



## POSITION AND PROTECTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN INHABITING CUSTOMARY FORESTS

M. Nabel Shidqi<sup>1</sup>, Ghea N. Salsabila<sup>2</sup>, Shinta C. Kinanti<sup>3</sup>, Dira J.D. Putri<sup>4</sup>, Andreas D. Siahaan<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Law, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. E-mail: [nabil09nabel@gmail.com](mailto:nabil09nabel@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Law, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. E-mail: [gheanisya05@gmail.com](mailto:gheanisya05@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Law, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. E-mail: [shintacahyani8@gmail.com](mailto:shintacahyani8@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Law, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. E-mail: [dirajulia70@gmail.com](mailto:dirajulia70@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> Faculty of Law, Universitas Jambi, Indonesia. E-mail: [andresibolqa724@gmail.com](mailto:andresibolqa724@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia requires the government to protect every citizen's rights, including indigenous peoples' rights in managing customary forests. This study explores the legal position of indigenous peoples in the use of customary forests and how the government safeguards the constitutional rights of indigenous peoples. This research uses a normative juridical approach focusing on theoretical aspects and legal principles. The study results show that indigenous peoples are legal subjects and owners of rights to customary forests. The government protects these rights by providing legal certainty through local regulations recognizing and protecting indigenous peoples. There are still many conflicts between Indigenous Peoples and the Government and companies that receive forest management permits from the Government. Forestry policies do not facilitate the management of forests. Centralized forestry policies cause overlapping conceptions of customary forests and state forests. The suggestion from this study is that the law should also be concerned with the Indigenous people so that the law protects them and irresponsible parties cannot sue them.

**Keywords:** Customary Forests; Government Regulation; Indigenous People

### 1. Introduction

Indonesia, endowed with abundant natural resources, frequently encounters environmental challenges. These issues often arise due to the expansion of natural resource sectors, which predominantly results in resource exploitation. Individuals' and groups' substantial control over resource assets can lead to inequities. Such disparities in resource management can ignite conflicts at various levels, driven by economic demands and the pursuit of fulfilling necessities.<sup>1</sup> These problems may be taken advantage of by irresponsible parties who want to enlarge their needs and other purposes and threaten inhabitants' living.

Indonesia's potential forest resources are enormous, playing many vital roles in human life and nature. Some possible aspects of Indonesia's forest resources include forest area, biodiversity, timber industry, and non-timber forest products. According to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia, the forest area in Indonesia reaches 99.6 million hectares or 52.3% of the total area of the country, with the main distribution in Papua, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra. Indonesia's forests are rich in biodiversity, store many

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<sup>1</sup> Elita Rahmi et al., *Land Resource Conflict Resolution Model (Agrarian) Based on Local Wisdom of Indigenous Peoples of Jambi Province* (Atlantis Press SARL, 2023), [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-194-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-194-4_11).



unique and endemic flora and fauna, and provide a variety of fruits and medicinal materials. In addition to timber, Indonesia's tropical forests also produce various non-timber products. There are about 4000 types of wood, with 267 types that have high economic value,<sup>2</sup> such as *keruing*, *meranti*, *agathis*, and teak, which are widely found in various regions in Indonesia.

Customary Law Communities (MHAs) are essential in forest resource management. Here are some potential aspects of MHA in forest management. Cultural Heritage and Traditions MHA has a cultural heritage that includes rich local traditions, customs, languages, and knowledge.<sup>3</sup> This heritage can be preserved and contribute to environmental sustainability. In addition, MHA Biodiversity often inhabits areas rich in natural resources, such as forests, rivers, and agricultural land. Their knowledge of sustainable nature management can positively contribute to the environment. Harmony with Nature MHA has a close relationship with nature. Their knowledge of ecology and natural balance helps maintain environmental sustainability. Land and Resource Management MHA manages land and natural resources collectively. Sustainable practices such as agroforestry, traditional fisheries, and organic farming can be applied. Ecotourism Development MHA's potential to develop cultural and nature-based ecotourism provides economic benefits and promotes Indonesia's cultural diversity. Therefore, efforts are needed to create the potential and to make the indigenous feel safe and protected.

