

Scene on Radio
Season 5, Episode 5: Jakarta, the Sinking Capital
Transcript

This episode was produced with support from Round Earth Media, a program of the International Women's Media Foundation. And with help from you listeners who've supported the show.

Amy Westervelt: So, everybody gets it now, right, John? Everybody's on board?

John Biewen: Meaning that the climate crisis is real and we're in it?

Amy Westervelt: Yes. As we're making this series, 2021 does feel like a pivotal year in this agonizingly long struggle to wake people up, in our part of the world, to this emergency.

John Biewen: Given the relentless drought and wildfires in the western U.S. The off-the-charts temperatures in famously cool places like Portland and Seattle. The prominent news video of that wild flooding in Germany, Belgium, China....

Amy Westervelt: More flooding in Venice and Turkey.

John Biewen: And Louisiana and Mississippi, and New York, New Jersey, and Philly. Don't forget those apocalyptic fires in Greece. On and on.

Amy Westervelt: All of that. It does seem like a lot more people, in the U.S., for example, have stopped talking about a "coming" climate crisis. Now they see that it's very much here.

John Biewen: But it feels dumb and, frankly, kind of embarrassing, to sit here with you, Amy Westervelt, and talk about people getting a clue here in the third decade of the 21st century.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, don't get me started on how long it's been very clear that we've been in deep trouble. Climate scientists have been shouting about it for forty, fifty years.

John Biewen: Amplified by journalists like yourself.

Amy Westervelt: And in large parts of the globe, especially poorer, warmer places, it would be ridiculous to talk about a *coming* crisis, even a decade or more ago. People have been coping with very tangible and disastrous effects of climate change for years. With much bigger upheavals to come. For example, Indonesia.

John Biewen: For example. We reached out to producers in a handful of places around the world, and we're gonna hear from them over several episodes. You and I have

spent four episodes tracing the history of the dominating, colonizing, extracting and polluting West — Western Europe and the U.S., primarily — to explain how we made this mess. A few of our coming episodes will take us to places in the Global South.

Amy Westervelt: Countries that the Western powers victimized for a long time. Militarily, economically, and ecologically. Places that, sure enough, are among the nations that the changing climate has hit earliest and hardest.

John Biewen: Now, there might be somebody out there who would say, wait a second. Indonesia, though? An innocent *victim* of the climate crisis? It's a big country — has the fourth largest population in the world, after China, India, and the U.S. And it's in the top ten leading emitters of greenhouse gases. That is, if you count the European Union as one country, as those rankings usually do.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah okay, but let's put that in context. The U.S. produces, per capita, roughly seven times the carbon emissions of Indonesia. Seven times! Indonesia produces a smaller share of greenhouse gases than its share of the global population. Some Americans like to wag their fingers at China these days, too, for the same kind of reasons. Oh, China is the leading emitter. It's not us, it's China.

John Biewen: We're number two! We're number two!

Amy Westervelt: But China has four times the number of people. So the average American still pumps out about double the climate-warming pollution of the average person in China. And I've said this before, but it bears repeating: the main cause of today's climate crisis is the buildup of historical emissions over the last century. And the U.S. and Europe are overwhelmingly responsible for that giant mountain of carbon. But, back to Indonesia.

John Biewen: Yes. Another crucial point is that today's Indonesia, the somewhat-industrialized country that generates one-and-a-half to two percent of global greenhouse gases — Western powers shaped that country and its economy, too.

Amy Westervelt. Right. Like most countries, Indonesia has tried to follow the West in adopting a capitalist, growth-hungry economy driven by fossil fuels. Indonesia's leaders certainly share in the responsibility for that. But Indonesia didn't achieve independence until 1945.

John Biewen: And for more than three centuries before that, that once-great colonial power, the Netherlands, controlled Indonesia from Jakarta and shaped the nation and its economy. The Dutch pillaged tremendous wealth from the Indonesian islands.

