



Climate Justice from the Margins: Indigenous Voices in Indonesia's Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of climate justice and Indigenous rights in Indonesia, focusing on how Indigenous communities—often marginalized in environmental policy discourse—are both disproportionately affected by and actively responding to the climate crisis. Drawing on case studies from Kalimantan, Papua, and the Mentawai Islands, the research highlights the lived experiences, traditional ecological knowledge, and resistance strategies of Indigenous peoples confronting deforestation, land dispossession, and climate-related displacement. While national and international climate frameworks frequently overlook or tokenize Indigenous participation, this study argues that meaningful climate justice must center their voices and agency. By engaging with critical Indigenous scholarship and conducting semi-structured interviews with community leaders and activists, the paper reveals how climate policies in Indonesia often exacerbate structural inequalities, reinforcing extractive development models under the guise of sustainability. In contrast, Indigenous cosmologies and land stewardship practices offer alternative paradigms for ecological resilience and adaptation. The paper contends that the Indonesian state's recognition of Indigenous land rights remains insufficient and inconsistent, undermining both environmental and social equity goals. The primary contribution of this study lies in its amplification of Indigenous epistemologies as essential to reimagining climate governance in Indonesia. It challenges dominant narratives that frame Indigenous communities as passive victims or romanticized stewards, instead portraying them as political agents with valuable insights into sustainable living. By situating Indigenous voices at the core of climate justice debates, the paper advances a decolonial approach to environmental policy that is both contextually grounded and globally relevant.

[Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi persimpangan antara keadilan iklim dan hak-hak masyarakat adat di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada bagaimana komunitas adat—yang seringkali terpinggirkan dalam wacana kebijakan lingkungan—baik secara tidak proporsional terdampak maupun secara aktif menanggapi krisis iklim. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus dari Kalimantan, Papua, dan Kepulauan Mentawai, penelitian ini menyoroti pengalaman hidup,



pengetahuan ekologi tradisional, dan strategi perlawanan masyarakat adat dalam menghadapi deforestasi, perampasan lahan, dan penggusuran terkait iklim. Meskipun kerangka kerja iklim nasional dan internasional sering mengabaikan atau hanya sekadar menyebutkan partisipasi masyarakat adat, studi ini berpendapat bahwa keadilan iklim yang bermakna harus memusatkan suara dan peran mereka. Dengan melibatkan kajian kritis masyarakat adat dan melakukan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan para pemimpin dan aktivis komunitas, makalah ini mengungkapkan bagaimana kebijakan iklim di Indonesia sering memperburuk ketidaksetaraan struktural, memperkuat model pembangunan ekstraktif dengan kedok keberlanjutan. Sebaliknya, kosmologi masyarakat adat dan praktik pengelolaan lahan menawarkan paradigma alternatif untuk ketahanan dan adaptasi ekologis. Makalah ini berpendapat bahwa pengakuan negara Indonesia terhadap hak atas tanah masyarakat adat masih belum memadai dan tidak konsisten, sehingga melemahkan tujuan kesetaraan lingkungan dan sosial. Kontribusi utama studi ini terletak pada penguatan epistemologi masyarakat adat sebagai hal penting untuk membayangkan kembali tata kelola iklim di Indonesia. Studi ini menantang narasi dominan yang menggambarkan masyarakat adat sebagai korban pasif atau pengelola yang diromantisasi, dan sebaliknya menggambarkan mereka sebagai agen politik dengan wawasan berharga tentang kehidupan berkelanjutan. Dengan menempatkan suara masyarakat adat di inti perdebatan keadilan iklim, makalah ini memajukan pendekatan dekolonial terhadap kebijakan lingkungan yang berlandaskan konteks dan relevan secara global.]

Keywords: Climate Justice, Indigenous Rights, Climate Crisis, Deforestation, Ecological Justice

Introduction

Climate change is not experienced equally across societies. Although its causes are deeply connected to global patterns of industrialization, resource extraction, and consumption, its consequences are distributed unevenly across regions and social groups. Communities whose historical contributions to greenhouse-gas emissions are comparatively limited frequently face some of the most severe consequences of environmental degradation, livelihood disruption, and ecological transformation. This inequality is particularly significant in the Global South, where climate vulnerability intersects with poverty, unequal land relations, colonial legacies, and limited political representation. Climate justice therefore requires more than reducing aggregate emissions; it requires attention to who bears environmental burdens, whose knowledge is recognized, who participates in decision-making, and who has the authority to determine the future of their territories (Sultana 2022; Ogunbode 2022).