Usually, it is the company that is responsible for the management of state-owned forests. The history of modern forest management in Java and Madura began in 1897 with the introduction of the "Bosreglement" and "Dienst Reglement," which were the basis for the framework of the forest management organization. Of the Forestry Service. Subsequently, in 1930, the administration of teak forests was entrusted to the "Djatibedrijf" agency, a government-managed teak forest company overseen by the Forestry Office. However, by 1940, the management of teak forests was reverted to the Forestry Office from "Djatibedrijf." Later, Government Regulation, instead of Law Number 19 of 1960, transformed the Forestry Office into a State Company named Perum Perhutani. Perum Perhutani then became the umbrella organization of the Forestry SOE Holding (Perhutani Group), which includes subsidiaries like PT Inhutani I, II, III, IV, and V. Efforts will be made to ensure that indigenous peoples can still exercise their customary forest rights within state forests.

The problems discussed are the potential of forest resources in Indonesia, the role and potential of Indigenous peoples in forest resource management, conflicts between companies and Indigenous peoples, the weak protection and position of Indigenous peoples in Indigenous forests, and what efforts the government can make.

## 2. Research Method

The methodology used was a normative legal research approach. The law is seen as a collection of norms, rules, or principles using a legislative or statute approach, which is explained descriptively based on issues arising from various legal regulations and relevant literature. As

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<sup>2</sup> Siti Sholikhah Irfan Akbar, Safinatun Najah, "LITERATURE REVIEW: POTENTIAL AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT," *Indonesian Journal of Educational Sciences (JSEI)* 4, no. 2 (2022): 38–43.

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Saleh, "Eksistensi Masyarakat Hukum Adat Dalam Pengelolaan Hutan Prespektif Undang-Undang N0mor 41 Tahun 1999," *Jatiswara* 26, no. 2 (2017): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.29303/jtsw.v26i2.12>.

far as it is concerned, normative legal in Indonesia tends to be one of the solutions for legal problems by using deductive reasoning (Negara, 2023). In other words, the normative legal research approach is an activity of intellectual guessing to find legal norms to justify a legal phenomenon. This study aimed to find legal views on issues stated as the focus of attention.<sup>4</sup>

The main sources in this study are laws and regulations regarding natural resource management, especially Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry and Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management. The law was analyzed by referring to the UUD 1945 of the Republic of Indonesia and the Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 related to the material test of Law No. 41 of 1999.<sup>5</sup>

This research also utilizes primary materials in Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 in the material test of Law No. 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry to understand legal views related to the rights of indigenous peoples over forest resources. In addition, to trace the change in the direction of state policies related to the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, this study also analyzes the Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs Number 52 of 2014 concerning Guidelines for the Recognition and Protection of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the Regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia Number P.21/MENLHK/SETJEN/KUM.1/4/2019 concerning Customary Forests and Forest Rights. This study uses a descriptive-analytical approach with case studies to provide a clear picture of the conflicts that occur and the progress of their resolution. Thus, the author can conclude that the application of the rights of customary law communities in Indonesia is based on the existing context.

### 3. Discussion

According to the discussion, it is concluded that several things need to be discussed in this material, namely the weak protection of Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Indonesia, conflicts between customary law communities and the government related to permits granted by the government to companies, legal protection of customary law communities where customary law communities are the responsibility of the local government. At the same time, their forests are the central government's authority.

To develop the potential of the community, various efforts are needed to motivate them to utilize their potential for a better life. These efforts include (i) community capacity building, (ii) encouraging community independence in development, and (iii) increasing community knowledge, attitudes, and skills so that they can play an active role in independent and sustainable development.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nadira Apricia, "Hak Negara Dan Masyarakat Hukum Adat Atas Hutan Adat," *SIBATIK JOURNAL: Jurnal Ilmiah Bidang Sosial, Ekonomi, Budaya, Teknologi, Dan Pendidikan*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.54443/sibatik.v1i7.128>.

<sup>5</sup> "Putusan Mahkamah Konstitusi Nomor 35/PUU-X/2012 Tentang Pengujian Undang-Undang Nomor 41 Tahun 1999 Tentang Kehutanan Terhadap Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945, Hlm. 3.," n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Mulyadi, "Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Adat Dalam Pembangunan Kehutanan," *Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Dan Ekonomi Kehutanan* 10, no. 4 (2013): 224–34, <https://doi.org/10.20886/jsek.2013.10.4.224-234>.

