



# Conversion of forests into oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, Indonesia: Insights from actors' power and its dynamics



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## ABSTRACT

Oil palm plantations have been touted as one of the main drivers of deforestation in Indonesia. This paper aims to explain how oil palm companies accumulate power that enables them to control forestland and convert it into oil palm. Specifically, this paper identifies empirical evidence pointing to why oil palm companies emerge as powerful actors in land use conflicts. This paper uses the case of forest lands claimed by different actors – i.e. a timber plantation company, an oil palm company, and local communities – in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Before the decentralisation policy, the interests of timber plantations were principally safeguarded by coercion from the forest ministry. The timber company was also supported by local communities by promising financial incentives to them. Following the decentralisation policy, additional actors get involved in the land use conflicts leading to more complex power interplays. In fact, some forestlands licensed for timber plantations are used by the oil palm company. Oil palm interests resonate with the economic interests of local governments, who use their legal mandates on land use allocation to facilitate the establishment of oil palm. The power of the oil palm company is also enhanced by the support from local communities, to which it handed more financial incentives than those of the timber plantation. It also used dominant information of customary claims and land appropriation by the ministry of forestry, with which it persuades local communities to pressurize government institutions to support oil palm operations.

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## 1. Introduction

Conversions of forests into oil palm have been expansive in Indonesia (Casson, 1999; Brockhaus et al., 2012; Boer et al., 2012). Between 1990 and 2005, more than a half of the plantation development was preceded by conversions of primary and secondary forests (Koh and Wilcove, 2008). In recent years, large tracts of oil palm were even established on forestland without legal release from the forest authority (see Setiawan et al., 2016). An official figure from the forest authority shows that up to mid-2015 more than five million hectares of forest land have been converted into oil palm plantations (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2016). Pressures on forestland are expected to increase as the government plans to expand the area of oil palm up to 20 million hectares by 2020 (Pacheco, 2012). Indrarto et al. (2012) conclude that oil palm development, both legal and illegal, has become the dominant driver of the allocation and uses of forest land in Indonesia.

In terms of legal aspects, conversions of forests have to follow statutory law; the forestland must be officially released by the forest

authority at the central government. Nonetheless, the overlapping land-use regulations have made forestland at odds since different bureaucracies at both central and local levels have different formal mandates and informal interests (Brockhaus et al., 2012). In part, this is largely driven by significant decentralisation and recentralisation policies over the past two decades (Barr et al., 2006; Sahide et al., 2016a; Sahide et al., 2016b). At the same time, forestland use and allocation are problematic in a way they often overlap with traditional and customary claims by local communities (Maryudi and Krott, 2012). Although land tenure arrangements by traditional authorities are largely ignored in the legal forest land-use (Santoso, 2003; Nurrochmat et al., 2014), claims on state forestland are not uncommon (see Setiawan et al., 2016). As a consequence, forest land-use and allocation in Indonesia is often characterized by contesting land claims between local communities, commercial interests (both forest and non-forest), and other actors (Peluso, 1995; McCarthy, 2000). Actors with commercial interests usually attempt to interact with the elites within both local and central governments as well as traditional authorities to ensure control land at the field (Broad, 1995).

The complex land-use arrangements have made the policy development over forestland, including how the land could be used for oil palm plantations, provides an interesting area for scholarly work.

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Development of a policy is essentially driven by the values and interests of certain actors within the operating socio-economic and political circumstances (Cubbage et al., 2007; Susanti and Maryudi, 2016). Usually, the actors have different interests and compete for priorities (Aurenhammer, 2013, 2015) and thus attempt to influence the formulation and implementation of a policy (Krott et al., 2014; Maryudi, 2015a). This manifests itself in the Indonesian forest context where actors with different interests are involved in the competition to obtain more benefits from forests and forestland (see Ekayani, 2011; Kustanti et al., 2014; Maryudi et al., 2015). To influence the process and implementation of policies, they use their power and capabilities; the interests of powerful actors determine the outcome of a particular forest policy (Krott et al., 2014). In fact, power serves as an explanatory factor for the relative gains of certain actors in the social networks and relationships (see Halas, 2008; Wibowo and Giessen, 2015; Prabowo et al., 2016).

Borrowing the theoretical framework of Actor-Centered Power (ACP) developed by Krott et al. (2014), this paper aims to explain the dynamics of land control, and specifically how oil palm companies accumulate power that enables them to use forestland and convert it into oil palm. Specifically, this paper identifies empirical evidence of why the oil palm companies become powerful within the networks in the struggle for the uses of forestland. In addition to the studies on the legal aspects of forest and land-use policy (e.g. McCarthy, 2000; Thorburn, 2004; Contreras-Hermosilla and Fay, 2005; Brockhaus et al., 2012; Indrarto et al., 2012; Maryudi, 2015b), there have been a number of studies on the power dynamics of land-use in Indonesia (e.g. Colchester and Chao, 2012; Colchester et al., 2006; Cramb and McCarthy, 2016; Myers and Muhajir, 2015; Setiawan et al., 2016). This research adds those with different localities and a rare competition of different business entities. This research focuses on the changing power over time, how an actor toppled the previously powerful actor in land-use. Using the case of PT. Citra Nusa Inti Sawit (PT-CNIS) in West Kalimantan (Indonesia), this paper reveals how the oil palm company is able to aggressively acquire forestland for establishing palm oil, including both the forest area that is formally licensed to PT. Finnantara Intiga (PT-FI) – an industrial timber/forest plantation company – and the land claimed by local communities. Principally, this research asks what modalities (power sources) the oil palm company employed, and under which conditions the modalities worked.