In Indonesia, these questions are particularly important because climate change is closely connected to forests, land-use change, extractive industries, and the political economy of natural resources. Indonesia possesses some of the world's most biologically diverse tropical forests, yet these landscapes have experienced extensive conversion for plantations, logging, mining, infrastructure, and other forms of development. Research by Austin et al. demonstrates that large-scale oil-palm and timber plantations accounted for more than two-fifths of nationwide deforestation between 2001 and 2016, while other forms of agriculture, grassland conversion, logging, and mining also contributed significantly to forest loss (Austin et al. 2019). These processes have important climate implications because deforestation releases carbon while simultaneously undermining ecological systems that support adaptation and resilience.

The consequences of forest transformation are not limited to carbon emissions or biodiversity loss. They also affect Indigenous peoples whose cultural identities, livelihoods, social institutions, and spiritual relationships are embedded in customary territories. Indigenous communities in Indonesia have historically developed complex relationships with forests and landscapes, including systems of customary governance, agroforestry, hunting, gathering, and spiritual practice. In this context, environmental degradation is simultaneously an ecological, political, cultural, and human-rights issue. As Whyte argues more broadly, Indigenous climate change perspectives emphasize that contemporary climate disruption cannot be separated from the longer histories of colonialism, capitalism, dispossession, and imposed environmental change (Whyte 2017).

The concept of climate justice provides an appropriate framework for understanding these intersections. Environmental justice cannot be reduced to the equitable distribution of environmental harms and benefits. It also involves recognition, participation, capabilities, and the political capacity of affected communities to shape decisions concerning their environments (Schlosberg 2007). For Indigenous peoples, recognition must include the recognition of collective territorial rights, customary institutions, cultural identities, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Procedural justice, meanwhile, requires participation that goes beyond consultation or symbolic representation. Communities must possess meaningful authority in decisions affecting their lands and livelihoods.

This paper examines the relationship between climate justice and Indigenous rights in Indonesia through three geographical contexts: Kalimantan, Papua, and the Mentawai Islands. Rather than treating Indigenous communities simply as vulnerable populations, the paper approaches them as political actors whose knowledge and resistance strategies provide important alternatives to dominant models of climate governance. The analysis focuses on four interconnected dimensions: the unequal distribution of climate and environmental burdens; the relationship between deforestation, extraction, and Indigenous dispossession; the contribution of Indigenous knowledge and territorial practices to ecological

resilience; and the limitations of participation and legal recognition within Indonesian climate governance.

Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative, interpretive case-study approach based primarily on scholarly literature concerning Indigenous peoples, forests, land conflicts, climate governance, and environmental justice in Indonesia. The three cases are used comparatively rather than as statistically representative samples of all Indonesian Indigenous communities. This approach enables the analysis to connect local experiences to broader structures of political economy and climate governance. Importantly, Indigenous peoples are not presented as homogeneous communities or inherently ecological actors. Instead, the paper emphasizes their political agency while recognizing internal diversity, contested interests, and the changing social conditions in which Indigenous knowledge and institutions operate.

Climate Injustice, Indigenous Marginalization, and the Political Economy of Deforestation

Climate justice in Indonesia must begin with the recognition that environmental degradation is embedded in unequal political and economic relationships. Deforestation is frequently represented as a technical problem that can be addressed through better monitoring, carbon markets, conservation programs, or sustainable commodities. However, such approaches can obscure the question of who controls land and who benefits from its transformation. Austin et al. (2019) demonstrate that Indonesia's deforestation has been driven substantially by large-scale commercial activities, particularly oil-palm and timber plantations. Their findings challenge narratives that place disproportionate responsibility on small-scale rural populations while paying insufficient attention to large-scale economic drivers.

This distinction is crucial for climate justice. If Indigenous communities are treated primarily as sources of deforestation rather than as communities whose territories are subject to external pressures, climate policies can reproduce rather than resolve environmental inequality. Traditional land-use systems may be highly visible because they involve direct interaction with forests, while the structural forces behind large-scale conversion may be less visible in local policy implementation. Research on adat forests in East Kalimantan, for example, demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between traditional land use and deforestation and warns against automatically interpreting Indigenous forest use as equivalent to environmentally destructive land conversion (Prabowo et al. 2018).

