

Peasant women of Koto Garo reclaiming land seized by plantation companies

INDONESIA

Introduction

Rumpun Perempuan dan Anak Riau (RUPARI) led a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) on rural women's rights to land and natural resources (Land FPAR) between September 2018 and June 2020 with women in the village of Koto Garo in Riau Province. RUPARI focuses on research, campaign and advocacy on women's issues to promote gender justice. Through the initiatives of this Land FPAR, RUPARI organised 26 peasant women as members of Bukit Berbunga women's group in Koto Garo to build their capacity to form alliances with other movements and reclaim their lands from corporate control.

Background

The export-oriented commodity industry such as oil palm and acacia have transformed Riau's rich community forests and agricultural fields into large-scale monoculture plantations. According to the Regional Regulation (Perda) No.10 (2018), only 11 per cent of Riau's total area (8.9 million hectares) is protected, leaving the rest of the 89 per cent of the land for cultivation. Corporations have used national regulations to expel communities from their lands to expand their plantations. The monopolisation of the control of natural resources by large monoculture plantation companies has deepened the land tenure gap between landlords (corporations and state) and the people. The destruction of natural forests has caused a gendered impact on the lives of women. This FPAR was conducted with peasant women in the village of Koto Garo, Riau



Province, Indonesia, who are struggling for their land rights which are currently under the control of four plantation companies, namely PT. SBAL, PT. RAKA, Sinar Mas Group, and PT. Arara Abadi. Approximately 65 per cent of Koto Garo's land is currently occupied by the plantations.



FPAR process

The RUPARI Land FPAR team led and facilitated two community consultation meetings in Koto Garo village to orient the community on the Land FPAR and develop a plan. Twenty-six women formed a women's group namely Bukit Berbunga, held regular monthly meetings and planned their activities. The RUPARI team conducted several trainings with the Bukit Berbunga women's group to develop their knowledge on the issues of land rights as well as build their capacity in campaign organising and public speaking. The young woman researcher and two local co-researchers of the Land FPAR used various participatory research tools such as focused group discussions (FGDs), survey, social mapping, power mapping and critical path analysis to document the lived experience of the community. The RUPARI team also collected secondary data from various agencies, companies, government sources and mass media to support the FPAR. As a result, a strong collective of 26 peasant women is fighting to protect and reclaim their land.



FPAR findings

Government policies and land control by state and companies

According to Indonesia's Basic Agrarian Law or UUPA 1960, land ownership types are divided into land ownership rights, land use rights, land for building rights and land for the use of business rights (Hak Guna Usaha- HGU). HGU is referred to as the right to cultivate land that is controlled directly by the State for companies in agriculture and fisheries. The birth of UUPA 1960 was aimed at abolishing the Dutch colonial government land policies to give community rights to land and its management from state arbitrariness. However, in reality, new regulations were added for the benefit of industry as part of the massive industrialisation process. So far, HGU has only been given to corporations but never to peasant and landless communities. HGU is granted for 35 years and can be extended for up to 95 years. As a result, massive agrarian community lands, including indigenous peoples' customary lands, have been transferred to the private sector without their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) through the HGU process.

Land conflicts and loss of livelihoods

The companies in Koto Garo often use tricks to get land tenure. For example, even though PT. RAKA did not have a Hak Guna Usaha or HGU (land use right) permit from the government, they used the Aman Damai Farmers Group to pass a land tenure for their use. A conflict between PT. RAKA and 177 families in Koto Garo village erupted in 2006 when the company grabbed 1,400 hectare of the village's land. The majority of evicted people ended up migrating to other parts of the country or becoming labourers in the plantations. A negotiation for compensation is still ongoing. Similarly, 78 families filed a lawsuit against PT. Arara Abadi in 2013 when it started operating in the area without a proper permit. In 2018, PT. Sinar Mas tried to prevent construction of electricity poles which would pass through its plantation area. Due to the massive land grabbing by the companies, the peasant community in Koto



Garo is left with little arable land and can no longer grow chillies and vegetables.

Gendered impact due to destruction of environment

The conversion of natural forest functions into commodity forest plantations, almost all of which are monoculture plants, resulted in the loss of biodiversity, such as flora and fauna. This caused loss of livelihoods of the people, especially indigenous peoples, who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. Before the forests and fields in Koto Garo village area were replaced with oil palm and acacia plantations, women used to easily search for tubers, vegetables and medicinal herbs in the fields and forests, but now they cannot find any wild vegetable plants anymore.

“In the past, we still planted rice, corn, chillies and vegetables to eat ourselves and also to sell, but since our fields were made for oil palm, we could not farm anymore. Now we plant more chillies on the hilly land.”

- Yanti, Koto Garo Village Women’s Group

Women’s Empowerment

As a result of the Land FPAR initiatives, 26 peasant women formed a group named “Bukit Berbunga”. The Bukit Berbunga group has allied with other women, youth and peasant organisations as well as joined the Alliance of People’s Struggle Front (FPR). The new alliance has been organising joint activities such as campaigns for International Workers Day, food shortage and the opening of the Riau smoke disaster post. Representatives of the Bukit Berbunga group were involved in a series of meetings with the government, PT. Sinar Mas group and State Electricity Company to fight for the availability of electricity in their villages. Their mass actions successfully led to the entry of electricity in the Koto Garo Village in 2018. One of the women’s farmer group leaders became a spearhead of the Koto Garo community to negotiate with PT. RAKA to return the community land that was seized by the company. Women representatives of Bukit Berbunga are also involved in the struggle of unregistered farmers to get subsidised fertiliser from the agriculture department, which is only provided to farmer groups formed by the government.

The women have occupied 30,000 square meters (three hectares) of land, which is annexed to PT. ARARA Abadi’s plantation and collectively started farming chillies and vegetables. Their current priority is reclaiming this land.





Recommendations

At the international and regional levels:

- To support the struggle of Koto Garo peasant women and form a joint campaign to promote sustainable development and demand to revoke plantation permits that destroy nature conservation and sustainability of the forest.

At the national level:

- The Indonesian government shall consistently implement the 1960 Agrarian Law to eliminate land monopoly, negate inequality and prioritise the interests and rights of farmers.
- The Indonesian government shall stop granting HGUs to corporations because HGU denies ownership of community land and land rights for peasant women.
- The Indonesian government shall be transparent and publish the HGU data to stop current encroachment of land in Koto Garo. The map of land acquisition shall be made public.
- The Indonesian government must change its agricultural policy orientation, from export orientation to an orientation that meets the needs and realises the food sovereignty of the peoples.

At the local / community level:

- Women's organisations shall expand women's involvement and leadership by adding members and strengthening alliances. More massive involvement of women will increase confidence and strengthen the peasant women's struggle for their land rights.



About Rumpun Perempuan Dan Anak (RUPARI)

RUPARI is a non-profit organisation focusing on research, campaigning and advocacy on women's issues and gender justice. Founded in 2012, Rupari aims to fight for justice and gender equality. In both urban and rural areas, RUPARI works with marginalised women, including urban poor women, peasant women and women labourers in plantations. Email: rupari.ngo@gmail.com



About APWLD

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

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