
From ecological to political buffer zone: ethnic politics and forest encroachment in Upland Central Sulawesi

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Summary

This paper discusses inter-ethnic relations and patterns of land-use and landownership, and how ethnicity is defined, used to grant preference, and to allocate socio-economic resources, by analysing two forest-margin villages in Sulawesi.

The heavy influx of migrants has altered the proportion of local people to migrants in Sintuwu and Watumaeta, villages located on the eastern border of Lore Lindu National Park. In 2001, there were over one-third households of Bugis – the largest group of ethnic migrants. Social distance, inability to adapt and unwillingness to integrate (Charras 1993, Human Rights Watch 1998) were indicated by house-clustering of the ethnic groups.

As most agricultural land inside the village has been sold to migrants, mainly to Bugis, the locals have been transformed from landlords to landless, while the migrants became landlords. In a land-based economy, land scarcity leads to declining socio-economic security. Social destabilization occurs as ethnic frictions result from this shift in resource control.

To gain back their economic power and socio-economic security, locals adopted a strategy of land expansion into ecological buffer zone areas. By outsiders, particularly the State, this is viewed as an encroachment into the national park forest, while to locals this is an attempt to re-secure their economic base. Locals justified their actions by disputing the park boundaries. Subsequently their “illegal” actions were accepted and formalized when they received usufruct rights in the form of SKPL (Letter of Land Utilization) issued by the village head and KKM (Community Conservation Agreement),