

Commentary

The IKN Project Invades Living Spaces: Evictions and Changes in the Livelihood System of Indigenous Communities

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The unique geopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural dynamics in Indonesia make it a highly interesting area of study for understanding the causes and consequences of forced evictions or displacements. Specifically, Indonesia is home to thousands of ethnic groups with diverse cultures. The polemics surrounding evictions in development projects are not recent phenomena in Indonesia. Recently, plans for evictions of indigenous communities in the vicinity of the construction of the Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) have been promoted by the IKN Authority (Yesidora, 2024). The IKN Nusantara region retains only 26.8 thousand hectares of forest, roughly 10% of the total area, predominantly situated within the 16.8 thousand hectares of Production Forest and 8.5 thousand hectares designated for other uses (Forest Watch Indonesia, 2022).

The construction of Indonesia's new capital city IKN project, has led to significant displacement and disruption of indigenous communities' traditional living spaces. The findings reveal that the forced relocations have not only led to the loss of land and homes but also severely disrupted the livelihood systems of these communities, which have traditionally relied on agriculture and forest-based resources (Hernawan, 2023; Nasir et al., 2023; Gunawan, 2024). Furthermore, the study highlights the inadequacies

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in the compensation and resettlement plans provided by the government, which have failed to address the long-term sustainability and cultural preservation of the displaced populations. The loss of ancestral lands has led to a breakdown in social structures and cultural heritage, exacerbating the vulnerability of these communities.

The issue intersects with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). East Kalimantan, chosen as the site for Indonesia's new capital city, is home to 185 indigenous groups, but there are 5 groups (*Kayan Umaq Lekan, Wehea, Basap Tebangan Lembak, and Long Bentuk*) recognized as *Masyarakat Adat/Masyarakat Hukum Adat* (Komalasari, 2024), others are recognized as traditional communities. Among these, 21 groups reside within the IKN development area, including the Balik, Paser, and Kutai tribes. The indigenous Balik community in the new capital region comprises 200 households (Yovanda, 2023). This raises concerns about the potential displacement and eviction of these communities, which could exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine their cultural heritage and rights.

The development of the new capital significantly impacts these indigenous communities, raising concerns about their rights and the preservation of their cultures and lands (Arifin et al., 2024; Nasir et al., 2023). Ensuring inclusive development that respects and integrates the needs and voices of these indigenous groups is crucial for sustainable and equitable progress. Focusing on evictions and changes in living space highlights the need for inclusive and equitable development that aligns with SDG 11. Ensuring that the relocation and development processes respect Indigenous rights and provide adequate compensation and support is essential. Sustainable urban development should prioritize the well-being of all residents (Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2023), including vulnerable Indigenous populations, to create resilient and inclusive communities.

The development of the new capital has led to significant and rapid deforestation, negatively impacting the environment by causing the loss of native flora and fauna habitats and the destruction of indigenous ritual sites (Mustajab, 2023; Ayunda, 2023; Sari & Naftali, 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, deforestation in the new capital region covered 1,663 hectares (Forest Watch Indonesia, 2024). Additionally, Forest Watch Indonesia reported that from 2018 to 2021, 18,000 hectares were deforested. Deforestation is defined as the conversion of natural forest cover into open land.

Since the enactment of Law Number 21 of 2023 concerning Amendments to Law Number 3 of 2022 concerning the IKN, Article 15A paragraph (1) states that land in the IKN consists of state property, property of the IKN Authority, community-owned land, and state land (Undang-Undang Nomor 21, 2023). There is no mention of customary land in the law. The fatal consequence is that indigenous communities are vulnerable to eviction because they lack legal land rights.

This essay criticizes the dynamics of evicting Indigenous communities, which lead to the loss of living space, disaster situations, and changing livelihood systems. Its aim is to manage the transformative challenges faced by indigenous communities in adapting to future changes. Particularly, Indigenous communities in the IKN development area in East Kalimantan, such as the Balik indigenous community and the Paser indigenous community, face complex social-political dynamics post-eviction, adaptation to disasters, and adaptation to changes in livelihoods.

State, Evictions, and Indigenous Communities

The state is the most responsible party for the injustices experienced by indigenous communities. The indigenous population in Indonesia is estimated to be between 50 and 70 million people residing in remote customary regions such as mountains, interior forests, and small islands (AMAN, 2013). However, in the context of IKN, the state becomes an actor in the eviction of indigenous communities who have deep historical and land ties.

Indonesia has a turbulent history marked by colonialism, conflict, and geopolitical rivalries. These historical factors contribute to the eviction of small communities and the creation of vulnerable populations. According to AMAN (2024), 687 indigenous people have been criminalized in the past ten years (from 2014 to 2023).

Furthermore, the wide-open investment opportunities through the Omnibus Law have brought significant changes, both positive and negative. In the context of Indigenous communities, the most dominant negative impact is felt. Natural resource exploitation results in the expropriation of indigenous lands, where they have emotional ties to the land and natural resources they possess development (Niko et al., 2024).