Amy Westervelt: In Episode Two you mentioned the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch Crown launched it in 1602, two years after the British founded their East India Company. And some economic analysts have argued that the Dutch version was the

largest corporation in history. It ran five thousand ships at one time, built its own forts and armies. So it was a trading company and also a war machine.

John Biewen: Warring against its European competitors, especially the Portuguese and Spanish, and against the people it conquered and colonized in Asia all through the 17th and 18th centuries. The Dutch renamed Jakarta, calling it Batavia. From that foothold, the Dutch East India Company built a monopoly on some spices in the 1600s. This confuses me, because the Black and brown people in my Twitter feed like to say white people have no interest in spices.

Amy Westervelt: (Laughs.) Yeah. Well, true or not, that didn't stop the Dutch from making a whole bunch of money off of nutmeg and cloves they hauled out of Indonesia. Along with countless shiploads of sugar, tea, and coffee.

John Biewen: For years one of the top men in the Dutch East India Company was a guy named Jan Pieterszoon Coen. He was a hero in the Netherlands for a long time. The Dutch town of Hoorn erected a statue of him in the 1890s. On the base of this statue is a quotation that supposedly sums up his greatness: "Despair not." Which leaves out the rest of what Coen said around 1618: "Despair not. Spare your enemies not. For God is with us."

Amy Westervelt: Wow. Okay. So there it is, the Doctrine of Discovery, to the victors go the spoils. The countless trees that the Dutch cut down on the Indonesian islands to

build those sugar and coffee and spice plantations are part of the country's climate picture today. Another is the rising sea on its way to drowning the capital city, Jakarta.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair, Episode Five. I'm John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt. This time, a visit to one prominent country in Southeast Asia. It's one of the regions most vulnerable to storms, rising oceans, and other climate effects. How does the climate emergency look and feel in Indonesia, and how are people there trying to adapt – and contribute to the repair?

John Biewen: Our producer for this episode is freelance journalist Nita Roshita. Here's Nita.

[Sound: Sunda Kelapa Port]

Nita Roshita: It's a quiet Monday morning at what used to be Indonesia's busiest international port. Since the Dutch colonized this island in the 17th century, this harbor has attracted traders from India, Japan, China, Europe and the Middle East. The

warehouses here store spices and crops for export. Now they are home to a maritime museum.

[Sound: Museum Bahari]

Firman Faturohman (Indonesian)

Voiceover: I think it used to be more than 2 meters. And now it's less. About 1 meter has gone.

Nita Roshita: Firman Faturohman with the museum told me that the Dutch built these warehouses with doors six feet high so the tallest of them can walk through. But the rising sea now laps against those big doors and the entire complex. Since the year 2000, the museum has had to elevate its buildings four feet above their original foundation. A pump and a dike keep the tides from flooding its floors every day.

Firman Faturohman (Indonesian)

Voiceover: We cannot predict when the tidal floods will come anymore. I think it's the impact of climate change.

Nita Roshita: He worries about what the seawater might damage.

Firman Faturohman (Indonesian)

Voiceover: If we lose the museum, so much will be lost. Losing this building would mean the loss of history and recorded memory, especially related to maritime history.

[Sound: Pasar Ikan (Fish Market), Pelabuhan Muara Angke]

Nita Roshita: Jakarta's Maritime Museum faces the same threat from rising water as the entire northern region of the city. Climate change has so affected Indonesia's capital city that the government plans to move its functions to Borneo, hundreds of miles away. Reversing centuries of destructive land use policies will take a lot of work. Since the Dutch claimed Indonesia as a colony, vast areas have become plantations for sugar, tea, and coffee — all export products that enriched Europeans and damaged the local environment.

Bondan Kanumoyoso (Indonesian)

Voiceover: The first was sugar, processed from sugarcane. That was the first crop they introduced for large-scale planting.

Nita Roshita: Bondan Kanumoyoso is a historian who studies the effects of colonialism on the environment.

Bondan Kanumoyoso (Indonesian)

Voiceover: To process sugarcane into sugar, the liquid needs to be cooked. And for that you needed lots of firewood in pre-industrial times.

