
[The insane expansion of industrial oil palm in the land of Papua, and the resistance struggle of Kampung Bariat](#)

One night in October 2023, dozens of women from Kampung Bariat, a village in Kondo district, Sorong Regency, province of West Papua, gathered in the centre of their community. They came together for an exercise that involved sharing and cataloguing the different ways they use and relate to the forest; these ways are essential for their caretaking tasks of feeding and ensuring the health and well-being of their families and community. Lit by only a few light bulbs, they wrote down and shared traditional knowledge about places of particular importance surrounding their community—for example, places where one can find good sago, a staple food of the community; places to cultivate certain crops; places to collect particular medicinal herbs, roots and leaves; sacred places; and so on. It was a joyful exercise, revealing a deep and strong connection the women have with their territory.

But the reason for doing this exercise was not joyful at all. In 2014, the Indonesian government in Jakarta decided to grant a 37,000-hectare concession in South Sorong to PT Anugerah Sakti Internusa, a subsidiary of the Indonusa Agromulia Group (1). Subsequent permits from authorities in Papua gave the company permission to start destroying 14,467 hectares within this concession area—which at the time was 96% intact forest—and plant millions of oil palm trees (2). The future of Kampung Bariat village came under threat because the concession overlaps with its territory. The community was not informed, let alone asked to give its opinion or consent for the concession.

On that particular October night, the women of Kampung Bariat also talked about the company. Angry about the situation, they say “We need to keep oil palm out!” and “We are able to take care of our territory!” The approximately 300 women and men of Kampung Bariat have taken care of their territory for generations, ever since ten family clans came together and settled in this area. They identify themselves as Tehit, an indigenous group belonging to the Afsya People.

Industrial oil palm expansion in Papua and Indonesia

According to official figures, there are about 16 million hectares of industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia—about half of the total global amount of oil palm. However, Sawit Watch, an Indonesian NGO that monitors the oil palm sector, estimates the total area of oil palm plantations in Indonesia to be closer to 25 million hectares (3), and it predicts millions of additional hectares in future. In 2023, industrial oil palm plantations grew by 116,000 hectares in Indonesia, a 54% increase compared with 2022 (4).

Along with the islands of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and parts of Java, Papua is targeted to become the new frontier for massive oil palm expansion in Indonesia and worldwide. This is due to its vast territory and the conditions that the Indonesian government offers companies and investors in the country. These conditions have become increasingly favourable, facilitated in part by the omnibus law (5). Papua is targeted for many more mining mega-projects, sugar cane plantations, large-scale agricultural so-called ‘food estate’ projects, and the longstanding Mamberano hydropower

project—all of which would cause devastating impacts. It is no coincidence that Papua, with its vast 'natural resources,' was the last territory the Dutch colonizers tried to keep control over, but had to give up due to international pressure (6).

The legal justification the central government in Jakarta has used to hand over forest lands to oil palm and other extractive companies in Papua is based on a Ministry of Agriculture decision that was made during the Suharto regime (nr. 820/1982). It declared Papua's estimated 41 million hectares of forested area to be 'state forests,' which took away Indigenous Peoples' power to manage and make decisions about the territories they traditionally occupy and depend on.

An insane expansion

Both the Dutch government of the past and the subsequent Indonesian government claimed to be the "owners" of Papua, completely ignoring the presence of indigenous communities there. They acted as if it was empty, unused land that capitalist interests could extract and profit from. However, an investigation by Pusaka revealed the presence of at least 10,472 villages in Papua, mainly inhabited by Indigenous Peoples; the report added that all these communities depend on a wider territory that they steward, in accordance with their practices, customs, and beliefs, etc. (7). The largest area in concession for oil palm development is the so-called Tanah Merah project in Boven Digoel Regency, South Papua province. Seven companies control the area, which has a total of 280,000 hectares. This project violates the territory where the Awyu People reside and upon which they depend (8).

The 29 million total hectares that industrial oil palm plantations cover worldwide were also not "empty" when they were occupied for this activity—quite the opposite (9). There is a wealth of well-documented experience from communities whose lands were taken by oil palm companies. Their experiences—stories of violence they've experienced, abuses women have faced, destruction and contamination of land and water—are strikingly similar. This is why a new round of large-scale oil palm expansion targeting Papua is such an insane idea.

