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## Gender and generation in engagements with oil palm in East Kalimantan, Indonesia: insights from feminist political ecology

Rebecca Elmhirst , Mia Siscawati, Bimbika Sijapati Basnett and Dian Ekowati

Across many parts of Indonesia, investment in oil palm has brought accelerated forms of land acquisition and market engagement for communities, signalling far-reaching implications for equity and well-being of current and future generations. This paper uses a conjunctural feminist political ecology approach to explore gendered and generational engagements with oil palm in Indonesia. The paper compares four communities in East Kalimantan that form part of an ongoing study of the gendered impacts of large-scale and independent smallholder investments in oil palm in the context of corporate zero deforestation commitments in West and East Kalimantan. We show how different pathways of engagement with oil palm – adverse or otherwise – reflect the interplay between modes of incorporation into oil palm systems with landscape history, gender, life stage and ethnic identity. Whilst our findings complicate singular ‘victim’ narratives, they also challenge the ‘cruel optimism’ that is accompanying the current oil palm boom.

**Keywords:** oil palm; gender; youth; Indonesia; forests; feminist political ecology

### Introduction

In many parts of Indonesia, oil palm investment is associated with accelerated forms of land acquisition and far-reaching implications for well-being and equity for smallholders and forest peoples in rural communities (White and Dasgupta 2010; Obidzinski et al. 2012; Potter 2011; Jiwan 2013; Cramb and McCarthy 2016). Whilst early analyses equated oil palm expansion with large-scale corporate-led dispossession, more recent studies reveal how its expansion involves a diverse range of differently positioned actors, and that the social impacts of this crop vary between types of land holder and modes of incorporation into oil palm systems (Obidzinski et al. 2012; McCarthy 2010; McCarthy and Zen 2016). Incorporation may simultaneously involve large-scale corporate land acquisition and the forging of smallholder leasing/contract schemes, coupled with the arrival of migrant contract workers. Local and migrant smallholders may themselves readily convert their fields to oil palm where resources allow: this is a crop which is also central to the emergence of a class of small-scale independent investors (Cramb and McCarthy 2016). Incremental land acquisitions for oil palm investment may indeed signal entrepreneurialism and rural dynamism, but also bring complex patterns of agrarian differentiation and dispossession. Such structural variations are what makes it possible to simultaneously identify on the one hand cases of accumulation by dispossession, accompanied by conflict and resistance (Colchester et al. 2006; McCarthy 2010; Li 2011), and on the other hand cases of smallholder ‘enthusiasm’ for oil palm, that attract policy responses aimed at facilitating

production and access to value chains (Rist, Feintrenie, and Levang 2010; Rival and Levang 2014).

Despite considerable research and advocacy on oil palm across a wide spectrum of political positions in Indonesia, there has been relatively little attention paid explicitly to the gender dimensions of its expansion, and even less to questions associated with youth, notwithstanding concerns over the potential for labour displacement in a country with already high levels of youth unemployment (Li 2011). In this paper, we explore the dynamics of gender and generation in oil palm investments in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, where oil palm investment takes multiple forms and comprises various modes of incorporation, from large-scale private-sector land acquisition to aspirational investments by local and migrant smallholders. Oil palm development in East Kalimantan began in the early 1980s with the then Indonesian New Order government's Project NES (PIR), a nucleus-plasma scheme managed by the state-run plantation company PTPVI. Investment accelerated rapidly in the early 2000s, led by large-scale private-sector acquisitions and stimulated by a rescaling of governance and forest concession control from the national to the district level. In line with district government regulations, these corporate investors must work through a partnership model (*kemitraan*) wherein a dividend from 20 percent of the total invested area (referred to as plasma) is shared out to land user communities. More recently, rapid expansion has been associated with expanding independent smallholder investment in oil palm by migrants and local people. Figures from East Kalimantan Province for 2014 indicate that of the total area of 740,092 hectares under oil palm, 51,995 hectares are under state oil palm, 486,596 hectares are under large-scale private-sector oil palm and 210,541 hectares are under independent smallholder oil palm.<sup>1</sup> In many places, communities are involved in some combination of these modes of incorporation to oil palm systems.

Amidst this diversity of forms, we seek to illuminate the processes that account for variations in gendered engagements with oil palm, and how these take shape in specific historical and geographical settings across East Kalimantan. Thus far, an emerging literature around the gendered impacts of and responses to oil palm links with parallel debates on gender, land rights and large-scale land deals more generally (for example, Behrman, Meizen-Dick, and Quisumbing 2012; Collins 2016; Daley and Pallas 2014; Archambault and Zoomers 2015). Writing specifically on oil palm investments, Julia and White (2012), Morgan (2013), Li (2015) and de Vos (2016) provide an explicit focus on gender impacts of and responses to oil palm companies in West Kalimantan, whilst Elmhirst and Darmastuti (2015) investigate the interplay between smallholder oil palm investments, emerging multi-local livelihood practices and migrant women's remittances in Lampung Province. In focusing on access to and control of land; voice, choice and participation in decision-making; and employment, wages, and contractual precarity, such studies share a generally pessimistic appraisal of the gendered impacts of oil palm, and show that women's role within prevailing and emergent gender divisions of labour, their lack of formal recognition in relation to emerging property relations, and limited engagement in *public* decision-making mean gendered disadvantage and exclusion.

However, the complex and diverse modes of incorporation into and responses to oil palm systems evident in the oil palm literature more generally suggest that gendered impacts and responses may be equally diverse and wide-ranging. Thus, we posit that how each of the dimensions outlined above unfolds depends on agro-ecological, historical,

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<sup>1</sup>Figures from BPS Statistik Kelapa Sawit Indonesia 2014 (Oil Palm Statistics of Indonesia).

cultural and political context, and on the prevailing mode of incorporation into oil palm systems. Further, recent contributions to debates on the gender dimensions of land acquisitions make it clear that social relations of age (or life-course stage), marital status, ethnicity, religion and class also inflect and shape the ways in which gender dynamics play out (Park and Daley 2015). For example, questions around youth and the unfolding of relations between generations (parents and children) are raised as future impacts and consequences of large-scale land acquisitions are felt most by those with the least voice when such transactions are taking place.

Our aim in this study, therefore, is to explore some of this complexity through a feminist political ecology approach that is both conjunctural and intersectional. Feminist political ecology is a subfield of political ecology which, in its explicit commitment to tackling gendered inequality and injustice, directs attention towards gendered processes underpinning the politics of resource access, whilst at the same time attending to the gendered agency of those struggling for justice and fairness in the face of transformation.<sup>2</sup> Our engagement with feminist political ecology highlights the conjuncture of processes that position different categories of men and women in relation to resource access and control in oil palm contexts. A similar conceptual framing of conjuncture has been used by researchers investigating complex oil palm-related transformations. Historically sedimented material and social elements such as agro-ecology, culture, technology, political, social and economic relations (including modes of incorporation into oil palm systems) combine at specific historical moments to shape the impacts of and responses to oil palm, and in turn to produce (potentially) specific path dependencies for what then follows (McCarthy 2010). Understanding the impact of oil palm requires an understanding of its insertion into the socio-political dynamics of East Kalimantan's political forest (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001), where different formations of tenure, property and resource access are of key importance.