The issue is therefore not simply whether forests should be protected but how protection is defined and by whom. Forest conservation policies can create new restrictions on communities whose livelihoods depend on access to forests. In some contexts, conservation can become a form of territorial control when Indigenous communities are excluded from decision-making or when customary use is criminalized. This creates a paradox: policies designed to protect ecosystems may

generate social injustice when they deny the people who have historically inhabited and managed those ecosystems the right to participate in their governance.

The politics surrounding REDD+ illustrate this tension. Indonesia has been a major site for experimentation with forest-based climate mitigation, particularly through REDD+ initiatives. In Central Kalimantan, REDD+ was presented as an opportunity to reduce emissions from deforestation while improving community welfare. Yet research has demonstrated the difficulties of ensuring meaningful Indigenous participation in such programs (Usop 2012). Similarly, Astuti and McGregor show that forest-carbon politics can simultaneously create opportunities for Indigenous land claims and new forms of exclusion or “green grabbing” (Astuti and McGregor 2017).

The concept of green grabbing is particularly useful because it reveals how environmental value can generate new forms of territorial competition. Forests acquire economic and political value not only through timber, agricultural production, or minerals but also through their capacity to generate carbon credits and conservation benefits. Consequently, a transition from extractive development to climate-oriented development does not automatically produce justice. If carbon forests are governed without secure Indigenous land rights, climate mitigation may simply transform the rationale for controlling Indigenous territories.

This problem is also evident in Papua. Runtuboi et al. (2021) show that oil-palm expansion in West Papua has affected forests of high biodiversity value and territories that are central to Indigenous Papuan social and cultural life. Plantation development has frequently failed to adequately incorporate Indigenous sociocultural considerations, resulting in customary rights and institutions being overlooked or weakened. The West Papuan case demonstrates that climate and environmental policies cannot be separated from the political economy of land acquisition and commodity production.

The fundamental issue, therefore, is not whether Indonesia should pursue climate mitigation. It is how mitigation is designed and whose interests are prioritized. A climate policy that reduces carbon emissions while dispossessing Indigenous communities cannot be considered fully just. Climate justice requires the simultaneous consideration of ecological integrity, territorial rights, cultural survival, economic security, and political participation.

Kalimantan and Papua: From Land Dispossession to Indigenous Political Agency

The experiences of Indigenous communities in Kalimantan and Papua demonstrate that Indigenous peoples are not passive victims of environmental change. They actively negotiate, resist, reinterpret, and challenge dominant forms of land governance. Their political agency can be observed through land claims, community organizing, resistance to plantations, customary institutions, and engagement with conservation and climate programs.

In Central Kalimantan, forest governance has developed within a complicated history of state intervention, plantation expansion, forest fires, and customary land claims. The implementation of REDD+ demonstrated the difficulty of integrating local communities into governance structures historically dominated by national institutions. Decentralization did not necessarily eliminate unequal power relationships because decision-making authority continued to be shaped by state agencies, corporations, donors, and other actors with greater institutional resources. Research on multilevel forest governance in Indonesia shows that coordination mechanisms alone do not necessarily produce environmental justice; organized contestation by local and environmental groups can be necessary to challenge entrenched interests (Ravikumar et al. 2018).

This finding is important because it challenges a technocratic conception of participation. Participation is often understood as attendance at meetings, consultation, or the provision of local information. Yet genuine procedural justice requires communities to have the ability to influence outcomes. A community may technically participate in a climate project while remaining unable to determine the boundaries of its territory, the terms of carbon projects, or the distribution of benefits. Participation without power risks becoming symbolic inclusion.

Papua illustrates the same structural problem in a different geographical and cultural context. The expansion of oil-palm plantations into West Papua has generated tensions between economic development, conservation, and Indigenous territorial rights. Runtuboi et al. (2021) demonstrate that the expansion of plantations can threaten biodiversity-rich forests while undermining customary institutions. Chao's ethnographic analysis of the Marind people further demonstrates that oil-palm expansion produces not only material changes but also profound transformations in Indigenous relationships with plants, animals, land, and ancestral worlds (Chao 2021).

