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The Birth of the Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC) and the Role of IIAS

Philippe Peycam



Fig. 1: A delegation from Leiden University visits various NGOs, universities, and government organizations in Indonesia. (Source: PKIP UNAIR, 2023)

One significant story to tell is the establishment of the Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC) in Surabaya, East-Java, Indonesia. Like all transformative institutional developments, this one has a long genealogy. For years, Airlangga University (UnAir), located in the Eastern-Javanese industrial and historical port-city of Surabaya, found itself uncomfortably positioned as one of the country's best medical and legal academic centres, but one that struggled to find its original groundings in the humanities and the social sciences in comparison with a few establishments in the western and central parts of the island.

This feeling of being a bit left out was compounded by the fact that Surabaya, on the eastern part of the island, is relatively far from the capital of Jakarta. Its location makes it, however, the natural gateway to the vast region of Eastern Indonesia – a region that includes Bali, Eastern Nusa Tenggara, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua – and beyond to Australia.

IIAS first entered into formal collaboration with UnAir in 2017, on the occasion of the launch of an institute-initiated programme, the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET). The event took place in Surabaya. With its focus on supporting a collection of functioning 'ecosystems' in which a university closely interacts with local neighbourhood communities, SEANNET was the starting point of a partnership between UnAir and IIAS, a partnership built on the promises of a unique embeddedness of the university within its surrounding urban fabric. Kampung Peneleh, one of the close-by neighbourhoods, is one of the city's most emblematic communities, one also recognized nationally for its historical importance during the country's struggle for independence. Its intrinsic historical diversity was the focus of IIAS's first local engagement. It also became an exemplary case for a strong interaction between our two institutions. For myself, I learned to appreciate the maritime significance of Surabaya as a hub of multiple 'crossroads.' The city is indeed situated at the nexus of old seafaring trade routes, from that of the Malays, the Arabs, the Chinese, to the Dutch.

In the last few months, a number of significant developments have accelerated, all of which contributed to reinforcing IIAS's role as a strategic South-South-North facilitator in inter-institutional collaboration and capacity-building amongst partners in the South.

In the subsequent years, our interactions with UnAir continued to deepen. On a number of occasions, we were approached by our colleagues as they sought ways to better position the university and the city internationally. It was on my first post-COVID visit, in August 2022, that I realized something important was happening: an extraordinary alignment of planets within UnAir made it possible for a team of highly motivated colleagues from different faculties and disciplines to decide to work together toward creating a new institutional collaborative model built on UnAir-Surabaya's unique context. The new dynamics, coordinated by the Faculties of Humanities and Social and Political Sciences, with the support of the university's leadership, in close contact with civic and cultural actors in the city, quickly led to an expressed desire to partner with IIAS to invent an Indonesian counterpart to our institute.

Things progressed very quickly. On the suggestion of IIAS, a strategic roundtable was planned for early 2023. Airlangga University already hosted a Centre for African Studies, and members of the university had been already engaged with IIAS in helping to forge an original Africa-Southeast Asia humanistic platform. Moreover, UnAir and Leiden University have for many years nurtured a close collaboration in the areas of Medicine and Public Health, making the connection very natural. All of these previous collaborations effectively converged when UnAir and IIAS promoted the idea of a new institute-platform that should, from the outset

embrace the support of different faculties, members of the civil society, as well as other Asian, African, and European partners.

This is exactly what happened in February 2023, with the organization of a strategic inter-faculty, local-international roundtable. With IIAS's assistance, the event brought together international colleagues from The Netherlands, but also from Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Thailand, and Singapore. The roundtable proved critical in helping shape both the organizational framework and intellectual outlook of the new structure. Even the entity's new original name was inspired by the central role of Surabaya as a continuing historical crossroads in the Indian Ocean maritime system. The concomitant stated support of four faculties capable of transcending internal university 'politics' shaped AIIOC's future governance and its vocation to act as a truly inter-disciplinary, trans-sectorial catalyst. Perhaps inspired by IIAS's pluri-functional approach, AIIOC's agenda was equally framed around a vision to concomitantly support activities of research, education, dissemination, and public services. The new institute's original intra- and inter-regional outlook, moreover, making a special place to Indonesian-/Southeast Asian-African connections, was also imagined on this occasion. The roundtable even recommended for AIIOC to be housed in a separate, visible, independent building in the city, so as to be both globally visible and accessible to local communities.

The cherry on the pie came from IIAS, with its offer to work toward organizing in Surabaya the first International Convention for Asia Scholars (ICAS) event of the post-COVID era, in collaboration with AIIOC and the whole Airlangga University, with the active participation of local civic and cultural actors.

It was on 8 May, on the occasion of a special 'Knowledge Mission' led by Leiden University, under the leadership of its President of the Board, Annetje Ottow, that AIIOC's establishment was made formerly public, along with the announcement of ICAS 13 Surabaya which is scheduled to take place during the period of July 28 – August 1, 2024.

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Fig. 2: The UnAir Strategic Roundtable that led to the creation of the Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC) in Surabaya, Indonesia. (Photo courtesy of Philippe Peycam, 2023)