



# Appetite for destruction: Rising global demand for palm oil spurs land grabbing in Indonesia

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## INTRODUCTION

Palm oil, extracted from the oil palm, is one of Indonesia's top exports. Because of the high global demand for this versatile product used in cooking and manufacturing, large-scale plantations have been developed across Indonesia.

The expansive plantations have generated much controversy because these have boosted monoculture systems. Moreover, it has led to land grabbing as more land is being devoted to meet continuously rising product demand.

Agrarian conflicts that have arisen due to palm oil related operations have caused villages, peasants, and indigenous peoples to suffer.

The government and private companies have tried to minimize these conflicts and the impact of oil palm activities on local communities through corporate social responsibility projects. However, it cannot be denied that the palm oil sector has spurred land grabbing and eviction across Indonesia.

The insatiable demand for palm oil in the global market has indeed changed the landscape of food agriculture, land, and forests in Indonesia into centers of oil palm plantations, now spanning more than 16 million hectares.

## *Methodology, Objectives, and Limitations of the Study*

This paper aims to provide an overview and brief analysis of the practice of land grabbing in Indonesia as a result of large-scale palm oil plantation operations, and how global capital pressures are closely linked to land grabbing processes at the site level, thus adversely affecting farmers' and indigenous peoples' rights to their land.

This paper also recommends solutions to protect local community land rights from the negative impact of large-scale oil palm plantations.

This study was conducted through *desk review* and analysis of secondary data. The data complemented information gathered from the

**Table 1. Projection of world vegetable oil demand and new area addition towards 2050**

Scenario 2050 Consumption (kg/capita)	World Vegetable Oil Needs 2050 (million tons)	Additional Vegetable Oil Production 2014 to 2050 (million tons)	Area Expansion to Meet Additional World Vegetable Oil Production 2050	
			If Only From Soybean Oil (million hectares)	If Only From Palm Oil (million hectares)
21	194	24	48	4.8
25	230	60	120	12
37	340	170	340	34

Source: PASPI (2016)

fact-finding missions in areas where agrarian conflicts related to the oil palm plantation sector is present - Seruyan in Central Kalimantan and Tebo in Jambi Province.

To guide the analysis in this paper, land grabbing is referred to as *“the control (whether through ownership, lease, concession, contracts, quotas, or general power) of larger than locally-typical amounts of land by any persons or entities (public or private, foreign or domestic) via any means (‘legal’ or ‘illegal’) for purposes of speculation, extraction, resource control or commodification at the expense of agroecology, land stewardship, food sovereignty and human rights.”* (Baker-Smith and Attila/EcoRuralis, 2016).

This paper aims to show how a global economy orientation adversely affects the local communities. By serving the world market demand for palm oil, this trend has changed the land and forest landscapes and deprived too many locals of their rights to land.

**Description, significance, scope, and trends of the sector**

Global vegetable oil consumption has increased in step with the growth in global population, making palm oil a valuable commodity.

There are other vegetable oils such as that extracted from sunflowers, corn and coconuts, but palm oil is deemed superior because it can be efficiently and consistently produced the whole year through.

This is why demand will likely continue to increase, which will mean more production of palm oil from Indonesia. In turn, this will mean extra pressure to devote more land to grow oil palm.

Indonesia’s palm oil industry has indeed grown significantly from 1970 to 2019.

