Bridge to the Future

An ADB road rehabilitation project in Indonesia has bridged two rural districts, boosted trade, and helped preserve social and cultural connections.

For several decades when farmers and traders from the agricultural district of Kulon Progo brought their produce to the market in the city, they had to stop at the foot of a bridge that crosses the Progo River in south-central Java, Indonesia.

There, they had to wait as their load was transported, batch by batch, by two-wheeled transportation because the bridge could not support anything larger.

"People would pile chickens, eggs, and coconut onto bikes or motorbikes," recounted the head of Srandakan village, which lies at the foot of the bridge. "Because of this, accidents were common."

Though the bridge, which was built in 1929, had become as much a part of the local people's culture as the produce they bring to market and the bikes on which they pile seemingly improbable volumes of goods, it gave way in 2003 under the weight of its age. Repairs were made with woods, but it was clear that the bridge had already outlived its utility.

Blessing in Disguise

"I think it was a blessing in disguise that the bridge finally gave way," says Bayudana, an engineer from Provincial Public Works for Srandakan Bridge.

In 2006, work began on the new Srandakan Bridge-a 626-meter long, 11-meter wide structure located near the old one-as part of an ADB-funded road rehabilitation project.

The $250 million project, 76% of which was funded by an ADB loan, supported national and provincial road networks in 17 provinces throughout the country. While the Government of Indonesia recognizes the importance of infrastructure, the 1997 Asian financial crisis had left it with limited funds and preoccupied with urgent issues, such as macroeconomic stabilization and corporate sector restructuring. Spending for roads and bridges required external aid.

Then in May 2006, tragedy struck. A 6.3-magnitude earthquake rocked Yogyakarta, leaving more than 5,000 dead and 36,000 injured. Hundreds of thousands more were left homeless, and roads and bridges-including the old Srandakan bridge-were damaged.

The task at hand became even more urgent. For about a week after the earthquake, the old bridge was completely unusable and residents had to take a 2-hour detour. The provision of immediate aid was hampered as well. The incident served to further highlight the importance of the new bridge.

The ADB project, which was completed in 2007, improved some 3,000 kilometers of roads and rehabilitated or replaced another 3,000 meters of bridges. Among these was a new $3.7 million bridge spanning the Progo River.

On 26 May 2007, exactly a year after the earthquake, the new Srandakan bridge was inaugurated.

Today, traders in trucks and commuters in buses cruise along the new bridge daily, within a stone's throw of the old one, where children and bicycles still pass-a step into modernity without forgetting the legacy of the past.

"I'm grateful for the new bridge, but the old bridge must be kept," says Manto, a resident who lives and sells bird cages at the foot of the old bridge. "It is part of our history," she added. Even though fewer people pass by her store now, she has her regular customers, she says, and she appreciates the relative quiet.

Farmers and traders also appreciate the faster and easier means of transporting their goods on the new bridge. Sutrisna Prasetya, a coconut oil producer in Bantul, says he is able to order more coconuts now from farmers in Kulon Progo.

New buildings have also cropped up along the roads leading up to both sides of the bridge, with village shops opening up to take advantage of the traffic.
"This bridge has been very beneficial not only to the economy of our village but to our social and cultural welfare as well," he says.

Yogyakarta city, for instance, is considered a center of art, culture, and learning in Indonesia, and the bridge has made it easier for local students and teachers from the eastern side of the province to take advantage of this.

The bridge has significantly improved access to health care facilities and to the airport in Yogyakarta city as well. "The impact is even felt on the southern side of Java," says Bayudana. "The Srandakan bridge is proof of the theory that to open up an isolated area build roads and bridges."

Sourced from https://www.adb.org/results/bridge-future