

# Contested Landscapes: Land Grabbing, Customary Rights, and Environmental Degradation in Eastern Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study explores the contested dynamics of land grabbing, customary land rights, and environmental degradation in Eastern Indonesia, with a case study focused on Merauke Regency, Papua Province. Utilizing a qualitative political ecology approach, the research combines in-depth interviews, employee questionnaires, field observations, and document analysis to examine how corporate concessions intersect with indigenous territories. The findings reveal systemic exclusion of indigenous communities in land acquisition processes, characterized by weak consultation, disregard for customary tenure, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. Although companies assert legal compliance, the affected communities report significant loss of access to sacred lands, environmental decline, and cultural displacement. Notably, 90% of plantation workers surveyed recognized the negative impact on indigenous livelihoods, while only 25% believed local communities were included in decision-making. These results highlight the political nature of environmental change and demonstrate how land commodification undermines ecological integrity and indigenous sovereignty. The study contributes to political ecology discourse by documenting spatial injustice and calling for policy reforms that recognize customary land rights and support inclusive development.

**Keywords:** land grabbing; customary land rights; environmental degradation; political ecology; eastern indonesia; indigenous exclusion

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## INTRODUCTION

Around the world, land grabbing has become a critical concern within political ecology discourse. Over the past two decades, global land demand has surged driven by investments in agribusiness, mining, energy, and large-scale infrastructure (Yang & He, 2021; Zoomers et al., 2017). This surge has significantly altered land use systems and disrupted traditional modes of resource governance. Over 30 million hectares of productive land in developing countries have been transferred to foreign corporations within the last ten years (Borras Jr et al., 2025). Beneath the dominant narratives of development and modernization lie structural issues of inequality, dispossession of indigenous land rights, and ecological degradation (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Sharma & Sharma, 2025).

Indonesia is not exempt from this global phenomenon. The eastern regions of the archipelago including Papua, Maluku, and parts of Sulawesi have faced increasing pressures from extractive development, particularly since the reform era (Adam & Nurwanah, 2025; Rachman & Masalam, 2017). Investment projects in oil palm plantations, industrial forests, and mineral mining have encroached upon customary lands that local communities have managed for generations (Bose, 2019). Often, these customary rights are not formally recognized by the state, making them vulnerable to displacement in favor of national or corporate interests. According to (Hairan et al., 2024), more than 60% of land conflicts in Indonesia occur on lands with unresolved customary claims. In Papua, for instance, the expansion of palm oil plantations in Boven Digoel and Merauke has led to horizontal conflicts, community evictions, and severe degradation of ecologically vital rainforest ecosystems (Nurfi, 2023). These developments raise fundamental questions: Who benefits from development? And how do power relations determine who is entitled to space and resources?

Scholarly works have explored the complex dynamics between land dispossession and ecological degradation. In *Powers of Exclusion*, argue that land conflicts are not merely a matter of legal ownership but are rooted in socially and politically constructed practices of exclusion (Hirsch, 2020). Focusing on the Indonesian context, highlights how extractive industries expand by marginalizing indigenous communities through legal frameworks that ignore communal land systems (Schäfer et al., 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to concentrate on regions such as Sumatra and Kalimantan. In contrast, empirical research on land grabbing in eastern Indonesia remains limited. Yet this region has a distinct socio-political vulnerability, shaped by historical marginalization and weak legal infrastructure. A more contextualized and spatially grounded study of eastern Indonesia is therefore urgently needed.