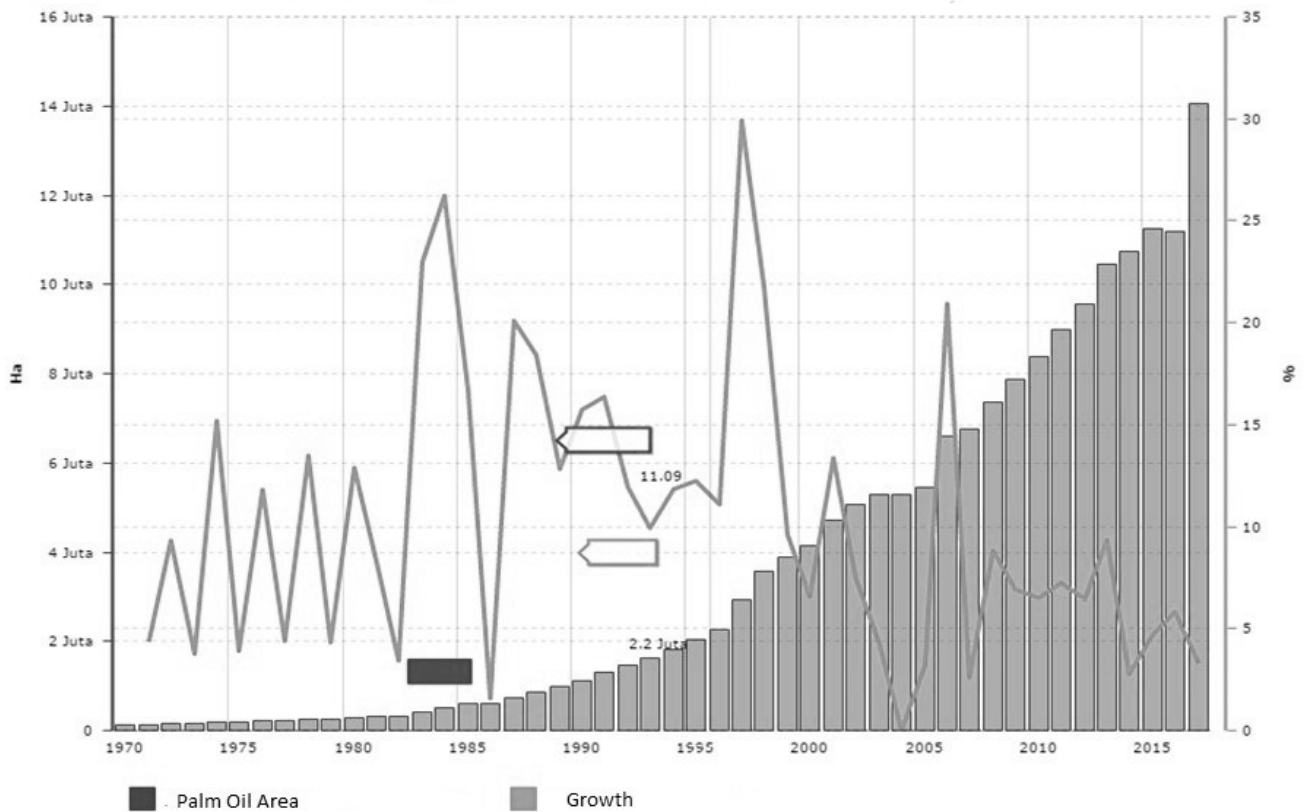
Figure 1 shows the growth trend that continues to increase dramatically year after year.

Indonesia is already the world’s largest producer of palm oil. But even then, the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin) wants Indonesia’s crude palm oil to be the main raw material in the global food supply chain under a plan called *“feed the world.”*

This desire has made the government plan to further expand oil palm estates to a whopping 22 million hectares in the next 10 years. So far, Indonesia is short of this target by six million hectares.



**Figure 1. Indonesia’s palm oil area and growth, 1970 to 2018 (in hectares)**



Source: Ministry of Agriculture

Government data show that as of December 2019, the area covered by “new” oil palm estates is 16.381 million hectares – see Figure 2.

According to the KPA year-end report, almost every year, the plantation sector has the most number of cases of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia. Most of these conflicts involve the oil palm sector. The massive expansion of plantations devoted to oil palm is directly linked to the expropriation of people’s land to benefit the oil palm sector.

By area distribution, the rapid expansion has taken place in five main provinces, namely Riau, North Sumatra, West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan and South Sumatra.

