THE PLANTATION LAND CONFLICTS
IN NORTH SUMATRA

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Abstrak

Implementasi otonomi daerah pada tahun-tahun terakhir ini secara nyata telah menghasilkan persepsi baru perihal masyarakat lokal atau komunitas. Pada masa yang cukup panjang, pemerintah secara nyata mendominasi seluruh aktivitas pembangunan di Indonesia. Hal ini berarti bahwa masyarakat lokal hanya dijadikan sebagai obyek pembangunan, yang berarti mereka tidak diikutsertakan dalam proses pembangunan. Akan tetapi, saat ini, implementasi otonomi daerah menuntut partisipasi masyarakat lokal dalam semua proses pembangunan, mulai dari perencanaan hingga evaluasi. Dalam konteks yang lebih luas, otonomi daerah dapat dipandang sebagai suatu peluang bagi pemberdayaan masyarakat lokal, dan pemerintah daerah harus memandang hal tersebut sebagai suatu keharusan untuk menjalin hubungan kerja sama dengan kelompok masyarakat, dan harus menciptakan suatu jaringan kerja sama yang saling menguntungkan bagi pemerintah dan masyarakat lokal. Implementasi pemberdayaan masyarakat merupakan suatu paradigma baru yang dapat menciptakan masyarakat yang kritis, khususnya dalam melihat masalah pembangunan yang ada di daerah mereka. Dalam kasus ini, masyarakat lokal senantiasa mengevaluasi program pembangunan, apakah sesuai atau tidak bagi mereka.

Kata kunci: otonomi daerah, program pembangunan, masalah pembangunan

Introduction

The East Sumatra region where later becomes known as a part of the Province of Sumatra Utara after the Declaration of Proclamation of The Republic of Indonesia in 17 August 1945 was comprised of Langkat, Deli, Serdang, Asahan, Batu Bara, Kualu, Panai, and Bila in the nineteenth century. According to Reid (1987), the East Sumatra region has many ethnic groups, such as the Malay, Karo Batak, and Simelungun who are the indigenous people. Pelzer said (1978: 3) “…in fact the greater part of the East Sumatran population consisted of Batak. It is quite possible that in the past the Karo Batak occupied the coast of Langkat, Deli and Serdang and the Simelungun Batak that of Batu Bara, the way the Toba Batak still hold the coast between the Asahan and Barumun rivers, but the they were gradually either displaced or assimilated by the incoming Malay element”. The largest part of them was subsistence peasants. They practiced tradition cultivation on temporary forest clearings.

In the late nineteenth century, the native people intensively began making contact with large-scale capitalist societies, represented by both the Netherland-Indies Government and European entrepreneurs. Mainly, they cooperated in making land lease contracts whereby The Sultans of various kingdoms represented the local people. Sultan usually approved those contracts without ordinary people’s participation. Later, these patterns of cooperation often became the triggers of agrarian conflicts.

This paper is trying to explain both the roots of conflict and its coping strategies from an historical perspective. Then, the strategy will compare with current policies of the government. The purpose of this paper is two fold: (1) to increase public awareness of the plantation dwellers development issues involved in plantation management; and (2) to make a policy recommendation that will, hopefully, promote good relations between the plantation companies and plantation dwellers.

Land Conflict in the Past

Below is what Pelzer wrote in his book : “…. the fall of 1940 when, unexpectedly, I was
forced to spend seven weeks, instead of an
anticipated one week, in Medan, the capital of
the great, prosperous plantation region which
stretches along the strait of Malacca from the
Aru Bay in Aceh to Labuan Batu on the
Barumun Panei River. During the course of this
enforced stay, I first learned about the great tug
of war, which was going on between planters,
the Indonesian sultans and the Netherland Indies
Government. The object of this tug of war was
the land occupied by the plantation under lease
arrangements, but the subject of the sultans had
alienable rights. All three parties were anxious
to see a disentanglement of the intertwined
agrarian rights of Westerns planters and
Indonesian peasants, but they could not agree on
the terms necessary to protect the future of both
the planters and the peasantry without affecting
the financial interest of the sultans. (Pelzer,
1978: V)

According to Pelzer, the agrarian conflicts
between the planters, who were usually
protected and supported by the sultans and the
ruling government, and the native peoples goes
back to the old days when land distribution and
its usage rights were unequal. Clashes such as
these have occurred from early days when
plantation-based investors were entering the
East Sumatra in the late nineteenth century.

We would later understand that agro
industry-based investments such as tobacco
plantations have given a range of benefits and
welfare to the planters and the local ruling elites.
Meanwhile, on the other side, the plantation
laborers and native people remain in a steady
state of misery and wholly inadequate
circumstances.

Referring to Pelzer (1978), we can say that
cooperation was going on between the planters
and local ruling elites (the sultans) could be seen
as a political conspiracy. They deceived local
people and manipulated the customary law in
attempt to get wider concessions for the
planters. Consequently, it has arisen various
confusion and angrily among of the native
people. For example, in 1871 Sultan of the Deli
Kingdom has given a concession to the planters,
there were within:

1. The territory of the Karo Batak
   confederation, or urung, Sepuluh Dua
   Kuta;
2. The territory of the Datuk of Sunggal, or
   the confederation of Serbanyaman;
3. The territory of the Datuk of Kampong
   Baru, or the confederation of Suka Piring;
4. The territory of the confederation
   Senembah Deli.