[Music]

Nita Roshita: Starting in the 17th century, the Chinese ran hundreds of sugar mills in Indonesia, he says.

Bondan Kanumoyoso (Indonesian)

Voiceover: The deforestation was massive in Batavia and surrounding areas. And I think that's affected metro Jakarta today. Because the buffer zone for that region was destroyed, it floods whenever there is an intense rainfall.

Nita Roshita: In the 18th century, the Dutch East Indies government applied a cultivation system that emphasized planting for export. Kanumoyoso traces Indonesia's environmental imbalance to that practice.

Bondan Kanumoyoso (Indonesian)

Voiceover: That is what changed the environment. It used to be managed for subsistence and food plants, not crops for export. Those export crops took over the landscape in Java.

Nita Roshita: International markets couldn't get enough of tea, quinine, or coffee. When bicycles, motorcycles, and cars became popular, rubber became another cash crop. The cultivation system the Dutch called *Cultuurstelsel* lasted only about 40 years, but it altered the landscape of food-producing areas.

Bondan Kanumoyoso (Indonesian)

Voiceover: That is what caused the thick, tropical forests of Java to vanish. The forests gradually declined from the 17th century to what they are today.

Nita Roshita: Since the Dutch suddenly left in the mid-1940s — during World War II — the Indonesian government has managed Jakarta, but not very well. Yayat Supriatna teaches planning and engineering at Trisakti University. He said the city was never designed to be a capital. Jakarta lies at the mouth of 13 rivers that erode the surrounding land every year.

Yayat Supriatna (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Jakarta has been a disaster risk since the beginning. This area has many swamps. The city was inherited as the capital from the previous government.

Nita Roshita: On top of that, Yayat says, at most 5 million people can live sustainably in the capital area. Its population now is more than twice that size.

Yayat Supriatna (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Most people in Indonesia see Jakarta as a dreamland that can solve the problems of their difficult lives.

[Music]

Nita Roshita: Between the threat of floods and the pressures of urban development, it will take a major effort to solve the region's environmental issues. That's one reason the national government plans to move the capital more than thirteen hundred miles north and east to West Kalimantan Province. Groundbreaking on the new capital was scheduled to begin in 2021. But development planning, public works, transportation and environment agencies are moving slowly, Yayat says, because the Covid-19 pandemic has exhausted the state budget. Supriatna said it might take 30 years to build a new

capital. But once it's moved, he believes, Jakarta has the opportunity to restore its economic and environmental life.

Yayat Supriatna (Indonesian)

Voiceover: We can reduce the burden on Jakarta when people are no longer concentrated here.

Nita Roshita: He predicts that at least two million people with government-related work will have to relocate to the new capital. While Jakarta will still operate as an independent metro area, Yayat says, it will have to strengthen its planning and other functions with neighboring areas.

[Sound: neighborhood]

Nita Roshita: People who live in the capital now can't wait 30 years for changes to their environment. Some residential areas have started to mitigate climate change. One of them is Kampung Tongkol, located between a riverbank and Jakarta Bay.

[Sound: Voices of children playing]

Nita Roshita: Before 2015, provincial authorities planned to move this neighborhood — not only because they considered it a slum, but because they wanted to control flooding from the river. To save their homes, Gunawan Muhammad says, he and his neighbors agreed with the government to create a buffer between their properties and the riverbank.

Gunawan Muhammad (Indonesian)

Voiceover: We did that with no guarantee that it would work to save our homes. But it did. Then we planted trees, to clean up the rivers.

Nita Roshita: The neighborhood also started collecting regular fees to clear garbage. It's not perfect, he says, but it's better than it was before 2015.

[Sound: neighborhood]

Nita Roshita: To get into the neighborhood on a 93-degree day, we had to navigate an area bustling with parking lots and big container trucks. The atmosphere changed on Muhammad's block.

Gunawan Muhammad (Indonesian)

Voiceover: The trees we planted are having a direct effect. You feel a difference.
Like, the air, the weather, right?