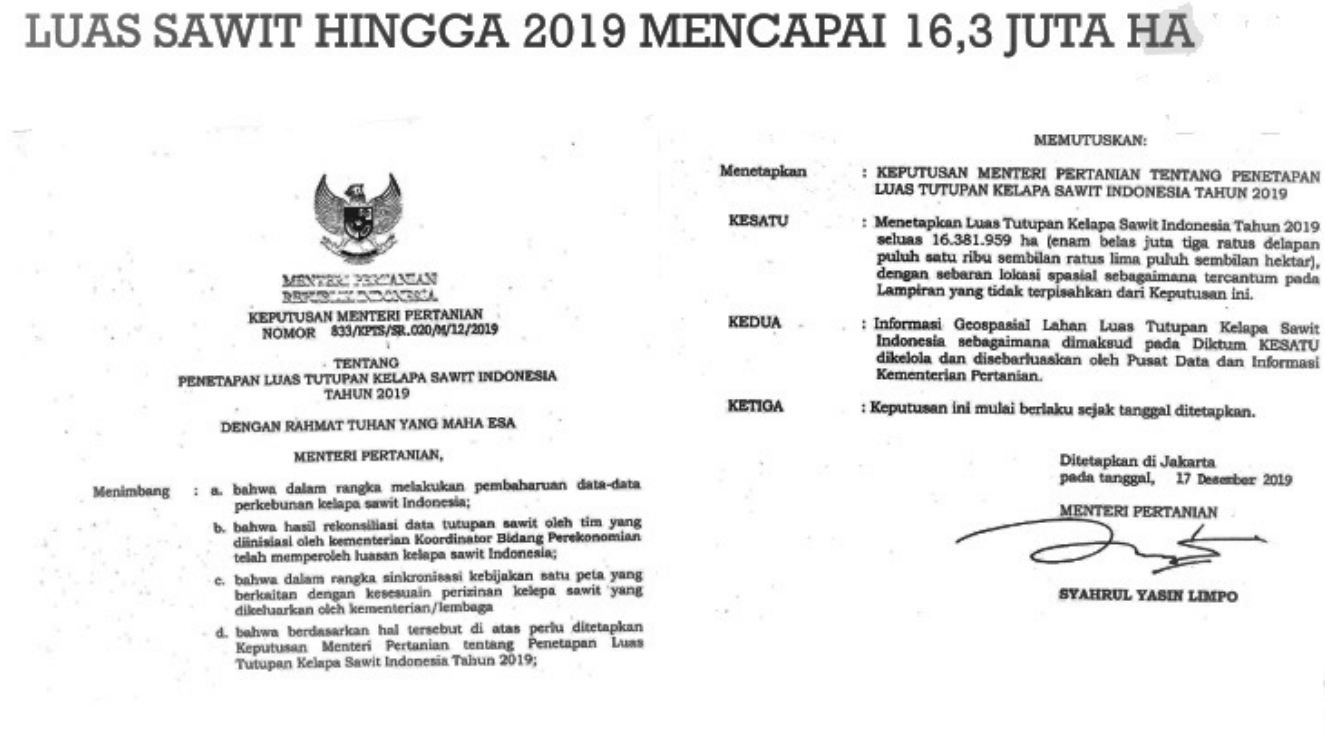
Not surprisingly, Riau Province consistently saw the most number of agrarian conflicts due to the dominance of the oil palm sector.

This shows that the expansion of oil palm plantations is very much related to increasing cases of land grabbing and evictions leading to agrarian conflicts.

**Global impact at site level: Land grabbing and agrarian conflict situations in the oil palm sector**

In 2019, there were 279 agrarian conflicts involving 734,239.3 hectares that affected almost 110,000 families spread over 420 villages in all provinces in Indonesia. Like in 2018, the plantation sector saw the most cases of conflicts at 87.

Figure 2. Land use control for oil palm plantation business per December 2029 based on Agriculture Minister's Decree Letter



Expansion and conflict in the plantation sector continue to rise, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

While all economic and industrial activities saw significant declines because of the pandemic, agrarian conflicts in oil palm plantations continued to escalate.

KPA noted that in 2020, there were 122 conflicts in the plantation sector with the oil palm sector accounting for 101 cases (refer to Table 6).

**Table 2. Agrarian conflict in oil palm commodity sector (2018 to 2020)**

Year	Number of Conflicts	Plantation Sector	Palm Commodity
2018	410	144 [ranked 1]	83 [ranked 1]
2019	279	87 [ranked 1]	69 [ranked 1]
2020	241	122 [ranked 1]	101 [ranked 1]

Source: KPA End Year Reports

**Monopoly of economy and land in the palm oil sector: Main players**

The economic viability of oil palm plantations due to the ease of acquiring large tracts of land, cheap labor and large global demand has accelerated the expansion of the oil palm sector in Indonesia.

