



Green Colonialism at Home? A Critical Look at ‘Sustainable’ Projects on Indigenous Lands

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Abstract

As climate action accelerates globally, “sustainable development” initiatives have proliferated across Indigenous territories, often framed as necessary steps toward a green transition. However, many of these projects—ranging from renewable energy installations to conservation zones and carbon offset schemes—risk reproducing patterns of dispossession and control under the guise of environmental progress. This research critically examines the phenomenon of “green colonialism” in the context of domestic policies, focusing on how ostensibly sustainable projects on Indigenous lands in Indonesia and comparable Global South settings intersect with histories of marginalization, land appropriation, and cultural erasure. Through qualitative case studies and policy analysis, this study reveals how state-backed and corporate-led sustainability efforts frequently bypass Indigenous consent, undermine traditional ecological knowledge, and impose external models of land use that conflict with local livelihoods. By tracing the discourses and power dynamics embedded in these interventions, the research exposes how environmental governance can become a vehicle for renewed colonial relations—this time justified by climate urgency. The study’s key contribution lies in reframing sustainability from a critical Indigenous perspective, challenging dominant narratives that equate “green” with “just.” It offers a framework for evaluating the legitimacy and equity of sustainability projects based on principles of self-determination, land rights, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the research calls for a redefinition of sustainability—one that centers Indigenous agency and recognizes environmental justice as inseparable from decolonization. This work contributes to broader debates on green transition ethics, providing a grounded critique of how climate solutions can replicate the very systems they aim to transform.

[Seiring percepatan aksi iklim secara global, inisiatif “pembangunan berkelanjutan” telah berkembang pesat di seluruh wilayah adat, yang sering



kali dianggap sebagai langkah-langkah penting menuju transisi hijau. Namun, banyak dari proyek-proyek ini—mulai dari instalasi energi terbarukan hingga zona konservasi dan skema kompensasi karbon—berisiko mereproduksi pola perampasan dan kontrol dengan kedok kemajuan lingkungan. Penelitian ini secara kritis mengkaji fenomena "kolonialisme hijau" dalam konteks kebijakan domestik, dengan fokus pada bagaimana proyek-proyek yang tampaknya berkelanjutan di tanah adat di Indonesia dan negara-negara Selatan yang sebanding beririsan dengan sejarah marginalisasi, perampasan tanah, dan penghapusan budaya. Melalui studi kasus kualitatif dan analisis kebijakan, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana upaya keberlanjutan yang didukung negara dan dipimpin korporasi sering kali mengabaikan persetujuan masyarakat adat, merusak pengetahuan ekologis tradisional, dan memaksakan model penggunaan lahan eksternal yang bertentangan dengan mata pencaharian lokal. Dengan menelusuri wacana dan dinamika kekuasaan yang tertanam dalam intervensi ini, penelitian ini mengungkap bagaimana tata kelola lingkungan dapat menjadi wahana bagi hubungan kolonial yang diperbarui—kali ini dibenarkan oleh urgensi iklim. Kontribusi utama studi ini terletak pada pembingkai ulang keberlanjutan dari perspektif kritis masyarakat adat, menantang narasi dominan yang menyamakan "hijau" dengan "adil." Studi ini menawarkan kerangka kerja untuk mengevaluasi legitimasi dan kesetaraan proyek keberlanjutan berdasarkan prinsip-prinsip penentuan nasib sendiri, hak atas tanah, dan kesinambungan budaya. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menyerukan redefinisi keberlanjutan—yang memusatkan perhatian pada peran aktif masyarakat adat dan mengakui keadilan lingkungan sebagai sesuatu yang tidak terpisahkan dari dekolonisasi. Karya ini berkontribusi pada debat yang lebih luas tentang etika transisi hijau, memberikan kritik yang berdasar tentang bagaimana solusi iklim dapat mereplikasi sistem yang justru ingin mereka transformasikan.]