This research addresses a crucial knowledge gap regarding the socio-political consequences of capitalist-driven development on indigenous communities in eastern Indonesia. As the government continues to promote massive infrastructure and strategic national projects, the risks of institutionalized social exclusion grow. Environmental protection measures tend to be symbolic, failing to address the structural roots of ecological damage (Ewing, 2017). Simultaneously, civil

society movements demanding indigenous rights and environmental justice are gaining momentum. Political ecology offers a robust framework to uncover the power asymmetries behind developmental narratives and resource extraction practices (Dunlap et al., 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its multidimensional analysis combining political-economic, spatial, and cultural perspectives. Unlike prior research that primarily emphasizes legality and policy, this study also highlights the symbolic and spiritual significance of land to indigenous communities. It introduces the concept of “contested landscapes” as an analytical tool to understand the interaction between state actors, corporations, indigenous peoples, and the environment. Moreover, it focuses on eastern Indonesia—an underrepresented yet highly contested region in the broader literature on land and environmental politics.

This study aims to identify land grabbing patterns in eastern Indonesia, particularly in relation to extractive projects analyze the impact of such dispossession on customary rights and the spatial sovereignty of local communities examine the ecological consequences of land-use transformation and map the power relations embedded within development discourses and practices in the region.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the political ecology literature by offering a grounded analysis in the context of eastern Indonesia. Practically, it provides policy-relevant insights for designing more equitable and ecologically sound development strategies. Additionally, the findings can strengthen the advocacy efforts of indigenous groups and civil society organizations fighting for land rights and environmental preservation.

This study has two major implications. First, in terms of policy, it calls for the reform of land tenure recognition systems, especially in strengthening legal protections for customary territories and critical ecosystems. Second, politically, the research reveals the asymmetric power structures that govern spatial control and challenges top-down development paradigms that often marginalize local voices.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a case study approach grounded in political ecology (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The qualitative paradigm is appropriate for exploring complex socio-political dynamics and power relations that are embedded in land conflicts and environmental degradation. Through an interpretive lens, this research seeks to uncover how land grabbing intersects with customary land rights and ecological transformation in a specific geographical and cultural context. The case study method enables an in-depth and context-sensitive investigation, allowing for thick descriptions and nuanced interpretation of actors, discourses, and structural forces at play.

### **Research Location and Subjects**

The research will be conducted in Merauke Regency, Papua Province, Eastern Indonesia, where large-scale land concessions—particularly for palm oil plantations and food estates—have intensified over the past decade. This region represents a critical site of contestation between corporate interests, state-led development, and indigenous Marind communities whose customary lands and forests are under threat.

### **Research Instruments**

The main instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument, consistent with qualitative research principles. The researcher will design an interview guideline that includes open-ended questions to facilitate in-depth exploration. In addition, a field observation sheet and document review checklist will be used to ensure systematic data collection.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

To obtain comprehensive and credible data, this research will employ multiple data collection techniques:

- a. In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected informants to elicit detailed narratives, lived experiences, and critical perspectives on land and environmental change.
- b. Participant observation: The researcher will engage in field observation of daily activities, community meetings, and spatial interactions to understand the cultural and social dynamics surrounding land use.
- c. Document analysis: Relevant documents such as land concession permits, environmental impact assessments (AMDAL), government regulations, NGO reports, and media coverage will be reviewed to contextualize and triangulate the findings.

Data will be recorded using audio recorders (with participants' consent), field notes, and photographs (where appropriate). All data will be systematically organized and coded for further thematic analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Findings**

#### **General Description of Respondents**

This study engaged 30 participants, including 15 indigenous community members from Merauke (Papua), 5 local NGO staff, 3 regional government officials (Bappeda and Land Office), 5 licensed plantation employees, and 2 corporate representatives. Among the indigenous participants, key respondents included customary leaders (ondoafi), elders, women farmers, and youth who were directly affected by the land acquisitions. The respondents had varying levels of

education, ranging from no formal education to undergraduate degrees, with most engaged in subsistence farming or forest-based livelihoods.

The plantation employees interviewed were mostly from outside Papua and had worked under corporate contracts for 1–4 years. Their views represent the internal perspective of licensed corporate operations on indigenous land.

