and medicine sector, the beauty, personal care and wellness sector, the alternative material sector, for infrastructure, for buildings, and other things, and hospitality, including travel and airlines.

Those five core component sectors promise value-added growth until 2045. That's where the responsible bioeconomy and responsible elements come in. Terminology like bioeconomy derives from a European view. Words like bioethanol and biofuel are related to monoculture practices, which is why Brazil through their Indigenous lens struggled to differentiate bioeconomy.

The government didn't ensure guarding the responsible elements when using the term bioeconomy in their long-term development plan—the national document that constitutes 20 years of planning for Indonesia and needs to function as the umbrella document for midterm five-year planning.

That's why we worked with the national planning agency responsible for the implementation of the plan, to ensure they take three responsible elements into account, related to how Brazil has issued the bioeconomy characteristics and indicators during last year's G20.

If you want to do bioeconomy, you need to utilize biodiversity and provide a value-add across the value and supply chain. You have to align with the well-being of the ecological, biophysical, and societal functions in the area. In December, the government issued the first draft of its indicators and principles around bioeconomy and built the Indonesia Bioeconomy Initiatives consortium which we are part of.

We help the government in responsibly doing public consultation and connect them with different organizations that might have opinions, insights, and also critiques. Hopefully, before mid-year, the government will come up with a revised version of its definition of bioeconomy with the responsible elements intact.



**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: The well-being of Indigenous groups and the well-being of the climate doesn't always coincide. Sometimes what's best for ecology does not always help with livelihoods for people and vice versa. How do you navigate that?**

**Gita Syahrani:** The current government administration looks at 8% development growth as their main target. It's based on the president's strategy and the ministries are no longer allowed or encouraged to have their own innovation. **The challenge is to align what we want to push for in a narrative that also contributes toward the government's push.**

Our target is aligning the climate target with the revised version of Indonesia's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). The country also has the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) Net Sink target by 2050 and the net zero target for 2060, we're trying to align with those too.

For the end goal of this particular solution, the alternative economy, we're looking to support Indonesia in protecting and restoring at least 29.4 of the total 109 million hectares of forest and peatland.

We decide which ones are critical and high-risk and have potential for conservation and restoration. If you don't do anything about it, the extractive industry might come in with monoculture expansion for palm oil and other sectors. If the 29.4 million hectares are converted into the climate target and we're successfully realizing it, we can cover almost half of the NDC target for the FOLU sector.

Since it's a solutions showcase, there is a buffer. **To get the government's attention, you need things that are blowing up in the public narrative aspect.** Outside of the 29.4, there might be other locations that are easier to pitch as a showcase for the bioeconomy model and aren't high-risk or critical. We came up to 31.8 million hectares of our 20-year target until 2045.

It's our goal to convert it into emissions and bring down the GDP from the extractive industry by 1% from the projected growth in 2045. Even if we manage to keep it as is, it's already good. We need to look at the percentage of the non-extractive GDP contribution.

Indonesia has embraced the previous type of economic introduction, like the creative and digital economy that have become models in contributing around 11% to 13% of the non-extractive GDP. Our target on average is around 12% of the non-extractive GDP, which is \$500 billion to \$800 billion in terms of sectors' value. The last indicator from the climate and social goal is the workforce because it would need to go back to welfare and well-being.



We realize you have to put a target on things you can measure. We can include any type of livelihood alternative at the local and Indigenous community level; smallholders, farmers, and different types of ultra-micro and micro businesses aside from the regular supply chain work that gets absorbed into the responsible bioeconomy.

Our target is around 7% of the total workforce in Indonesia, we look at sectors that are already aligned with responsible bioeconomy reaching around 8.5 million people. The local and Indigenous communities are not recognized as professional workforce. It's an informal sector without professional competencies attached.