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Green Transition, Green Colonialism, Ecological Justice, Environmental Justice

Introduction

The global response to climate change has generated an unprecedented expansion of projects presented as environmentally sustainable. Renewable-energy infrastructure, forest conservation, carbon markets, biodiversity protection, ecological restoration, and nature-based solutions have increasingly become central components of national and international climate policy. These initiatives are generally framed as necessary instruments for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, protecting ecosystems, and achieving sustainable development. Yet the assumption that environmental sustainability automatically produces social justice is increasingly contested. In many parts of the Global South, projects designed to

protect nature or accelerate decarbonization are implemented on territories inhabited and managed by Indigenous peoples whose land rights remain insecure. Consequently, environmental interventions may generate new forms of dispossession even when their stated objective is ecological protection.

This tension has been described through concepts including green grabbing, green accumulation, neoliberal conservation, and, more broadly, green colonialism. Green grabbing refers to the appropriation of land and resources for environmental purposes, including conservation, carbon sequestration, biofuel production, and other forms of “green” development (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). The concept is significant because it demonstrates that environmental objectives do not exist outside political and economic relations. Land designated for conservation or carbon storage remains land with social, cultural, and economic value. Decisions about who controls that land therefore constitute questions of power as much as questions of environmental management.

Indonesia represents a particularly important context for examining these dynamics. The country contains extensive forests, biodiversity-rich ecosystems, and numerous Indigenous communities whose livelihoods and cultural identities are closely connected to customary territories. At the same time, Indonesia has pursued ambitious conservation, climate mitigation, renewable-energy, and carbon-governance programs. These initiatives have created new opportunities for environmental protection but have also generated questions about land tenure, participation, benefit-sharing, and the recognition of customary rights.

The problem is particularly visible in forest governance. Indonesia's forest-carbon initiatives have created new forms of environmental governance in which forests are increasingly valued not only for timber or agricultural production but also for their capacity to store carbon. Astuti and McGregor (2017) demonstrate how the emergence of REDD+, the Constitutional Court's recognition of Indigenous forest claims, and the national One Map initiative created a new political conjuncture around Indigenous land claims in Central Kalimantan. However, the same carbon-oriented governance structures could also produce new forms of exclusion because access to environmental finance often depends on particular representations of Indigenous communities as ecological guardians.

The contradiction becomes even more apparent when conservation is examined. Conservation areas can restrict access to forests, hunting grounds, agricultural land, fishing areas, and other customary resources. Such restrictions may be justified through biodiversity protection, but they can conflict with Indigenous systems of land management that are based on customary law and reciprocal relationships with ecosystems. In West Papua, for example, research on conservation policy demonstrates that new conservation initiatives have generated tensions between local hunting practices and conservation authorities, indicating that environmental protection can conflict with local livelihoods when governance is not sufficiently place-based or participatory (Fatem et al. 2023).

Renewable energy presents another dimension of the problem. The global transition away from fossil fuels requires enormous investments in solar, hydropower, geothermal, wind, and other technologies. However, renewable-energy infrastructure requires land, water, minerals, transmission corridors, and investment. If projects are developed through centralized planning without meaningful participation by affected communities, renewable energy can reproduce the spatial and political inequalities historically associated with extractive development. Research on community renewable energy in Sumba, Indonesia, demonstrates that even projects explicitly designed to address energy poverty can reproduce energy injustices when local political and historical contexts are insufficiently recognized (Sovacool et al. 2021).

These concerns raise a fundamental question: when does sustainability become another mechanism of territorial control? This paper argues that the answer depends less on whether a project is technically “green” and more on how land, authority, benefits, and decision-making power are distributed. A project that reduces emissions but dispossesses Indigenous communities cannot be considered socially sustainable. Likewise, conservation that protects biodiversity by criminalizing customary livelihoods may achieve ecological objectives while producing environmental injustice.

This paper therefore critically examines the concept of green colonialism in the Indonesian context. It focuses on four interconnected dimensions: first, the historical and political foundations of green colonialism; second, the ways in which conservation and carbon projects can generate new forms of territorial dispossession; third, the possibility that renewable-energy development can reproduce extractive relations; and fourth, the principles of Indigenous self-determination, land rights, participation, and epistemic recognition required to make sustainability genuinely just.

The paper does not argue that conservation, renewable energy, or carbon management are inherently harmful. Rather, it challenges the assumption that environmental objectives justify particular forms of land governance. Its central argument is that “green” cannot be treated as synonymous with “just.” Environmental sustainability becomes legitimate only when it is compatible with Indigenous rights, meaningful participation, cultural continuity, and the political autonomy of communities whose territories are being transformed.