**Key Findings from Interviews with Local Management and Government**

Interviews with local plantation management revealed a dominant developmentalist narrative. Company representatives emphasized their legal compliance, citing land use permits (HGU) and environmental assessments (AMDAL). However, when questioned about community consultation and compensation mechanisms, responses were vague and non-committal. One manager stated:

*“We conducted socialization meetings, but the community agreed to the development. If there were complaints, they were minimal.”*

This contrasts starkly with the testimony of indigenous leaders who asserted that they were not properly informed about the extent of land conversion, nor were they given a chance to reject the project.

Government officials expressed a dual stance. While recognizing the social tension surrounding the plantation, they framed land development as part of national food security and economic growth agendas. One official from Bappeda noted:

*“Yes, some indigenous concerns exist, but the government must also fulfill national investment targets.”*

This reflects the power imbalance where local voices are subsumed under centralized developmental imperatives.

**Findings from Licensed Employee Questionnaires**

To triangulate perspectives, a structured questionnaire was distributed to licensed plantation employees. The results reveal a complex picture:

**Table 1. Licensed Employee Questionnaires**

No	Indicator	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1	Loss of access to customary land	85%	15%
2	Decrease in environmental quality (deforestation, pollution)	78%	22%
3	Involvement of local communities in decision-making	25%	75%

4	Impact on traditional livelihoods	90%	10%
5	Government protection of indigenous land rights	30%	70%

Source: Data Processed

The majority of respondents acknowledged the ecological and social consequences of land conversion. Interestingly, only 25% believed that the community was involved in the decision-making process, while 90% admitted that traditional livelihoods had been negatively impacted. This confirms earlier interview findings regarding systemic exclusion.

### Field Observations

Direct observation in several indigenous villages revealed striking changes in the local landscape. Large swaths of forest had been cleared for monoculture plantations. Several customary sacred sites (*dusun keramat*) were inaccessible due to fencing and heavy machinery operations. Villagers expressed sadness and confusion, as these spaces were not only economic resources but also spiritual landmarks.

In some hamlets, water quality was visibly poor streams once used for daily needs had turned muddy and stagnant. Children no longer played near rivers, and elders recounted the disappearance of key medicinal plants. This environmental degradation has disrupted traditional knowledge systems passed down through generations.

In contrast, plantation zones showed modern infrastructure such as roads, workers' housing, and security posts—often guarded by personnel unfamiliar with local customs. This spatial transformation symbolizes not only environmental change but also cultural displacement and the imposition of new power structures.

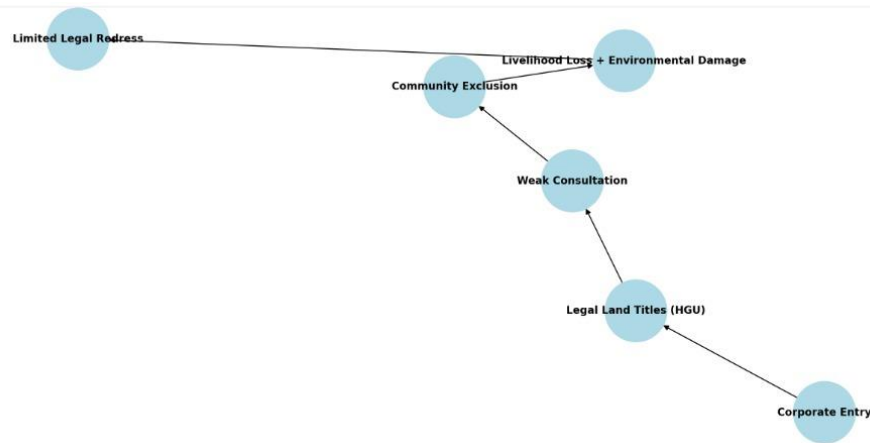
#### 3.5 Visualizing the Landscape of Contestation

To better represent the contested spatial dynamics, a map was developed showing overlapping land claims between corporate concessions and customary territories.