Chao's analysis is especially relevant to climate justice because it expands the meaning of environmental loss beyond measurable economic value. From a conventional economic perspective, forest conversion may be evaluated through hectares, productivity, employment, or gross regional income. From an Indigenous perspective, however, the forest may constitute a living social and moral world. The destruction of forest ecosystems can therefore represent the disruption of relationships between humans and more-than-human beings, as well as the erosion of cultural identity.

This does not mean that Indigenous communities should be romanticized as inherently sustainable. Indigenous societies are internally diverse, and their practices change in response to markets, state policies, demographic transformations, and new technologies. The appropriate argument is not that Indigenous people are naturally better environmental managers, but that their political institutions and knowledge systems contain forms of ecological understanding that have been systematically marginalized by dominant governance

systems. This distinction prevents the romanticization of Indigenous peoples while still taking their epistemic contributions seriously.

The same principle applies to resistance. Resistance should not be interpreted merely as opposition to development. Indigenous resistance frequently represents demands for recognition, consent, territorial security, and alternative forms of development. It is therefore better understood as a struggle over political authority: who has the right to decide what happens to forests and territories? From a climate-justice perspective, this political agency is essential. Indigenous peoples should not be included only as beneficiaries of climate programs but as decision-makers and rights-holders. Their political claims challenge the assumption that climate governance should be designed exclusively by governments, scientists, corporations, or international organizations.

Mentawai Knowledge and Indigenous Ecological Resilience

The Mentawai Islands offer an important complementary perspective because they highlight the positive dimensions of Indigenous ecological knowledge rather than focusing exclusively on dispossession and resistance. Siberut Island, in particular, is recognized for its distinctive biodiversity and longstanding relationships between Indigenous communities and forest resources. Research on the Siberut community has documented the importance of traditional knowledge in forest-resource utilization and the complex relationship between customary practices and conservation policy (Fisher et al. 2016).

The Mentawai case challenges a simplified distinction between “nature” and “society.” Indigenous ecological practices often operate through relationships in which forests are simultaneously ecological spaces, sources of food and medicine, cultural landscapes, and sites of spiritual significance. Lee et al. (2021) found that Mentawai Indigenous knowledge includes extensive ethnobotanical knowledge and that traditional practices remain important to biodiversity conservation. At the same time, their research also identifies threats to the continuity of this knowledge, demonstrating that Indigenous knowledge cannot be treated as a static repository of ecological information.

This point is theoretically significant for climate adaptation. Adaptation is frequently framed through technical interventions such as infrastructure, early-warning systems, agricultural technology, and climate-resilient crops. These interventions can be valuable, but they do not exhaust the meaning of adaptation. Indigenous communities have historically adapted to environmental variability through social institutions, ecological observation, diversified livelihoods, and intergenerational knowledge. Persoon and Minter (2020), examining Indigenous communities in insular Southeast Asia, demonstrate how Indigenous resource-management practices interact with external interventions and changing environmental conditions.

Consequently, Indigenous knowledge should not simply be “added” to an existing climate-policy framework as an informational supplement. Such an

approach risks instrumentalizing Indigenous knowledge while leaving the underlying power structure unchanged. Instead, Indigenous knowledge should be understood as part of broader systems of governance and relationships to territory.

This requires distinguishing between knowledge extraction and knowledge partnership. Knowledge extraction occurs when researchers or institutions collect local knowledge for use in externally designed projects while communities have limited control over how the knowledge is interpreted or applied. Knowledge partnership, by contrast, requires reciprocity, consent, recognition of intellectual and cultural rights, and meaningful community control.

The Mentawai case also demonstrates why conservation policies must account for local social realities. The establishment of protected areas can produce tensions when state conservation objectives conflict with customary practices. Research on Matotonan in South Siberut found that Indigenous communities have long utilized forest areas for spiritual and livelihood purposes and that the relationship between the state and customary communities has been shaped by competing forms of authority over forests (Arman, Afrizal, and Asrinaldi 2018). The central question is consequently not whether conservation is necessary, but whether conservation can be achieved through institutions that recognize Indigenous territorial authority.

From a climate-justice perspective, the answer should involve co-governance and recognition rather than simple incorporation. Indigenous peoples should have meaningful authority over adaptation planning, forest management, and the design of conservation initiatives affecting their territories. Climate resilience should be measured not only through physical infrastructure or emission reductions but also through the capacity of communities to maintain livelihoods, cultural continuity, ecological relationships, and political autonomy.