From Colonial Land Control to Green Colonialism

The concept of green colonialism is rooted in a broader critique of the political economy of environmental governance. Colonialism historically involved the appropriation of territory, resources, labor, and authority through systems that positioned external actors as legitimate decision-makers over Indigenous lands. Although contemporary environmental initiatives operate under very different political and legal conditions, similar patterns can emerge when external

institutions acquire control over land and resources while local communities lose meaningful authority over their territories.

The concept of green grabbing is particularly useful in identifying this continuity. Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones (2012) define green grabbing as the appropriation of land and resources for ostensibly environmental purposes. Such appropriation can occur through conservation, carbon sequestration, ecosystem services, biofuels, and other environmental initiatives. The critical insight is that environmental justification can transform the political legitimacy of land acquisition: what might previously have been criticized as land grabbing can become framed as conservation or climate action.

Green grabbing should therefore not be understood simply as an unintended consequence of environmental policy. It can emerge from the interaction between environmental objectives and economic interests. Carbon markets, biodiversity finance, ecotourism, and ecosystem-service schemes can create new economic values for land. Once forests, wetlands, or other ecosystems acquire financial value through carbon or biodiversity mechanisms, control over those ecosystems becomes economically significant.

Indonesia's forest-carbon politics illustrate this contradiction. Astuti and McGregor (2017) show that REDD+ created new opportunities for Indigenous communities to pursue land claims, but it also generated new forms of exclusion. The political system increasingly required Indigenous communities to fit particular representations of “green” indigeneity in order to gain recognition or access to carbon-related opportunities.

This produces what can be called the “ideal Indigenous subject” problem. Environmental institutions may celebrate Indigenous communities when they are represented as harmonious guardians of pristine forests, while simultaneously overlooking the political complexity of Indigenous societies. Indigenous communities are not homogeneous ecological entities. They contain differences of class, gender, generation, ethnicity, political affiliation, and economic interest. Astuti and McGregor (2017) demonstrate that green governance can therefore create “intimate exclusions” within Indigenous communities themselves.

The issue also has historical roots in Indonesian land governance. The recognition of adat or customary land rights has long existed in Indonesian legal discourse, but recognition has frequently remained conditional and difficult to operationalize. Butt (2019) argues that the promotion of adat within Indonesian land law has produced relatively limited concrete protection against dispossession and that relying solely on indigeneity as a land-rights strategy presents significant legal and political difficulties.

This history matters because contemporary environmental programs are frequently implemented through the same institutional structures that have historically centralized authority over land. A conservation project may therefore introduce new environmental objectives without fundamentally transforming the underlying relationship between the state and Indigenous territories.

Green colonialism is consequently best understood as a continuity of power rather than a literal continuation of colonial rule. Its defining characteristic is not that contemporary environmental actors are colonial governments. Rather, it describes situations in which environmental goals legitimize external control over Indigenous territories while Indigenous communities remain structurally disadvantaged in determining how those territories are governed.

The concept also highlights the importance of discourse. Words such as “sustainable,” “green,” “conservation,” and “climate-friendly” carry considerable political legitimacy. They can make certain interventions appear universally beneficial while obscuring distributional conflicts. A proposed conservation area, for example, may be presented as a biodiversity solution without asking who previously depended on that landscape or whose authority determines acceptable land use. The central analytical question should therefore shift from “Is the project environmentally sustainable?” to “Sustainable for whom, decided by whom, and at whose cost?” This question provides the foundation for an Indigenous environmental-justice approach.

Conservation and Carbon Projects: When Protecting Nature Produces Dispossession

Conservation is often treated as the clearest expression of environmental responsibility. Protected areas, national parks, forest reserves, and biodiversity corridors are intended to prevent deforestation and preserve ecosystems. Yet conservation has a long and complicated relationship with Indigenous rights.

The problem arises when conservation is based on the assumption that ecosystems are most effectively protected when human use is minimized or removed. Such approaches can conflict with Indigenous systems in which people and ecosystems are understood as interconnected rather than separate. Indigenous communities may hunt, cultivate, harvest forest products, fish, or conduct cultural practices within territories that conservation authorities define as protected spaces.