Some common aspects to these stories and experiences from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Colombia, Nigeria, Guatemala, Papua New Guinea, Ivory Coast, Honduras, Brazil, Ecuador, Cameroon and many other countries include the following:

- The territories of indigenous and black communities are targeted the most, in violation of their territorial rights and livelihoods. In the land of Papua, for example, oil palm expansion has caused conflicts with indigenous communities in every case. By 2018, 272,000 hectares of mostly forest area in Papua had been converted to industrial oil palm plantations, leaving behind not only a wake of destroyed forests, but also destroyed livelihoods (10).

- Industrial oil palm not only appropriates land but also water. In West Kalimantan, more land and water have been appropriated for industrial oil palm than anywhere else on earth. An investigation there revealed massive water appropriation, contamination and destruction throughout the palm oil production chain—which affects the entire region and its population. Without water, no one survives (11).

- Palm oil has become the cheapest vegetable oil globally, due to the relentless labor exploitation of people who formerly sustained themselves from the forest, agriculture and fisheries. Oil palm companies' profits are particularly bolstered by the exploitation and control of women's bodies. When industrial oil palm invades a community territory, the lives of women become extremely hard. When a river is destroyed, for example, this has deep implications for women. Due to the existing sexual

division of labour—in which women are the ones who sustain life—the destructive impacts of oil palm deepen the oppression of women. Companies also exploit women's labor on plantations. Prostitution and sexual violence against female workers is widespread in this context (12).

- Even when there is evidence of water contamination or other legal violations, oil palm companies enjoy impunity. Meanwhile, community activists face intimidation, death threats, criminalization, accusations of terrorism, and imprisonment when they say NO to industrial oil palm plantations and defend their human rights to their territory.

- Certificates of 'quality control,' such as the 20-year-old RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil), have become greenwashing tools for the oil palm industry. These certificates do not change the structural patterns of injustice, violence and destruction; and their internal complaint mechanisms do not change companies' behaviour in practice. What these tools do ensure are profits for palm oil producers, investors, traders and manufacturing companies (13). These tools and certificates bear co-responsibility for the multiple oppressions caused by extractive industries in the Global South.

Nowadays, 'biofuels' or 'agrofuels' from palm oil are sold to the public as 'renewable energy' and part of the so-called 'energy transition.' This is the latest lie that the palm oil industry has spread to justify its massive expansion. As early as 2013, research by GRAIN revealed that the current agribusiness-driven food system, in which the oil palm sector as a key player, is responsible for about half of global greenhouse gas emissions (14).

Kampung Bariat and other communities are fighting back

Back in Kampung Bariat, on another night in October 2023, the community gathered to watch a video from a visit that some community members had made to Indonesia's capital of Jakarta, about 3,000 km away. The images showed villagers expressing their concerns to different authorities in Jakarta. Yuliana Kedemes, one of the participants on the visit, summarized their message in an interview: "We can't allow them [the oil palm companies] to come here, because where will our children and grandchildren live in the future?" (15)

The next day, the community received the South Sorong regency and Kondo district authorities. They were welcomed in the Tehit language by representatives of the ten clans, who shared the story of how Kampung Bariat was founded. They gave the authorities a file with documentation and a map that shows the deep connection women and men have with their territory. They stated they need a minimum of 3,200 hectares of land to ensure their community's survival. The authorities declared they would support the demands of the people of Kampung Bariat. The fight of Kampung Bariat and many other Indigenous Peoples in Papua against the ongoing threats of oil palm received unprecedented support when, in April 2021, four oil palm companies had their licences revoked by the regent of Sorong. This was based on an audit that had begun in 2018, which identified legal and administrative violations on the part of the companies. The licenses of another 12 oil palm companies were revoked in June 2021 in South Sorong, including the licenses of PT Anugerah Sakti Internusa, the company whose concession overlaps with Kampung Bariat's territory (16). However, PT Anugerah Sakti Internusa went to court in December 2021 to fight the decision, in an attempt to get its licenses back.

More Indigenous Peoples in Papua are involved with court cases. In the case of Papua's biggest oil palm development area—the Tanah Merah project—the Awyu People are fighting for their rights in court, even up to the Supreme Court. In May 2024, the Awyu and Moi indigenous people travelled to Jakarta, where they held prayers and rituals and performed dances to call on the Supreme Court to

protect their lands from destruction (17).