All four territories (urung) have been
belonged to the Karo-Batak, which had become
their traditional property rights, and then, the
territories beyond jurisdiction of Sultan. As I
said, commonly in order to give the concessions,
Sultan of Deli did not attempt to take a
participation of the Karo Batak Datuks which
has caused that he was accused violating the
custumary law which was prevailed prior to the
incoming of the Europe’s entrepreneurs.

The Sultan, actually, has two reasons so that
he has the courage to manipulate the content of
custumary law. Both are: firstly, in political
reason, he dares because he got full support
from the center ruling government. Second, in
economic reason, he very ambitious to line of
his pockets, which the money was given by the
planters as a payment for the concessions, and
his services.

Datuks and inhabitants became unsatisfied
since the planters and Sultan overacted, so that
they began making a social movement against
the sultan. They attacked the source of the
sultan’s newfound income by burning the
planters’ tobacco drying sheds, preferably when
filled with yields. More than that, ultimately,
they declare war on sultan. As wrote in the
historical book, the war occurred in 1872. It was
a big war, later known as the Sunggal War,
because the Dutch authorities was forced to
bring in troops from the Riouw Islands and from
Java who fought from May until November
1872 before the rebellious Karo-Batak chiefs
surrendered (see, Pelzer 1978: 69).

The Pattern of Conflict

Unpleasant relations between the plantation
companies and dwellers have been steadily
continuing and emerging in periodically since
1940s, 1950s, 1960s until present. It is easy to
explain the conflicts if we wish remember the
state of affairs in past time. In late nineteenth
century, those conflicts often had occurred when
a number of people had still infrequent and
empty land (tanah kosong) widely available too.
It seems normal if the conflicts recently had
become more difficult to avoid when a number
of people gradually grew-up and the size of the land had stay permanent.

Nowadays, conflict between the planters and plantation dwellers usually triggered by each of them laid claim to the land. The Plantation dwellers put a claim for the land based upon their customary rights, whereas the planters put a claim for the land based upon their licenses for land use (HGU), which issued by the government. In the other word, in two recent years, we saw social protest movements, which go back to old years, and, therefore, it is just like a historical circle.

It is interesting to ask: why have those conflicts been steadily occurring until now and government seems difficult to settle it? To find out the explanation, in my opinion, it is better if we see the government’s agrarian policies, particularly, as long as The Suharto’s regime (the new order) had been controlling Indonesia for 32 years.

As we known, the farmers perceive that land like their second soul. In religious terms, land is an object which relating to their ancestors as well as has a prestige values. Its mean is that someone who has no land either will difficult to meet of obligations to his/her ancestors or will has no pride. In the other words, the farmers need for owning, at least, a piece of land in order to maintain their offspring and to increase their reproductive capability, so their community will steadily continue. Unfortunately, the new order regime did not want to take into account the farmers’ belief regarding to the land. It is mean; in agrarian policy making process seems that government has less recognized the existing of farmers. As a result, even though Indonesia is an agriculture-based country where approximately 70% of people as rural dwellers, in fact, the government did not give a high priority to produce people-based land and agricultural policies. Rather, the new order regime has been implementing liberalized land-tenure system policies and supporting capital-intensive activities in rural areas. These policies had opened some possibilities either for someone or a certain corporation to get dominating land resources in wide-scale, almost unlimited.

Regrettably, the policies such as the green revolution programs had given some negative effects, those are: (1) the agricultural sector has already become as a capital-intensive industry. Even though the new agricultural technology more sophisticated and the yields kept increase, but it has become a causal factor for many labor forces became unemployment; and (2) more and more farmers became have no land again since their land were taken over by the large-scale industrialists or, at least, their land-wide became smaller. It happened since the government did not protect the farmer’s productive land from the capital owners who commonly characterized as the land-hunter. It is ironic situation, when a number of people who her/his living based on agriculture-related activities steadily increased, at the same time the farmlands were converted to non-agriculture needs in high-speed. Many wet-rice fields have been converted into a real estate, super market, highway road, manufacture industries, and otherwise. These matters occurred due to the capital owners got support from the government and military repressive behaviors. As a result, bargaining positions of the farmers became weaker and their existence high-risked to the market system changes.

The farmers perceived that the government policies, psychologically, had caused they felt to be abused, ignored, and disregarded. In sociological terms, these marginality processes had structural effects, which they harder to break away from the poverty and powerlessness traps. Then, in culturally, these circumstances had already maintained the farmers’ rebelliousness to the regime. Therefore, today we see that as long as agrarian policies are not reformed, logically, of course the agrarian conflicts between the planters and the local people will steadily occur. It is a historical dilemma and was became the government’s owe to the farmers. International statistics showed that the crime rates and political instability most tend to occur in countries, where were implementing an unequal land-distribute system.