Crude Palm Oil (CPO) is Indonesia's main non-oil export commodity. Data from the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (*Gapki*) shows that the value of palm oil exports in 2016 reached Rp 240 trillion.

As these areas expanded, so did land conflicts. Based on data from 2020 showing 122 conflicts, 106 can be traced to private plantation companies.

Based on the data from the Ministry of Trade, 16 private firms are the main exporters of palm oil in Indonesia, led by

Wilmar. The Wilmar palm oil plantation group's main expansion areas are in Seruyan, Central Kalimantan and is among the private firms involved in agrarian conflicts in the plantation sector.

**Table 3. Area of palm oil plantation coverage in Indonesia in 2019**

Rank	Province	Area (Hectares)	Percentage (%)
1	Riau	3,387,206	20.68
2	North Sumatra	2,079,027	12.69
3	West Kalimantan	1.807.643	11.03
4	Central Kalimantan	1.778.702	10.86
5	South Sumatra	1.468.468	8.96
6	East Kalimantan	1.287.449	7.86
7	Jambi	1.134.640	6.93
8	West Sumatra	558.683	3.41
9	South Borneo	549.953	3.36
10	Aceh	535.002	3.27
11	Bengkulu	426.508	2.60
12	Bangka Belitung Islands	273.842	1.67
13	Lampung	268.061	1.64
14	North Kalimantan	234.535	1.43
15	West Sulawesi	155.958	0.95
16	Central Sulawesi	110.901	0.68
17	Papua	110.496	0.67
18	West Papua	58.656	0.36
19	Southeast Sulawesi	55.786	0.34
20	South Sulawesi	31.980	0.20
21	Banten	18.365	0.11
22	West Java	14.997	0.09
23	Maluku	14.966	0.09
24	Gorontalo	11.257	0.07
25	Riau islands	4.926	0.03
26	North Maluku	3.950	0.02

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, 2020

**Table 4. Trend of the eruption of agrarian conflicts in Riau Province (2014 to 2018)**

Year	Number of Conflicts	Ranking (Per-Province)
2014	52	1
2015	36	1
2016	44	1
2017	47	4
2018	42	1

Source: KPA Year-End Report, 2018

## FORMS OF CONTROL

Land conflicts arise mainly because of the ease with which the government grants Cultivation Rights (HGU) to plantation companies, without first looking at the situation on the ground, on whether these will result in the displacement of communities.

This situation is exacerbated by the lack of information regarding HGUs, especially HGUs that have problems with local residents. To make matters worse, many site permits and HGUs cover forest areas released by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

The central and local governments often view the resistance of peasants and indigenous peoples, as well as the emerging agrarian conflicts, as a mere "plantation business disturbance." This perspective stems from the legitimacy of these plantations' operations provided by the Plantation Law.

The Plantation Law has positioned communities in conflict with private companies as business nuisances, illegal loggers, and even criminals, without taking into consideration the root cause of the agrarian conflicts: that these began with the expropriation of land occupied by farmers, indigenous peoples, and villages.

## FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

### *Land grabbing on oil palm sector in Seruyan, Central Kalimantan Province*

In Central Kalimantan, the Seruyan District Government has issued 43 oil palm plantation permits, totaling 598,815.491 hectares, since 2008.

The high number of oil palm plantation permits for giant corporations in Seruyan illustrates the phenomenon of land grabbing due to global and national capital pressures. As a result, oil palm plantations now dominate the landscape.

Land grabbing in the oil palm plantation sector is also closely related to decentralization and regional autonomy policies. The creation of new districts and autonomous regions provides additional avenues for plantation companies to secure permits.

The Seruyan District Government, for example, was created in 2002. The capital city of Seruyan

**Table 5. Number of agrarian conflicts in the plantation sector, 2020**

Plantation	No. of Conflicts
Palm	101
Clove	5
Sugarcane	5
Rubber	3
Coffee	2
Coconut	2
Gumlac	2
Tea	2
Horticulture	2
Nutmeg	1
Orange	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>126</b>

Source: KPA Year-End Report, 2020

**Table 6. Agrarian conflicts according to sector (number and hectares), 2020**

Sector	No. of Conflicts	Hectares
Plantation	122	230,878.78
Forestry	41	312,158.16
Infrastructure	30	57,185.20
Estate	20	6,019.013
Mining	12	12,792.76
Military Facility	11	4,741.40
Sea Shore	3	243.30
Agro Business	2	391.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>624,416.113</b>

Source: KPA Year-End Report, 2020

District is Kuala Pembuang, Seruyan Hilir Sub-District.