Part of what Indigenous Peoples in Papua are pointing out to the central government is the widespread abandonment of concessions by companies in Papua. An investigation by Pusaka showed that from 1988 until 2011 (when a presidential moratorium was issued on forest clearing), only 125,284 hectares of the 1,162,893 hectares granted to 51 oil palm companies (10.7% of the area) had actually been converted to oil palm. Meanwhile, a number of these companies had stopped operating. If logging and timber plantation concessions are also included, the amount of abandoned land, considering the concessions granted during this period of 1988-2011, is as much as 1,925,306 hectares. Indigenous Peoples claim that the government should return these lands to them, as it is their ancestral territory, and recognize their territorial rights (18).

'Green' extractivism

Rather than responding to the legitimate claims of Indigenous Peoples, the Indonesian government is allowing yet another type of extractivism to expand in Indonesia—with all its associated land-grabbing and profiteering: the 'green' extractivism of forest carbon projects and programmes. In recent years, since the Paris Climate Agreement, the demand for carbon credits has been fuelled by big polluting industries' frenzy to become 'carbon-neutral.' In reality, by buying such 'credits,' these polluting industries can continue with their activities and even increase the burning of fossil fuels—which is the main cause of climate chaos. That is why 'carbon credits' should be called 'pollution credits.'

This carbon market is in the interest of the Indonesian government: it has already received tens of millions of US dollars from the World Bank, Green Climate Fund and the governments of industrialized countries like Norway, Germany, Japan and the UK to become 'REDD-ready.' This means putting the necessary 'infrastructure' in place—such as favourable legislation and methods of supposedly measuring and verifying the amount of carbon in Indonesian forests—which are compared with baseline amounts the government and donors themselves define (19).

In addition to being an opportunity for the so-called 'conservation industry'—e.g. organisations such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF)—to increase 'protected areas,' the carbon business in Papua has also become a new opportunity for extractive industries like oil palm plantations and logging. But their new business is worsening climate chaos and making Indigenous Peoples' struggle for their territorial rights more difficult.

The carbon market and carbon trading: A new opportunity for extractive industries, a new threat for Indigenous Peoples in Papua.

Palm oil and other companies in Papua can now tap into a new source of income. Instead of destroying forests for logging or oil palm, they can leave the forest 'standing' and still make money, by selling a new product called 'carbon credits'—based on the promise that they will maintain the forest intact instead of clearing it. The Indonesian government allows companies in the concession category PBHP (Forest Utilisation Business Permit) to use concession areas for more than one commercial activity, which can include carbon credits. The ALS Group (Alamindo group), for example, owner of three timber companies and industries in Papua, intends to set up a carbon business through PT Rimbakayu Arthamas, in collaboration with nine other companies, making use of this type of permit (20).

In Brazil, oil palm companies got into the carbon market in a similar way, while harming indigenous communities even more than they already were. The Agropalma company in the state of Pará in the Amazon region is using forest land (not under oil palm cultivation) to sell 'carbon credits.' These 'carbon forests' are 'protected' by heavily armed guards who persecute indigenous Turiwara and Afro-descendent communities, called quilombolas. These peoples will always try to enter the forest, because it is their ancestral territory where their ancestral cemeteries and places to fish and hunt are located (21). With the recent forest carbon project, their longstanding struggle to reclaim these lands has become even more difficult.

Globally, 17 years of experience with forest carbon and other so-called REDD-type projects has shown that wherever the carbon business advances, the struggle of indigenous communities for their territorial rights is weakened. This is in spite of the fact that promoters and supporters of carbon projects claim and promise that the projects will advance and improve the territorial rights of indigenous peoples.” (22). What is worse, carbon projects do little to reverse deforestation, and they exacerbate climate chaos—which will ultimately negatively affect tropical forests, and thus Indigenous Peoples. According to research, the Amazon forest is in a process of rapidly 'drying up.' It could become a large savannah in the near future if governments, of industrialized countries in particular, do not swiftly decide to protect the underground store of fossil fuels from extraction (23).

