

Policy Brief






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

 **Hanna Nur Afifah Yogar**
Faculty of Social and Political Science,
Chulalongkorn University

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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.

Impacts of Palm Oil Plantation Expansion on Indigenous Communities

-  Often leads to the clearing of Indigenous lands.
-  This threatens physical assets like homes and land.
-  It undermines psychological well-being.
-  It erodes cultural knowledge.
-  It weakens the deep connections 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.

While culture is recognized as an essential component in Indonesia's human rights law, its translation remains fluid, which can hinder their practical realization. **Economic stability** tends to dominate the discourse and often overlooks the importance of **cultural security**.

**Economic
stability**

**Cultural
security**

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.



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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.

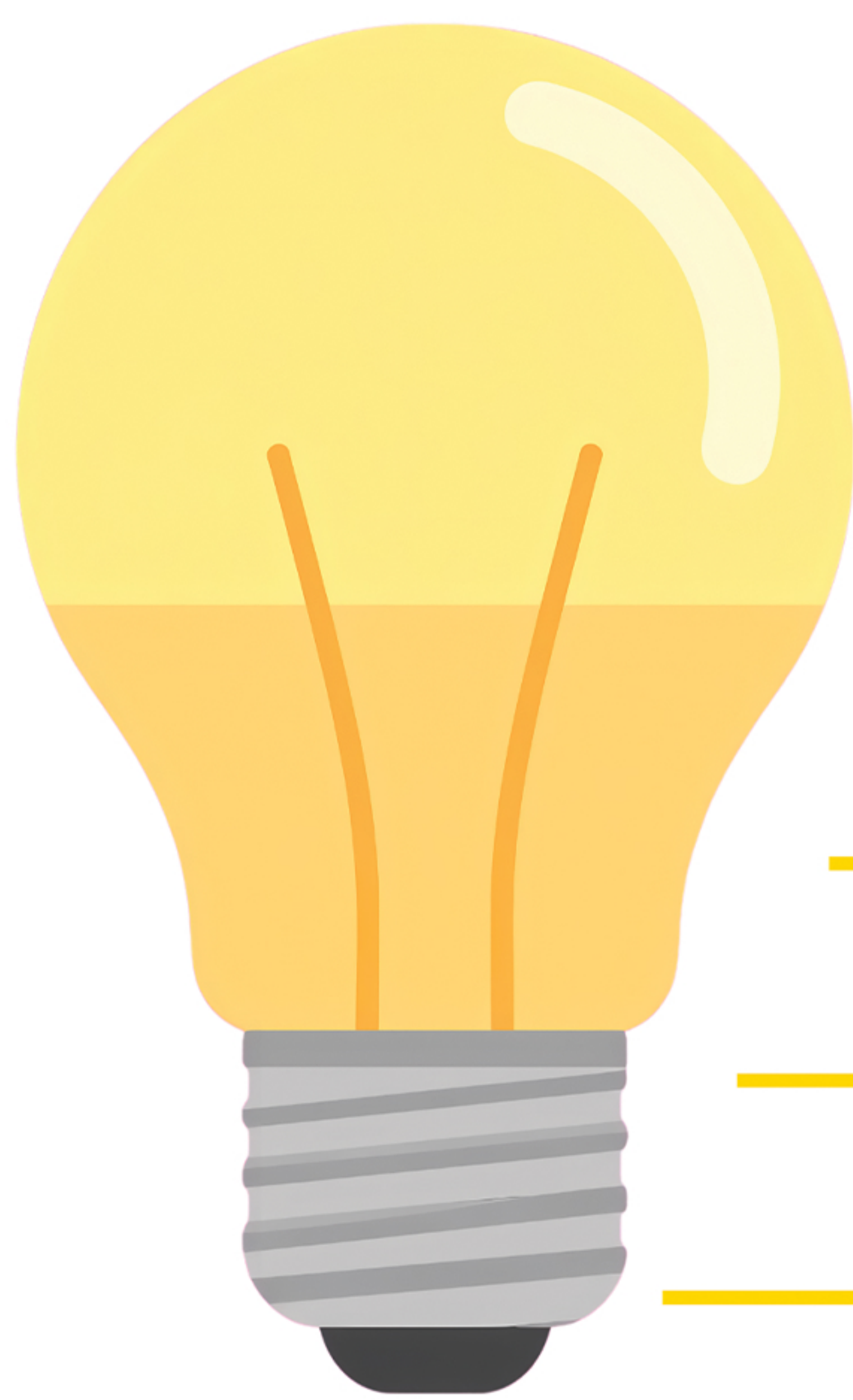
A human-sensitive approach should account for the complex interplay of emotions, preferences, cultural and identity preservation, and survival strategies. Rather than reducing compensation to a transactional process, development projects must acknowledge the broader risks posed to affected communities and their intrinsic ties to nature and culture, which are essential to their long-term well-being.



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.



SUSTAINABLE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNAL PERCEPTIONS



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE



IDENTITY

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.



PALM OIL PLANTATION
DEVELOPMENT



CULTURAL IMPACT



HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT



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 multiscalar 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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