**Figure 1.** Map of Overlapping Customary Territories and Corporate Concessions

In addition, a thematic diagram was created to illustrate the flow of dispossession:



**Figure 2.** Political Ecology Flowchart

- a. Corporate Entry
- b. Legal Land Titles (HGU)
- c. Weak Consultation
- d. Community Exclusion
- e. Livelihood Loss + Environmental Damage
- f. Limited Legal Redress

This visual mapping helps clarify how land grabbing is not a single act, but a process involving legal, institutional, and ecological dimensions.

### **Conclusion of Findings Section**

The research findings indicate a systematic pattern of dispossession and marginalization of indigenous communities in eastern Indonesia. The disparity between official narratives and community experiences reveals a democratic deficit in land governance. While development is justified under national interest, its implementation often disregards the rights and worldviews of local populations.

Moreover, the environmental consequences of large-scale land conversion reinforce the inseparability of ecological and political struggles. Through a combination of interviews, questionnaires, and field observations, this study affirms the central argument of political ecology: that environmental degradation is fundamentally shaped by unequal power relations.

### **Discussion**

#### **Interview Data and Interpretation**

The interviews with indigenous leaders, community members, and local authorities reveal a deep and persistent asymmetry in power and knowledge regarding land acquisition processes in

Merauke. While company managers asserted that "socialization and agreement" occurred prior to project implementation, local community narratives strongly contest this claim. Indigenous respondents described feeling misled, unconsulted, or entirely excluded from any decision-making process.

One village elder expressed:

*"We were told this was for the benefit of the nation, but no one explained what would happen to our sacred lands. Now the forest is gone."*

This illustrates how extractive development operates through what Li (2014) termed "rendering technical" reframing land as a productive economic asset rather than a spiritual or cultural space (Taggart & Power, 2024). Moreover, the language used by state and corporate actors frames land transformation as "progress," obscuring the displacement and disempowerment of indigenous people.

The interviews also reveal the psychological and emotional impacts of land loss. Women and elders in particular expressed grief over the destruction of sacred groves and the loss of traditional medicinal plants. This demonstrates that land grabbing is not just a legal or economic issue it is also an existential threat to identity and collective memory.

### **Questionnaire Results Discussion**

The structured questionnaire distributed to licensed plantation employees provides valuable insight from within the operational structure. The results indicate that while employees are aware of the social and ecological consequences of land conversion, they also recognize the lack of community involvement.

Only 25% of respondents believed that indigenous communities were genuinely involved in project decisions, while 90% agreed that traditional livelihoods were negatively impacted. This aligns with the interview data and reinforces the argument that formal consultation procedures, if conducted at all, are superficial and inadequate.

The finding that only 30% believe the government protects indigenous land rights further highlights a widespread perception of institutional failure. Such perceptions among workers—who are not direct victims suggest that exclusion and environmental damage are both visible and undeniable within the plantation system.

The triangulation between internal corporate actors and external indigenous communities strengthens the validity of the research finding: the land acquisition process in Merauke systematically marginalizes customary land holders, both socially and spatially.

### **Observation Findings Analysis**

Field observations reinforce the testimonial data. The visual transformation of the landscape—from lush forests to rows of monoculture crops—represents not just environmental change but also spatial domination. Corporate control is evident not only in physical infrastructure (e.g., fences, roads, security posts) but also in the absence of traditional markers of land stewardship such as *dusun keramat* or shared forest areas.

The environmental degradation observed—muddy rivers, shrinking biodiversity, drying wells—confirms community concerns and reflects a breakdown in ecological integrity (Grotti & Brightman, 2025). These changes are not incidental but systemic, reflecting the ecological consequences of state-sanctioned land commodification.

Furthermore, the researcher noted a lack of participatory monitoring systems on the ground. Local people were unaware of AMDAL outcomes or the content of land use permits. This invisibilization of critical information perpetuates what (Deng & Zhang, 2025) have called “governmentality from a distance,” where control is exercised through legal codes and economic incentives while excluding affected populations from meaningful participation.