The study draws on primary data collected in four case study communities in East Kalimantan where livelihoods have been affected by corporate and (to a lesser extent) small-holder oil palm investment, which in all cases began around 10 years ago. The communities selected reflect a range of modes of incorporation into oil palm systems, migration and settlement history, and varying natural resource contexts, i.e. they have contrasting socio-natural histories. In addition, the communities are made up of different ethnic groups, with distinctive gender dynamics that are in turn associated with each community's socio-ecological history. Three of the communities are located close to each other in the sub-district of Segah in Berau, whilst Long Uma is located in Telen sub-district, East Kutai (Table 1).

Our framework proposes that contrasting socio-ecological histories may give shape not only to gender norms and gender relations around resource access, but also to variations in the material and meaning-laden effects of oil palm investments and modes of incorporation. We extend this relational perspective to foreground gender as one of the 'relations' within the conjuncture, but we understand it as intersectional: produced through relations of ethnicity, religion, class and life-course stage, but not reducible to any one of these. Thus, configurations of gender norms and practices can only be understood by attending to the ways gender, life-course stage (age), ethnicity, class, race, sexuality and other socio-political or cultural categories interrelate and, through this interrelationship, shape how subordination (and privilege) is experienced and lived (Lykke 2010).

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<sup>2</sup>See Elmhirst (2015) for an introduction to feminist political ecology.

Table 1. Case study communities.

	Community characteristics	Socio-ecological history and livelihoods	Mode of incorporation to oil palm
Long Segeh	Gaai Dayak community in upland area of Segah River basin. Population of 568, mostly Catholic.	Established in the 1960s. Previously logging, gaharu resin and artisanal gold mining. Now: swidden rice, rubber, forest products, wage work on nearby oil palm plantations.	Corporate 'leasing' of land for oil palm cultivation through kemitraan system (company controls 80% of development area, 20% plasma in form of a dividend shared by the community).
Gunung Tarik	Berau Malay community that now includes large number of Bugis cross-border migrant workers returning from Sabah oil palm work, originally from Sulawesi. Population of 7897 of whom around 3500 are Bugis migrants. Both Malay and Bugis are Muslim.	Established in the 1970s. Previously logging, gaharu resin and artisanal gold mining. Now: swidden rice, wage work on nearby oil palm plantations. Independent smallholder cultivation of oil palm.	Corporate 'leasing' of land for oil palm cultivation through kemitraan system: company controls 80% of development area (inti), 20% plasma in form of a dividend shared by the community. Acquisition of plots by migrant smallholders for independent oil palm.
Bumi Jaya	Mostly Javanese and Sundanese in origin, some migrants from oil palm plantations who have bought land.	Transmigration settlement established in 1982 to serve timber plantation. Rain-fed irrigated rice fields, mixed food cropping, wage work on oil palm, some independent cultivation of oil palm.	Not incorporated into large-scale systems. Some independent smallholder investment in oil palm on allocated transmigration land. Some acquisition of additional plots.
Long Uma	Resettled Kenyah Dayak swidden cultivators. Protestant and Catholic communities.	Established in 1962. Swidden rice, rubber, tree crops, wage labour on oil palm plantation.	Corporate leasing of land by private investor. Some independent smallholder investment. Partially implemented kemitraan plasma-inti arrangement.

Sources: Household survey, focus group discussions and key informant interviews, July 2014, and August–September 2016.

In combining these elements, we seek to illuminate the processes that account for variations in gendered engagement with oil palm investments, and how these take shape in the case study communities. We adopted a mixed-methods approach comprising an intra-household survey, focus group discussions and individual interviews with men and women (and male and female youths, defined as younger than 23) in each community. Field work took place over two rounds, from August to November 2014 and August to early November 2016, and was conducted by two teams of male and female field workers. In Long Uma, the study was able to draw on anthropological survey work conducted in the early 1980s in order to explore longer term changes to gender norms and forest livelihoods.

The discussion is organised as follows. We begin by outlining the ways in which socio-ecological histories (of resource governance, migration and resettlement), and gender

norms and relations in the case study communities provide the terrain on which modes of incorporation into oil palm systems have played out. Next we discuss gendered incorporation into different kinds of oil palm systems, focusing on processes of land acquisition and their outcomes. In the remainder of the paper, we consider in turn the disappointments, hopes and ‘cruel optimism’ that mark engagements with corporate and independent smallholder investments in oil palm, and what this means for gender and intergenerational justice in Indonesia’s oil palm landscapes. Overall, we find that whilst oil palm has brought short-term economic opportunities, gender and generational equity is challenged by the interplay between gender norms, the modes by which communities engage with and are incorporated into oil palm systems and the erosion of security over current and future access to land. Our study shows that gender dynamics are important in terms of the gendered impacts of oil palm investments on men’s and women’s resource access and livelihood opportunities, in terms of the engagements different categories of men and women have with oil palm as they seek the betterment of their livelihood prospects; and in facilitating and enabling pathways for oil palm development within communities.

### **The gendered terrain of oil palm investment**

East Kalimantan’s oil palm transformation is the latest phase in the province’s socio-ecological history, which has been marked since the colonial era by successive waves of large-scale resource extraction (timber, coal mining and timber plantation) and the opening up of transmigration resettlement sites (Deddy 2006; Elmhirst, Siscawati, and Colfer 2016; Gönner 2011; Haug 2014). This, coupled with the changing modalities of resource governance that underpin such transformations, has changed resource access and control, and livelihood opportunities for Dayak swidden cultivators in Long Segeh and Long Uma, Berau-Malay smallholders in Gunung Tarik, and migrants whose families originated from various regions beyond Kalimantan, including state-sponsored Javanese transmigrants in Bumi Jaya, as well as oil palm migrants from South Sulawesi who have settled in Gunung Tarik. The gendered practices and interactions of these groups have themselves contributed to changing resource dynamics in East Kalimantan.

### ***Socio-ecological histories***

From the 1960s onwards, with the enactment of the Basic Forestry Law No. 5 of 1967, access to and control of land resources were profoundly shaped by the state’s authority over areas classified as *kawasan hutan* (forest zone), through which areas were divided into land-use categories such as production forest (mainly for timber extraction and timber plantations), protection forest (mainly for soil and hydrological protection), conservation forest (for national parks, nature reserves and animal sanctuary) and convertible forest (for industrial-scale agriculture, transmigration, mining, infrastructure development, etc.). Concessions for timber extraction in production forests (*Hak Pemungutan Hasil Hutan* or *HPHH*) have been granted on this basis, whilst other forms of state resource control include the granting of commercial use rights (*Hak Guna Usaha* or *HGU*) to enable the conversion of forest area to land for agriculture, principally through state or private-sector commercial plantations, or for the development of transmigration resettlement schemes. Thus, the study communities are differently located within a mosaic of resource concessions, controlled and granted originally by the central government and, more recently, by a range of other actors at provincial and district levels of government (Colchester et al. 2006; Urano 2014).

These forms of state control overlies areas characterised by local customary use, leading to the *de facto* coexistence of overlapping resource access regimes of local communities,

state and commercial interests. In the mainly Dayak case study communities of Long Segeh and Long Uma, concepts of land access involve a combination of individual rights, usufruct or customary rights for the establishment of rubber and fruit gardens and rotating swiddens, and uncultivated lands often subject to common access (for hunting and gathering of forest products). This has resulted in a complex coexistence of collective rights (*hak ulayat* or communal rights) and *de facto* individual entitlements (Semedi and Bakker 2014) associated with both subsistence swidden rice cultivation and production for the market (e.g. rubber). Similar arrangements exist within the Berau Malay community of Gunung Tarik.

