
[Indonesia: Struggle against land grabbing of oil palm company PT Hardaya](#)

The villagers of Buol District, in Central Sulawesi, have struggled for 20 years to regain their lands. All of their customary lands and forests had been signed away without their knowledge or consent to one of Indonesia's richest and most powerful families - business magnate Murdaya Widyawimarta and his wife Siti Hartati Cakra Murdaya through their holding company, the Cipta Cakra Murdaya Group - for the creation of a massive 22,000 ha oil palm plantation. The business had a dramatic toll: the farmlands and forests used by over 6,500 families were destroyed.

When the operation began in 1994, many villagers stood in front of trucks and attached themselves to trees to prevent the chopping down of trees in the surrounding forests of their villages. Yet, with the military backing the operation, there was little that they could do. Eventually, endless monoculture of oil palms belonging to the PT Hardaya Inti Plantations company replaced the lands where the villagers used to have their fruit trees and paddy fields.

Since 2005, the area under oil palm in Indonesia has nearly doubled, and now covers 8.2 million hectares, about a third of all of Indonesia's arable land, and Sulawesi is one of the main targets of the breathtaking expansion of oil palm plantations in the country. This expansion is fuelled by growing global demand for cheap vegetable oil for food processing and biofuels. But it's also a result of brutal inequality.

Norwegian pension fund withdraws investments in certain oil palm companies

Indonesia together with Malaysia share the position of world leaders in palm oil production which has expanded exponentially in the last years.

In Indonesia, the total area of oil palm plantation increased by 279 % between 1998 and 2008, converting legally and illegally huge swaths of rainforest into monoculture plantations and reaching some 7 million hectares that in 2009 the government announced it aimed at expanding by further 18 million hectares.

The expansion of the oil palm plantations has led to numerous conflicts with local communities, as well as widespread criticism for the disastrous environmental impact of the massive forest destruction.

Norway has been one of the countries which has invested in palm oil companies (US\$ 637 million in 21 companies), among them the Singapore company Wilmar International. But recently, Scandinavia's largest pension company, Storebrand, has announced that it will no longer invest in 'climate villain' companies, meaning not only non-renewables such as coal, which contributes to large amounts of CO2 emissions, but also palm oil as long as its boom is a major cause of deforestation across the tropics, and hence a huge source of carbon emissions.

Source: http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_round_up/2259146/norwegian_pension_giant_drops_investments_in_coal_tar_sands_palm_oil.html, <http://www.u-landsnyt.dk/nyhed/19-11-12/b-redygtig-palmeolie-sv-rt-opdrive-i-danske-butikk>, http://www.regnskog.no/no/s%C3%B8keresultat/_attachment/30008/binary/27091?_download=true&_ts=137126c547d

Despite the powerful forces of racial prejudice, the villagers of Buol District were determined to get their lands back. They agreed to sell their lands at an agreed upon price, prepare and plant palm oil palms for each

But just one month later, the company denied having made the agreement and instead offered only to run an outgrower programme on 15,000 ha outside of the concession area, on lands that the provincial government would have to identify.

It was a painful setback for the villagers. Depleted from years of struggle and without any support for their cause from the government, their protests petered out and the company was able to move forward with its operations and began expanding outside of its concession area.

The deforestation and planting of oil palms along river banks and on hillsides both within and outside the concession caused severe soil erosion, with much of the soil ending up in the fast flowing Buol river.

The company's promised outgrower programme has barely materialised. So far, just 400 ha have been allocated for the programme, and most of these lands have gone to the local politicians that supported the company.

Working conditions on the plantation are abysmal. There are over 3,000 people working on the plantation, many of whom lost their lands to the same company. They live in dilapidated camps and are paid according to the amount they harvest.

Hamsi is one of these workers, living with his wife and children in a cramped room in one of the work camps on the plantation. He and his wife have been working long, hard weeks here for the past 13 years.

"No matter how hard we work, we are always in debt," says Hamsi.

It is not only the meagre wages paid by the company that keep its workers poor. The company constantly makes deductions for all kinds of expenses – from the electricity and water they use in their homes, to the tools and safety equipment that they need for work. By the end of each month, Hamsi says, there's no money left.

Hamsi's wife, like other women workers in the plantation, is responsible for spraying pesticides. One of the pesticides used extensively in the plantation is Gramaxone (paraquat), an herbicide that is banned in over 30 countries due to its severe impacts on human health. She says she was not provided with training or protective equipment by the company, and that she sprayed pesticides throughout her pregnancies and soon after child birth, as she could not afford to take unpaid days off from work.

In 2012, the plantation workers had formed a union and had begun pushing for better working conditions. Together they decided to take up the fight against the company once again under the banner of Forum TaniBuol. In 2012 they organised a road blockade and occupied the mayor's office.

The government and company officials responded with promises to pursue a settlement of the land conflict, but nothing materialised. In March 2013, peasants and workers took over the company's processing factory. The government sent in the military to remove them, but not before they managed to wrest another promise from the government to impose a resolution.

Despite the years of failed promises, the villagers are optimistic that they are close to getting their lands back and they are even starting to discuss what they will do with the lands once they get them back. They are in agreement that the lands should be managed collectively and not through individual ownership and they recognise that they have little choice but to keep producing palm oil until the current trees are fully mature and can be replaced by other crops.

The experience of the communities in Buol shows how the profound impacts of oil palm plantations on local communities get worse over time. The meagre benefits that a plantation provides, whether in jobs or through outgrower programmes, are no substitute for the loss of access to and control over lands and water that communities use to ensure their food needs and livelihoods.

It is in this context that international solidarity and monitoring of the situation is critical. The villagers are keen to bring more international exposure to their case. They say that one of the ways in which people can provide support is by signing a petition that they will be sending to PT HardayaInti Plantation.

Read the petition in support of the Buol villagers' struggle at http://www.grain.org/bulletin_board/entries/4870-petition-for-the-struggle-of-buol-farmers-forum-against-land-grabbing-by-pt-hardaya-inti-plantations, and get in touch with the villagers through AGRA: agraindonesia12@gmail.com

Excerpted and adapted from "Long struggle against Indonesia oil palm land grab", GRAIN, January 2014, <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4868-long-struggle-against-indonesia-oil-palm-land-grab>