### 3.1. Weak Protection of Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Indonesia

Weak political leadership and government in protecting indigenous peoples' rights prove that the commitment to democratic values is inadequate. According to Fuchs (2007), commitment to democratic values is a culture that can build a democratic system.<sup>7</sup> According to Safran Salam, "Customary law communities (MHAs) in Indonesia face severe challenges in protecting their forestry-related rights. Here are some of the problems related to the weak protection of MHA in the forestry sector:

**Legal Recognition:** Although the rights of the MHA are recognized in the 1945 Constitution, its implementation still faces obstacles. This legal recognition needs to be strengthened with more concrete policies and regulations. **Legal Strength:** Legal protection for MHAs must have sufficient force. This includes recognition of customary territories and traditional rights and the protection of customary lands and customary forests.

**Conflicts with Investment:** MHAs often face conflicts with investments, especially in the mining, plantation, and forestry sectors. Legal protection must ensure that the rights of the MHA are not neglected in the development process. **Recognition of Customary Territories:** Recognition of customary territories (customary lands and customary forests) is an important step. This involves the determination of customary territorial boundaries and natural resource management rights within them.<sup>8</sup> Collaboration between the government, the community, and non-governmental organizations is urgently needed to achieve better legal protection. Strong recognition and protection of MHA will positively impact environmental sustainability and society's overall well-being".<sup>9</sup>

Based on the quote above, we agree with Safran Salam's opinion that strong recognition and protection of customary law will positively impact environmental sustainability and the welfare of society as a whole. Therefore, collaboration from the government, communities, and non-governmental organizations is essential. For instance, Sumarni in Jayantiari (2024) mentioned that the Dayak Ngaju community showed how indigenous apply the ways to manage customary forests. They believe there is a connection between their lives and nature, so they are fully responsible for the cultural norms and values. Hence, there is a responsibility to take care of and protect the forest fully.

### 3.2 Conflicts between customary law communities and the government

The consequence of this provision is that even if the community is declared still exists, forest management activities and the utilization of forest products are carried out as an activity in the State forest and not on the forest custom because, under the definition, that customary forests are A country that is in the territory of a customary law community. Disclaimer of existence This customary forest is then, in practice, management, and utilization of forest products that are

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<sup>7</sup> Auradian Marta, Leo Agustino, and Kittisak Jermsittiparsert, "Democracy Under Threat: Study of the Implementation of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to the Management of Natural Resources in Riau Province," *Politik Indonesia: Indonesian Political Science Review* 5, no. 3 (2020): 328–42, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ipsr.v5i3.21272>.

<sup>8</sup> Safran Salam et al., "PERLINDUNGAN HUKUM MASYARAKAT HUKUM ADAT ATAS" 7, no. 2 (2016): 209–24.

<sup>9</sup> Salam et al.

felt to be unfair and, of course, then cause conflicts between customary law communities and holders of control rights forests (HPH), large plantations, industrial plantation forest ownership rights (HPHPI) which obtained a valid permit from the government.<sup>10</sup>

Conflicts between customary law communities (MHAs) and the government regarding permits granted to forestry companies are a complex and frequent issue in Indonesia. Here are some aspects related to this conflict:

**Legal Uncertainty:** Permits granted by the government to companies often do not adequately consider the rights of MHA. This legal uncertainty can cause conflict between the MHA and the company—for example, disputes between regional regulations and national laws or between customary rights and company concessions. **Neglect of Ulayat Rights:** Ulayat rights are the traditional rights of indigenous peoples to the land they have occupied and managed for generations. However, this right is often ignored when the government permits companies to use the land for forestry, mining, or plantations. Sometimes, permits given by the government ignore customary land and customary rights that MHA has long owned. This can lead to dissatisfaction and conflict.

**Overlapping Land Tenure:** The boundaries of land management by the government and MHA's customary land are often not clearly outlined. As a result, there is overlapping land control, which triggers conflict. This can occur between indigenous communities, governments, and companies. For example, land considered state forest by the government may also be customary land by indigenous communities. **Unequal Access to Information:** MHAs often do not have equal access to information regarding company permissions. These inequalities can exacerbate conflicts. This can result in unequal participation in decision-making processes and the formation of laws, affecting the sustainability of natural resource management.

To address these conflicts, the government must pay more attention to MHA rights, provide strong recognition, and ensure transparency in the permitting process. Collaboration between the government, MHA, and companies is also needed to achieve sustainability and justice for all parties. Regarding government policies, the government has issued Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 6 of 2007 concerning Forest Management and the Preparation of Forest Management Plans, as well as Forest Utilization.