The relationship between state and customary resource control is unequal as laws continue to be interpreted in ways that prioritise 'national development', including green governance, over customary rights, even in circumstances where the latter are acknowledged. This continues to facilitate the allocation of concessions or development permits by the state, in which local and national governments have different roles within the granting process of the concessions and permits, over and above community interests. Furthermore, in much of East Kalimantan, customary tenure practices exceed the notion of land as a mere location for agricultural production. Land becomes meaningful to people through social relationships, and it is via these relations that people are able to benefit from resource access (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Land, and the benefits people can derive from land, can concurrently be valuable for socio-economic, cultural, spiritual, ecological and political reasons (de Vos 2016). In sum, the plural and uneven nature of access to resources underscores the gendered impact of oil palm investments of various kinds. As will be shown, it is the disconnection between state, corporate and community understandings of these multifarious bundles of rights and recognition that underlies many of the issues, and that continues to blight oil palm investment.

### ***Mobility, settlement and land***

A second dimension to the socio-ecological history of resource access and control in East Kalimantan concerns the role of migration and resettlement in shaping land acquisition, tenure and resource control. The relationship between migration and resource control is multi-faceted. The establishment of state-sponsored transmigration settlements comprising settlers mostly from Java brought tenure systems based on individual household ownership of land resources as transmigrants were allocated two-hectare plots for food and tree cropping through the scheme. The case study community of Bumi Jaya exemplifies this experience: transmigrants came in 1997 during the El Niño drought, and faced difficulties associated with crop failure, poor soils and a lack of infrastructure linking them to market centres. However, in the context of relative security of tenure, the landscape was quite rapidly reworked to provide rain-fed irrigated rice fields, whilst home gardens were created for growing fruit and other food crops. Other forms of migration have also been apparent, including, as is the case with Long Uma, the government-sponsored settlement of Dayak swidden cultivators into 'resettlement villages' in the early 1960s, ostensibly to facilitate the delivery of state services to remote communities. In the cases of Long Segeh, and Gunung Tarik, floods and other forms of environmental degradation meant communities had relocated to more promising areas in the 1970s when land was relatively abundant.

More recently, in both Bumi Jaya and Gunung Tarik the arrival and settlement of migrants from South Sulawesi and elsewhere has been propelled by engagement in logging and, even more recently, the oil palm boom. Gunung Tarik has been transformed by the arrival of several hundreds of migrants seeking oil palm-based livelihoods and access to land for small-scale independent oil palm investment. This began in 2002 with a small

group of families from Sulawesi, and then soon after, a second wave of returning cross-border migrants (also originally hailing from Sulawesi, with many being relatives of the first wave). The migrants had been drawn by the promise of access to cultivable land, and for those coming from Malaysia, this was a need driven by the expiry of employment permits in Malaysian oil palm plantations. Social ties with people in Gunung Tarik, including key political figures, coupled with a shared Muslim identity (which helped in welcoming migrants) were factors driving this phenomenon. The migrants settled on land that had originally been allocated by the state for conversion to a transmigration settlement, but as that scheme had been abandoned, the land was regarded as 'idle' but convertible to agricultural uses. Our research also shows that the development of a land market, coinciding with the arrival of migrants in recent years, has created the conditions under which it is no longer sufficient to rely on customary resource access arrangements. In Gunung Tarik, a third of survey respondents reported being in possession of a Surat Keterangan Tanah (SKT), which is a village-level recognition of ownership, deployed even where there is a lack of clear transparency over the legal status of land. A growing awareness of the commercial value of land was emerging even prior to oil palm investment.

### *Situating gender in East Kalimantan*

To make sense of the gendered impacts of large-scale (and migrant smallholder) oil palm investments in the study sites, 'gender' and 'gender inequality' need to be placed in context, particularly with regard to resource access and forest-based livelihoods. In much of Indonesia, gender binaries and gender hierarchies are fluid and complex: gender is often less marked than other social categories, such as age, position in the sibling birth order and marital status. As Sears notes, gender 'may be one of the least contested sites of discontent in contemporary Indonesia where poverty, ethnic tensions, persecution, and disease coexist within global networks of late capitalism' (Sears 1996, 4). This means that gender questions are often hidden from view, masked by other, apparently more pressing concerns.

Anthropologists have linked the relative lack of gender hierarchy, and the structural importance of women in Indonesia historically to prevailing socio-ecological conditions, which provide the conditions in which norms and practices of gender take shape. These include (1) the availability of frontier land and the historical role of women as pioneers in land development (as is evident in Long Segeh and Long Uma); (2) low population densities in some places (as was previously the case in all the case study communities), meaning that women's labour was essential for realising the benefits of resource access; (3) rice-based agrarian systems in which women are dominant; (4) the relatively late development of a centralised state which has led to a conceptual gap between the patriarchal state and local culture; (5) the predominance of bilateral kinship, and the inheritance of land and other resources by daughters; and (6) women's control over money and management of family finances (Colfer 2008; Atkinson and Errington 1990). Gender also intersects with age, marital status and position in the life course. Within the household and kinship systems, authority is often conferred upon the mother role through the construct of Ibuism (ibu meaning mother), which permits women to 'go beyond narrow domestic boundaries to pursue economic and political activities beneficial to their families', and this may expand into the participation of women in public spaces in particular circumstances (Locher-Scholten and Niehof 1987, 7).

These general points aside, gender is understood through its intersection with ethnicity, sometime analysed as adat or custom, which shapes gender norms, kinship practices and property relations, and it is within this intersection that critical gender concerns emerge.



For example, in Dayak communities such as Long Segeh and Long Uma, social relationships are not ordered by a fundamental code of gendered differentiation, and there is limited evidence of norms restricting or enabling activities purely on the basis of gender. Women and men were able to inherit plots of land (e.g. fruit gardens), the mutability of gender roles has historically been shaped by men's travel for work or hunting forays, and women play a central role (symbolically and materially) in swidden rice cultivation. Women are able to attend adat dispute resolution meetings, for example, but they tend to sit at the side or to be positioned as 'audiences' to men's arguments (Tsing 1990; Colfer 2008). Adat cannot easily be distinguished as an originary domain of social practice due to cultural flows associated with European colonialism and global capitalism, and, for Dayak groups generally, Christianity. For other groups in the study, e.g. Berau Malay or Bugis in Gunung Tarik, cultural flows associated with Islam intersect with gendered adat practices and discourses. In both groups, principles of social differentiation associated with generation or class are relatively marked compared with Dayak communities. In other words, 'bilateral forms of kinship give women sources of power in everyday relations, and bilateral inheritance ensures their access to productive resources' (Robinson 2009, 20).

