
[PODCAST - Indonesia: Dayak Women Defend the Forest of Tambun Bungai](#)

“Haga lewun keton, petak danom, ela sampai tempun petak nana sare (Dayak language) – “Take care of your home. Don't allow yourselves to be forced to farm on the forest edge, because you are the owners the land” (1).

Tambun Bungai is the name of a warrior from the ancient kingdom of the Ngaju Dayak tribe, the Tanjung Pematang Sawang Kingdom. The Dayak People used to call Central Kalimantan Tambun Bungai. Before investors arrived and began to dominate the Land of Tambun Bungai with their heavy machinery, the Dayak People of Central Kalimantan – especially the communities of Mantangai Hulu, Kalumpang and Sei Ahas – were self-sufficient and lived in prosperity. The harvests from their fields and vegetable gardens were abundant – more than enough to ensure their food needs from season to season. This included several types of excellent local rice varieties, such as: Garagai, Siyam, Indu Sangumang, Red Boras, Bariwit, Kawung, Baputi, Manyahi, Jambu Bahandang, Tampurihat, Luwaw kantor, Hamuntai Bahenda and Nampui. Vegetables were also abundant in their forest. There also used to be plenty of fish in the rivers. Rubber, rattan, as well as other forest products added to their prosperity and well-being.

The problems for these Dayak communities began in 1995 with two presidential decisions: one was a regulation related to Indonesia's food security situation, and the other a decree on the development of peatlands for food crop agriculture in Central Kalimantan (Decree No. 82/1995). The latter was initiated by the then Minister for Transmigration issues, Siswono Yudo Husodo. At that time, Indonesia was living under President Suharto's so-called New Order regime. The government's ambition to achieve rice self-sufficiency in the country motivated a transmigration of people to use peatlands for food production. As a result of the Peatland Clearing Project (PLG), no less than 1 million hectares of peatlands and swamps were cleared and opened up to plant rice. To create the conditions for this project, canals were built throughout the peat forests of Central Kalimantan. Nonetheless, the project was a big failure, because peatlands are not suitable for the cultivation of hybrid rice varieties.

The administration of President Jokowi – whose mandate ended on 20 October 2024 - has repeated the same mistake, by launching yet another Food Estate project in the area. This project is one of the Indonesian government's nearly 200 National Strategic Projects (PSN) for the period 2020-2024, and its aim is to maintain national food security. The government has invested up to Rp 1.5 trillion in this project, but this second attempt has also failed.

The clearing of peatlands by the government opened the door for powerful investors to take control of the Dayak People's forests in Central Kalimantan. These forests are constantly being exploited by both private and state companies. Over the years, and in particular during the rainy season, large-

scale plantations have sprung up like mushrooms in the region. According to data from the General Directorate of Plantations, Central Kalimantan has the third largest area of oil palm plantations in Indonesia. By 2022, there were almost 1.9 million hectares of oil palm plantations in Central Kalimantan, with smallholder plantations accounting for 330,000 of these hectares, and national private companies managing the remaining 1.5 million hectares.

Mining companies have also polluted the beautiful and healthy environment of the Dayak communities, and the forest cover that supports their livelihood has been continually decreasing. Due to these companies' activities, the rivers have become polluted with toxic chemicals, threatening fish and other river species with extinction. Furthermore, the Dayak people – especially the women – are finding it difficult to get traditional medicine in the forest. (2)

Large-scale oil palm plantations and mining have not been the only threats. In 2009, a REDD+ project (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) was established, called the Kalimantan Forest Climate Partnership project (KFCP). This project was a collaboration between the governments of Indonesia and Australia, and it was initiated with funding of USD 30 million and a concession area of 120,000 hectares in Mantangai sub-district, Kapuas district, Central Kalimantan. The project created problems and horizontal conflicts within the communities, because it restricted the communities' access to and control over the forest, on which they depend for their livelihood.

Herlina, a woman from Sei Ahas Village, said that the KFCP project was not implemented in a transparent manner. Information about the project was not properly shared with the community; only certain people or groups knew about it – the same people who benefited from it. The community has been victimised. People have lost their rights, access to, and control over the forest. They are no longer able to benefit from the forest, which until the arrival of the KFCP project had sustained them. REDD+ and KFCP have destroyed the forest and their livelihoods, leading to impoverishment that disproportionately affects women.

The deforestation caused by these investment projects has contributed to climate change. The seasons are no longer predictable. During the planting season, the Dayak communities – including the women – can no longer rely on local knowledge based on the constellations: the stars, which they traditionally used to guide them, no longer look the same in the sky. This is because Central Kalimantan's skies have been polluted by the increase in greenhouse gas emissions. This pollution has led to an increase in pests and floods, causing crop failure in the communities. In short, the indigenous peoples of Mantangai Hulu, Kalumpang and Sei Ahas villages have experienced several layers of systemic impoverishment; and women have been most intensely affected.

Because the Dayak women of Mantangai, Kalumpang and Sei Ahas villages did not want to give up hope, they began to build a collective resistance movement, starting with discussions to build understanding, raise awareness and increase their knowledge. They have initiated efforts to reclaim and defend their forests, realizing that the forest is a source of food for their families, as well as a pharmacy and a culturally significant space. Above all, the forest sustains their lives and that of future generations. They also have held trainings to build their courage to speak out about the situation and the problems they have been facing ever since their forest began to be controlled by corporations. One of the strategies they have been using to defend their land from powerful investors is collectively gardening a variety of vegetables and herbal plants. They have also been weaving with rattan, which is a plant found in their forest. Through their weaving, women have recorded the history of Dayak civilisation, which is very closely related to nature and the forest. For indigenous women, continuing to weave is a form of resistance to the various injustices they have been experiencing.

The Dayak women have visited governmental institutions to demand justice and reclaim their forest. They have the support of Solidaritas Perempuan, an organisation that has consistently accompanied the struggle of the people of Sei Ahas, Kalimpang and Mantagai Hulu. Solidaritas Perempuan provides space for women to voice their struggles, not only in the region, but also at the national and even international levels.

So far, their struggles have resulted in three major victories. One victory is that the KFCP project got cancelled (though a local regulation continues to restrict communities from using fire in their traditional way). A second victory is that the palm oil company active in Sei Ahas village has had its business licence revoked. And a third victory is that the women, together with the people of Kalumpang village, have made the decision to reject the Food Estate project in their village. According to the women and their communities, these projects will not bring them welfare, but only take over and control their lands. In the end, this path would lead to increased marginalization for the community, and in particular for the women – as they would be separated from the spaces on which they have built their lives and livelihoods.

Yuni Warlif dan Rima Bilaut (Solidaritas Perempuan)

(1) Maneser Panatau Tatu Hiang: Diving into the wealth of our ancestors, book by Tjilik Riwut.

(2) Dijah, Dayak woman from Mantagai Hulu village, Kapuas district, Central Kalimantan. 28 June 2024