[Sound: bell ringing, birds singing, people talking]

Nita Roshita: People stroll and birds sing along streets shaded with mango and cherry trees. A cool breeze was almost enough to make me forget how hot Jakarta was that day.

[Music]

[BREAK]

[Sound: Selamat Daroyni's office, speaking Indonesia via video chat]

Nita Roshita: In central Jakarta, environmentalist Selamat Daroyni runs a virtual meeting from his high-rise office. Since 2004 he has worked with the city's neighborhoods. In recent years he also worked closely with the Jakarta provincial government of Jakarta. He admits that the government hesitated to take climate change seriously.

Selamet Daroyni (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Before 2017, no one was talking about how to integrate the issue into the city's development plan. The following year, that discussion began and now climate change is part of the plan. But carrying out that plan will be a long process.

Nita Roshita: Further delay by the government risks eroding public support for climate mitigation efforts, he says.

Selamet Daroyni (Indonesian)

Voiceover: I think it is natural when the community becomes apathetic, even hopeless, and people say, 'where are we going with the development of this city, this nation?'

Nita Roshita: To adapt to the effects of climate change, Selamet Daroyni promotes more rooftop solar panels in neighborhoods, along with alternative ways to commute to and from work: walking, bicycling, and using public transportation.

[Sound: a virtual meeting of Ikhtiar Jakarta (Jakarta Endeavor)]

Nita Roshita: These are elements of his two-year citizen initiative — supported by more than a hundred neighborhood groups, religious organizations and small businesses — to reduce emissions in Jakarta. The participants have signed a pledge that they hope the provincial governor will endorse, so it can become an official part of Jakarta’s Strategic Action Plan for climate change. Student activist Amalia Syafruddin rode a commuter train from her home, about 18 miles from central Jakarta, to meet me. She encourages other young adults to walk instead of drive when their destination is less than a mile away.

Amalia Syafruddin (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Sometimes my friends use a delivery service to get food from across the street when we could have just come down the stairs and walked. I say, ‘why not walk?’ And they reply, ‘Why should we?’ But if we walk together sometimes, they want to join me. I think that is a good start, to build a habit of walking.

[Sound: people walking]

Nita Roshita: In early 2020, Amalia showed her friends how different the city could feel when everyone drove less.

Amalia Syafruddin (Indonesian)

Voiceover: The first two weeks of the pandemic, the sky was so clear. It was a sign that if we change our habits, reduce driving, the air will be better. It was only for two weeks. Imagine if we do it for a whole year. I think the air will be fresh again.

[Music]

Nita Roshita: To respond to the air quality problem, Jakarta will have to make its public transportation more accessible, comfortable, and affordable.

[Sound: Mass Rapid Transit of Jakarta announces the arrival of a train]

Nita Roshita: In 2020, the University of Chicago's Air Quality Life index ranked Indonesia as the ninth most polluted nation in the world. The World Health Organization predicts that average life expectancy in Jakarta will decrease by more than four years if present air quality levels continue. Bondan Andriyanu is with Greenpeace, one organization that has campaigned for better air quality since 2017. He's concerned that pollution has remained at 2.5 parts per million. That concentration is high, he says, and the particles are small.

Bondan Andriyanu (Indonesian)

Voiceover: About one-thirtieth of a strand of human hair. So small that when it enters the body, it can go past the throat, to the smallest lung tissues. Because it is so small it can go through the vein to the brain.

Nita Roshita: He says there's no safe level of these pollutants.

Bondan Andriyanu (Indonesian)

Voiceover: My second child was born prematurely, with low birth weight and delayed speech development. I remember that when my wife was pregnant and we moved to our new house, we were surrounded by people who burn their domestic waste. So I relate to the issue.

Nita Roshita: People in Jakarta have complained about air quality for years. They even sued the provincial and national governments, claiming that they're responsible for air pollution. It involved high-ranking officials as defendants, including the President of Indonesia and the regional governor.