Whilst gender complementarity and equality are notable in Indonesia, in everyday life the overall prestige and power enjoyed by men typically exceed those of women, and this in part reflects the ways that gender practices and relations are also shaped by the gender discourses and practices of the Indonesian state. State gender ideology comprises an ideal pattern of gender centring on a household in which men exercise power over women. Many state-led development interventions carry this ordering of gender, and its associated definitions of appropriate gender roles: usually, a male bread-winning household head, and a female care-giver. Whilst the origins of this ideology are generally placed within the New Order government (1966–1998), this kind of ideology continues to pervade both private- and state-led development initiatives and interventions, not least those associated with access to land and property. Whilst there is nothing specific that restricts women from taking title to land, in practice such ideologies mean there is a default to a male titular head. For example, as has been noted elsewhere in Indonesia, the transmigration settlement of Bumi Jaya was established through the allocation of land based on a model of a male-headed nuclear family farm (Elmhirst 2011). The state's homogenising of gender and family is particularly troublesome when it rubs against local gendered adat practices such as those associated with Dayak and Malay communities, and this again underscores some of the particularities of the gender and generational impacts of land acquisition for oil palm in the study. The intersection of gender and generation with ethnicity is significant because ethnicity is more than an identity position: it is associated with a historical relationship with a centralising state, with particular resource access histories, and with different kinds of relationship (material and symbolic) with the forest and forest resources.

We conclude this part of the discussion by noting that oil palm investments have taken place amidst a landscape already marked by extractivist resource politics (logging, mining, timber plantations), communities already oriented towards market engagement (rubber cultivation, the sale of non-timber forest products), and portfolio livelihoods combining subsistence, wage work and migration. Moreover, migration and settlement associated with resource investments and transmigration have fostered ethnic diversity and, with this, a continual redrawing of gender norms, suggesting a need to recognise gender not simply as an essentialised and geographically bounded form of knowledge but as in process, produced through widening geographies of production, trade and communication (Colfer and Minarchek 2013; Elmhirst, Siscawati, and Colfer 2016). The practice of combining subsistence with cash was well established long before the arrival of oil palm. As Gönner (2011) notes

among Benuaq Dayak in nearby Kutai Barat, the forest provided ‘waves of opportunities’ for communities who would frequently switch from one income source to another, depending on resource availability, market prices, seasonality and so on, as a resilience-building strategy for coping with external shocks. At least in our Dayak and Berau Malay case study communities, the combination of women’s prominent role in swidden rice cultivation, dependence on women’s labour in forest swiddens and male temporary outmigration have led to gender norms that highlight strong independent women and relatively egalitarian household decision-making, even as public community-level decisions may be made by men. These factors provide a variegated context in which incorporation into oil palm systems has subsequently unfolded in gendered ways.

### **Gendered incorporation into oil palm systems**

Oil palm investment began in the case study communities in the early 2000s when large-scale private companies began to take an interest in the area, with a view to taking over former logging concessions. Two principal business models feature in our study. The first of these is the ‘partnership’ model (*kemitraan*), an evolution of earlier state-run nucleus estate and smallholder schemes, which is described by Cramb and McCarthy (2016, 58) as a ‘radical reshaping of benefit-sharing arrangements’. For example, corporate investment in oil palm in Gunung Tarik (by PT Hutan Hijau Mas) and in Long Segeh (by PT Natura Pacific Nusantara, PT Berau Karetindo Lestari, PT Mulia Inti Perkasa, and PT Agrindo Sukses Sejahtera) is undertaken on a business model that includes a plasma revenue-sharing system, in accordance with Berau District Government Regulation No. 25 (2003), which stipulates that every plantation company must establish a partnership with communities around its plantation in the form of a dividend distribution or nucleus-plasma scheme (sometimes referred to as *plasma-inti*). This means dividends are split 80:20 between the company (nucleus) and the community (plasma), with benefits divided within the community according to how the ‘plasma’ was allocated.<sup>3</sup> This is effectively the allocation of profits from two hectares of plasma land per recipient, once the cost of land clearing, planting, crop maintenance and other operational costs have been deducted. Letters of agreement between the companies and the communities do not recognise customary rights to land, and instead make reference to ‘Tanah Negara’ (state land), thus effectively supporting the claims of the state over community land. In effect, communities have entered into a debt arrangement with the company in relation to land over what they perceived to be their own land. This model predominates in Long Segeh, in Long Uma and, to an extent, in Gunung Tarik. For those in the transmigration settlement of Bumi Jaya, no such arrangement was made: incorporation into this business model was in terms of access to oil palm wage work. The second model is independent smallholder production which, as will be argued, is flourishing in parts of Gunung Tarik and in Bumi Jaya due to a specific set of circumstances that has provided these communities with access to social networks, capital and knowledge that go some way towards enabling engagement with this type of production.

Across the diverse contexts represented by the case study communities, large-scale oil palm has brought mixed blessings. These patterns reflect local histories and the positioning of particular groups of people *vis-à-vis* the oil palm sector. For local Dayak and Malay

<sup>3</sup>Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten Berau Nomor 25 Tahun 2003 Tentang Perijinan Usaha Perkebunan Di Kabupaten Berau (Berau District Regulation No. 25 Year 2003 on Licensing of Plantations in the District of Berau).

communities, the impacts of oil palm are embedded into wider (and longstanding) processes that have affected customary tenure arrangements and security of access to resources which close down some opportunities for forest-based livelihoods. However, reduced access to forest resources and impacts on swiddens (many of which are now located at considerable distance from communities) are weighed alongside other changes which have facilitated capacities to realise the benefit of access. For example, access to cash has meant households can now afford motorbikes, enabling people to get to distant swiddens.

In a wealth-ranking exercise conducted during data collection, it became apparent that on a number of indicators, many families have seen their livelihoods and overall well-being improve since the arrival of oil palm. Today, many people own a motorcycle, some have a car, and many parents are able to afford to send their children to senior high school, and even up to college – and, for now, this has had the effect of driving aspirations towards a future beyond the forest for young people. Ten years ago, livelihoods were based on cultivating subsistence rice and vegetables, accompanied by the sale of some forest products, and from wages earned by male migration (*merantau*). Today, the introduction of a market economy, new jobs and livelihood opportunities means that people can already have cash from the result of work in the company, investing in oil palm themselves, and trade in the local area. The presence of oil palm plantations has brought increased numbers of people with their workers from outside the region, creating markets for local goods. It has contributed to raised household incomes as produce from people's gardens (*kebun*) can be sold to these 'imported' workers.

In addition, people have been able to grow oil palm themselves, independent of the company, and in communities such as Gunung Tarik where this has been established for longer, are now feeling the income from oil palm. Oil palm is emerging as a primary source of income, with subsistence rice and vegetable cultivation an add-on rather than the focus of livelihoods. Activities such as seeking gaharu resin, timber, honey, rattan and other forest products, including hunting and fishing, have become a second job for what are now oil palm communities. Concerns about reduced access to labour opportunities (as described by Li 2011) were not articulated: if anything, oil palm was 'sold' to communities on the basis of access to wealth without having to labour for it. Indeed, one of the ways of persuading communities to accept the terms offered by plantation companies was that they would receive dividends without having to contribute labour and capital of their own. To paraphrase one of our interviewees, people were told they could just sit on the porch and watch the money roll in. Our findings concur in part with the observation of White and Dasgupta (2010) and Rival and Levang (2014) who make the point that the objection of local communities is not to oil palm per se, but rather to the unfair terms on which they must engage with it. For the communities in our study at least, adverse incorporation hinges on exclusion from access to the benefits of oil palm within their own livelihood systems. We suggest, therefore, that the institutions that mediate company–community relations and access to oil palm benefits are crucial sites in which to explore gendered disadvantage in oil palm systems. Rather than focus on labour relations in corporate oil palm operations (e.g. Li 2015), our analysis here focuses on the gender dynamics evident in three related dimensions of company–community relations: first, in the negotiations over land and the introduction of plasma (a process referred to as *sosialisasi*); second, in the structure and operation of 'plasma dividends'; and, third, in the operation of smallholder producer cooperatives.