### 3.3 Forest Management Conflicts in Indonesia

In Indonesia, various problems exist in customary law communities, including the rights and rights of customary law communities to manage forest resources. The following are examples of conflicts that have occurred in several regions of Indonesia related to disputes between customary law communities and companies:

1. Pandumaan–Sipituhuta Customary Law Community, North Sumatra  
Pandumuan and Sipituhuta are two administratively different villages. Still, in social relations and the history of natural resource management, they have been united for hundreds of years before Indonesia became independent. These villages are located in

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<sup>10</sup> Jenny.K. Matuankotta, "Eksistensi Masyarakat Hukum Adat Dalam Mempertahankan Sumber Daya Alam," *Konstitusi* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1–15.

Pollung District, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra. The residents of both villages live off forest products, with their main occupation being frankincense farmers. They work daily in the forest to search for and collect frankincense and other forest products, known as marspears. Based on genealogy research and generations of the indigenous people of Pandumaan and Sipituhuta, it is known that they have inhabited the area for more than 300 years. This research is corroborated by an archaeological report that analyzed charcoal samples in Parik Lumban Gaol, which shows community activity in the region about 200 years ago.

These indigenous peoples divide their territory into several customary holdings, setting territorial boundaries with customary markers used for generations according to their respective clans. PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL), a pulp (paper) company established on April 26, 1983, under the initial name PT Inti Indorayon Utama, has a concession covering an area of 269,060 hectares spread across 11 districts, including Humbang Hasundutan Regency. This company has a permit from the Ministry of Forestry No: SK.493/Kpts/II/1992 with a permit period from June 1, 1992, to May 31, 2035. This permit was then amended by several ministerial decrees until 2011.

The location of the TPL concession intersects with the Pandumaan and Sipituhuta customary forests in Pollung District. The conflict arose in early 2009 when TPL massively cut down frankincense trees in the customary territory for six months and replaced them with eucalyptus plants. Residents requested intervention from the Regent's Office and the Humbang Hasundutan Regency DPRD to stop TPL's actions. Even though the DPRD issued a decree to stop the logging of frankincense forests, companies still do it. Indigenous peoples protested to reject the activity, but law enforcement officials arrested and detained residents involved in the protests.

## 2. Barambang-Katute Customary Law Society, Sinjai Regency

The Baramban-Katute customary law community settled in the mountains and hills of Bonto Katute for generations long before Indonesia's independence. A local traditional stakeholder revealed that the Barambang people first inhabited the area in the 15th century AD. They live by applying socio-economic, political, legal, and cultural systems based on customary law. In managing forests, they use local wisdom inherited from generation to generation, with the principle of balance between economy and environmental sustainability.

The life of the Barambang-Katute customary law community in Sinjai Regency was disrupted when 1994-1995, the Government designated the Barambang-Katute customary area as a protected forest without notification and consent from the local indigenous people. When the community learned of the decision, they protested with the Government. However, the protest did not receive a response from the Government. In 2005, the Government launched the National Movement for Forest and Land Rehabilitation (GN-RHL) by planting the customary territory of the

Barambang-Katute customary law community with Pine, Mahogany, Gamelina, and Cinnamon trees. This movement again received protests from the community. When the community entered the forest area to collect forest products, they were arrested and designated suspects for encroaching on protected forests. Eleven parents of the Barambang-Katute customary law community were found guilty at the Sinjai District Court.

### 3. Sanjan Village Customary Law Community

The Kampung Sanjan Indigenous Peoples rely heavily on forests because they are considered vital for their lives. They believe that forests are at the core of their identity and sustainability. To protect the forest, they feel the need to get official recognition from the local government. This recognition is essential so that they have a legal basis in defending their customary territories from external threats, especially regarding their rights to forest management. However, their efforts to gain recognition were hampered by establishing a local ordinance in 2002, eventually overturned because it was contrary to national-level regulations.

Despite attempting to implement the village government system independently after the repeal of the regulation, the Kampung Sanjan Customary Law Society was unaware that since 2005, the government had granted permission to a company to manage their customary forest without involving them in the process. The company's management of the forest interferes with the management rights that Indigenous peoples should have because the company feels that it has rights to the forests it manages without acknowledging the Indigenous peoples' ownership claims to the forests.

Conflicts between governments and customary law communities are based on different interpretations of the status of customary forests. The government is considered to be using the forestry law as a tool to take control of customary forest areas, which are then handed over to the private sector through forest management permits. In practice, permit holders often ignore the existence of customary law communities in forest management.