The fight for the next 20 years is to get it recognized as professional competence; the traditional wisdom and local practices as part of the way of farming. Like New Zealand does for Maori, assessing biodiversity potential as a professional competence. How can you build that in the next 20 years so that people are not dichotomized based on where they are in their productive contribution to the country's economy? Right now, from the government's perspective, Indigenous people are an economic burden, not an economic asset.

**Ambika Samarthy-Howard: Let's go back to the coalition building. How is it working out for you? What have been some of the challenges?**

**Fito Rahdianto:** Our members consist of various for-profit and non-profit organizations. We divided them into five working groups based on what we needed to get done. First is the advocacy working group, with Bustar Maitar's EcoNusa. They're working in eastern Indonesia towards bioeconomy and strengthening value chains. They're transforming into a more market-driven organization because advocacy groups realize that advocacy is not enough. When you talk with the government, you need economic proof.

The second working group is enablers and pipelines, the majority of our members. These organizations focus on incubation accelerators, strengthening companies, startups, and SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] into social or sustainable companies.

The third working group is investment and fundraising. We have several boutique private investment managers or companies. Impact Fund is unlocking the needed funds.

You can see the connectivity between the first three working groups. Our ambition is to connect the companies with a pipeline for investment, and connect to the jurisdiction grassroots because our advocacy work is not just national but subnational.



There are two other working groups [working on] communication and narrative and a media agency. Social media channels help to build the responsible bioeconomy narrative, showcasing the success story and lessons learned.

Last but not least is the impact monitoring because it's hard to monitor the impact of this coalition if we do it alone. It's a member-led organization and we took impact monitoring to another level. Our impact is macro impact, you can count it at the national level and regional level.

The first challenge is the five working groups with 30 plus organizations, meaning 30 plus hats. They come from various backgrounds, they're not all CSOs and even the thinking framework differs in lingo. We bridge the outside world and also inside the coalition.

In the initial phase, we were venturing into the unknown, and being stuck in the in-between of things is frightening for some people. We are here also to console and nurture them.

**Ambika Samarthy-Howard: What's your advice for other coalition builders about things that have worked for you?**

**Fito Rahdianto:** Gita mentioned not collaborating just for the sake of collaboration itself. We need shared visions otherwise things fall apart. Creating the members during the recruitment helps identify whether their organizations align with our shared visions and whether they want to transform their vision. If we share our KPIs [key performance indicators] it's less burdening.

Secondly, we have an independent backbone team, not all coalitions have that privilege. If the backbone team were members it would become less independent and less trustworthy.

**Gita Syahrani:** There's a theory around collective action and impact that emphasizes the role of orchestrator and backbone organization which people often overlook. An effective coalition has a dedicated team that is just there to make sure that the vision and mission of the coalition come true. It's a neutral party. It's important to mobilize resources to have this backbone team as an organizer.

Right after our first general assembly in May 2024, we did an assessment study of all the coalition members. What do they expect from the coalition? How do they think it's working so far? What are the strengths? What do organizations bring to the table? You need your skin in the game. You cannot be a free rider.



We recorded it and reported it back to the members as a study. One of the learnings is that coalition building is also a phase. In the first one to three years, the early phase, when it's about establishing and transitioning before doing strategy, the drive needs to come from the management team to align the members and show them how the work amplifies their organization's target.

After that, you go into full operation as a coalition. People often think this is less important because it's governance, making rules of conduct, and things like that. Members often just want to go and do the work. The orchestrator and the backbone team role is critical here.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How have you been able to achieve that nurturing of being in the in-between? How have you been able to nuance those journeys for people?**

**Gita Syahrani:** We combine the nurturing aspect into three main layers. One is the governance, the working groups. Making sure everybody knows the rules of the game.

The second part is allowing them to recognize the value of working on this coalition for their own mission. So we did the valuation study because they would be motivated if they could see how this also benefits their organizational growth and trickle down the message across the organization's channels.