### **Land acquisition and the gender dynamics of adverse incorporation**

The process of large-scale land acquisition involved a number of stages and levels of government. It began with oil palm companies first securing a location permit from the district government; second, getting a conversion permit if the area was within the boundaries of

the state forest zone; third, acquiring a business license from provincial authorities; and, finally, getting a concession license (HGU) from the Ministry of Agrarian and Spatial Planning (previously known as the National Land Agency/BPN). These steps are applied with the conception that all lands within the area proposed for the oil palm concession (Hak Guna Usaha or HGU) are state lands unless officially certified as privately owned. Alongside this process, the companies were seeking 'consent' from local land users, in this case Dayak in Long Uma and Long Segeh, and Berau Malay in Gunung Tarik, respectively. As a resettlement site, the transmigrant settlement of Bumi Jaya was outside the concession area (HGU) identified for oil palm so land users were not consulted, even as large-scale oil palm would come to impact on their livelihoods more broadly. The 'consent' process closely resembled what McCarthy and Robinson (2016, 8) have observed elsewhere in Indonesia, where the role of local landowners and customary institutions is 'reduced to bargaining over the benefits offered by developers under licences that had already been issued by higher authorities'. Community consultation involved top-down 'sosialisasi' – a term used to describe the process of being 'informed', and this is common practice in company–community negotiations. Community meetings focused on the limited levels of effort required for large financial returns, compensation for swidden and tree crops, plasma dividends, opportunities for wage work and the infrastructure provision that would accompany development, with promises that well-being levels would be similar to that found in Brunei. There was a sense that large-scale investment would not impact on swidden cultivation as there was still at that time a perception that land was plentiful and that access to land for rice cultivation would not be an issue. For example, the former village head in Gunung Tarik was rather dismissive when asked about the impact on people's access to land – a few thousand hectares would not be missed: 'The people who gave up their land still had access to other land. It was not a problem' (former village leader, interview, September 2016).

In Long Segeh, the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), which had been active in developing a project introducing rubber to halt deforestation, mobilised the community to resist incorporation and facilitated an agreement between five villages to do so collectively. In response, companies, working in tandem with representatives from local government, invited village leaders (the village head, the head of the adat council and the head of the Badan Perwakilan Kampung [BPK, or village representative body]) to oil palm areas in West Sulawesi, a trip paid for by PT Berau Karetindo. As rubber prices were low at that time, this was a persuasive tactic: 'I described what I saw to the people in the village. Many people rejected it but I kept trying to convince them. Finally, they accepted it' (Adat council leader, Long Segeh, July 2014).

Thus, the leaders ensured that the community withdrew from the earlier agreement with neighbouring villages and the NCC, and instead gave their consent for inclusion in the investment. It is evident that at the time of negotiations, many people did not understand what they were entering into, and there was little in the way of strong leadership to challenge the company with searching questions. Adat leaders were also silent at the time, even though they have gone on to sound their concerns over what happened. As shifting cultivators unused to sedentary forms of property rights, there was an assumption that the company would hold the land for one crop cycle and then move on. Effectively, they were persuaded to give their consent, but without full and transparent information. Decisions were largely confined to a select group of people, and most people were left unaware or only marginally involved in the actual negotiations. While many were convinced by company rhetoric about the positive livelihood benefits that would follow, there were limited spaces available in which to voice dissent, both locally and extra-locally.

In Long Segeh, interviews with village elites and analysis of the official letters provided by the companies to the village leaders to secure agreement of land acquisition show a divergence of understanding over what ‘land acquisition’ implied. Village leaders assumed (wrongly) that the acquisition was temporary, for one 35-year cycle. But the letter of agreement itself does not acknowledge that this is community land in the first place: rather, what communities are signing up for is an agreement that ‘their’ land belongs to the state. Because no minutes were kept on the discussions during ‘socialisation’ meetings, local communities had no way of verifying what the company promised and what was understood/interpreted by the community. There was no way of holding the companies to account for not fulfilling their obligations, too.

The muddiness of *sosialisasi* was experienced by both men and women in the communities, but women and young people faced a second layer of exclusion due to the ways in which the community interfaced with the company and the local government. A number of points are salient here. First, there are complex reasons for the gender-specific exclusion. In part, it reflects the way oil palm is socially constructed in village, regional and national gender discourses as a ‘man’s crop’, just as subsistence (and household nutrition) is equated with women. It is also reflective of a longer term positioning of men with some seniority as the group that interfaces with the state. Oil palm companies are seen as part of a state–business assemblage. Gendered discourses colouring the ‘nature’ of oil palm and the practices of ‘consultation’ are partly internalised by women and young people, meaning their participation in *sosialisasi* meetings was limited, adding a further layer that limited access to information for free and informed consent.

Secondly, a combination of local gender norms and state/company stereotypes in their programme design have in effect facilitated the process of land acquisition with limited local opposition. Gendered divisions of labour in Dayak and Berau Malay communities position women as key to swidden rice cultivation, and therefore women are most likely to voice concerns over the replacement of food cropping spaces with oil palm. Indeed, women in Long Segeh said in interviews that they had been keen to be part of the decision because it would inevitably impinge on how they were able to reproduce their households. As one participant explained:

Back then when the company came, they never held meeting with us ‘the women’. We were invited only once, there were five women. But we only listened, rather than speaking. The village staff, a local person [i.e. Dayak], told us: ‘palm oil is not women’s thing’, despite the fact that we are the ones who provide meals at home. We cannot plant chili, papaya, cassava and corn if all parcels of land are occupied by palm oil . . . I once told the kampung staff, but not directly to the company: . . . ‘If I was a kampung official, I will not do it [i.e. let oil palm be grown everywhere], there will be no land left for our children and grandchildren’. Again he answered: ‘This is not women’s thing’. I said ‘It’s not only me who has children and grandchildren, you do too’. (older Dayak woman, Long Segeh, August 2016)

As this quotation reflects, women articulated their concerns with regard to food security and care for the prospects of future generations, as this woman appears to suggest. But by defining oil palm as a men-only issue, and young people having limited involvement in negotiations, key decision makers appeared to direct the discussions to men only and exclude women’s concerns from their deliberations. Such concerns could not be heard because women were restricted from accessing spaces for negotiation.

Thirdly, in many instances, only the household head came to the meeting, as representative of the family. Whilst there were no obvious restrictions on women’s participation, women were not directly invited to join in. Gender stereotyping evident in the practices

of companies and local government coupled with community norms in which it is men who are the public face with outsiders made it unusual for women to play a publicly active role in negotiations with company or government representatives, even when in other spaces women were vocal and active. In Dayak communities, women said that they often expressed their grievances amongst themselves but they didn't dare (*tidak berani*) to raise them in front of their husbands or at the community level for fear of transgressing gendered religious norms of being a 'good Christian wife'. In preparing the ground for investment, the *sosialisasi* invoked and reproduced gender and familial norms, which had the effect of reducing the meaningful participation of both women and young people. The rolling out of the oil palm negotiation in this way also demonstrates how quickly gendered practices become new gender norms (around the gendering of oil palm) and how this goes on to condition other gendered engagements, for example with the management of the plasma dividends oil palm cooperative.

