

Reflections on 16 Years of REDD+ in Indonesia: Indigenous People Empowerment or Commodification of Inclusivity?

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Since introduced in 2007, the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program in Indonesia has transformed its funding sources from relying on government agencies and international organizations to mobilizing private finance, known as the carbon market. In implementing REDD+, Indonesia successfully collaborated with Norway to reduce the deforestation rate by 2016 and is currently working on regulations to operate a fully-fledged carbon market by 2025.

Nonetheless, the evolution of REDD+ in Indonesia has brought inevitable consequences for its primary agent, the indigenous people. As a minority often neglected in economic development, REDD+ has provided a strategic space for indigenous people to improve their political leverage in the fight for recognition of identity and customary land. On the contrary, however, many scholars also perceive REDD+ as not far from being just a means for developed countries and multi-billionaire companies to divert the world's attention from the real driver of deforestation by commodifying indigenous people's participation. Thus, inclusivity mainstreamed within the program is not necessarily associated with the empowerment agenda.

Studying the duality of these insights will offer a better understanding of how REDD+ has been utilized, for better or worse, by various actors to pursue their interests. As such, we can reflect on how we should perceive REDD+ and appropriately accommodate indigenous people within the program. In this regard, Indonesia represents a valuable case study as an early adopter and leader in REDD+ as well as

in portraying the complex relationship between indigenous people, government and private interests.

Projects in REDD+ have long claimed the social-economic benefits they deliver to indigenous people through the payment for environmental services (PES). One study on the REDD+ project under Kalimantan Forest and Climate Partnership (KFCP) claimed to have built a village nursery business as part of reforestation programs and the provision of income while developing education and health facilities to provide a better livelihood for thousands of indigenous Dayak and Dayad people (Boer, 2017). While such claims are valid, more emphasis is put on how REDD+ has been exploited by indigenous people to secure their territory.

A relevant example can be seen from a study conducted in Bahanei, Central Kalimantan, where the Indigenous People of the Archipelago (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara/AMAN*) together with the Bahanei people, strategically demarcated their land claim through REDD+ projects by insisting that 'tenure securitization is crucial to support the successful implementation and investment of REDD+' in order to avert the threat of land acquisition from a nearby logging company. In doing so, AMAN sought to include indigenous people in a workshop on payment for PES and benefit-sharing mechanisms, as well as capacity-building programs such as training on basic cartography to help the mapping processes to define the indigenous territory (Astuti & McGregor, 2017).

This approach illustrates how indigenous people strategically turned their distrust on market environmentalism to fight for their rights using the same market-based instruments. Such counterbalance efforts even claimed to ignite the stipulation of 2012 Constitutional Court Decision No. 35, which removed the inclusion of customary forests as part of state forests, and the One Map Policy, which aimed to reduce the number of overlapping land claims by harmonizing and integrating spatial data (Nofyanza et al., 2020). More importantly, President Jokowi has permanently enacted a moratorium prohibiting the issuance of new permits for land clearing in primary forests and peatlands, thereby protecting the indigenous people living within or adjacent to the moratorium area from the fear of new concessions (Samadhi, 2019).

Although the empowerment of indigenous people within REDD+ has been recognized in several cases, others worry that framing indigenous people as primary actors in REDD+ is a facade for companies to distract the attention away from industrial agriculture as the culprit of major deforestation. In Indonesia particularly, most deforestation happened due to the expansion of large-scale palm oil plantations and illegal logging from timber plantations (Shahreen, 2022). Thus, it poses a fundamental question of why global forest management initiatives such as REDD+ tend to focus their agency on local actors.

Besides the nature of direct actions like cash transfer and capacity building within REDD+ is indeed more suitable for small-scale actors rather than large-scale actors, indigenous people are also much easier to target than large industries that are more politically challenging (Skutsch & Turnhout, 2020). Although most big donors of REDD+ have clearly understood the major culprit behind deforestation, terminating or suspending industrial activities is considered too risky since it is confronted a lot with domestic politics in recipient countries.

Oftentimes, multinational corporations are backed by state apparatus, and together, they play out a narrative that palm oil industries are vital for economic growth in emerging economies like Indonesia. Thus, the reluctance to encounter potential conflicts with state and industrial interests drives REDD+ to favor feasible and pragmatic solutions through indigenous people (Skutsch & Turnhout, 2020), ultimately keeping the industries further from being accountable.

Another reason that can explain the strong participation of indigenous people within REDD+ is simply that this narrative is so powerful in attracting global investment under the neo-liberal hegemony. If we look closely, REDD+ is always sold as a program that can tackle two problems with one silver bullet: let the industries in advanced countries offset their emissions by empowering people in other parts of the world through environmental projects. Not only would it help to reduce global emissions, but it could also elevate people from poverty. However, such a strategy focusing on win-win approaches is merely a tactic companies utilize to exempt themselves from the obligation to reduce emissions by purchasing carbon credits and claiming to be carbon neutral already (Kolinjivadi, 2023). Hence, it is no surprise that those investing in carbon finance are usually one of the top emitters, such as Shell and airline company KLM who purchased carbon credits from the Katingan Menyata Project in Central Kalimantan (World Rainforest Movement (a), 2020). A US\$1 billion pledge under Norway-Indonesia REDD+ Partnership even came from a pension fund derived from the profits of Equinor, Norway's state oil company (World Rainforest Movement (b), 2020).

The duality of the above insights has shown how REDD+ not only serves as a forest initiative that offers practical solutions for sustainable forestry, yet also a political arena for the actors within to practice and pursue their interests.

This conflict of interest, however, does not necessarily make REDD+ become irrelevant to Indonesia. In fact, REDD+ remains one part of the responsibilities developed nations have to pay developing countries for their historical emissions debt. On top of that, REDD+ and carbon markets can also be an effective carrot-and-stick mechanism to target major emitting companies if implemented mandatory and with the 'right' pricing scheme.

However, one major lesson from 16 years of REDD+ in Indonesia might be to think about how we should situate this program more carefully as a forest initiative so it will not demystify the fundamental problem of deforestation and indigenous people. To date, many Indonesian REDD+ documents still have done little to nothing to recognize industrial activities as a main driver of deforestation (World Rainforest Movement (b), 2020). Hence, while REDD+ promotes sustainable forestry practices and its benefits to indigenous people, it must also underline the root causes and urgency of more rigorous law enforcement towards land use and deforestation.

Lastly, albeit REDD+ practices have prompted the Indonesian government to pass several regulations to improve the indigenous people's bargaining position, the struggle of these communities is nowhere near over. In reality, indigenous people are still prone to criminalization by large-scale plantations and mining operations due to land disputes. At the same time, they still have to undergo a complicated process to obtain legal recognition over their identity and customary land (Sriwijaya, 2022). Hence, genuine empowerment should not rely upon or undertake through market mechanisms like what the Bahane case study has demonstrated, as it only happens on a case-by-case basis. As with any other community group, the indigenous people's rights must be given and protected unequivocally by the state under the law.

One critical step is starting with ratifying the Indigenous Peoples Bill.

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