

Policy Brief: Rethinking Development: Addressing Cultural Insecurity and Human Rights in Palm Oil Expansion

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- The development of palm oil plantations in West Kalimantan is driven by political decisions focused on national and economic interests. However, this development often undermines local communities' well-being and contradicts its intended goals.
- In Dayak Iban villages in Kapuas Hulu Regency, community members view national development policies as misaligned with their needs, creating fear and insecurity that extend to their cultural identity and social sustainability, termed cultural insecurity.
- This policy brief, grounded in a human rights-based approach, highlights that cultural heritage and practices are essential to human rights, and deeply rooted in social identity and psychological well-being, thus necessitating their protection.
- Development and human rights must consider relational capacity—how political decisions affect both material conditions and psychological well-being. Effective policy can enhance human rights, while neglecting these factors can exacerbate socio-cultural vulnerabilities.

This policy brief explores the intersection of palm oil plantation development and human rights issues, particularly through the lens of cultural insecurity in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. While development initiatives are intended to promote well-being, they often lead to greater insecurity

and instability for local communities. By emphasizing a human-sensitive approach, this brief highlights the paradoxes of development and advocates for ethical, context-driven policies that are more attuned to local realities.

Introduction

The intersection of development effected by palm oil plantations and human rights has been increasingly debated across academic, political, and media platforms. Beyond scholarly and policy discussions, media coverage has also amplified public awareness by framing the issue through an emotional and human-centered perspective. In West Kalimantan Province, this discourse has gained further complexity, particularly concerning the insecurity experienced by local communities in relation to their livelihoods and cultural heritage—referred to as cultural insecurity. Within the broader human rights framework, this form of insecurity highlights the significance of psychological and mental well-being, as these dimensions are integral to the full realization and exercise of human rights.

Culture is a vital part of all community life, including that of the Indigenous Dayak communities in Kalimantan. While often associated with tangible heritage, culture also includes relational aspects of life that can either strengthen or weaken a community's well-being. The expansion of large-scale palm oil plantations has significantly affected the right to security, as culture includes not only the material heritage but also inherited emotions, attachments, and identities. These cultural dimensions require greater attention within Indonesia's policy frameworks to ensure better protection.

Cultural insecurity, human rights and palm oil plantation development

Human rights are fundamental and inherently attached to individuals; they should not be determined by policies or the authorities. Ensuring and fulfilling these rights requires a broad and interconnected perspective. While Indonesia recognizes the right to participate in cultural life, its practice is often antithetical to this principle, particularly when development priorities take precedence. The expansion of palm oil plantations, which frequently results in the clearing of Indigenous lands, not only threatens physical assets such as homes and land but also undermines psychological well-being, cultural knowledge, and the deep-rooted relationships between communities, their culture, and the natural environment.

As a result, Indigenous communities are experiencing increasing and persistent insecurity regarding their cultural practices and identities. This phenomenon functions as a threat multiplier, as these communities are already politically marginalized, and further deepens long standing

issues of inequality and exclusion—as rooted in economic and political decisions. To address these challenges, policy research, analysis, and frameworks must be strengthened by expanding the understanding of human rights variables and their causal relationships while moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to development.

Classifying “cultural insecurity”

In the discourse on fundamental human rights, culture is explicitly recognized in Indonesia’s human rights law as an essential component of an individual’s life.

However, its interpretation remains fluid and, at times, challenges the practical realization of these rights. The dominant discourse on security tends to focus on economic stability and overall well-being, and often overlooks other critical dimensions, including cultural security. This narrow framing risks marginalizing the cultural aspects of human rights, despite their legal recognition and significance to community identity and continuity. Cultural insecurity can therefore be seen as an intangible and slowly developing issue within human rights, one that is not functioning as it should.

Humanity-sensitive approach to cultural security

In development discourse, security is often framed through the fulfillment of economic needs, with an emphasis on economic assets and considerations. This focus, however, tends to overlook the significance of site-specific, community-specific, and sociocultural factors in development. In Indonesia, the legal and policy frameworks are often rigid, which hinders the necessary flexibility to address the diverse and dynamic needs of communities. Consequently, policy analysis and development strategies would benefit from adopting a humanity-sensitive approach, one that more comprehensively addresses the interconnected economic, cultural, and social dimensions of security.

The current development-related policy, while structurally codified and ambitious, still requires further institutionalization to effectively address its challenges. A more strategic approach is needed, one that considers the emotional dimensions and stakes involved. The existing relocation strategy has not only displaced communities but has also compelled them to adapt to unfamiliar environments, leading to shifts in livelihoods, detachment from their place of origin, and heightened insecurities. As a result, their traditional knowledge cannot be fully applied, disrupting their way of life and severing connections to their identity.

A human-sensitive approach should account for the complex interplay of emotions, preferences, cultural and identity preservation, and survival strategies. Rather than reducing compensation to a transactional process, development projects must acknowledge the broader risks posed to

affected communities and their intrinsic ties to nature and culture, which are essential to their long-term well-being.

Policy design can be made more inclusive by recognizing the interconnected nature of these issues. In this context, insecurity is closely linked to fundamental rights, including the right to own, use, and manage land, as well as the right to practice and preserve cultural traditions and knowledge. A more adaptive and context sensitive policy approach should align with the specific needs of affected communities, to ensure that development strategies do not undermine their rights but rather support their resilience and cultural continuity.

Cultural security as long-term security

The connection between policy and emotion remains largely unaddressed and makes the integration of cultural insecurity into policy frameworks a complex challenge. Addressing this issue may require a more personalized, case-by-case approach, tailored to the specific needs of different communities and regions. A long-term strategy should incorporate communal perceptions, local knowledge, and identity, recognizing that beyond absolute rights, these elements are integral to sustainable local development.

Development policies can be designed to balance economic progress with local needs, by acknowledging that cultural heritage carries valuable knowledge applicable to broader development challenges, including climate change. The evolving dynamics of environmental and socio-economic changes will inevitably shape and challenge development initiatives.

Moreover, cultural security can serve as a critical entry point for bridging research-based policy agenda setting and formulation. By grounding policies in lived realities, they can become more responsive, informed, and effective in addressing the complexities of development.

Conclusion

The link between palm oil plantation development, cultural insecurity, and broader human rights issues is increasingly recognized in both academic and advocacy spaces. As scholars and non-governmental organizations continue to integrate these concerns, it becomes essential to rethink ambitious development projects—not only in terms of their outcomes but also in how they are pursued ethically and reciprocally.

Acknowledging the uniqueness of indigenous cultures and knowledge, as well as the broader socio-cultural contexts of affected communities, can help development policies better anticipate, adapt to, and mitigate potential harm.

Potential research-driven recommendations include:

- Revisiting existing development policies, assessing their intersections with socio cultural issues that may create unintended contradictions or conflicts;
- Ensuring policy frameworks align with a bottom-up approach, integrating community perspectives and their understanding of development challenges;
- Promoting a balanced multiscale and multi-actor approach, establishing a shared understanding of security and development which includes incorporating local knowledge and practices to improve policy design, assessment, and implementation.

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