This tension is visible in West Papua. Fatem et al. (2023), examining conservation policy and traditional hunting practices in Tambrau, demonstrate that conservation initiatives have generated conflicts between local hunters and conservation authorities. Although conservation agencies are presented as mechanisms for strengthening environmental governance and local participation, implementation can create restrictions that conflict with existing livelihoods and customary practices.

The problem is not necessarily that traditional practices are always environmentally sustainable. Rather, the problem is the assumption that external institutions possess automatic authority to determine what constitutes sustainable land use. A conservation policy may identify hunting as a threat to biodiversity while failing to recognize the customary institutions that regulate hunting intensity, seasonal access, species selection, and ecological relationships.

This is fundamentally an issue of epistemic justice. Environmental governance does not merely allocate material resources; it also determines which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate. Scientific conservation knowledge frequently receives institutional authority, while Indigenous ecological knowledge may be treated as supplementary or anecdotal.

Such a hierarchy can create what scholars of environmental justice describe as recognition injustice. Communities are physically present in environmental governance but their knowledge systems and political identities are not treated as equally legitimate. Carbon conservation introduces another layer of complexity. REDD+ and related forest-carbon initiatives seek to generate financial value from avoided deforestation and forest conservation. These programs can provide resources for conservation and potentially create benefits for forest-dependent communities. However, carbon governance can also transform forests into financial assets controlled by external actors.

Astuti and McGregor (2017) demonstrate precisely this ambiguity in Indonesia. The development of forest-carbon governance opened political opportunities for Indigenous land claims but simultaneously produced new forms of exclusion and pressure to conform to particular representations of Indigenous identity.

This suggests that carbon projects should be evaluated through at least four questions: Who owns the land? Who owns the carbon rights? Who makes decisions about the forest? and Who receives the financial benefits? If the answers to these questions consistently favor governments, corporations, investors, or international organizations, then the project may reproduce unequal territorial relations despite its environmental objectives.

The question of benefit-sharing is particularly important. Carbon finance can generate revenues, but financial compensation does not necessarily resolve questions of political authority. A community may receive payments while having little influence over whether a project exists, how long it operates, or what activities are permitted. Compensation without self-determination can therefore become a substitute for rights. The same principle applies to conservation. Providing alternative livelihood programs to communities affected by protected-area restrictions does not necessarily resolve the underlying question of whether communities possess authority over their ancestral territories.

Conservation should therefore move from a “fortress” model toward rights-based and participatory approaches. This does not mean abandoning ecological protection. Instead, it means recognizing that biodiversity protection and Indigenous territorial rights can be mutually reinforcing when communities possess meaningful authority. The evidence from Indonesia demonstrates that this possibility is not merely theoretical. Research on Indigenous and community-based resource governance increasingly demonstrates that local institutions can contribute to environmental management when they are recognized rather than displaced by centralized governance. The appropriate question is therefore not

whether Indigenous communities should be incorporated into conservation, but whether conservation governance can be reorganized around Indigenous territorial authority.

Renewable Energy and the Reproduction of Extractive Development

The energy transition presents a particularly difficult case because reducing fossil-fuel dependence is essential to addressing climate change. Renewable energy is therefore not simply desirable but necessary. Yet the necessity of decarbonization creates a potential political problem: climate urgency can be invoked to justify accelerated development procedures that weaken consultation, land protections, or community participation.

This is where the concept of green colonialism becomes especially important. Large-scale renewable-energy projects require physical infrastructure. Hydropower projects require rivers and watersheds; geothermal projects require land and subsurface resources; solar farms require extensive areas of land; wind farms require suitable landscapes; and electricity transmission requires corridors across territories. Renewable energy may therefore involve substantial territorial transformation.

The fact that the resulting electricity has lower operational emissions does not eliminate questions about land rights. Sovacool et al. (2021) provide a particularly relevant Indonesian example. Their study of community renewable-energy projects in Sumba demonstrates that renewable energy cannot automatically be assumed to produce energy justice. Historical and sociopolitical conditions influence how renewable-energy projects are planned and implemented, meaning that community-based energy projects can still reproduce inequalities.

