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Resource Nationalism and Local Economic Justice: Assessing the Distributional Effects of Nickel Downstreaming in Morowali, Indonesia

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Abstract

Resource nationalism has increasingly shaped Indonesia's mineral policy, particularly through restrictions on raw mineral exports and the promotion of domestic downstream processing. While these policies aim to capture greater economic value domestically, questions remain regarding how the resulting benefits and costs are distributed at the local level. This study examines the relationship between resource nationalism and local economic justice through the case of nickel downstreaming in Morowali, Indonesia. The study employs a qualitative case-study methodology combining legal and policy analysis with secondary socioeconomic evidence on investment, employment, local business participation, and regional development. A distributional justice framework is used to evaluate the allocation of economic benefits among the state, corporations, workers, and local communities. The analysis also considers whether increased domestic value capture translates into meaningful improvements in local economic inclusion. The study argues that resource nationalism should be assessed not only according to national ownership, fiscal gains, or industrial upgrading, but also according to the extent to which local populations participate in and benefit from resource-based development. The research contributes to debates on resource governance by connecting resource nationalism with subnational economic justice. It further highlights the importance of local procurement, skills development, employment access, and institutional accountability in translating mineral policy into broadly shared economic benefits.

[*Nasionalisme sumber daya semakin membentuk kebijakan mineral Indonesia, khususnya melalui pembatasan ekspor mineral mentah dan promosi pengolahan hilir domestik. Meskipun kebijakan-kebijakan ini bertujuan untuk menangkap nilai ekonomi yang lebih besar di dalam negeri, masih ada pertanyaan mengenai bagaimana manfaat dan biaya yang dihasilkan didistribusikan di tingkat lokal. Studi ini meneliti hubungan antara nasionalisme sumber daya dan keadilan ekonomi lokal melalui kasus* *pengolahan hilir nikel di Morowali, Indonesia. Studi ini menggunakan metodologi studi kasus kualitatif yang menggabungkan analisis hukum dan kebijakan dengan bukti sosioekonomi sekunder tentang investasi, lapangan kerja, partisipasi bisnis lokal, dan pembangunan regional. Kerangka kerja keadilan distributif digunakan untuk mengevaluasi alokasi manfaat ekonomi di antara negara, perusahaan, pekerja, dan masyarakat lokal. Analisis ini juga mempertimbangkan apakah peningkatan penangkapan nilai domestik diterjemahkan menjadi peningkatan yang berarti dalam inklusi ekonomi lokal. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa nasionalisme sumber daya harus dinilai tidak hanya berdasarkan kepemilikan nasional, keuntungan fiskal, atau peningkatan industri, tetapi juga berdasarkan sejauh mana penduduk lokal berpartisipasi dan mendapat manfaat dari pembangunan berbasis sumber daya. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan tentang tata kelola sumber daya dengan menghubungkan nasionalisme sumber daya dengan keadilan ekonomi subnasional. Hal ini juga menyoroti pentingnya pengadaan lokal, pengembangan keterampilan, akses lapangan kerja, dan akuntabilitas kelembagaan dalam menerjemahkan kebijakan mineral menjadi manfaat ekonomi yang dirasakan secara luas.*]

Keywords: resource nationalism, nickel, economic justice, resource governance, Morowali

Introduction

Resource nationalism has re-emerged as a dominant framework governing mineral exploitation across emerging market economies, with Indonesia standing as one of its most assertive global practitioners. Through the systematic implementation of Law No. 3/2020 on Mineral and Coal Mining, the Indonesian state enacted absolute export bans on raw nickel ore to mandate domestic processing and value addition (Warburton 2017). This policy trajectory reflects a strategic shift from traditional raw-commodity concession models toward state-directed industrial policy designed to capture higher domestic rents, foster technological transfer, and integrate the nation into global clean-energy value chains (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). The primary focal point of this industrial experiment is Morowali Regency in Central Sulawesi, home to the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP), which has attracted vast sums of foreign direct investment to build mega-smelters and refining complexes (Hamilton-Hart and Schulze 2016).