In the 1990s, the local economy of this area, like in most Kalimantan regions at that time, relied heavily on logging. The precious hardwoods were extracted from the dense forests that once covered the entire island and logs were transported downstream by rivers to Sampit, where they then were shipped to different wealthy countries around the world.

After the fall of Suharto, the logging industry collapsed and the local government used the economic devastation as justification for establishing oil palm plantations. As a result, forest areas permits were granted to oil palm plantation companies. Many large private companies involved in oil palm plantations now operate in Seruyan District and have converted existing forests into plantation land.

According to the Guidelines for Plantation Business Licensing, the coverage of principle permits ranges from 100,000 to 120,000 hectares per company or group. However, in the



Seruyan Regional Government, the coverage was expanded to 120,000 hectares.

Based on rules regarding designation of forest areas in the province of Central Kalimantan, the total forest area in Seruyan is 1.113 million hectares, which is divided into 464,673 hectares for Limited Production Forest (HPT), 388,266 hectares for Production Forest (HP), and 260,123 hectares for convertible Production Forest area. For Forest Concession Rights (HPH) and Industrial Plantation Forests (HTI) in Seruyan, the area is 501,950 hectares.

The early drivers of the licensing boom in Seruyan included the wealthiest families in Indonesia and Malaysia. When Darwan took office in 2003, Robert Kuok, who was once Malaysia’s second richest man, was probably the largest landowner in Seruyan. His Seruyan plantation portfolio was merged with other plantation companies, which are part of the Kuok family business, to form Wilmar International, reputedly the world’s largest oil palm company.

Land grabbing involved the issuance of permits to cronies of the District Head (Regent) at that time, namely Darwan. Then, these permits were resold to the Wilmar Group, thereby creating a vast oil palm plantation in Seruyan that feeds the global market.

Because of *land grabbing*, plantation estate permits were granted covering approximately 27 villages, including houses, agricultural land and other public facilities, creating tension and conflict.

Towards the end of July 2011, tensions in Seruyan escalated. Thousands of villagers across the district came to Kuala Pembuang, setting up tents outside the DPRD (local parliament) building and

asked for an audience with the regent (district head).

The unrest also prompted other political uprisings. In the 2018 local election, Darwan Ali’s son, Ahmad Ruswandi, was defeated by an independent candidate, Sudarsono, an ethnic Javanese who was supported by peasant victims of land grabbing in Seruyan.

### ***Land grabbing on oil palm in Tebo, Jambi***

According to 2019 data from the Ministry of Agriculture, the area of palm oil land in Jambi

**Table 7. Top 16 Exporters of oil palm in Indonesia (March 2016)**

Rank	Name of Company (Country of Origin)	Exported Value (in US\$ million)
1	Wilmar (Singapore)	2,092
2	Sinar Mas (Indonesia)	1,860
3	Musim Mas (Singapore)	1,817
4	Asian Agri (Indonesia)	987
5	Permata Hijau (Indonesia)	497
6	Astra (Indonesia)	325
7	LDC Group (Netherlands)	311
8	Salim (Indonesia)	278
9	Golden Hope (Malaysia)	278
10	HAS Group (Kuwait)	209
11	FELDA (Malaysia)	171.1
12	WINGS Group (Indonesia)	171
13	First Resources (Singapore)	102
14	Best Group (Indonesia)	100
15	Tunas Baru Lampung (Indonesia)	92
16	Godwen Austen (Indonesia)	89

Source: Ministry of Trade



**Palm Oil Expansion in Seruyan, 2017. Photo by Mongabay Indonesia**

Province reached 1.134 million hectares or around 6.93 percent of the total national oil palm land area.

KPA reported that in 2020, there were 21 incidents of agrarian conflict in Jambi Province, the second highest after Riau Province with 29 conflict eruptions. Close to half of these incidents involved oil palm plantations.

Year after year, Jambi is listed as one of the epicenters of agrarian conflict in Indonesia, due mainly to the control and monopoly of oil palm plantation companies and the forestry industry.

