
"We will fight until our lands are returned": Peasant resistance to oil palm plantations in Indonesia

We are peasants from Indonesia, the world's largest producer of palm oil. We write from the island of Sulawesi, a region where the government and private sectors are promoting plans to expand oil palm plantations by about 1 million hectares, through the ambitious "Sulawesi Palm Oil Belt" project (1). This initiative is part of the national plan to develop 20 million hectares of crops, including oil palm plantations. In our area, Buol Regency, we have experienced firsthand the negative impacts that projects like this have on peasant communities, forests and the broader environment. That is why, since 2022, we have organized through the Buol Plasma Peasants Forum (FPPB), an association of peasants affected by palm oil partnership schemes who are committed to defending the rights of peasants and plantation workers within the palm oil sector.

Let us start from the beginning. Oil palm is not native to Indonesia. The plant was introduced by the Dutch colonial government and later extensively developed as a monoculture plantation crop. Its expansion has been rapid, and continues to this day: by 2023, the total area of oil palm plantations in Indonesia had reached more than 16 million hectares - almost the size of Tunisia. This vast area was established in a relatively short period of time, largely through aggressive expansion practices driven by major companies.

Many of us peasants still remember when oil palm was first introduced in Sulawesi. At that time, we did not even know what the fruit looked or tasted like. In Buol, the company PT Hardaya Inti Plantations (PT HIP) was the first to bring oil palm in the 1990s. That marked a major transformation that continues to affect our lives to this day.

The arrival of agribusiness in Buol was marked by massive deforestation. Forests that had once been living spaces and sources of livelihood for the community were cleared to make way for oil palm plantations. PT HIP obtained a planting permit for 22,828 hectares of land, which directly affected at least 6,500 peasant families. These families' customary lands and forests were taken without their consent and replaced with oil palm monocultures.

The invasion of oil palm plantations did not stop there. Beyond the permitted concession area, the company also illegally invaded about 5,400 hectares of peasant-owned land. This land grabbing went on for years without justice for the communities. In 2012 a major scandal broke out at the peak of this land grabbing, when the company's owner, Mrs. Siti Hartati was sentenced to prison by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) after bribing the Regent of Buol. The bribe was related to the processing of a land-use right (HGU) over areas that the company had already planted without a legal permit.

In an effort to expand its monopoly in our region, PT HIP introduced a partnership program through the Nucleus–Plasma scheme in 2008. Through this scheme, the company further expanded its plantations. (2)

The 'Plasma' Partnership Scheme

The program, known as the Nucleus–Plasma Partnership, was promoted by the Indonesian government with support from the World Bank. It was presented as a path to shared prosperity, and the company made many promises: peasants would receive plasma plots, gain a fair share of profits, and escape the trap of poverty. Yet behind all this rhetoric lay an agenda to tighten this company's control over our land.

In theory, the scheme sounded promising. The name “plasma” was taken from the model of a biological cell: the nucleus is the company, while the plasma represents the peasant cooperatives around it, supposedly working together in a mutually beneficial relationship. According to its provisions, the plasma program even requires companies to establish plantations for local communities on at least 20% of the total concession areas they obtain. In other words, companies are supposed to allocate part of their concession to smallholders, who in turn manage oil palm plots. Companies are also supposed to provide technical support and guarantee the purchase of smallholders' harvests.

However, the reality in our region turned out to be very different. Instead of sharing land from the concession area they already controlled, PT HIP used the plasma scheme as a tool to tighten its grip on the lands of Buol's people. The plasma plots were not taken from the company's concession, but from the peasants' own land. In other words, a program supposedly designed to improve community welfare has become a tool for land seizure and corporate domination.

At that time, as landowners, we were invited to join the plasma scheme. The company's promises sounded very convincing, and many of us were tempted to participate. They promised prosperity and the opportunity for our children to go to high school and even university. But so far, none of these promises have been fulfilled. Many of our families have made sacrifices, yet our rights remain unrecognized.

Since we entered into the partnership with PT HIP, there has been no training or technical assistance provided on how to plant, maintain, or manage oil palm. The company is only concerned with extracting as much profit as possible, while those of us who have lost our land have been left without knowledge and without guarantees. They have repeatedly promised a profit-sharing system, but we have experienced the opposite: prosperity that has never arrived. We only realized the true consequences of our decision when it was too late.