While national political discourse frames resource nationalism as an unmitigated triumph of sovereign economic development, the subnational realities in host communities tell a significantly more complex and contentious story. Aggregate macroeconomic indicators—such as surging provincial gross domestic product (GDP) figures, record foreign direct investment, and expanding national export balances—do not automatically translate into equitable socio-economic advancement for local populations (Phelps, Atienza, and Arias 2015). Instead, the rapid influx of mega-capital into a rural coastal economy has generated an industrial enclave model, where intense capital accumulation operates alongside persistent local vulnerability, giving rise to acute spatial and socio-economic inequities (Gellert 2019).

Evaluating the legitimacy and outcome of resource nationalism requires looking beyond state-centric fiscal metrics to apply a framework of local economic justice. Economic justice demands that the extraction and processing of non-renewable national resources foster equitable wealth distribution, protect local agency, and prevent the uncompensated transfer of operational risks onto marginalized communities (Schlosberg 2007). In resource governance, a justice-oriented lens critically disaggregates the structural allocation of benefits and costs among central state institutions, multinational corporations, domestic labor forces, and surrounding host populations (Bebbington et al. 2008).

Local economic inclusion serves as the core operational metric for assessing whether nationalized industrialization policies achieve subnational justice. Genuine economic inclusion necessitates that local residents, small businesses, and primary producers gain structural access to high-value employment, public supply chains, technology transfers, and decision-making processes (Heffron and McCauley 2018). In Morowali, institutional bottlenecks, pre-existing skill asymmetries, and corporate procurement barriers frequently insulate foreign and national corporate actors from the local economy, restricting local participation to low-tier, precarious economic activities (Resosudarmo et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the environmental degradation associated with intensive nickel smelting—including coal-fired power plant emissions, land conversion, and marine ecosystem disruption—disproportionately undermines traditional agricultural and maritime livelihoods. Local farming and fishing communities absorb severe ecological damage without receiving proportional compensation, financial security, or alternative economic opportunities (Gellert 2019). This misalignment reveals a profound deficit in distributive justice, as the structural risks of state-backed resource nationalism are localized while the primary economic dividends are central state coffers and multinational corporate balance sheets (Warburton 2017).

Addressing these subnational dislocations requires an analytical framework that integrates resource political economy with critical distributional justice theories. A state-centric model of resource nationalism assumes that capturing value at the national border automatically serves the public good, ignoring how internal power dynamics mediate local distribution (Phelps, Atienza, and Arias 2015). Analyzing the spatial, institutional, and socio-economic mechanisms operating in Morowali clarifies how current policy structures prioritize corporate capital accumulation and national revenue targets over community-centered development (Warburton 2017).

This study investigates the subnational distributional effects of Indonesia's nickel downstreaming policy in Morowali through the analytical lens of local economic justice. By examining the allocation of economic gains and risks among the central state, foreign investors, local labor, domestic businesses, and host communities, the paper seeks to identify the institutional drivers of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, the study aims to formulate policy recommendations that align resource nationalism with subnational equity, ensuring that national sovereignty over critical minerals empowers and enriches the local communities where extraction occurs.

State-Centric Resource Nationalism vs. Subnational Distribution: The Enclave Capital Paradox

Indonesia's nickel downstreaming policy represents a classic manifestation of state-centric resource nationalism, where central government authority is deployed to assert sovereignty over raw mineral wealth and force foreign capital into domestic processing (Warburton 2017). By leveraging raw export bans under Law No. 3/2020, the central state successfully forced global mining conglomerates to construct heavy industrial smelting infrastructure within designated mega-parks like the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). However, while this strategy has generated dramatic macroeconomic victories—demonstrated by soaring national export valuations and high regional GDP growth figures—it has simultaneously produced an enclave capital model that insulates corporate industrial profits from the local economy (Phelps, Atienza, and Arias 2015).