### **Disappointment: gendered exclusions in plasma dividend arrangements**

In exchange for giving up current and future rights to use communal and private land, local communities were offered compensation and promised the distribution of plots planted with oil palm in the form of plasma. In the case study communities, 'plasma' refers to a dividend distribution scheme in which recipients receive the net revenue from two hectares of oil palm once the cost of land clearing, planting, crop maintenance and other operational costs have been deducted. Both the plasma (20 percent of the investment area) and the main plantation are managed as a block without any direct input from the dividend recipient. Management of day-to-day relations with oil palm companies is through a cooperative (*koperasi*), established in each community to conduct land mapping and to resolve conflicts between the company and the people. The cooperative is also responsible for handling plasma arrangements, including the distribution of plasma within the community, and the management of dividend payments from this. Each cooperative management board included members of the community, but these tended to be coopted elites. In none of the cases were there women on the management board of their respective cooperatives. For example, in Gunung Tarik, the cooperative management board included members from the community, but these were from the middle and upper social groupings (as per the wealth ranking conducted by the field team) and none were women.

Once the cooperative was formed, the Board then collected identity cards (KTP) and family cards from each household head so that they could be registered as recipients of smallholder plasma. A list of names was then submitted and, ultimately, a list of the names of plasma recipients sent to the Bupati (Leader) of the District government. The name on the recipient list was the name of the head of the family, and in most cases these were men's names, although widows (i.e. women heads of household) could be listed. In Gunung Tarik, a community with a high number of migrants, it was notable that the list of recipients included non-natives (i.e. non-Dayak or Berau Malay). In other words, receipt of plasma depended not on ethnicity, but on residency as recognised by the issuance of identity cards to those living within the administrative boundaries of Gunung Tarik at the time of the acquisition. However, in the transmigrant settlement of Bumi Jaya, plasma allocations were not made at all. In Long Segeh, where four companies were operating, the allocation of two hectares per family meant, in theory, each household would have access to plasma dividends from eight hectares of land.

Effectively, the system of distributing plasma had a number of gender implications. First, it was based on the idea of a male head of household, thus mimicking the gender

ideology of the Indonesian state, which positions men as breadwinners, and women as dependents. This stereotyping has been the subject of much criticism for the ways that it overrides more nuanced and egalitarian gendered practices of resource access and entitlement in communities across Indonesia, but in particular in indigenous communities such as Dayak. Secondly, the use of identity cards (KTP) is significant as, effectively, decisions over entitlement are lodged with political leaders (the village head, in conjunction with the District Head). In effect, access to resources rested on a small but powerful grouping of political figures, all men, creating a system that was vulnerable to elite male capture.

The plasma system did not progress as hoped in any of the communities (Table 2). There has been considerable disquiet about a lack of transparency over the distribution of benefits accruing from the oil palm. Firstly, plasma holders often are unaware of the precise plot of land that is 'their' plasma. However, the plasma resource is accessed purely 'on paper': under a dividend scheme such as this, households would, in theory, hold a letter outlining the hectares from which they would benefit in terms of income generated by the oil palm once costs (for labour and processing) had been deducted by the company. In other words, realising the benefits of access (following Ribot and Peluso's 2003 'theory of access') was contingent on the smooth and transparent operation of this dividend scheme. There was no expectation that households would provide the labour themselves for the oil palm.

Interviews with both community members and cooperative staff in Long Segeh and Gunung Tarik showed that most recipients did not know where 'their' plasma was located. None had received any income from their plasmas. But, importantly, the plasma

Table 2. Plasma promises and actual practice.

	Promised during negotiations	Actual practice
Plasma	Re-allocation of 20% of land handed over as plasma. Both inti and plasma managed as a block without the need of labour contribution from plasma holders.	Plasma holders often do not know location of 'their' plasma. Has the effect of establishing indebtedness as costs of establishing oil palm must be paid off. Plasma certificates retained by company: lack of transparency.
Dividends from plasma	Plasma holders to receive regular dividends within four years, amounting to regular and decent income for holders and families.	Lack of transparency over how dividend is calculated, variations in monthly income unexplained and seemingly random, according to 'grading' of quality of oil palm fruits. Plasma sales have created a 'paper land market'.
Cooperative	Interface between company and community on behalf of community, manages oil palm, plasma dividends, dividends from sale of oil palm fruits. May also provide guidance to smallholders.	Long Segeh – co-opted by company. Elite male capture. Lack of transparency and increase in grievances between company and community, between women and men within community. Gunung Tarik – co-opted by company, and elite male capture. Long Uma – co-opted by company, divisive distribution of benefits and community conflict.

Sources: Focus group discussions and key informant interviews, July 2014, and August–September 2016.

scheme was itself predicated on poor returns to those receiving the plasma. Households were due to receive the remaining portion of profit after the companies had deducted the repayment of bank loans and company management fees. Any official documentation regarding plasma allocation has not been released as letters are held in company offices and no copies are distributed to the plasma holder. This made it very difficult for the community members (men as well as women) to hold the company to account. Furthermore, widespread concerns were articulated that the companies were not managing plasma land as well as they managed the inti (nucleus), and the company did very little to address these concerns. As a consequence, the allocation of the plasma was opaque and the benefits from plasma elusive for all, as the quotation below suggests:

I know that my name is listed by the cooperative as a plasma holder, eight hectares in total. But I was only shown two plots from two companies (four hectares). I have no idea about the other two plots. But for the two plots that I've seen, myself and the other villagers are still disappointed. Our plasma fields were not fertilized, were not cleared, were not managed. Only the inti [plantation nucleus] is taken care of, and now the company has started harvesting from the inti. (Dayak man, Long Segeh, September 2016)

Secondly, plasma holders are never informed of the precise costs incurred by the company for clearing land, planting and maintenance. So plasma recipients had no way of knowing the level of debt they had entered into, and how much they were likely to receive from the sale of the oil palm once it started producing. For example, in Gunung Tarik, the amounts paid varied from Rp 450,000 to Rp 1.8 million per hectare. The variation in revenue was never explained directly by the company; instead, this was reported to the cooperative board and this was then never passed on to the community members themselves.

At first it was one hectare free [of debt obligations] and one hectare credited. Now it has been three years of harvest but this did not reduce the debt at all. If the company gets Rp10 million, we should get Rp2 million because of the 80:20 agreement. But still the debt is not reduced. We have questioned it and still there is no explanation. (Berau Malay man, Gunung Tarik, September 2016)

A former member of Gunung Tarik's cooperative board (a native of Gunung Tarik and relative of one of the customary leaders), who had challenged some of the transparency issues by keeping precise records, said that he had been dismissed from the cooperative board on the pretext that he no longer owned plasma so could not sit on the board. Some interviewees suggested that those on the board or closely connected to the cooperative board seemed to have benefited rather more than others, suggesting there was malfeasance taking place.

We were promised a lot with plasma. Our society was blind about oil palm, we do not know what kind of palm, how to care for it, our rights. We were told the plasma is to improve society, income will be greater if we have two hectares, you would be able to buy anything. All this talk in the front of the house. Now what is there? (woman plasma recipient, Gunung Tarik, September 2016)

Interestingly, the quotation above makes reference to the negotiations that happen on the porch – an idiom for what is said in 'public', rather than what goes on behind the scenes. Within the community, experiences with plasma depend on relationships with the company and its representatives in the community, and clearly these sorts of relationships need to be nurtured. For example, although fees are not a requirement for obtaining the surat garapan (land user certificate) from the village head, or for securing a plasma claim, a number of interviewees described giving a 'gift' of money as a goodwill gesture.