[Sound: Mass Rapid Transit of Jakarta ambience]

Nita Roshita: Adapting to climate change does not just mean using the courts and sophisticated technology. A return to traditional habits and culture may be a solution. A couple hours' drive west of Jakarta, a traditional village is taking steps to restore the land. It's called Kampung Cireundeu, "Cassava Village," because people there eat cassava. Most Indonesians' staple food is rice. Villagers in Cireundeu make a living from farming and eco-tourism.

[Sound: people talking in Cireundeu]

Nita Roshita: They manage just over 158 acres divided into three areas. Five freshwater springs run through what they call the "forbidden forest." No one can disturb the plants there. In the second area, people can cut down the trees, but they must plant one for every one they remove. They've reserved the third area for farming cassava, peanuts, vegetables, and yams.

[Music]

Nita Roshita: In 2005, a huge mountain of waste collapsed in the village. A tsunami of garbage killed 157 people. That inspired the survivors to restore their ecosystem, including their freshwater springs, through traditional methods.

Kang Yana (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Our water is from there and today we can see wildlife coming back.

Nita Roshita: Kang Yana is one of the village's youth leaders.

Kang Yana (Indonesian)

Voiceover: We can see the water getting clearer. Before, thick black waste polluted the water, but we've identified plants that can absorb toxins from the water. It might take a long time. But there's progress. The animals are back.

Nita Roshita: Restoring cassava as a major nutrition source is in tune with ancestral beliefs, he says. Indonesians who rely on rice look down on cassava as poor people's food. To Kang Yana, it's a pathway to food security.

Kang Yana (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Our people do not need to worry about the food supply. Compare that to rice. It's like a ghost: today we have it, tomorrow it's gone. Sometimes the price of rice is high, sometimes it's low. But *our* people do not worry about the price, because we can live a comfortable economic, social, and cultural life. Why can't Indonesia learn from us?

[Sound: water springs near village, talking]

Kang Yana (Indonesian)

Voiceover: Cirendeu people live well, we're not poor. The government has sent people to our village to learn how we can still consume cassava and stay healthy.

[Sound: women cooking together and chatting]

Nita Roshita: During the pandemic, this area has attracted tourists — as many as 200 local people a day. The village requires them to hike in barefoot before they can learn more about the way people have lived for centuries. Kang Yana hopes even city people can benefit from that.

Kang Yana (Indonesian)

Voiceover: There is nothing wrong with modernity. It depends on how we use it. How we take advantage of the knowledge we have, for the good of mankind.

[Music]

Nita Roshita: The hill above his village rises nearly 560 feet above sea level. Like other visitors, we climbed it barefoot. There, eagles nested and fresh wind kissed our faces. It felt as if we were a world away from the flooded streets and polluted air of Jakarta.

[Music]

John Biewen: Hey, Nita. It's Amy and John. Thanks for your reporting, which you managed to do while navigating Covid lockdowns and other challenges.

Nita Roshita: Well, thank you John and Amy, and thanks for having me. Yeah, it's been a really tough way to report during the Covid lockdowns.

Amy Westervelt: Nita, hearing about the rising waters around Jakarta — and I understand the city is also sinking at the same time, mostly because of heavy groundwater use. But I can't help thinking about the Netherlands, Indonesia's former colonizer, and its famous talent for building infrastructure to control flooding and fend off the sea. The Netherlands literally means "low-lying country." Much of it was below sea-level even before manmade climate change started to kick in. So Dutch engineers have become some of the best in the world at building dikes and spillways, storm surge

barriers. And I'm wondering, have the Dutch government or Dutch corporations offered to help Jakarta with its water problems?

Nita Roshita: Well, sort of. In 2014, the Indonesian government started a massive project to protect Jakarta from the rising sea, with input from the Dutch government, Dutch design companies, and the South Korean government. The centerpiece was called the Great Sea Wall Jakarta. It was going to be a huge barrier, 25 miles long, in front of Jakarta Bay. And it was projected to cost like 40 billion dollars.

John Biewen: So the Netherlands is going to pay for this? I mean, that seems like the least the Dutch could do after extracting so much wealth from Indonesia for centuries.