Under the prevailing governance structure, resource nationalism operates primarily as a mechanism for central state rent capture and national industrial upgrading rather than localized community enrichment. The central government retains primary regulatory authority over mineral licensing, tax incentives, and the administration of Strategic National Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional* / PSN) (Warburton 2017). Consequently, the substantial fiscal revenues, corporate tax receipts, and foreign exchange earnings generated by Morowali's nickel processing are centralized in Jakarta before being selectively funneled back through standardized regional balance funds (Hamilton-Hart and Schulze 2016). This top-down fiscal centralism deprives the local Morowali Regency administration of direct revenue capture mechanisms needed to fund critical municipal infrastructure and social safety nets (Gellert 2019).

The physical and operational design of the industrial park further enforces this spatial and economic insulation. IMIP operates as a self-contained industrial enclave, equipped with private captive coal-fired power plants, dedicated deep-water port facilities, private security apparatuses, and internal logistics networks (Phelps, Atienza, and Arias 2015). This structural autonomy allows multinational platform operators—predominantly Chinese industrial syndicates—to bypass reliance on local public infrastructure and regional supply networks. As a result, the mega-industrial park functions as an economic island that extracts local natural resources and relies on surrounding land, yet remains largely detached from the broader regional business ecosystem (Resosudarmo et al. 2021).

From a distributional justice perspective, this enclave model creates a profound asymmetry between localized costs and centralized gains. Host communities in Morowali bear the immediate, uncompensated burdens of industrial expansion, including rapid price inflation, severe road degradation, overwhelmed municipal waste systems, and housing shortages (Gellert 2019). Meanwhile, the financial windfalls of resource nationalism accrue primarily to multinational corporate shareholders and central government budgets, leaving local populations to manage the socio-economic fallout of hyper-industrialization without adequate institutional support (Bebbington et al. 2008).

The concentration of economic authority within corporate and central state hands systematically excludes local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) from participating in high-value secondary supply chains. Industrial smelting operations require highly technical inputs, heavy machinery, and specialized chemical reagents, which are sourced through established international procurement networks or national corporate affiliates (Hamilton-Hart and Schulze 2016). Local business owners face overwhelming capital barriers, stringent corporate vendor qualifications, and institutional biases that prevent them from securing contracts beyond low-margin service sectors such as catering, basic logistics, and informal housing rentals (Resosudarmo et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of the industrial zone distorts the local economy by driving up the cost of living and basic consumer goods, creating severe economic friction for non-industrial residents. Land prices, housing rents, food commodities, and utility costs have escalated dramatically across Morowali, driven by the influx of industrial capital and thousands of salaried workers (Gellert 2019). While industrial employees receive money wages that partially buffer these inflationary pressures, local farmers, artisanal fishermen, and small-scale informal traders experience a sharp decline in real purchasing power, widening intra-regional economic inequality.

Efforts by regional business associations and local political leaders to demand mandatory local procurement quotas or regional profit-sharing arrangements are consistently stymied by the legal framework of national strategic projects. Because industrial operators report directly to national ministries in Jakarta, local government authorities possess limited legal leverage to enforce local content requirements or demand direct corporate contributions to municipal development (Warburton 2017). This regulatory centralization creates a state of municipal powerlessness, where local institutions are tasked with managing social unrest and environmental degradation without possessing the legal or financial tools to govern industrial capital.

The ideological narrative surrounding resource nationalism often uses national economic sovereignty to justify localized socio-economic sacrifices. State officials frame the rapid industrialization of Morowali as a patriotic contribution to national modernization, clean energy leadership, and macro-industrial resilience (Warburton 2017). However, applying a justice-oriented critique demonstrates that resource nationalism which relies on the structural marginalization and economic peripheralization of host communities fails to achieve genuine public good (Schlosberg 2007).

Ultimately, the paradox of enclave capital in Morowali highlights that state-driven value capture at the national level does not guarantee local economic justice. Reconciling resource nationalism with equitable regional development requires decentralizing fiscal governance, enforcing binding local content mandates for regional businesses, and granting host municipalities direct legal authority over industrial zoning and revenue capture (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Without these structural adjustments, nickel downstreaming will remain an exclusionary framework that extracts value from the periphery to enrich central state and corporate elites.