Theoretically, the kinds of the farmers’ social movements include are: protest actions, latently social disobedience (i.e. burning the crops and production hardware facilities, stealing the yields, destroying the plantation roads, etc), explicitly harassment, land occupied, and physical war (see, Scoot, 1983:3). In addition, in doing a rebel action, there are two patterns of mass mobilizing. First is the rebellion without a leader. Thus, it is autonomous participation of each person to attack the common enemy. Second, a mass rebellion was provoked by a certain elite institution either a local leaders or internal and
external organizations (i.e. the NGOs and farmer associations).

The grade of rebellion relies on condition and political context changes. As long as the New Order regime had been reigning known that nothing yields of plantations were stolen and the plantation lands were occupied because the dwellers feared on military (TNI/POLRI) oppression. Adversely, nowadays, it is happen in frequently because prior to 1998 Indonesia is an authoritarian country, and suddenly without sufficiently transition processes all of the state institution such as executive, legislative and law enforce institutions have been being powerless. In other words, all of the state institutions have failed making the adjustment in the transitioning circumstances. Therefore, law enforcement has been becoming more difficult to endorse since reform’s era 1998 up to now, and consequently, the culture of law has gradually grown weakness. Law order in changing Indonesian was both full uncertainty and ambiguity. Second, in three recent years, the farmer’s chance to make alliances with the political parties and other vested interest groups was widely open. Most of them, right now, are affiliating with PDIP (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, Struggling Indonesia Democratic Party), which was symbolized as the new order regime’s opponent in a few years ago, and become the ruling government. In the other side, the planters and his labors are indistinguishable with the former ruling party, Golkar. They had long been taken for granted as the core constituents of the Golkar. However, the intensive contacts between the farmers and PDIP politicians have been most colored spirits to complain the social function of the plantations for dwellers. Similar effects have also been introduced NGO activists in their efforts into empowering the plantation dwellers. Currently, interrelations between the farmers and external organizations seems will be enhancing the courage and self-confidence of the farmers negotiating with the planters and the government.

**Recommendation**

The implementing people-based land policy, such as applying an agrarian reform, must become the main priority of government in effort to avoid agrarian conflicts in the future. The aim is to reorganize the land tenure systems and its inner resources, so that it will meet of the principles of fairness, social equality, and welfare for all people. It is easy to say, but it will only happen if there is a good will from all people, mainly from the government. For example, we may see to the Egypt’s experience when they had been making agrarian reform from 1950s until 1960s, which was, redistributed land to the poor farmers and somebody who has no land in efforts to increase the citizen’s productivity. It seems that the policy will be creating social prosperity for the Egypt’s people.

On the contrary, in Indonesia, implementing an agrarian policy same as Egypt’s seems still difficult. It needs the government’s good will as well as will require a set of capabilities, principally, for negotiating with all stakeholders, whereas, in the other side, in the grass-root levels the government will need continuously promote a cooling-down situations because disputes between the dwellers and the planters have still been occurring and extending until present. For this reason, it is better for the local government and legislative (DPRD) in province as well as in district levels more creative and proactive to carry out dispute resettlements especially since 2000 they have new political legalities and a set of law to do it as good as possible. Their new authorities mainly based on a set of regional autonomy laws that were issued after the fallen of the new order regime, such as: the Regional Governance Law No. 22/1999 and the Finances Balancing between Center and Local Government Law No. 25/1999. Based on these authorities must be designed the policies that will give most benefits for all first-hand stakeholders such as the dwellers, the companies, and the local governments. We would like possibly studying of the Dutch’s policy in coping of the conflicts between the dwellers and the planters together with the sultans in early 1870s. At that time, the Karo Batak’s spokesmen argued that their people would welcome the establishment of plantations in their territories, provided that: (1) enough land remain in their possession to practice tradition cultivation, (2) their fruit trees and other property would be respected, and (3) they would not be prevented by the Europeans from developing new pepper gardens and wet-
rice fields” (Pelzer, 1978: 70). A solution was given the Dutch resident in settled the conflict that is by ruling that payments for concessions in Karo territories must be divided into three equal parts, one-third going to the sultan, one-third to the Karo Batak Datuks, and one-third to the village chiefs within the concession (see, Pelzer 1978: 70).

The essence of that policy is creating a win-win solution, that all first-hand stakeholders get social economic incentives from the existing plantations within their region. Its mean, the dwellers have possibilities to access some resources surround the plantation in order to improve their income. By existing the incentives will encourage the dwellers’ participation to protect the plantation’s resources from destructive behavior by people, and others.

**Conclusion**

All stakeholders may recognize that the basic goal of the plantation companies is to meet the market demand on the plantation products. Their rights are able to quiet running their business and gaining improvement in order to give the salary of their labors and tax payment to the government, which is as an income source of the government. However, they also have an obligation that is giving contribute in prospering the plantation dwellers, so that the plantation development may become an example of the sustainable management of the environment. The point is that the community development in recent years has already increased its attention on environment issues. In spite of this, the difficulties in attaining the goal of sustainable development have not diminished.

**References**


