



## Political ecology of land use change in Indonesia

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Indonesia had once around 10% of the world's rain forest. Many accuse shifting cultivation and poverty to be responsible to tropical deforestation and land use change. Without denying the importance of these factors, this paper tries to see the problem from a different angel.

Massive deforestation first took place when the Dutch colonials decided to develop coffee, tea and later rubber and oil palm plantation in the late 19th century. During the Independence Era, land use change can be divided into 3 periods: 1950 – 1975 period of agricultural expansion, mainly government program; 1975 – 1990 period of commercial logging concession, mainly private concession with government's endorsement; and 1990 to date period of land use change to cash crop, settlement, and business area, a more complex process involving private company, government program and endorsement, and personal action. The first two periodization shows clearly that land use change in Indonesia has a strong connection to political decision and power at certain period of time, which also influenced by international market tendencies at the given period. The last period has actually not so much difference.

This paper seeks to explain land use change in Indonesia especially in the last period of 1990 to present. This period can be divided again into 3 sub-periods: later New Order Era, early Reformation Era, and the Regional Autonomy Era. The case study was conducted in Labuhan Batu Utara District of North Sumatera. Semi-structured interview was done with various actors in different levels. It is argued that government's policies and arrangements along with government's reaction to international market and politics plays a substantially important role in land use change.

In the first sub-period (1990 – 1998), it is the fading power of Suharto's regime that increases farmers' courage to violate the strict prohibition of rice field conversion to other uses. Another important factor is the introduction of Smallholder Estate Scheme by the government as a form of rural development within oil palm development policy, a policy drawn up following the increasing world market demand. This scheme includes facilitating the sale of oil palm's fresh fruit bunches, indirectly inform the people of the value of oil palm. During the early Reformation Era (1998 – 2000), almost literally, the power is in the hand of the people. The absence of long time oppression gives the people a sense of freedom. Inconsistent law enforcement during this era serves as a kind of authorization of performing land use change, either from forest or from rice field to oil palm estate. The Regional Autonomy Era (2001 to present) can also be named Legalized Land Use Change Era. Regional autonomy policy delivers a large portion of power to regional leaders to manage their region. The idea to give region their right to develop themselves without many interventions from the central government leads to uncontrollable regional policies. Many land use change were endorsed by the regional leaders in the name of regional development.