The third component is connecting as people. We have child corners for our working moms, karaoke night sessions, and just hanging out and having fun as humans and individuals.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you need outside of funding to do the work that you're doing?**

**Gita Syahrani:** Making it successful by having the government recognize responsible bioeconomy as a legal umbrella, to make that into a KPI for all regional governments and build an incentive mechanism. If you are offering a solution, you need to pinpoint from the get-go who is the doer and who is the payer.

A lot of the responsible bioeconomy infrastructure should be the government's responsibility, the things that the businesses cannot support, like tree planting, necessities on the ground for the commodities, infrastructure, and services for the people. If it's linked to lucrative and investible growth in the economic sector, it will be super helpful. The regional government can be part of the doer and payer.

The second part is the market side of things. The channeling mechanism of funding is not working right now. For example, if many businesses, especially small-medium size,





want to expand their sourcing area to multiple regions and need stronger working capital access, which is non-existent at a good interest rate.

The financing world is looking at them as high-risk consumers. How can we build a new financing instrument that caters to the needs of struggling in-betweeners?

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is the role of the Indigenous communities in your work?**

**Gita Syahrani:** We've been promoting to the members that the way the Indigenous community practices their biodiversity process is a technology in itself. An ongoing campaign by one of our members looks at a new definition of technology as Lo-TEK, Local and Indigenous Technology, and wisdom. The pitch is that you can't have a responsible bioeconomy unless your innovation and technology recognize what is being done upstream.

The upstream level is the way the community manages its territory, and the way it processes. It boils down to four different local wisdoms in processing that we've been doing for centuries: hydration, distillation, extraction, and fermentation. You can call it the low-temperature distillation method, and build new equipment, but in the end, it goes back to what they've been practicing.

They're part of the ultra micro and micro entities, the business entities on the ground as the core suppliers that ensure the traceability and the sustainability of the commodities. It's both Indigenous and local communities, the majority are the smallholders and the farmers.

The Indigenous community guards the forest with commodities like tengkawang, and the illipe nuts. They ensure that supply exists. The second part is the *Ekonomi Membumi*, the Earth-Centered Economy, it derives from principles of balance. We adopt them as core principles of our coalition. They go back to the Balinese traditional culture of *Tri Hita Karana*. It's about balancing the economy, ecology, and society. Those coalition roots derive from our ancestries.

**Fito Rahdianto:** We're also considering the Indigenous community as part of the constituent because they grow their business organization called BUMMA, Indigenous community-owned businesses. The majority are owned at the societal level, not the individual level. We work with them as part of the value chain, on the commercial side.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some mistakes that you have made? Not to look at it as remorse or regret but as lessons you can learn from.**





**Gita Syahrani:** It was definitely losing the fun. Everybody was so pumped after G20. We managed to pull out the investment and people were surprised about the coalition's impact on their organization. Throughout 2022, we were working and having fun at the same time. Once we decided to build a governance structure, the fun died down and it became serious.

For members it became too much. We were pivoting our transition from an organic coalition into a working coalition without a structure in place. A lot of the burden was being put on the members. The members became the co-chairs and should be running the show. It felt like work on top of their work for them.

During that time, we went on an experimental trial on investment because we saw a portfolio that we liked and we didn't want to lose momentum. We jumped into that without a clear structure in place and it became quite complex. It strained the relationship among the members because there was no concrete Standard Operating Procedure, people were working based on their trust and intuition.

Once you need to integrate a governance structure in the middle of the experiment, people suddenly need to justify their actions in a formal manner which creates tension.

We were also relying on the government too much last year. That's why we wanted to make sure that we're independent. Once you're being associated with certain ministries your reputation also goes down the drain. We were associated with the Ministry of Investment, which has a bad reputation in civil society. Some of the civil society organizations, especially the ones that are working with grassroots communities didn't want to work with us because they say we're too capitalistic and they cannot trust us.

It's painful, the legality aspect is important to be truthfully independent. The government is not part of us. We are in partnership, yes, but we can walk away from that partnership anytime we want. There's no consequence.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you.**

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.*



*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*