This finding challenges a common technological assumption: that decentralized or renewable technology is inherently emancipatory. Technology does not determine social outcomes by itself. Ownership, governance, participation, financing, and institutional arrangements determine who benefits. The same point is demonstrated by research on Indigenous renewable-energy projects elsewhere. O'Neill (2022), examining large-scale renewable energy development and Indigenous land rights, shows that legal arrangements can provide weaker procedural protections for Indigenous landholders in renewable-energy development than in other resource sectors. Benefit-sharing and reparative mechanisms therefore become central to determining whether renewable projects contribute to energy justice.

For Indonesia, this raises concerns about the emerging energy transition. If renewable projects are developed using the same institutional model historically used for mining, plantations, or large infrastructure projects—centralized approval, limited community participation, land acquisition, and external ownership—the energy transition could reproduce extractive relations under a low-carbon label. This can be described as extractive continuity. Under conventional extraction, land is transformed into a source of minerals, timber, agricultural commodities, or fossil

fuels. Under green extraction, land can become a source of carbon credits, renewable electricity, biodiversity credits, or ecological services. The commodity changes, but the underlying relationship may remain similar: external actors determine the value of a territory and extract economic benefits from it while local communities have limited control.

This does not mean that renewable energy and fossil-fuel extraction are identical. Their environmental impacts, technological characteristics, and climate consequences differ substantially. The analytical point is instead that a technology can be environmentally preferable while its governance remains unjust. This distinction is crucial for climate policy. If climate mitigation is treated as an overriding objective that automatically outweighs local rights, then Indigenous communities may be asked to sacrifice their territories for a global environmental benefit. Such a framework effectively externalizes the social costs of decarbonization onto populations that may have contributed relatively little to global emissions.

A genuinely just energy transition must therefore distinguish between decarbonization and decarbonization at any cost. Meaningful participation is central to this distinction. Communities should have the ability to influence project design, reject unacceptable projects, negotiate benefits, monitor environmental impacts, and participate in long-term governance. Consultation that occurs only after fundamental project decisions have already been made cannot constitute meaningful participation.

The principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) provides an important normative framework. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to participate in decisions affecting their lands and resources and establishes consent as an important principle for projects affecting Indigenous territories (United Nations 2007). However, FPIC should not be reduced to a procedural checklist. Consent must be genuinely free, obtained before project implementation, based on accessible and sufficient information, and capable of affecting the decision itself. If communities are presented with an already-approved project and offered compensation, the process resembles negotiation over damages rather than genuine consent. Renewable energy can therefore contribute to decolonization only when Indigenous communities become participants and decision-makers rather than simply hosts of green infrastructure.

Toward Decolonial Sustainability: Indigenous Self-Determination and Environmental Justice

If green colonialism emerges when environmental objectives are pursued through unequal territorial relationships, then the solution cannot simply be to make existing projects “more inclusive.” A deeper transformation is required: sustainability must be redefined around rights, self-determination, recognition, and ecological justice.

The first principle is territorial recognition. Indigenous communities need secure recognition of customary territories before environmental projects are implemented. This is particularly important in Indonesia because formal recognition of customary forests has historically been slow and institutionally fragmented. Sopaheluwakan et al. (2023), examining two decades of decentralization and customary forest governance in West Papua, found that despite long-standing demands for recognition, formal recognition of customary forests remained limited and local governance frameworks were insufficiently aligned with customary rights.

This creates a fundamental contradiction: environmental programs increasingly depend on Indigenous territories while Indigenous communities may lack secure legal authority over those territories. The second principle is procedural justice. Indigenous communities should have meaningful participation in environmental decision-making from the earliest stages of project development. Participation must include agenda-setting, environmental assessment, project design, monitoring, and benefit-sharing.

The third principle is distributive justice. Environmental projects generate both benefits and burdens. If a community bears restrictions on land use while external actors receive the majority of financial benefits, the project cannot be considered just merely because it produces environmental gains. Benefit-sharing mechanisms should therefore be transparent and proportionate, while communities should have opportunities for direct ownership or co-management where appropriate.