One of the palm oil companies causing agrarian conflicts is PT. Erasakti Wira Forestama (EFW). In Jambi Province, PT. EWF was involved in conflicts in several districts, including one with the people of Merbau Village, Mendahara Sub-district,

Tanjung Jabung Timur. PT. EWF is also listed as one of the suppliers of the Wilmar Group. (KPA, End Year Report 2020).

The agrarian conflict between PT, EWF and the community has been going on since 2006. This conflict also involved several palm oil companies due to the practice of buying and selling HGU on community land, which was unilaterally acquired by the company.

In 2006, PT. Sawit Mas Perkasa (SMP) entered Merbau Village. At that time, the District Head of East Tanjung Jabung appointed PT. SMP as a partner of smallholder oil palm plantations based on Decree No. 389/2006.

The partnership was executed on 1,200 hectares of land cultivated by the Merbau Village community. The company offered to plant oil





palm on community land, on condition that the wood on the land would become the property of the company.

Eventually the company broke its promise. It only planted on 150 hectares and no partnership was forged.

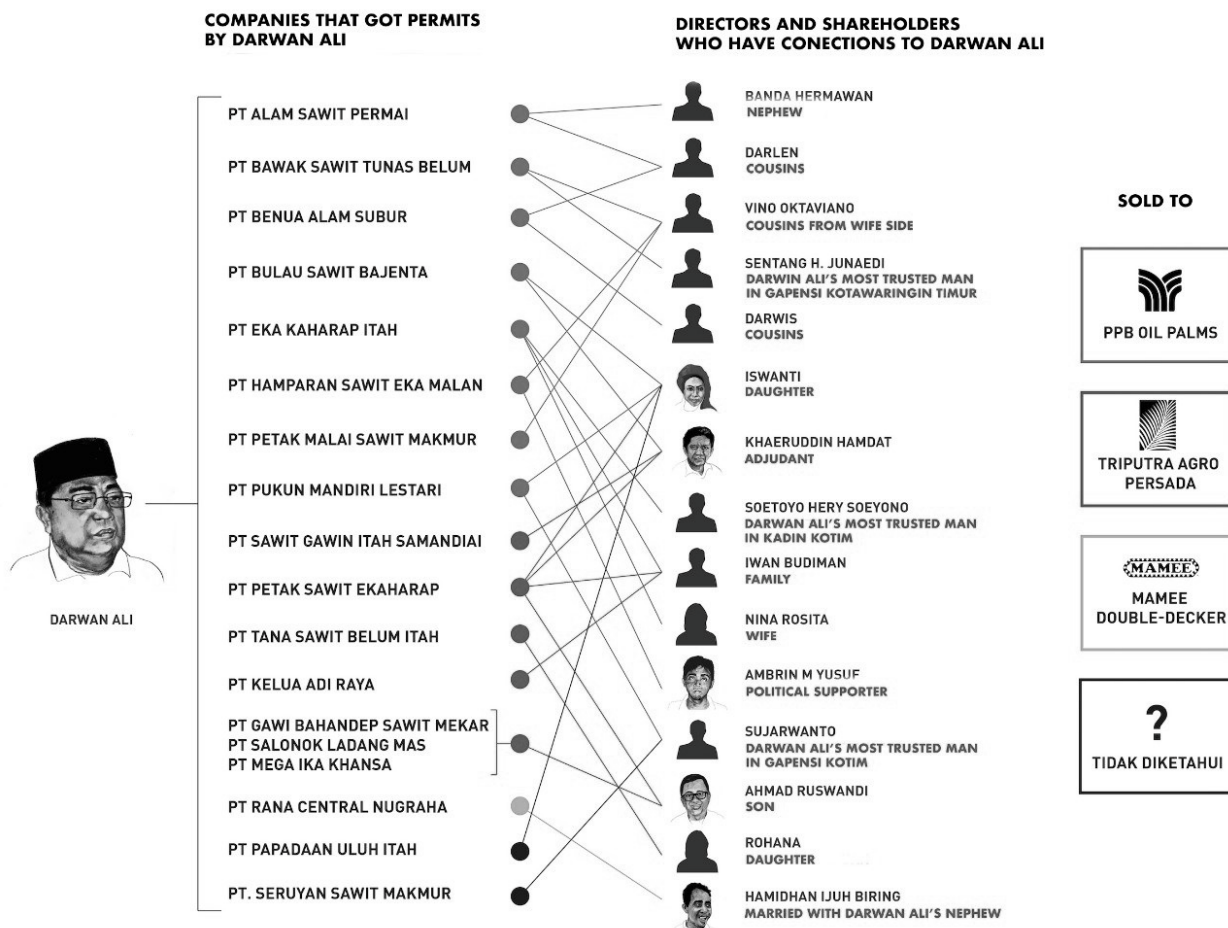
In 2012, the land that was supposed to be subject to a partnership with the community was sold by PT. SMP to PT. Indonusa Agromulia. The 406-hectare land was sold by manipulating the data regarding who owned the land. Those who said they had never sold their land sued against