Labor Stratification, Skill Deficits, and the Limits of Local Employment Absorption

Labor absorption is regularly promoted by state proponents of resource nationalism as the definitive proof of inclusive regional development, yet an empirical analysis of employment patterns in Morowali reveals deep structural stratification. While the establishment of processing complexes within IMIP has generated tens of thousands of industrial jobs, access to these positions is deeply divided along geographic, educational, and demographic fault lines (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Local residents from Morowali and neighboring areas in Central Sulawesi are heavily concentrated in low-wage, unskilled, and hazardous operational tasks, whereas high-paying managerial, technical, and engineering roles are predominantly held by foreign personnel or skilled domestic migrants from urban centers (Gellert 2019).

This structural labor hierarchy is largely driven by severe pre-existing skill asymmetries and a systemic failure of state-led human capital planning. The abrupt shift from a regional economy dominated by smallholder agriculture and artisanal fishing to a complex, capital-intensive metallurgical processing hub created an immediate demand for specialized technical competencies that local educational systems could not supply (Hamilton-Hart and Schulze 2016). Rather than establishing comprehensive vocational academies prior to launching downstreaming mandates, central authorities and industrial operators addressed technical workforce deficits by importing pre-trained foreign technicians and skilled urban workers, treating the local population as a reservoir for basic manual labor.

The resulting workplace stratification breeds intense perceptions of procedural and distributive injustice among domestic workers and local host communities. Indonesian workers frequently operate alongside foreign technical staff, performing physically demanding tasks under challenging environmental conditions while observing stark disparities in pay scales, housing accommodations, and organizational mobility (Warburton 2017). Corporate management defends these compensation gaps by citing skill differentials and foreign technical qualifications, but the absence of transparent skill classification frameworks and accessible internal promotion tracks leaves local workers feeling structurally exploited within their native region.

Workplace health and safety vulnerabilities represent a critical dimension where operational hazards are disproportionately shifted onto the front-line industrial workforce. Smelting operations, captive power generation, and heavy equipment transport carry extreme operational risks, including high heat exposure, toxic dust inhalation, and severe industrial accidents (Gellert 2019). Frequent reports of furnace explosions, fatal site incidents, and chronic respiratory illnesses highlight severe deficits in state labor inspection and regulatory enforcement, as national oversight agencies struggle to maintain effective supervisory presence over remote, highly secure industrial complexes.

Contractual precarity further erodes the long-term economic security of domestic industrial workers within the downstreaming ecosystem. A substantial segment of the domestic labor force is recruited through third-party labor outsourcing agencies or bound by short-term, fixed-duration employment contracts (De Stefano 2016; Resosudarmo et al. 2021). This widespread reliance on flexible contracting arrangements denies workers long-term job security, restricts access to comprehensive health coverage, and undermines attempts to organize collective bargaining units, preventing workers from converting temporary industrial wages into durable household wealth.

Gendered exclusion within the heavy industrial processing sector further restricts the equitable distribution of labor benefits across host communities. Metallurgy, furnace operation, and heavy logistics in Morowali are culturally and structurally coded as male domains, leading corporate recruitment practices to systematically favor male candidates for direct industrial employment (Gellert 2019). Local women are consequently excluded from higher-paying industrial wage tracks and pushed into informal, low-margin service roles—such as running small food stalls, managing worker dormitories, or offering domestic services—which yield precarious, highly volatile earnings.

The demographic shock resulting from the sudden influx of tens of thousands of domestic and foreign industrial workers has also strained the socio-cultural fabric of host communities. Local public health systems, sanitation networks, and civil security infrastructure are chronically overstretched by the population boom, giving rise to heightened social friction, cultural misunderstandings, and inter-group tensions in residential settlement areas surrounding the industrial park

(Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Local host populations bear the brunt of this rapid socio-demographic disruption without receiving adequate municipal services or social integration support.