The fourth principle is recognition justice. Indigenous ecological knowledge should not be treated as a decorative addition to scientific environmental management. It should have institutional standing. This requires recognizing customary laws, seasonal management systems, spiritual relationships with land, traditional agricultural systems, and locally defined understandings of ecological sustainability. The fifth principle is self-determination. Indigenous communities should have meaningful authority over their territories. This is the most transformative dimension because it changes the relationship between Indigenous peoples and environmental institutions from one of consultation to one of political agency.

Self-determination does not imply that every Indigenous community must reject development or environmental projects. Different communities may have different preferences. Some may support renewable energy, conservation, ecotourism, or carbon projects if these initiatives strengthen local livelihoods and territorial sovereignty. Others may reject particular projects because of their ecological, cultural, or economic implications.

The critical issue is that the choice should belong to the community. This approach also requires abandoning the romanticization of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities should not be represented as inherently ecological or incapable of environmental harm. Such representations are problematic because they create another form of essentialism. Indigenous communities are political

societies with diverse interests and internal conflicts. Astuti and McGregor's (2017) analysis of carbon politics is especially instructive because it shows how environmental programs can create internal exclusions when they rely on simplified representations of Indigenous identity.

Therefore, recognizing Indigenous rights must also include attention to internal diversity, including gender, class, age, and minority groups within communities. The sixth principle is accountability. Environmental projects should be subject to independent monitoring of their social and ecological impacts. Environmental impact assessments should incorporate cumulative effects, cultural impacts, livelihood consequences, and Indigenous rights rather than focusing exclusively on biophysical indicators.

Finally, sustainability should be evaluated through a broader definition of success. A project should not be considered sustainable simply because it reduces carbon emissions or protects a quantified area of biodiversity. A more comprehensive evaluation should ask: Does the project respect customary land rights? Was meaningful consent obtained? Are Indigenous institutions recognized? Are benefits distributed fairly? Are local livelihoods protected or improved? Can communities influence project governance? Does the project preserve cultural continuity? Does it strengthen rather than weaken local ecological knowledge? and Are affected communities able to challenge or withdraw from harmful arrangements? These criteria transform sustainability from a purely ecological concept into a political and ethical one.

The broader implication is that decolonizing sustainability does not mean rejecting environmentalism. It means challenging the assumption that environmental protection requires the concentration of authority in states, corporations, or international institutions. Environmental justice can instead be constructed through plural forms of governance in which Indigenous communities possess meaningful authority over their territories. Indonesia's experience demonstrates the urgency of this transformation. The country's climate and biodiversity goals cannot be separated from the rights of the communities who inhabit and manage many of its most ecologically significant territories. If the green transition ignores those communities, it risks reproducing the historical inequalities that contributed to environmental degradation in the first place.

Conclusion

The emergence of green colonialism demonstrates a fundamental contradiction within contemporary sustainability politics: environmental objectives can coexist with social dispossession. Conservation areas, carbon projects, renewable-energy infrastructure, and other green initiatives can generate genuine ecological benefits, but these benefits do not automatically make projects socially legitimate. In Indonesia, where Indigenous territories have historically been subject to state-centered land governance and competing forms of resource extraction, environmental interventions can reproduce unequal relationships when they are

implemented without secure land rights, meaningful consent, or Indigenous participation.

This paper has argued that the central problem is not “green development” itself but the governance structures through which it is implemented. Green colonialism emerges when environmental goals are used to legitimize external control over Indigenous territories, when Indigenous knowledge is subordinated to external expertise, and when communities bear the costs of environmental projects while external actors control their benefits. Evidence from Indonesian forest-carbon governance, conservation in West Papua, and community renewable energy demonstrates that the transition toward sustainability can reproduce historical inequalities if questions of power and territorial authority are ignored. A genuinely sustainable transition must therefore be decolonial as well as ecological. Indigenous land rights, self-determination, FPIC, fair benefit-sharing, recognition of customary knowledge, and meaningful participation should be treated as substantive foundations of environmental policy rather than procedural additions. The ultimate test of a “green” project should not simply be how much carbon it removes or how much biodiversity it protects, but whether it creates ecological improvement without sacrificing the rights, livelihoods, cultures, and political agency of the people whose territories make that environmental intervention possible.

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