this action, so at that time, a nine-member Conflict Resolution Team (CRT) was formed by the East Tanjung Jabung District Government.

The decision of the CRT indicated that the land purchase by PT. SMP was full of fabrications and falsification of land sales and purchase certificates, and the company does not legally own land rights in the village.

After the people's victory, PT. Indonusa sold the land again to PT. Kurnia Tunggal, which later changed its name to PT. EWF. The company received a site permit from the Regent (district

**Figure 3. The Palm oil industry oligarchy in Central Kalimantan**



Source: Environmental news site mongabay.co.id, Local Oil Palm Actors and Oligarchs



The Women of Tebo Peasants Union block the land clearing operations by PT. WKS. *Photo by KPA.*

head) of Tanjung Jabung Timur and claimed to have purchased the community lands at the agreed price.

KPA's field investigations found that the communities were forced to sell their lands due to intimidation from the company and former village head. Of the total residents, 47 of them refused to sell their land covering 72 hectares.

The conflict continued on 9 May 2018, when residents sent a letter of complaint to the Land Office of Tanjabtim to seek mediation with PT. EWF and requested that the cultivation rights certificate of PT. EWF be suspended until their 72-hectare land dispute is resolved.

Mediation between the residents and PT. EWF took place from July to August 2018 but was not resolved. The Agrarian Ministry/National Land Agency (BPN) advised the parties to take legal action.

In mid-August 2019, PT. EWF charged Thawaf Aly of violating the Plantation Law. Thawaf Aly is an advocate who has received power of attorney from the 47 resisting residents. The incident occurred three months after the residents wrote to the East Tanjung Jabung Land Office (requesting not to issue the company's cultivation rights during the settlement process). A month before the incident, BPN issued a cultivation rights certificate for PT. EWF.

This case illustrates the escalation of land grabbing incidents in Indonesia as a result of the continuing expansion of the oil palm plantation industry.

#### **STATE POLICIES AND MECHANISMS THAT ADDRESS LAND GRABS IN OIL PALM PLANTATION**

Such was the adverse impact of the unabated expansion of oil palm plantations that the



Indonesian government was compelled to step in and issue Presidential Instruction No. 8 of 2018 or the Palm Oil Moratorium Instruction to put some semblance of control to the granting of permits. Unfortunately, while the intention may be good, the implementation has been wanting and conflicts have continued to erupt.

Agrarian conflicts in the plantation sector continue to increase every year in Indonesia because of several factors, including:

*First*, the granting of new permits without first resolving past plantation conflicts.

*Second*, the very liberal agrarian political-economic development paradigm that looks at land as a mere commodity that can be traded for investment and business purposes. This development model restricts community rights/ access to land and other agrarian resources.

*Third*, failure to impose sanctions on corrupt practices that led to the granting of permits or concessions to private and State companies. So far, corporations and State officials who commit violence against communities in areas of agrarian conflict have yet to be punished.

*Fourth*, the growing market demand for palm oil that Indonesia wants to supply. Thus, Indonesia today relies heavily on palm oil to boost its revenues.

*Fifth*, legal discrimination against farmers, indigenous peoples, or other marginalized groups/entities occupying land, causing evictions, sweeping changes in the landscape, and elimination of local wisdom.

*Sixth*, the lack of political will to carry out the conflict resolution agenda through agrarian reform and implementation in the field.

*Seventh*, lack of coordination among agencies and the differing regulations depending on the State agency or institution, thus making it difficult to resolve plantation agrarian conflicts. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of understanding in government of the agrarian perspective.

