
Indonesia: Bayat Society Builds Life

Timber Plantation concessions are a model of forest exploitation conducted by corporations in Indonesia. More than 9 million hectares of timber plantation concessions have already been awarded by the Ministry of Forestry, though not all of these concessions are used for timber plantations. Up to 2011, less than half of the total area of timber plantation licenses was being managed by the license holder corporation. While in fact, timber plantation licenses have shifted the natural function of forest diversity and caused a series of problems in domino effect, such as influencing the social relation and the sovereignty of the indigenous peoples and the villagers that live on the concession land, undermining local knowledge and local food system, as well as draining the macro capital source to cover the bankruptcy threat of the downstream industry of timber plantation.

The weak sanctions by the government towards moral hazard enabled corporations to leave millions of hectares of land in an unclear management status --- corporations that have applied for a timber plantation license, cut down woods and taken them, leaving a damaged forest area after earning much money. One of those corporations is PT Pakerin, a timber plantation company in Musi Banyu Asin Regency, South Sumatra Province.

PT Pakerin received the timber plantation concession license from the Forestry Minister in 1998 for an area of more than 43,000 hectares, and started the operation in 1992. The concession of PT Pakerin had taken more than 7,000 hectares of the people's land of Simpang Bayat Village. The society of Simpang Bayat was fighting to defend the right, but the "wall" that protected the company was very strong, namely "tembok" in the form of the support from the Government and the military apparatus.

In 1997, there was a fire disaster that destroyed the trees of PT Pakerin, which made the management stop the business activity. In the following ten years, the company did not conduct any activities. Since 2010, slowly, the community of Simpang Bayat has been re-entering the land that used to be their village. The community has built small houses, agreed together on a shared land management, and started working on the land to build their livelihoods

Until now, from 7,000 hectares people's land of Simpang Bayat Village that had been taken away by PT Pakerin, approximately 1,500 hectares have been successfully re-claimed by the community. The community of Simpang Bayat has built approximately 750 houses, that are inhabited by approximately 400 family heads or more than 1,000 people. Apart from building the houses, the community also built common facilities collectively, such as a road, place of worship, village secretariat, and an elementary school is being planned. For the daily life, the society produces charcoal for sale, and plants vegetables, fruits, and raises cattle. While for the long term, the community is planting rubber trees.

To organize itself and to consolidate the struggle, the community established an organization called Dewan Petani Sumatera Selatan (South Sumatran Farmers' Board). This local farmers' organization has established, together with the farmers, regulations for their organization and land use.

PT Pakerin accused the Society of Simpang Bayat Village to the Police of conducting illegal land exploitation. Some of the farmers' organization leaders have been arrested and the police has tried to intimidate the community in various ways, but they do not weaken the spirit of the farmers. The community of Simpang Bayat Village continues re-claiming their right on land and life.

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