Nita Roshita: No. The Dutch government provided a small grant, less than ten million dollars, to help fund the planning for the project, but left it to Indonesia to pay for construction. The Indonesian government couldn't afford this huge expense. So most of the financing was going to come from private developments on artificial islands that were part of the blueprint. They were planning on rich people buying properties on this reclaimed land and keeping their yachts there, that kind of thing.

John Biewen: Their yachts?

Nita Roshita: Yeah.

Amy Westervelt: Wow.

Nita Roshita: Yeah. But Indonesians raised a lot of objections. Scientists said the Great Sea Wall would just create new environmental problems. For example, it was going to destroy the last mangrove forests in the Jakarta region.

Amy Westervelt: Wow. Ok John, you're going to have to fire up the bleeping machine. Because—I can't even. It's so ridiculous to me that they would say, yeah, this is going to cost forty billion but we'll kick in 10 million, and let's see if luxury development can pay for the rest. Plus, you know, mangroves are crucial habitat for fish and other wildlife. They prevent flooding and erosion. They store lots of carbon. The idea that you're gonna build a project to adapt to climate change and in the process wipe out mangroves is nuts!

Nita Roshita: Yes. Besides that, construction of the first phase of the Great Sea Wall wrecked the livelihoods of small-scale fishers who have long fished in Jakarta Bay.

John Biewen: And let me guess. People who fish for a living in Jakarta Bay are *not* rich. They're not fishing from their yachts, are they?

Nita Roshita: Not at all. The Indonesian government completed the first phase of the Wall in 2019 — a three-mile portion. But now the Great Sea Wall is on hold. Jakarta is planning smaller projects to address the sinking city and the rising sea.

Amy Westervelt: Wow. So, the answer to the question is, the Netherlands is *not* doing anything really major to help Indonesia hold back the waters.

Nita Roshita: That's right.

Amy Westervelt: You know, you would almost get the idea that it's better to stave off climate change as much as we can to avoid these kinds of effects, instead of trying to engineer impossible solutions, with unintended consequences, after we've wrought catastrophic changes to our world.

John Biewen: Almost. Nita, one more question. It's impressive to hear from the people you interviewed who are adapting and taking action to reduce carbon emissions. How big is the issue of the climate crisis in Indonesia? Do people talk about it? And do a lot of Indonesians feel anger and frustration towards those of us in parts of the world that have done so much more to cause the crisis?

Nita Roshita: Small groups of people are making efforts, for example, fighting against companies whose activities are damaging their homes or the environment. But aside from those small-scale conflicts, in the big picture the mainstream media here are not really giving much attention to environmental issues or the climate crisis.

Amy Westervelt: Thank you, Nita Roshita, on the island of Java.

[Music]

John Biewen: What stands out for you from Nita's piece, Amy?

Amy Westervelt: Well a lot of things, but to start: Jakarta, a city of ten or eleven million people and the capital of the 4th most populous country in the world, is sinking into the

rising ocean and will have to move to a whole other part of the country. That is huge, and I just think a story like that should be all over our news media. Don't you? I mean, I honestly hadn't heard about this as much in this level of detail until I heard Nita's reporting.

John Biewen: Yeah, me too. And yes, I do. I just think we're infamous in the rich West, but especially in the U.S., for not having much interest in the rest of the world, especially the parts we call "developing." They rarely make our front pages, unless, of course, it's a place where we're sending our troops.

Amy Westervelt: To protect, very often, some vital U.S. economic interest, such as, you know, oil.

John Biewen: Yes. And even then we don't hear about all the places we're sending troops. But yeah, and I think this is where you're going with your point: our news media have been painfully timid, for decades, about declaring that climate change is in fact a crisis, a grave global emergency. And that muted coverage has helped Americans to think of climate change as something that's "coming," or "*might be coming*," for as long as we have seen it that way.

Amy Westervelt: That's right. And I think added to that is that so many of the starkest impacts have happened in the Global South, which an activist recently described to me as, 'over there, don't care' for Americans. And I think that, you know, it's important to note that that cautiousness by news organizations is another result of the propaganda campaigns by the oil industry, other corporate groups, and right-wing politicians, to sow doubt about whether climate change was even a thing.