Labor organizing and collective advocacy face formidable institutional resistance inside the industrial enclave. Industrial operators maintain strict oversight over worker activism, relying on administrative sanctions, contract cancellations, and security interventions to discourage union formation, strike actions, and public wage disputes (Warburton 2017). The suppression of organized labor deprives workers of effective procedural mechanisms to negotiate safer working conditions or demand equitable wage adjustments, cementing their subordinate position within the industrial hierarchy.

The official narrative that national downstreaming automatically delivers inclusive local employment acts as an ideological cover for structural labor exploitation. While aggregate employment figures appear impressive in policy reports, the substantive quality, safety, and distributive fairness of those jobs remain deeply flawed (Standing 2011; Gellert 2019). True local inclusion requires going beyond headcounts to ensure that local workers secure safe, dignified working conditions, equal pay for equivalent work, and structured pathways to technical advancement.

Correcting labor inequities in Morowali demands a comprehensive restructuring of regional educational infrastructure and industrial labor governance. The central government must mandate that platform operators fund specialized, tuition-free technical institutes in Morowali, establish strict local hiring quotas for technical and administrative positions, and enforce rigorous, independent labor inspections (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Without enforceable legal mandates that mandate human capital development, the employment generated by resource nationalism will remain exclusionary and deeply inequitable.

Ecological Degradation, Livelihood Dislocation, and Governance Frameworks for Subnational Equity

The environmental fallout of nickel downstreaming in Morowali illustrates a profound ecological injustice, where local biophysical environments and traditional primary producers absorb the severe costs of national industrial development. Extracting high-purity nickel and ferro-nickel from low-grade lateral ores requires energy-intensive smelting technologies, powered in Morowali by a massive network of dedicated, captive coal-fired power plants (Gellert 2019). The resulting release of carbon emissions, sulfur dioxide, and airborne particulate matter severely degrades ambient air quality, exposing surrounding rural populations to chronic respiratory diseases and long-term health vulnerabilities (Schlosberg 2007).

Marine and coastal ecosystems—which historically sustained Morowali's coastal communities—have suffered extensive degradation from thermal pollution, industrial effluent, and coastal reclamation works. Smelting operations dump large volumes of heated wastewater and industrial byproducts into adjacent gulf waters, elevating sea temperatures and destroying sensitive coral reef systems and coastal fisheries (Gellert 2019). Artisanal fishermen report catastrophic collapses in nearshore fish stocks, forcing them to navigate small vessels into dangerous open sea waters, which drastically increases operational fuel expenses and life-safety risks.

Agricultural livelihoods face widespread destruction due to land conversion, forest clearance, and toxic industrial runoff. The rapid expansion of mining sites, slag storage facilities, and transportation corridors has stripped extensive forest cover, causing severe topsoil erosion, river siltation, and frequent flash flooding during heavy rainfall seasons (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Runoff contaminated with heavy metals regularly inundates neighboring agricultural fields and rice paddies, rendering fertile soil uncultivable and destroying the food security of farming families who have relied on land cultivation for generations.

This systemic destruction of primary livelihoods represents a clear violation of distributional and environmental justice. Farmers, artisanal fishermen, and indigenous groups lose access to the natural capital that formed the foundation of their economic self-reliance, receiving minimal, one-time financial compensation from corporate actors or state agencies (Bebbington et al. 2008; Gellert 2019). Displaced primary producers are rarely absorbed into the industrial workforce due to age, literacy, or skill barriers, leaving them structurally stranded in deep socio-economic insecurity.

The regulatory governance structure surrounding nickel downstreaming in Indonesia consistently prioritizes rapid project implementation and capital accumulation over environmental protection and community rights. Under the national framework governing Strategic National Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional* / PSN), major industrial complexes like IMIP are granted accelerated environmental impact assessments (AMDAL) and streamlined regulatory approvals (Warburton 2017). This fast-tracking mechanism minimizes public participation, bypasses meaningful community consultation, and dilutes environmental compliance standards in the rush to meet national production targets.