The lack of transparency was experienced equally by both men and women, although a second layering of exclusion is introduced for women where gender norms have rendered them silent and disempowered in the process of plasma allocation, and they are now unable to find a pathway for holding the companies to account, as the two quotations above suggest. The prospects for women of having any influence over the board were even less than those for men.

I heard about plasma before, they said that we will receive plasma, but we don't know where, whether it has been planted. Probably the cooperative knows about it, it's their job. I don't know about other people, but I really know nothing. I wanted to ask, but I'm too embarrassed, as I think other people are smarter than me. (Dayak woman, Long Segeh, September 2016)

In Gunung Tarik more recently there has been a new innovation in the plasma system, that of granting 'plasma perempuan', or women's plasma; which entitles married and widowed women to also be granted plasma on a more or less equal footing with men. This has meant that households often have more than one plasma claim: the husband's and the wife's. However, the lack of transparency that is a problem at the community level (engendering mistrust between cooperative board members and the community, and between different sections of the community) may also be a problem at the intra-household level, where husbands and wives know very little about each other's plasma – its location, what benefits accrue from it, what debt remains on the resource.

Thus, while on the face of it, for now, plasma offers a new strand to a suite of albeit reduced livelihood activities for people in Long Segeh, Long Uma and Gunung Tarik, so far, the benefits have not been fully realised by the majority of people. Instead, a lack of transparency has engendered mistrust and conflict within the community, and between those from the community who have been co-opted onto the cooperative board, and those outside. The gender dimensions of this are similar to those found in land-acquisition processes described in the previous section: much weight is attached to social networks and day-to-day social relationships, which are formed and nurtured on the porches of houses, which may require money offered to smooth decisions through, and that are, in a very everyday sense, excluding of women and the voices of young people. Thus, whilst there are issues generally regarding benefit flows from plasma, the imposition of gender and generational norms that restrict participation in the networks that enable people to realise the benefits of access serves to put women and young people in a particularly difficult situation. Moreover, limited transparency is creating a situation where intra-household/intra-familial mistrust and anxieties are emerging.

### **Spaces of hope: gendered engagements with independent smallholder oil palm**

Engagement in the cultivation of oil palm on a smallholder basis, independently of the company, is in evidence in all four case study communities. Here, just as Potter (2011) notes from West Kalimantan, oil palm is heralded as a potential wealth-creator for smallholders. Both women and men who participated in the study had aspirations to start their own oil palm, and related this to disappointment with the benefits that had not materialised from their engagement with the oil palm companies. In Long Segeh and Long Uma, this mode of engagement is in its infancy. Here, an underlying source of grievance with the company was that with the limited profits that they would generate from plasmas and the difficulties that they would have in earning back the land that they lost, they feared they wouldn't have the capital and land to plant their own oil palm. In the two years since we first undertook field work in Long Segeh, the number of people planting oil palm independently has gone from just two to more than 15.

Independent smallholder cultivation of oil palm is most prominent in Gunung Tarik and in the neighbouring transmigration settlement of Bumi Jaya. As noted in an earlier section, this mode of engagement with oil palm has arisen as a result of a specific set of circumstances that enabled people to assemble the necessary land, capital and skills to participate. A defining feature of smallholder investment is the role played by returning cross-border Bugis migrants originally from Sulawesi. Since 2004, more than 900 migrants have established a community on the edge of Gunung Tarik, and this has become known locally as Kampung TKI (which translates as ‘village of Indonesian migrant workers’). Most of these migrants returned from Malaysia where they were working as oil palm labourers. They brought with them economic and social remittances that have enabled them to acquire land, to successfully cultivate oil palm independently of any large-scale company and to establish a frontier oil palm community that is being incorporated into formal palm oil markets. Many of them arrived with young children and teenagers (girls and boys), who grew up in Kampung TKI.

The expansion of independent smallholder oil palm was initiated in Kampung TKI under the guidance of two Sulawesi-born migrants, working in tandem with the oil palm company to first of all establish a smallholder cultivator’s group (Kelompok Tani Sawit Mandiri), and a cooperative that serves oil palm smallholders and provides the connection with the company. The apparent success of migrants in Kampung TKI with oil palm, compared with the woeful returns from plasma experienced by plasma recipients, has encouraged people in Gunung Tarik to begin investing in smallholder oil palm also. Local people now also have access to the services of the smallholder cooperative set up in Kampung TKI by the network of migrant leaders and local government representatives, including the Department of Cooperatives, and this provides access to inputs and stewardship of the sale of oil palm to the company.

The gender divisions of labour in smallholder oil palm are similar to those on the plantation. Men generally are responsible for the heavier tasks, whilst women do lighter tasks, including weeding, fertiliser and pesticide application, and the harvesting of loose fruits. Decision-making is largely joint with regard to pursuing oil palm as a livelihood option. There are some differences noted between Gunung Tarik’s original inhabitants and those in Kampung TKI with respect to women’s involvement. According to our survey findings, in the latter, there is more direct everyday involvement of women in oil palm activities and decision-making in Kampung TKI, and much of this relates to the life histories of women in Kampung TKI, in particular their experience as oil palm labourers in Malaysia, which gives them the knowledge and confidence to input into decision-making. It is also the case that women in Kampung TKI play an important role in holding together the multi-local oil palm livelihoods that link Kampung TKI with the oil palm plantations of Sabah, Malaysia (in which many still have relatives), and communities in Sulawesi, where children may go to be educated (taking them out of the oil palm landscape) and where some Kampung TKI women have elder care responsibilities. Several of the girls who had accompanied their parents from Malaysia or Sulawesi have grown up to become prominent actors and decision-makers at the community level, building further on the knowledge and confidence described above.

Where gender exclusions come into play is in terms of interfaces with the cooperative and the company, where, although there are no restrictions on women’s participation, the key decision-makers within the cooperative are men and it is an ostensibly male space. Membership of the cooperative is based on the identity card (KTP), and therefore through this mechanism women are able to join the cooperative. However, in the case of Gunung Tarik, out of 300 members, fewer than 10 are women. In return for facilitating

the sale of the oil palm, the cooperative takes an overhead of 10 percent of the profit. Other deductions may be made, however, depending on the quality of the fruit. Challenging the cooperative is something that men are involved with, and happens in instances where men query how their oil palm has been graded, and therefore the level of return they can expect to receive from the company. Interviews suggest that there is considerable unevenness across both Kampung TKI and Gunung Tarik in terms of which men are best placed to have any influence in relation to transactions with the cooperative. This again is suggestive of the ways in which men's social networks are crucial for negotiating benefit sharing arrangements of smallholder oil palm. Connections with the key actors such as the head of the cooperative, the migrant leader (and now neighbourhood head) and the village head in Gunung Tarik can make the difference between successful smallholder investment and investments that do not reach their potential.