### **Comparison with Previous Studies**

The findings of this research resonate with and extend the work of (Schoenberger et al., 2019), who emphasized the multifaceted nature of exclusion—legal, social, and discursive. In the Merauke case, legal exclusion occurs through the issuance of HGU permits without recognition of customary tenure; social exclusion emerges from displacement and the disruption of livelihoods; and discursive exclusion is enacted through narratives of national development that delegitimize indigenous resistance.

Unlike earlier studies which focused heavily on Sumatra and Kalimantan (Davidson, 2018), this study contributes by foregrounding the specific socio-political dynamics of eastern Indonesia. The combination of weak infrastructure, low media coverage, and ongoing marginalization make the situation in Merauke especially critical, yet underexamined in academic literature.

Moreover, this study builds on the work of (Kelly & Peluso, 2015) on political forests by showing how forested land becomes political not merely when it is exploited, but when its meaning is redefined through policy, law, and capital investment.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this research are far-reaching. First, it calls for the urgent reform of land acquisition procedures, particularly in regions with significant customary land claims. Legal reforms must recognize and protect indigenous tenure systems that do not align with Western notions of ownership but reflect collective stewardship.

Second, development planning must move beyond symbolic participation. True Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanisms are needed to ensure that communities are not only consulted but given the power to reject or renegotiate land deals. Community-based

environmental monitoring and grievance redress mechanisms must be institutionalized and resourced.

Third, corporate actors must be held accountable not only through state law but through independent environmental and human rights audits. Certification schemes must include social indicators that track community displacement and cultural loss—not just yield or carbon metrics.

### **Research Limitations**

This study, while rich in qualitative depth, is limited in geographical scope. It focuses only on one regency—Merauke—though similar dynamics likely exist across other parts of eastern Indonesia. The findings, therefore, should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive.

Second, access to corporate and government documentation was limited. Much of the legal and environmental justification for land use change was not made available to the public, which limited deeper institutional analysis. Furthermore, the presence of the researcher may have influenced some participant responses, especially during observational visits to plantation areas.

Lastly, language barriers and cultural interpretation may have constrained some interviews, despite the assistance of local translators. While every effort was made to preserve the authenticity of voices, further ethnographic immersion would enhance cultural understanding and longitudinal insights.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research has revealed that the phenomenon of land grabbing in Eastern Indonesia—specifically in Merauke Regency is not merely a result of legal land allocation or national development plans, but a systemic process of exclusion shaped by unequal power relations between the state, corporations, and indigenous communities. The findings show that customary land rights are consistently overlooked in favor of corporate concessions, leading to spatial dispossession, cultural disintegration, and ecological degradation.

Interviews with indigenous leaders and community members indicate that consultation processes were often absent or symbolic, with little to no opportunity for the community to meaningfully influence the outcome of development projects. The results of the employee questionnaire further confirm that even within the operational framework of plantations, there is acknowledgment of the social and environmental costs borne by local populations.

Observations of degraded landscapes, loss of access to sacred spaces, and changes in local livelihoods provide strong evidence that land conversion does not simply transform the physical environment it fundamentally alters the social and spiritual fabric of indigenous life. This supports the core thesis of political ecology: that environmental transformation is intrinsically political and contested.

In light of these findings, the study highlights the urgent need for policy reforms that recognize customary land tenure, ensure genuine community participation, and embed ecological

justice into development planning. Moreover, there is a pressing need to expand the academic and policy focus to include underrepresented regions like Eastern Indonesia, which remain at the frontline of extractive expansion and socio-ecological vulnerability.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature that challenges mainstream narratives of progress and development by centering indigenous perspectives, local struggles, and the political dimensions of environmental change. Ultimately, it calls for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable model of land governance that respects both cultural identity and ecological integrity.

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