Recognition, Participation, and the Limits of Indonesian Climate Governance

Indonesia has made significant legal and institutional developments concerning Indigenous rights, but implementation remains uneven. One of the most important legal developments is Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which rejected the classification of customary forests as state forests and strengthened the legal position of Indigenous peoples in relation to customary forests. The decision represented an important recognition of Indigenous territorial rights and corrected aspects of the Forestry Law that had subordinated customary forests to state control (Tobroni 2013).

However, legal recognition does not automatically translate into effective territorial security. Implementation depends on administrative procedures, local regulations, mapping, institutional capacity, and political willingness. Studies after the Constitutional Court decision have continued to identify disputes and difficulties in translating legal recognition into practical protection (Fitri and Nur

2023). This gap between formal recognition and substantive implementation is one of the central obstacles to climate justice in Indonesia.

The distinction between recognition and redistribution is particularly important. Recognition concerns whether Indigenous peoples are acknowledged as rights-bearing political communities. Redistribution concerns whether they receive actual control over land, resources, and economic benefits. A policy can recognize Indigenous identity while leaving territorial control largely unchanged. Similarly, communities may be invited to participate in climate projects without receiving meaningful control over the financial or political benefits generated by their territories.

The problem is compounded by the dominant institutional structure of climate governance. Climate policy tends to privilege measurable outcomes such as tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, hectares of forest protected, carbon credits generated, or investment mobilized. These indicators are useful but insufficient. They can marginalize dimensions of justice that are difficult to quantify, including cultural continuity, spiritual relationships, collective autonomy, and historical responsibility.

Schlosberg's multidimensional understanding of environmental justice provides a useful corrective. Justice requires distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities rather than distribution alone (Schlosberg 2007). Applied to Indonesia, this means that a climate project should be evaluated according to at least four questions: Who bears its costs? Who receives its benefits? Whose knowledge and identity are recognized? And who has the authority to participate in and influence decisions?

The concept of critical climate justice further strengthens this approach. Sultana (2022) argues that climate justice must address the structural inequalities underlying climate vulnerability rather than simply redistribute climate-related resources. For Indigenous peoples, those structural inequalities include colonial histories, land dispossession, unequal political representation, and extractive economic systems. Consequently, climate justice requires institutional transformation rather than merely better implementation of existing programs.

A more just model of Indonesian climate governance should therefore prioritize several principles. First, secure recognition of Indigenous territories should precede or accompany climate mitigation and conservation projects. Second, participation must be based on meaningful decision-making authority rather than consultation alone. Third, climate finance and carbon-related benefits should be distributed transparently and equitably. Fourth, Indigenous knowledge should be protected from appropriation and integrated through community-led processes. Fifth, climate policies should address the major structural drivers of deforestation rather than shifting responsibility toward communities with relatively limited control over large-scale land conversion.

Such an approach would also reposition Indigenous peoples from “vulnerable groups” to political partners. Vulnerability remains an important category for

identifying unequal exposure to climate impacts, but it should not define Indigenous peoples entirely. Indigenous communities possess institutions, knowledge, strategies, and political capacities that can contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation. Treating them solely as victims risks reproducing the marginalization that climate justice seeks to overcome.

Conclusion

Climate justice in Indonesia cannot be achieved without addressing the historical and contemporary marginalization of Indigenous peoples. The cases of Kalimantan, Papua, and the Mentawai Islands demonstrate that climate vulnerability is inseparable from land governance, deforestation, extractive development, and the recognition of customary rights. Indigenous communities experience the consequences of environmental degradation while simultaneously defending territories, maintaining ecological knowledge, and developing strategies of adaptation and resistance. Their experiences therefore reveal that climate change is not simply an environmental problem but a political struggle over land, knowledge, resources, and authority.

The Indonesian state has taken important steps toward recognizing Indigenous rights, particularly through Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012. Nevertheless, the continuing gap between formal recognition and substantive implementation demonstrates the limitations of existing governance arrangements. Climate policies based primarily on carbon accounting, conservation targets, or economic investment risk reproducing inequality if they fail to recognize Indigenous territorial authority and meaningful participation. A genuinely just climate transition should instead place Indigenous rights, self-determination, ecological knowledge, and political agency at its center. Indigenous peoples should not be treated merely as beneficiaries, informants, or symbols of environmental stewardship, but as rights-holders and political actors whose knowledge and authority are essential to constructing more equitable and ecologically resilient futures.

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