State environmental enforcement bodies in Central Sulawesi operate under severe budgetary limitations, technical capacity shortfalls, and political pressure, rendering effective oversight of complex metallurgical complexes virtually impossible (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Industrial operators face negligible regulatory consequences for environmental violations, often treating minor administrative fines as routine operational expenses rather than incentives for clean production. This regulatory capture creates a permissive environment where corporate entities pollute with minimal state intervention, leaving host communities without institutional protection or access to legal remedies.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives executed by industrial firms in Morowali fail to compensate for these systemic socio-ecological losses. Corporate CSR agendas center primarily on superficial public relations projects—such as building small village halls, distributing basic food packages, or sponsoring local sports tournaments—while ignoring the permanent destruction of local ecosystems and primary livelihoods (Gellert 2019). These discretionary, piecemeal hand-outs do not provide sustainable alternative livelihoods, functioning instead as mechanisms designed to pacify community grievances and preempt organized resistance.

Achieving subnational economic and environmental justice requires a fundamental restructuring of resource governance frameworks to prioritize ecological integrity, human rights, and regional equity alongside industrial production (Heffron and McCauley 2018). Regulatory frameworks must eliminate special environmental exemptions for strategic projects, mandate the transition from captive coal plants to renewable energy sources, require closed-loop wastewater management, and enforce strict, continuous environmental audits. Furthermore, regulatory agencies must establish independent environmental oversight boards that grant binding voting power to local community delegates, civil society representatives, and independent scientists.

Legal mechanisms for economic compensation must also be overhauled to guarantee that host communities receive direct, perpetual restitution for loss of natural capital and environmental harm. A dedicated subnational environmental restoration and community trust fund—financed through mandatory corporate levies on processed nickel tonnage—should be legally established to fund ecosystem rehabilitation, public healthcare infrastructure, and local economic diversification programs (Resosudarmo et al. 2021). Furthermore, all future industrial expansions must strictly adhere to international standards of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), protecting vulnerable rural populations from involuntary land loss and forced economic displacement. Ultimately, the long-term legitimacy and stability of Indonesia's resource nationalism depend on its ability to deliver tangible socio-economic justice to the subnational communities where mineral extraction takes place. If downstreaming continues to rely on environmental destruction, regulatory capture, and the socio-economic marginalization of host populations, it will fuel escalating local conflict, international supply chain backlash, and long-term ecological devastation (Heffron and McCauley 2018; Gellert 2019). Reclaiming resource nationalism as a progressive, transformative force requires placing subnational equity, community rights, and environmental justice at the center of national mineral policy.

Conclusion

This study has critically assessed the subnational distributional effects of Indonesia's nickel downstreaming policy in Morowali, demonstrating that state-centric resource nationalism does not automatically result in local economic justice. While the central state's export bans and domestic processing mandates have successfully driven national value capture, macro-industrial upgrading, and massive foreign direct investment, these national achievements operate through an enclave industrial structure that insulates corporate capital from the local economy. Foreign processing firms and central state institutions capture the overwhelming share of financial returns, while host communities bear the localized burdens of environmental degradation, inflation, land loss, and socio-economic displacement. Consequently, the rhetoric of national economic sovereignty masks a deeply asymmetrical distribution of benefits and risks at the subnational level.

Transforming resource nationalism into a vehicle for inclusive and equitable regional development requires a structural overhaul of Indonesia’s mineral governance framework. National industrial policy must evolve from a narrow focus on state rent capture to encompass binding subnational justice mandates, including enforceable local hiring quotas, tuition-free technical education, mandatory local business procurement, and direct municipal revenue-sharing mechanisms. Furthermore, state institutions must restore environmental governance by ending regulatory fast-tracking for strategic projects, enforcing strict ecological compliance, and establishing independent monitoring bodies led by local community representatives. Ultimately, the true success of resource nationalism should be measured not merely by national export values or macro-growth metrics, but by its capacity to uphold human dignity, protect local ecosystems, and ensure shared economic prosperity for the communities hosting resource extraction.

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