

Cardboard instead of rice?

Land grabbing in the Toba Batak region

Analysis of the determinants of successful land reclaiming of indigenous people in land conflicts using four case studies in the Toba Batak region of Sumatra, Indonesia

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Summary

The present study examines which determinants influenced the fight against land grabbing.

What's the matter?

Where is the connection between your printer, indigenous people singing about trees and one of the world's largest paper producers?

In Indonesia, a large number of indigenous tribes are affected by land grabbing. Many different factors are responsible for this deficiency. The focus of state politics is on promoting industrial economic power, while at the same time smallholder structures are being destroyed. This is closely linked to the current legal system, which in current laws ignores an article of the constitution that the indigenous people must be recognized and protected. The unclear responsibilities of the authorities in land grabbing cases are also caused by the missing or outdated mapping of the land. And above all, Indonesia is one of the most corrupt countries on earth, which wealthy investors often use to advance their interests. Across the country, rural residents are mired in land conflicts as palm oil, timber and paper, and mining companies claim land for themselves

Despite all this, some indigenous villages around Lake Toba in Sumatra managed to regain their common land. The local Toba-Batak have strong ties to the land and forest they have lived on, in and with for more than 200 years. For many traditions, legends, rituals and the medical knowledge of traditional healing methods and plants, the rainforest and the common land of the village are of great importance.

Since the opening of a paper and pulp mill in the Toba-Batak region, more and more villages have been affected by land conflicts with the paper industry. For the production of paper and cellulose, the company needs thousands of tons of wood every day, which comes from the surrounding primeval forests or from the countless, large-scale eucalyptus plantations in the region. Without any compensation or prior information, the company Toba Pulp Lestari is clearing the indigenous forests or establishing eucalyptus plantations on the common and farmland of the rural population. The villagers live mainly from the income from growing coffee, vegetables or rice or from collecting incense resin. If the company takes their land, they will lose their source of income and many will only be able to emigrate to the island metropolis.

In many villages in the region, villagers are banding together to reclaim their land and evict the company's workers. Again and again there are violent tenders from both sides. The villagers are supported by the local NGO ksppm, which provides human rights training and legal defense to the rural population. She also works out a strategy with the villagers. Four of the region's villages that have had the most success in fighting for their land after years of conflict with the company and the state authorities served as case studies for this work. I lived with the Toba-Batak for three months, analyzing the four case studies through interviews, site visits, document analysis and literature research. In doing so, I pursued the question: Which determinants had a positive influence on the success of the four Toba-Batak villages in regaining their land.

All four villages stressed the regularity of their protests, which they staged as soon as they spot workers on the conflict-ridden plot of land and when villagers were arrested. During the investigation, it was striking that in three of the four case studies, almost 100 percent of the villagers took part in the protests and in the struggle for the land. One of the crucial actions of the villagers in all four case studies was their personal consultation with the national government and the country's human rights committee. As well as keeping the affected piece of land free of eucalyptus seedlings. The fact that the land is community-owned played a major role in motivating the residents to continue defending their ancestral lands despite repression and intimidation by the company and the police. The cultural significance of the country for the residents also played an important role. Less important for success is the education of the protest leaders and the villagers. It was also noticeable that the degree of police repression did not have a major impact on the number of participants in the protests and the success of the indigenous people.