What we have witnessed is that, in practice, the Nucleus–Plasma Partnership in oil palm plantations actually harms landowners. The scheme has become land grabbing in disguise; cooperatives and partnerships cloak mechanisms that function like a debt trap for peasants. In our region, the palm oil partnership program has been deeply exploitative, involving not only large-scale palm oil companies, but also government officials and corrupt cooperative leaders. As a result, around 4,934 peasants – with a total of more than 6,746 hectares of land organized through seven cooperatives – have become victims.

All income from the plantations is managed directly by PT HIP together with cooperative administrators, but landowners rarely receive clear and adequate information about the development of the plantations, their maintenance, harvesting, or the sale of Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB). In other words, we landowners have not been treated as equal partners, but rather as unwelcome guests on our own land.

For nearly 17 years, we watched trucks leave our land, loaded with hundreds of tons of harvest. The oil palm fruits taken from our soil were sold and exported to global giants such as Nestlé, Hershey's, Cargill, General Mills, PepsiCo, Danone, Unilever, and many others. Yet as the rightful owners of the land, we have never received a fair share of the profits from these plantations. Instead, we have been burdened with ever-growing debts, and accusations piled upon us – rather than profits shared with us. Indeed, today we are trapped in debt. This is not because we failed to work, but because the partnership scheme was, from the very beginning, designed to benefit the company rather than ensure the welfare of peasants.

Since 2020, PT HIP has claimed that peasants from seven agricultural cooperatives in Buol owe a debt of around 590 billion rupiah (approximately 37 million US dollars). According to the company, this debt stems from bank loans supposedly used to initiate the partnership, along with excessive charges they arbitrarily imposed that were not contained within the contract: management fees, general expenses, maintenance costs, and various hidden levies.”

We ask: where did this debt come from? We have never received any of the supposed benefits of this arrangement. Harvesting has continued; truckloads of palm fruit leave our land, yet we have never seen a share of the profits. Instead, the debt keeps piling up, and it is never explained or justified. Whenever we question the company, their only response is: *“That is your debt.”* There is no transparency.

This scheme has put our land at risk of being forcibly taken. Weak government oversight of the palm oil partnerships has trapped peasants in a cycle of crushing debt. The situation is further worsened by cooperative administrators who are not transparent and often act against the landowners' best interests.

As a result, this partnership has stripped landowners of the livelihoods they once secured from their own land. Many people have been forced to work as farm laborers on land that was once their own. Quite a few have been pushed into informal jobs, where they have no safety guarantees in the workplace, or even the most basic rights.

This work is done not by choice, but out of necessity. With meagre wages and dangerous working conditions, many families now live in conditions that are a far cry from the prosperity that the company once promised. Some have been forced to leave their villages to seek work elsewhere. As a result, many women have been left behind by their husbands, and they now bear a double burden: caring for their families while also struggling to sustain daily life.

Beyond the social and economic impacts, the presence of large-scale oil palm plantations has also brought devastating changes to our environment and traditional culture. Not only do we face the risk of poverty, but also the destruction of ecosystems that sustain our lives.

Before the arrival of oil palm, we cultivated a variety of food crops, such as rice, sweet potatoes, corn, and various vegetables. Our lives were self-sufficient and relatively prosperous. However, since the palm oil program began, these diverse food crops have been wiped out and replaced by oil palm monocultures. As a result of deforestation, the forests that once absorbed rainwater have disappeared. The impacts are severe: if it rains for just half an hour, our rice fields are immediately flooded. We frequently face crop failures, which means we must replant repeatedly just to sustain production.

This damage has affected not only agriculture but also the forest ecosystem. Endemic wildlife that

was once part of our daily lives has now become increasingly difficult to find. The forest buffalo (anoa) and the Sulawesi hornbill, which used to be easily seen, are now nearly gone because their habitats have been replaced by vast oil palm plantations.

Recognizing the magnitude of the losses, we established the Buol Plasma Peasants Forum (FPPB) in 2022. This forum serves as a collective platform to share information, gather essential documents, voice our concerns, and defend the rights of landowners who have been harmed for more than a decade under these unjust partnership practices.

Resistance Movement

What remains for us peasants is the valuable lesson drawn from this bitter experience, and the determination to continue our struggle. For the Buol Plasma Peasants Forum (FPPB), the central and most challenging fight is to reclaim the land of peasants who have been trapped in the partnership scheme. We assert that this land must be returned to its rightful owners, not exchanged or traded as a means to resolve conflicts. We believe that through collective struggle, this goal can be achieved, step by step.