*Eighth*, there is no real resolution of pending agrarian conflicts, which then allowed conflicts to fester.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The demand for the President of the Republic of Indonesia to intervene in resolving agrarian conflicts has long been raised.

In 2003, the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission in collaboration with civil society formally asked the former President, Megawati Soekarno Putri, to form the National Committee for Agrarian Conflict Resolution (KNUPKA). However, the proposal was rejected, and the President's only response was to strengthen the National Land Agency by establishing a deputy for agrarian conflict resolution.

The facts show that the deputy at the National Land Agency, until the establishment of the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/ National Land Agency as it is today, could not do anything to resolve agrarian structural conflicts. It is inconceivable to think how an institution that is the cause of the eruption of agrarian conflicts through the practice of granting permits is tasked to resolve the agrarian conflict itself.

On 28 January 2015, the National Committee for Agrarian Reform (KNPA)<sup>1</sup> demanded

<sup>1</sup> A network consisting of the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA), the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), the Indonesian Peasant Union (SPI), the Forum for the Environment (WALHI), KontraS, the Sajogyo Institute, among others.



President Joko Widodo for the establishment of a Presidential Task Force for Agrarian Conflict Resolution (UKP2KA).

The proposal was submitted to the cabinet secretary, but there has been no official response from the government. Instead, the government formed other institutions such as the Peatland Registration Agency (BRG) and the Presidential Working Unit for the Improvement of Pancasila Ideology (UKPIP).

One of the main prerequisites for resolving agrarian conflicts is the government's political will. The current government has demonstrated at times that it does have the will to do what it should, but it has not been as firm and consistent as communities would like it to be.

As a result, the approval of investments and land acquisition of business entities, which then give birth to new agrarian conflicts, has moved at a faster pace than the resolution of pending agrarian conflicts.

Not surprisingly, since 2014, KPA Year End Report has noted a significant increase in eruptions of agrarian conflicts in various regions in Indonesia.

The situation is getting worse with the repressive actions of the security forces that victimize members of the community. Many residents who reject land grabbing and evictions have been subjected to intimidation and persecution.

Conflicts have continued to erupt due to the fundamental problem of them not being resolved under the paradigm of social justice through agrarian reform. After all, such reform is a way to unravel agrarian inequality and conflict, including conflicts that occur in plantation areas.

As a result, the majority of the citizens could not enjoy the little justice from the implementation of agrarian reform.

Given the complexity of and intertwined problems, it is thus necessary for the government to take bold and wise steps to address these agrarian conflicts arising from oil palm plantations. The following actions are thus proposed.

*First*, at the political level, the President should directly lead the implementation of agrarian reform while resolving pending structural agrarian conflicts.

*Second*, at the regulatory level, the government should immediately ratify the revision of the Presidential Regulation on Agrarian Reform in line with the aspirations and demands for improvement from the affected citizens.

*Third*, foster the wide and active participation of civil society and the agrarian reform movement in registering priority sites/locations, organizing beneficiaries, and building a sustainable development model that is just and transformative in areas where agrarian reform is implemented.

In the medium and long term, the Agrarian Reform Bill as mandated by MPR (People's Assembly) Decree No. IX of 2001, in line with the 1960 LoGA, should be put in place to provide a legal basis or framework for implementing agrarian reform that is stronger and in line with the ideals of the Constitution.

In this way, agrarian reform as the basis for national development will be genuinely implemented. ■



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## DISCLAIMER

The views of this study do not necessarily reflect of those of ILC.

## ACRONYMS

AMAN	Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of Nusantara
BPN	National Land Agency
BRG	Peatland Registration Agency
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DPDR	Regional House of Representatives
HGU	Cultivation Rights
Kadin	The Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
KontraS	The Commission for Disappeared and Victims of Violence
KNPA	National Committee for Agrarian Reform
KNuPKA	National Committee for Agrarian Conflict Resolution
KPA	Consortium for Agrarian Reform
SPI	Indonesian Peasants Union
UKP2KA	Presidential Task Force for Agrarian Conflict Resolution
UKPIP	Presidential Working Unit for the Improvement of Pancasila Ideology
WALHI	The Indonesian Forum for Environment