The gender dynamics in such arrangements point to an intersection of gender with social class (in terms of connections to powerful individuals) and ethnicity (where this maps onto communities of origin and kinship networks), although not, as it turns out, religious identity. Women's engagement in these arrangements is contingent on their husbands or other male relatives, as the 'spaces' in which such relationships are fostered are male spaces. Observation of how such negotiations are undertaken is important for understanding gendered exclusions. Negotiations take place through long, seemingly informal discussions over coffee and cigarettes, conducted on the front porch of people's homes, usually at night. This includes the undertaking of formal business with official decision makers at different levels, which takes place outside office hours and office spaces, and, importantly, outside mechanisms that may be subject to local government gender mainstreaming initiatives. Women are generally not present, but may be listening 'from the kitchen'. Whilst there are no direct restrictions on women, it would not be 'normal' practice for them to participate, and women (and men) would feel uncomfortable. Thus, women's participation in these kinds of discussions is second-hand – seeking influence through husbands or male relatives. Thus, although women play a critical role in inserting smallholder oil palm into diversified household livelihoods, their capacity for voice and influence is muted when confronted with the workings of male-dominated networks that shape processes of land acquisition (for smallholder investment in oil palm) and that feed into the workings of the cooperative with which they must work if they are to have access to oil palm processing and markets.

### **'Cruel optimism' and future livelihoods**

In our final section we turn to the intergenerational injustices that are hard-wired into the current practice of large-scale oil palm investment in East Kalimantan. Despite disappointments with plasma dividends and the unevenness of benefits from smallholder engagement, a defining feature of oil palm investment generally is the way in which 'cruel optimism' figures in both official and everyday aspirations. In this case, for communities being incorporated into oil palm systems in seemingly adverse terms, an 'optimistic' relationship with a particular future was based on the promise of oil palm riches with limited labour inputs. For Berlant, 'cruel optimism' is a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic (Berlant 2007, 33). As large-scale and independent smallholder oil palm investment expands, there is a burning question around future livelihoods, particularly in communities where land acquisition by companies has been based on a disavowal of community rights of avail to resources. As earlier sections of this paper show, people are being

compensated for lost ‘use rights’ rather than there being any recognition of entitlement beyond this. It is unclear whether there might be any sort of future return to these ‘use rights’ if the investing companies decide to move on, as is always possible given the history of commodity investment and other kinds of crop booms. Longer term security and equity are particularly uncertain, and it is apparent that future inheritance rights have been handed over.

What is evident in the Letter of Agreement (surat perjanjian) issued from the company to people in each of the communities is that these letters do not recognise local customary (adat) rights to land that would be in accordance with the Indonesian government’s Constitutional Court Ruling of 2013 on customary forest that purports to recognise customary rights to forest land (Rachman and Siscawati 2016). By making reference to Tanah Negara (state land), the letters effectively support the claims of the state on the land. Documents state categorically that the land being compensated would remain state land, with the company being granted the rights to use and manage it (as a concession or HGU) over a certain period of time. The letter goes on to state that the land is being handed over to the company for oil palm; that the handover was conducted without force and was decided by consensus between the community and the company; that the children or grandchildren of the person who handed over the land, and/or any other third party, do not have any right to reclaim the land in any form in the future; that the person who handed over the land will be responsible if there is any claim over the land in the future; and that in cases where peoples’ cultivated land has been acquired, the company has paid cash compensation for loss of those crops, the amount of which is agreed by both parties.

As far as the settlement received by the communities goes, it is unclear whether there might be any sort of future return to the ‘use rights’ at the end of the concession period: this will depend very much on the status the compensation letters could have in any future negotiations as to whether the oil palm concession is on state or adat land, according to the 2013 Constitutional Court Ruling on Customary Forest. One telling point is that in Gunung Tarik, Bugis people, living within the boundaries of Gunung Tarik but regarded as newcomers and not part of local adat, did not receive compensation for private land (i.e. land that they were using that fell within the boundaries of the oil palm concession). This suggests an ambiguity as to whether companies recognised adat: those considered to be within adat communities were recognised as being due compensation (whereas relative newcomers were not), but none were recognised as ‘owners’ of the land in the first place. Adat appears to be marked, but then is disavowed by the companies and the district governments with which such documents are drafted.

Longer term security and equity are particularly uncertain, and it is apparent that future inheritance rights have been handed over. These problems affect all members of the community, and there is an issue of lack of transparency and informed consent that affects both men and women. For women, however, the process is doubly opaque and they are doubly misinformed: their *de facto* exclusion from negotiating spaces and lack of recognition in letters confirming resource use rights means they were dependent on husbands, fathers and sons as conduits of information and there was limited opportunity for their voices to be heard. Where ‘cruel optimism’ sits within this conjuncture is in the aspirations parents have for their children, with oil palm receipts directed towards secondary and even tertiary education in the hope that company jobs will be forthcoming. In the communities investigated here, it is too early to see how these strategies have played out, but as Tania Li (2011) has noted, the employment prospects from secondary and tertiary education are limited, to say the least. It is unclear what ‘waves of opportunity’ may transpire in a future where forests can no longer serve the purpose of being a livelihood safety net.

## Conclusion

In this study, a conjunctural feminist political ecology helps reveal the ways in which the social and gender impacts of oil palm reflect an interplay between modes of incorporation into oil palm, and historically and ecologically embedded gender norms and other axes of power/difference. We have shown how landscape history and modes of incorporation into oil palm systems feed into multiple dimensions of subordination (and privilege) that form gendered and generational experiences in this context. The conclusions we draw from this point to the ways oil palm has played a critical role in reinforcing contrasts amongst differently positioned actors, and between differently positioned communities. At the same time, some gender and intergenerational norms are seen to hold a remarkable fixity in the face of profound social, economic and environmental change, and indeed have facilitated and enabled the pathways oil palm investments have taken.

The case studies have shown how large-scale investments in oil palm can engender a whole series of direct and indirect impacts, many of which have clear gender dimensions. Both large-scale and small-scale investments in land across the case studies have eroded customary authority to define and regulate land access and use, intensifying competition, fostering the emergence of a land market (including the buying and selling of plasma) and raising the prospects of conflicts between migrants and local communities. Concerns about access to land and forest for young people in the future are readily voiced by older people from local communities, and it seems unlikely that plasma dividends could provide a pathway to future prosperity for young people who imagine a future outside farming, even where parents have been able to pay for higher levels of education for their children.

At the same time, migrant investment in smallholder oil palm, and, in particular, the institutional arrangements that have emerged to support that (e.g. the nexus between the migrant leader, the smallholder oil palm cooperative, local government and the oil palm company) have accelerated the incorporation of smallholder oil palm into existing livelihoods, bringing considerable material benefits to households even as security of customary tenure is being eroded. Opportunities for women (and youths) to engage in these emerging institutional arrangements are limited by prevailing gender and family norms that cut across different ethnic groups. These norms restrict women's and young peoples' ability to participate in male-dominated networks of power, which involve intense negotiations, often at night, on the porches of peoples' homes. Women may facilitate such meetings from behind (providing coffee, providing a congenial environment) and male youths may be present, but their voice and active participation are limited. Thus, as formal decisions are made within informal spaces, opportunities to influence decisions are heavily restricted.

This key finding from the case studies demonstrates the importance of understanding social dynamics and the gendering of spaces of authority in oil palm contexts. Focusing attention simply on the oil palm companies and encouraging them to adopt gender mainstreaming principles in their corporate social responsibility arrangements is an important necessary step, but likely to miss a whole layer of oil palm governance where most of the gender exclusions are to be found. It is at this rising independent smallholder category and community–company–government interface (including through cooperatives) that attention needs to focus in exploring the range of options and strategies that advocacy organisations can adopt to promote the rights and interests of women in indigenous and forest-dependent communities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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