For example, investment in the palm oil plantation sector in Kalimantan has led to forced cultural root extraction, massive environmental damage, and the loss of traditional livelihoods for indigenous communities. Climate change, natural disasters, and prolonged environmental degradation have the potential to evict indigenous communities and worsen existing vulnerabilities. The expansion of palm oil plantations transforms land traditionally managed by indigenous communities for generations into unsustainable use. In 2023, 2,578,073 hectares of indigenous territories were seized for business investment and infrastructure development (AMAN, 2024).

Despite the adverse consequences experienced by local indigenous communities, the Indonesian government promotes palm oil production as a development tool and continues to expand its production. Violations of indigenous land rights are essentially facilitated by existing power dynamics.

Evictions and Changes in Living Space

The living spaces of indigenous communities are threatened by the issuance of [Peraturan Kepala Otorita Ibu Kota Nusantara Republik Indonesia Nomor 3 Tahun 2023 Tentang Rencana Detail Tata Ruang Wilayah Perencanaan Ibu Kota Nusantara Timur 1](#). Article 53, paragraph (10), section c states that: *“bangunan permanen yang diperbolehkan hanya untuk kepentingan publik seperti untuk kepentingan pertahanan dan keamanan, pelabuhan/dermaga, tempat tinggal Masyarakat hukum adat yang sudah turun temurun, pos penjaga keselamatan, bangunan prasarana sumber daya air, dan bangunan ketenagalistrikan.”* (Permanent buildings are only permitted for public purposes, such as defense and security, ports/docks, long-established Indigenous community residences, safety guard posts, water resource infrastructure, and electricity infrastructure). While this article appears accommodating, it only recognizes five indigenous community groups within the IKN area, whereas others are categorized as traditional communities. These unrecognized traditional groups are at risk of eviction and displacement. The question arises: has the formulation of these IKN authority regulations involved both the indigenous and traditional communities?

Evictions refer to the forced relocation of individuals or communities from their original homes. Changes in living space occur suddenly as a result of evictions, where people are forced to leave their homes and form new living arrangements (Sullivan, 2017). In the context of indigenous communities around the IKN development, evictions have become a recurring issue and have caused significant changes in their living space. In the future, indigenous communities will become strangers in the land they have managed for almost two centuries (Lumbanrau, 2024).

Evictions are fundamentally caused by various factors such as land grabbing, deforestation, and infrastructure development. In the context of IKN, evictions are caused by state projects that involve not only infrastructure development but also investment and resource exploitation. As a consequence of these evictions, Indigenous communities are forced to adapt to new settlements or residences (Imang, 2020).

Changes in living space often result in the loss of traditional ways of life and original cultural practices of indigenous communities. More broadly, evictions lead to population density problems (Syaf, 2020), limited access to resources, and changes in land for farming and livelihoods (Sesar et al., 2021). To address this, they are forced to find new ways to increase land productivity. When productivity becomes their source of livelihood, it is certain that the capitalist-worker system will exist. Farming practices with technological systems are the workings of capitalism. With the existence of a capitalist system amidst evicted indigenous communities, indigenous practices, traditional knowledge, and communal ways of life will begin to be abandoned.

Evictions of Indigenous communities in the IKN development area impact the loss of the traditional living spaces they have preserved for centuries (Pramudyantini & Perkasa, 2024). The livelihoods of indigenous communities are closely related to the forests around them. Therefore, forests and land are

their sources of livelihood. The IKN project will change the traditional practices of indigenous communities to profit (economics) and technology. As a young Indigenous person from Kalimantan, I am aware that environmental transformation and climate change force our communities to adapt in ways of survival.

The disasters that emerge from environmental degradation are climate crises that bring layered vulnerabilities to indigenous communities. Evicting them from their ancestral villages is equivalent to eroding their community identity. Similarly, they will form a new identity—that is no longer traditional—through post-eviction experiences they will face.

The decision to build a new capital (IKN) in Indonesia has sparked significant debate regarding its alignment with the country's global commitments to forest conservation. Indonesia has made substantial international pledges to protect its forests, which are crucial in the global fight against climate change. As a signatory to the 2016 Paris Agreement, Indonesia is required to make substantial efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Prior to this, Indonesia also committed to the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests, aiming to restore degraded lands and halt deforestation. Deforestation and forest degradation significantly contribute to emissions, making forest conservation essential to achieving these targets.

Conclusion

Historically, the government has failed to provide Indigenous communities with equal opportunities for self-determination due to the legacy of colonialism and systemic marginalization. This is evidenced by policies related to the new capital city (IKN) that exclude indigenous voices. I refer to this as a colonial power dynamic, where the implementation of government systems excludes the voices of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, economic interests in natural resources prioritize development over the rights of indigenous communities. Lands are readily handed over to investors for exploitation. The question is, what benefits do indigenous communities receive?

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