Based on this thought, the Customary Law Society, through the National Customary Law Society Alliance, requested a material review of Article 1 Letter f of Law Number 41 of 1999 to the Constitutional Court. In its decision, the Constitutional Court granted AMAN's application. The Constitutional Court thinks this provision contradicts Article 33, paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution. The Constitutional Court Decision Number 35/PUU-X/2012 stipulated the decision regarding the testing of Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry against the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945. Based on the decision, Article 1 letter f of Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry

is canceled. The impact of this Article's cancellation is that customary forests are recognized as forests located in the territory of Customary Law Communities.<sup>11</sup>

### **3.4 Legal Protection of Customary Law Communities where customary law communities are the responsibility of the local government while the forests are the authority of the central government**

Local governments have an essential role in protecting the rights of customary law communities. In general, they can create local regulations that support the recognition and protection of land and natural resource rights and ensure free, pre-informed, and non-coercive consultation and consent (FPIC) before a project or acquisition is made. However, specific details about the authority of local governments may vary depending on applicable national and local laws. Legal protection for customary law communities (MHA) in customary forest areas is vital in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> Although authority over forests is in the hands of the central government, local governments have a responsibility to protect MHA's rights related to customary forests. Here are some aspects that are relevant to MHA's legal protection:

**Legal Recognition:** Local governments can play an essential role in recognizing and protecting MHA's rights related to customary forests. Although forest authority is in the hands of the central government, local governments can issue more specific policies and regulations to protect the rights of MHAs. **Customary Territory Regulation:** Local governments can establish customary territories separate from state forest management and recognize customary forests as forest rights. This involves the determination of customary territorial boundaries and natural resource management rights within them.

**Collaboration with the Central Government:** Although the forest's authority is in the hands of the central government, collaboration between the local and central governments is essential. Local governments can act as mediators and advocates for MHA in dealing with conflicts with companies or other parties interested in customary forests. **Empowerment of Customary Law Communities:** Local governments can strengthen the role of MHA in customary forest management through community empowerment following local wisdom. This includes providing education and guidance on procedures for using customary forests.

Thus, although the central government has authority over forests, local governments are responsible for protecting MHAs' rights related to customary forests. Collaboration between local and central governments is essential for better legal protection for MHAs.

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Arden Madonna, "PENERAPAN HAK MASYARAKAT HUKUM ADAT DALAM PENGELOLAAN HUTAN DI INDONESIA TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MASYARAKAT HUKUM ADAT ON FOREST MANAGEMENT IN INDONESIA," *Bina Hukum Lingkungan* 3, no. 2 (2019): 264–78, <https://doi.org/10.24970/jbhl.v3n2.19>.

<sup>12</sup> naoufal khaidar . maulana adi Nugraha, "Protection Indigenous People (Local Beliefs) in the Context of Human Right in Indonesia," *Jurnal Sains Dan Seni ITS* 1, no. 2 (2022): 97–122, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ciils.v1i2.58319>.



Customary law community activists consider the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 as a success in the struggle of customary law communities. With this decision, the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta customary law community has the spirit to ask the Government to resolve this conflict. The community made efforts to conduct hearings at local government institutions. Based on these hearings, state institutions such as the Directorate General of BUK of the Ministry of Forestry, Komnas HAM, Special Committee on DPD, and so on issued recommendations for resolving this conflict. However, until now, the government has not tried to resolve this conflict.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

To develop the potential of the community, various efforts are needed to motivate them to utilize their potential for a better life. These efforts include (i) community capacity building, (ii) encouraging community independence in development, and (iii) increasing community knowledge, attitudes, and skills so that they can play an active role in independent and sustainable development. Communities governed by customary law can administer and use customary forests. These communities are granted permits for customary forest management. Therefore, in compliance with Article 67 of Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry, communities governed by customary law whose existence is acknowledged are authorized to manage forests and harvest forest products. The solution for Indigenous peoples is social forests. Social Forestry (PS) is a sustainable forest management system implemented in state forest areas or rights/customary forests by local communities or customary law communities as the main actors to improve their welfare, environmental balance, and socio-cultural dynamics. Based on the Minister of Environment and Forestry Regulation Number 83 of 2016, Social Forestry aims to solve tenure and justice problems for local communities and customary law communities in or around forest areas for the community's welfare.

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