Final remarks

The Indonesian government can no longer ignore the existence of Indigenous Peoples in the land of Papua, whose delegations regularly visit their offices in the capital of Jakarta. Handing over their land to private companies and allowing these companies to destroy it, or to practice 'green' extractivism, bluntly violates article 33 of the Indonesian Constitution—which states that even though land belongs to the State, it should be “utilized to the greatest extent for the prosperity of the Indonesian People.” In a recent interview with Al Jazeera, Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo even affirmed that “the interests, the security and future of all indigenous peoples are highest priority in my view. We have to protect them, we have to secure their livelihood” (24).

But securing their livelihoods means ensuring they can freely exercise control over their territories. This demand has been systematically ignored by the government. Therefore, strengthening the resistance struggle is key. This can occur through horizontal learning processes that connect communities worldwide, so that they can share their wide diversity of experiences of resistance against such plantations. One example of this is the informal alliance against industrial oil palm expansion in West and Central Africa, which since 2016 has connected communities fighting to reclaim their lands from oil palm companies in several African countries (25). Connecting struggles against oil palm and other extractive threats might be a key element in strengthening the ongoing fight of communities in Papua to defend their territories.

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Sources:

(1) <https://awasmifee.potager.org/uploads/2015/04/atlas-sawit-en.pdf>

(2)

<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/01/spurred-by-investor-friendly-law-palm-oil-firms-sue-to-get-licenses-back/>

(3) Sawitwatch. Catatan&Proyeksi perkebunan sawit Indonesia tahun 2023, 2023

(4) <https://nusantara-atlas.org/2023-marks-a-surge-in-palm-oil-expansion-in-indonesia/>

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- (5) <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/indonesia-legalizing-crimes-under-the-slogan-of-creating-jobs>
- (6) After the Indonesian government took over, the first foreign investment approved for the land of Papua in 1967 opened the door for Freeport Sulpur Inc. to extract ore from what is considered one of the world's biggest gold reserves, with devastating impacts on the communities that continue to this day.
- (7) [Brief Paper: Karena ada Hutan Tong Hidup](#), Jakarta, 2023
- (8) <https://pusaka.or.id/en/the-awyu-tribe-fights-the-tanah-merah-project-companies-up-to-the-supreme-court/>
- (9) <https://grain.org/en/article/7123-oil-palm-in-latin-america-monoculture-and-violence>
- (10) https://www.cifor-icraf.org/publications/pdf_files/factsheet/7444-factsheet.pdf
- (11) Toxic river. [The fight to reclaim water from oil palm plantations in Indonesia](#), December 2020, Kruha et al,
- (12) <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/breaking-the-silence-harassment-sexual-violence-and-abuse-against-women-in-and-around-industrial-oil-palm-and-rubber-plantations> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/rape-abuses-in-palm-oil-fields-linked-to-top-cosmetic-brands-ap>
- (13) See for example: <https://chainreactionresearch.com/report/latin-american-palm-oil-linked-to-social-risks-local-deforestation/> or <https://news.mongabay.com/2015/03/whos-funding-palm-oil/>
- (14) <https://grain.org/en/article/5272-how-much-of-world-s-greenhouse-gas-emissions-come-from-agriculture>
- (15) <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/01/spurred-by-investor-friendly-law-palm-oil-firms-sue-to-get-licenses-back/>
- (16) Ibid
- (17) <https://pusaka.or.id/en/land-back-supreme-court-ceremonial-venue-for-papuan-indigenous-peoples-fighting-palm-oil-companies/> So far, only seven communities have ensured control over their land through the use of a legal category that was created through changes in the Forestry Law of 2012. They are called 'customary forests,' and total 39.841 hectares. It is an important step, though insignificant at the same time, when compared with the areas released to companies--comapnies that are heavily impacting livelihoods and threatening the future of IPs.
- (18) [Brief Paper: Karena ada Hutan Tong Hidup](#), Jakarta, 2023
- (19) Indonesia REDD+ National Strategy 2021-2030; Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia November 2022
- (20) <https://pusaka.or.id/en/tag/papuanforests/>
- (21) <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/redd-and-the-green-economy-exacerbate-oppression-and-deforestation-in-para-brazil>
- (22) <https://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/15-years-of-redd>
- (23) <https://www.the-scientist.com/amazon-rainforest-nearing-savannah-tipping-point-69782>
- (24) https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=51Rctpb_EJg
- (25) See the declaration from the last meeting of this Alliance in 2022 [in this link](#)