John Biewen: For far too long it was an issue that news organizations felt they needed to both-sides. "Climate activists say this, but climate *skeptics* say, 'on the other hand, dot dot dot.'"

Amy Westervelt: Right, exactly. As if those two were equally valid positions, sort of like people who prefer chocolate to Rocky Road ice cream.

John Biewen: Before we go, let's circle back to the part about the Netherlands helping Indonesia. Or not. Or anyone else in the rich Global North helping anyone in the vulnerable Global South, or not.

Amy Westervelt: This is a huge issue, and it's one that we'll raise again over the next several episodes. Indonesia is a relatively poor country. It's enduring storms and

flooding and other effects that we in the Global North mostly caused. *And* Indonesia is dealing with the lasting environmental destruction that a colonizing European nation wrought over three centuries. Plus, let's not forget, one of the largest oil companies in the world, Shell, is headquartered in the Netherlands. So we in the West are very good at overlooking the fact that our countries got rich, and became the major emitters of greenhouse gases, in large part by exploiting other peoples and their lands.

John Biewen: Yeah. Our wealth and their poverty are not coincidental, they're linked. So now the biggest historical emitters are also the countries that have the most capacity to adapt to the emergency — to upgrade our infrastructure, build walls, move people and cities. We also have the wealth to make the necessary investments to pivot to renewable energy and stop our civilization's rush off the cliff. We're not doing any of that in any serious way as of this moment, but we do have the capacity. A country like Indonesia? Not so much.

Amy Westervelt: Right. So Global South countries have been saying for years, you all in the rich Global North need to help us. You can't just demand that we make a sudden conversion to renewable energy after you spent a century and a half building your wealth on fossil fuels. This also ties into a major fossil fuel industry talking point, too. They love to say that anyone who is pushing for a transition to green energy is condemning those in so-called developing countries to a lifetime of poverty because we

are denying them access to cheap energy. Which of course ignores the externalities of that fossil fuel — you know....

John Biewen: The real costs.

Amy Westervelt: The real costs, exactly! And so — and it completely ignores a couple of really key things. One is that Global North countries could absolutely, and should absolutely, subsidize a transition for countries in the Global South, and the other is that citizens of countries in the Global South have been saying for quite a long time themselves that they would like to not be hooked on fossil fuels, thank you very much. So no one is actually asking the people in these countries what they want and it's almost being completely ignored that renewables don't have to be a costly transition for them. That's not a foregone conclusion.

John Biewen: And yet another layer to this is that folks in the Global South are also saying to the Global North: you should also be paying for the damage you've caused in our part of the world by your decades and decades of greenhouse gas emissions, right?

Amy Westervelt: It has a name. It's called climate reparations. And people have been talking about it coming up on 20 years now.

John Biewen: So then the question is, what does that look like, climate reparations?

Well, let's come back to that and take that up again in a later episode.

Amy Westervelt: One last thing. A quick update: Nita mentioned a citizen lawsuit against the government over Jakarta's notoriously bad air quality. A group of citizens sued in 2019, saying that government officials had failed to provide decent air for citizens to breathe. In the fall of 2021, a court in Jakarta ruled for the plaintiffs, saying that indeed, those officials had committed unlawful acts by failing to combat smog. The government says it has taken recent steps to improve air quality, for example by installing solar panels on government buildings. We will have to wait and see how the longer-term impact of this court ruling will be.

[Music]

John Biewen: Next time: Nigeria. And how people there are coping with floods, erosion, even violence, all exacerbated by climate change.

John Biewen: Our story editor for Season 5 is Cheryl Devall. Nita Roshita got recording and production help from Hilman Handoni. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim

Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber, and Fabian Almazan. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Voiceovers by Hilman Handoni, Vincentius Martin, Fitra Rianto, and Khairunissa Semesta. We post transcripts, among other things, at our website: sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Transcription by Jess Jiang.