

Alan Berg and his contribution to the development of nutrition manpower in Indonesia in the 1980s

By Soekirman, PhD

My early years with Alan Berg

I knew Alan Berg in person for the first time in 1985 when he led a World Bank mission to Jakarta. Before that I had only seen him in a conference on Nutrition, National Development and Planning at MIT in 1971. That was my first year at Cornell University as the late Prof. M.C. Latham's student in the International Nutrition program which had just opened at Cornell. I was told by Prof. Latham that the MIT conference would be good for us students to attend. On the way back from the MIT conference to Ithaca, Cornell, I was feeling so inspired by the lectures and discussions of the conference. This was probably related to a letter I had received a few days earlier from my senior colleague Prof. Darwin Karyadi, the Director of the Nutrition Research Centre in Bogor informing that the National Development Planning Ministry, well known as Bappenas, needed a senior nutritionist for the coming National Development Plan (1973-1978). "I am hoping it will be you" – Darwin had written.

During the final year of my courses (1973), the class was assigned to read the new book by Alan Berg "The Nutrition Factor." And I think up even to the present Alan's book is still a required reference for the International Nutrition students. In Indonesia Alan's book has been translated and published as "Faktor Gizi" in 1985 by late Djaeni Sediautama, a medical doctor at the Nutrition Department, University of Indonesia.

In 1973, I began writing my Master thesis. Inspired by the MIT conference, I decided to write my thesis on nutrition and national development policy. I discussed several times with Prof. Latham until he finally agreed that the title would be "Priorities in Dealing with Nutrition Problems in Indonesia." I passed the thesis exam and flew back to Jakarta right away. I did not bring with me the final copy of my thesis because it was still being processed at the university office. To my surprise, in early 1974 I received a package contained a publication entitled "Priorities in Dealing with Nutrition Problems in Indonesia" by Soekirman, Cornell International Monograph Series, Number 1 (1974). Within weeks, the Monograph circulated in Jakarta, including among the BAPPENAS officials. I do not know if it contributed to the process of my assignment from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of National Development Planning – BAPPENAS -- in 1974.

In the end I worked at Bappenas for 20 years from 1976 - 1996. First as a planning staff, then the Chief of the Bureau of Health and Nutrition, then the Deputy Minister for Social Affairs, and at the end as the Deputy Minister for Human Resource Development. At all of these positions there had been a nutrition component in many aspects of the national development policies, well known as "REPELITA" – The Five-Year National Development Plan".

During my tenure at Bappenas, I often met Alan Berg at the Bank mission in Washington or in Jakarta or in some international nutrition conference. In 1985, he led the Bank mission which led to the funding of the Development Nutrition Manpower Project, building eleven “Akademi Gizi” (Nutrition College) in eleven provinces, one big auditorium for the Faculty of Nutrition, and a large laboratory for the Faculty of Food Technology of the University of Agriculture (IPB University), Bogor. Many senior faculty members of these institutions still remember the name Alan Berg from the World Bank who built their campus.

A frightening event

I do not know if Alan still remembers a frightening event that occurred when he and his colleague visited me and my late wife Sri at my house for dinner in 1985 in Jakarta. In the midst of a happy dinner, suddenly there was a loud explosion like a bomb. It seemed to be close to the house and we saw a bright flare not far away. All of us were frightened and we wondered if there was something bad that might endanger our guests. We had to say goodbye even before the dinner finished and let Alan and his friend return to their hotel. The whole night we speculated what had happened. Only the next morning did we learn from TV news that it was an accident at the marine military building filled with ammunition which caught fire and blew up. It was about five kilometers from my house. For some time after that frightening event, wherever I met Alan we always laughed, recalling that event.

Happy ending

I retired from BAPPENAS in 1996. The last 20 years of my career had been at BAPPENAS and met many international friends including Alan Berg. To my surprise the first six months of my retirement in 1996, I had been closer to Alan. The World Bank Washington invited me to be a Senior Research Fellow attached to Alan Berg. I had an office next to Alan’s at 1818 H Street, N.W., Washington DC. I enjoyed my assignment as a senior fellow for six months. I spent most of my time in Washington hunting for reference books and journals at the Bank library and book stores close to the Bank. With these references I felt "rich" and ready to be back resuming my academic life as a professor of nutrition at the IPB University Bogor until my second retirement in 2006.

With the above notes, I am sending to you, Alan, my best wishes for a wonderful 90th birthday. And a million thanks for the friendship, especially for the wonderful time you gave to me and late my wife Sri during our stay in Washington in 1996.

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Soekirman