In addition, we are also fighting to improve the partnership system so that the profits from palm oil production are distributed fairly and transparently to peasant landowners. We demand compensation for the losses suffered during the partnership period, including 17 years without profit sharing, as well as compensation for the secondary crops and rice in our farms that were cleared and replaced with oil palms without our prior consent.

Over the past few years, we have undertaken various efforts through organizing, advocacy, and campaigning. We have achieved some important strides, including in 2024 when the Business Competition Supervisory Commission (KPPU) of the Republic of Indonesia ruled that PT Hardaya Inti Plantations (HIP) had violated the partnership principles in dealing with peasant cooperatives. This ruling reinforced evidence of the injustice we have long spoken out about. In addition, the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) issued an official recommendation stating that human rights violations were committed against peasants who were fighting for their land rights. These findings confirm that our struggle is not based on false accusations, but on a documented reality that state institutions have recognized.

However, our struggle has never been free from pressure and harsh reactions from the company (3)(4). PT HIP has repeatedly used excessive violence to undermine the farmers' demands. Landowners have demanded fair and transparent negotiations, but the company has never met these demands. Meanwhile, military and police officers have been continuously deployed to quell peaceful protests by farmers on smallholder plantations. During protests and strikes throughout 2024 and 2025, a total of 27 peasant families, including women and children, faced criminalization. Currently, three peasants are facing legal proceedings before the court and the police, which has become a focus of FPPB's support and accompaniment.

Women face the brunt of the negative impacts of oil palm monoculture expansion in Buol. Many women are forced to bear the double burden of caring for their families and managing the land alone, because their husbands have been imprisoned due to criminalization, or have migrated to other areas in search of work. This situation further heightens the vulnerability of women and children in our community.

Taking all these impacts into account, we firmly reject the 'Sulawesi Palm Oil Belt' plan. We are

convinced that large-scale expansion of oil palm monocultures will only worsen the social, economic, and environmental crises that have persisted for decades. This project may benefit a select few, but it clearly does not benefit the peasants, landowners, and the people of Buol.

Returning to Ancestral Roots

The threats to our lives are real – from economic pressure to criminalization – but none of this has deterred our struggle to survive. On the contrary, amidst these pressures, we strive to return to our cultural roots and ancestral agricultural traditions which have been undermined by the destructive expansion of large-scale oil palm plantations surrounding our village.

Our main focus is on organizing peasants, tenant farmers, and plantation workers, with an emphasis on strengthening women's roles in village development and promoting sustainable food farming practices without pesticides. We carry out these practices through the *Mopalus* traditional method, a labor exchange system among farmers that has long been the foundation of solidarity in our community.

Pesticide-free farming is not just an agricultural technique; it is a form of resistance against oil palm expansion and corporate land monopolies that have disrupted irrigation systems, threatened our clean water sources, and seized our land through partnership schemes. In this way, we strive to rebuild food sovereignty and provide healthy food sources rooted in local culture and environmental sustainability.

In addition, we are committed to preserving remaining forests as buffers for clean water sources for our villages. Forests are our last stronghold against the worsening droughts and floods of recent years, which have been driven by large-scale deforestation from oil palm plantations and mining activities.

The Message

Our message to all communities, wherever you are, is this: if a company wants to enter your area and claims it intends to partner with you, do not accept it. Do not repeat what we are experiencing now. We must be self-reliant, manage our own land, and avoid dependence on outside partners. What we peasants need is support from the government and the state. First, we need land to manage so that we can sustain our lives. Second, we need the government to provide capital so that we can cultivate the land.

Regarding the struggle, we must stand together; we cannot retreat from defending our rights. We must keep moving forward. Here in our region, despite the threats, we continue to move forward and fight until our land is returned. There is hope. That is our message to all friends.

Finally, we invite support from all parties, especially from abroad, since many countries are also producers and consumers of palm oil products. We hope that all relevant parties will help address the nucleus–plasma partnership issues in Buol Regency, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, and ensure that the rights of peasant landowners are respected and fulfilled by HIP.

Text by members of the Buol Plasma Peasants Forum (FPPB)

References

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 - (4) Watchdo Documentary, 2025. Buol Bertahan di Tanah Harapan ([video](#))