## 2. The theoretical framework: Actor-Centered Power (ACP) and its dynamics

There has been extensive conceptual work explaining power. Some political theorists (e.g. Weber, 2000; Dahl, 1957; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962) conceptualize power as the capacity of an actor to make another to do something or to impose own will to others (*power over*). Here, power is equated with domination. There is also a contrasting camp (notably Arendt, 1971) that views power as the capacity to do something (*power to*). This group understands power in a more positive tone, and relates it with empowerment (Haugaard, 2012). Social capital theorists (notably Putnam, 1993, 2000) also use the desirable tone in a way power can be employed to refine problems occurred in social interactions. In contrast, Bourdieu (1992) argues that social capital can be used as a mechanism of power to produce or reproduce inequalities. He focuses on how certain groups occupy powerful position in social connections and are able to retain their position. Bourdieu's work is further elaborated by Birner and Wittmer (2000a,b), who argue that social capital can be translated into political capital, as well as institutional and socio-economic aspects in the context of decentralisation in natural resources management.

What is under-developed is how to verify power. Bachrach and Baratz (1974) for instance understand the limitation of their theory in terms of empirical evidence. Offe (1977: 10) also points out the inherent weaknesses of the behavioural concept of power in a way influence

cannot be verified. The ACP starts from this departure. Krott et al. (2014) argue that verifying the power of a particular actor is not easy. They are convinced that power is not visible because it is on the imagination of the actors. In fact, power is the effect of the relation of social interaction (Allen, 2003) and can only be verified from the use of a power source by certain actors (Krott et al., 2014). Drawing on Weber's conception of power and elaborating Etzioni's (1975) conceptions of actors' resources and instruments, ACP formulates three sources of power: coercion, (dis)incentives and dominant information (see Table 1).

Coercion is defined as subordinate altering behaviour of by force in the form of regulation, physical acts, and an act of physical threats. Providing incentives is also a source of power because it can alter the behaviour other actors. For dominant information, Krott et al. (2014) argued that not all information can be a source of power in a way that knowledge has been obtained or verified by other actors. Information becomes as a source of power when it is unverified and blindly trusted, and based on which the behaviour of the other actors altered (Simon, 1981; Krott, 2005). It does not necessarily mean that the information is fabricated. When an actor uses and behaves accordingly to unverified information from other actors, subordinate became dependent on the ordinate (Krott et al., 2014).

The ACP of Krott et al. (2014) does not entirely ignore other political scholars (e.g. Bachrach and Baratz, 1974; Arts and Tatenhove, 2005) who argue that an actor-oriented approach overlooks the structural power (that is based in the rules, discourses or settings) at a societal level. The ACP nonetheless maintains that power is not part of the structure, instead it is directly related to the ability of certain actors to influence other actors (Krott et al., 2014). The actors' position in the structure is not a power in and of itself, but a source of power for a certain actor and could potentially be used. Whether the structure is a source of power depends on the willingness of the actors to act (using it) in accordance with their interests (Aurenhammer, 2013).

Actors' power is not static (see Aurenhammer, 2013; Maryudi et al., 2016; Prabowo et al., 2016; Schusser et al., 2016). Prabowo et al. (2016) argue that the change in policy or behaviour of a particular actor will be responded to by the other actors that make the social interaction is altered over time. An actor may be powerful at one point, but at another time the power may be shifted to the other actors, depending on the power source potential and the opportunity to use it. This is in line with a number of recent studies employing the ACP (e.g. Rahman et al., 2016; Rahman and Giessen, 2016; Giessen et al., 2016; Wibowo and Giessen, 2015). Changes in the political structure may also encourage the dynamics of power relations between actors (Maryudi et al., 2016).

## 3. Research methods

### 3.1. The case of land-use change

Massive conversions of forests into oil palm plantations have occurred along the borders of Kalimantan-Malaysia (McCarthy and Cramb, 2009). This research selected the production forestland of Sekayam-Mengkiyang (HP-SM) which is also at the borders as the case

**Table 1**  
Definition of core elements and observable facts of ACP.  
Source: Adapted from Krott et al. (2014: 40).

Elements	Definition	Observable facts
Coercion	Altering behaviour by force	Physical action, threat for physical action or sources for physical action
(Dis-)incentives	Altering behaviour by (dis-)advantage	Providing of, or threat with, sources of material or immaterial benefit or detriment
Dominant information	Altering behaviour by unverified information	Providing of, or threat with, sources of information unverified due to lack of will or ability

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