

A health economy built for everyone: Young health economists in Indonesia

Healthcare economics is a burgeoning industry in Indonesia, where over 200 million citizens are covered by the government's universal healthcare program. And because rapidly growing industries require an abundance of resources, knowledge, and manpower, they are almost always centered around urban areas where people have access to cutting-edge technology, education, and robust networks.

In Indonesia, the health economics community is centered almost exclusively around the country's two largest provinces, Jakarta and Java. Not only does this limit access for young people across Indonesia's over 17,000 islands to discover health economics as a career, but it also results in policy limited in scope by research that does not necessarily represent *every* Indonesian regardless of socioeconomic or geographical background.

To find new pathways to more diverse and pioneering research that will inform efficient and representative health finance policy, we decided to look to the future.

A knowledge gap

When Estro Dariatno Sihalohe was studying economics at Universitas Padjadjaran in West Java, Indonesia, he noticed a correlation between health policy issues and economic stress. But when he asked his economics classmates what they thought of this correlation, they seemed to have little general knowledge of the healthcare industry altogether; and when he asked his friends studying health, they similarly lacked knowledge of the ins and outs of economics. Estro had found a gap in intersectional policy-building that had long gone ignored. He wondered how it had affected those seeking healthcare, not only in Java but beyond, in rural Indonesia, so he reached out to a professor to ask. His professor introduced him to the world of health economics.

Estro dove into his studies and quickly learned how to apply economic theories to create positive health and health policy outcomes. He saw the path to building a health system tailored to the needs of each Indonesian citizen, one that could hurdle health, geographic, and historical barriers that had long denied access to effective healthcare to many Indonesians. Health policy built with economic tools can not only reduce out-of-pocket expenses for the average citizen, but it can boost the efficiency of health facilities thus reaching more Indonesians faster with the care and resources they need.

"I think economic tools can help solve many health problems in Indonesia, so I dedicated my career to this area," Estro says.

When he learned about USAID's Health Financing Activity (HFA) fellowship for emerging Indonesian health economists, Estro saw a chance to grow what he knew was a vital field and immediately applied.

The next generation of health economists

The Young Health Economists (YHE) program was created to bring together young economists from across Indonesia as a strong, knowledgeable base for its quickly growing health system. The more experts there are in health economics representing people often left out of the policymaking process, the more minds there are dedicated to building sustainable economic policy that optimizes government health spending and revenue *and* increases access to health facilities for all Indonesians. A critical mass of young health economists like Estro is the future of Indonesia's healthcare policy.

Estro joined a cohort of forty other fellows like himself that includes primary healthcare practitioners, academics, and NGO workers from across Indonesia's over 17,000 islands. Together, for two years, they have discussed and dissected evidence-based data to produce and share research that Indonesian health policymakers can use to improve things like government health revenue, treatment coverage, community engagement on health issues, and government coordination around healthcare policy implementation.

"I'm so happy that really for the first time, I've been able to connect with other health economists," Estro reflects. In a WhatsApp group, the fellows exchange articles (often their own) and resources, bounce ideas off each other, debate policy, and share career opportunities. "It's given me so much inspiration to learn from the other fellows. I'm constantly thinking 'wow' when I speak with them," Estro says. When he talks policy with his peers, he sees them on the same path that led him to the intersection of health economics at the beginning of his university career.

Change that lasts

Beyond building a community of emerging health economists across Indonesia, the YHE program aims to open health leaders' eyes to how economic evidence can transform health policy decisions and revenue growth. By making health economics an understandable and approachable policy topic, legislators will be equipped to build policy around Indonesians who have often been left without access to quality care. Similarly, the YHE program is an opportunity for legislators to leverage untapped potential in the far reaches of Indonesia. Giving young people the tools to find their passion for health economics and represent their communities in health policy is the key to broadening the field and making healthcare more equitable.

To foster early connections between future health economics experts and local policymakers, the program has paired fellows with mentors to develop chapters of an e-book on applied health economics topics tailored to Indonesia. The book will be a source of easy-to-understand, relevant information on health economics for Indonesian health system stakeholders so they can fine-tune health funding and evidence-based policies for accessible and effective healthcare for their citizens. It also creates a legacy for the program: use of materials like this book will inform future policy and future formulation of more materials like it.

Estro's chapter focuses on health financing—its general concepts, best practices, and how it can improve Indonesians' access to health services without financial hardship. "I've received so much motivation from my mentor, Adiatma Siregar—he's really encouraged me that this work matters," Estro states. After drafting the chapter, Estro and Adiatma presented its contents at a USAID webinar for an audience of around 300 that included Indonesian health practitioners, health system leaders, and panelists from the Ministry of Health (MoH) and World Bank. When Estro and Adiatma finished their talk and answered questions, the panelists turned toward Estro and praised him as an up-and-coming health economist, one to be reckoned with.

The Future of Health Economics

Estro, along with the other forty fellows in the program, is already making waves as he bridges public health and economics to improve Indonesians' wellbeing. In the coming weeks, the textbook they've been collectively puzzling together will be ready to be shared widely. By October, the team will

hopefully see their product used in classrooms and by policymakers across the country. A resource written by young experts from every corner of Indonesia will broaden the scope of health policy for years to come and will help build a health finance system built for sustainability and efficiency.

Individually, the fellows represent the vast and diverse collection of fields that comprise the healthcare industry, but together, they represent the future of a healthcare system built for each and every Indonesian citizen.