

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS: THE IMPACT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PALM OIL FACTORY IN DENSELY POPULATED AREA (CASE STUDY OF PULO PADANG VILLAGE, LABUHANBATU REGENCY)

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Abstract

This study examines the development of a palm oil mill in a densely populated area such as Pulo Padang Village, which has created complex dynamics related to environmental politics and social conflict. This study aims to evaluate the impact of development on society and the environment, as well as the resolution process. A qualitative approach method was used with interview, observation, and documentation techniques for residents, the government, and the company. The results show that the conflict is rooted in a lack of transparency, minimal community participation, and ecological impacts that are detrimental to the surrounding community. The government needs to strengthen regulations and actively involve the community to achieve equitable sustainable development. These findings emphasize the importance of an inclusive approach, constructive negotiation, and the application of environmental justice principles to reduce conflict and improve socio-ecological sustainability.

Keywords: *environmental politics, social conflict, sustainability, community participation, sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental politics is a way of understanding the complex relationship between nature and society by analyzing the so-called forms of access and control over resources and their implications for the environment sustainable living environmental politics is closely related to the conflict between the palm oil mill and the Pulo Padang community, community participation is an important element in environmental politics environmental justice is a concept that emerged from the awareness of the negative impacts the importance of environmental justice in sustainable development cannot be overstated. The concept of environmental justice highlights the need for fair distribution of natural resources and equitable treatment of environmental burdens between various social groups. In the perspective of ecological politics, environmental justice is a strong foundation for ensuring that development not only takes into account economic interests, but also pays attention to the ecological balance and social welfare of development towards the environment and society.

Establishing a palm oil mill in a densely populated area such as Pulo Padang Village in Labuhanbatu can have significant impacts on the environment and communities. One of the main impacts is deforestation, where land clearing for mills and plantations can damage local ecosystems and natural habitats. In addition, waste from the processing process can pollute water and soil, potentially threatening the health of the environment and surrounding communities. The Pulo Padang community needs to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their environment, so that their voices are heard and taken into account. Therefore, it is important to implement strict environmental regulations and involve the community in planning and resource management. This approach can help reduce negative impacts and ensure that economic development goes hand in hand with environmental protection. Sustainability must be a primary focus so that communities and the environment can support each other. Government policies on land and environmental management also play a key role in determining how palm oil mills operate and the impacts they have on communities. Natural resource management is also an important issue, where there is a conflict between the exploitation of resources, such as

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forests and minerals, and the need to preserve the environment. This often involves land rights for local communities, which are affected by industrial activities.(elvianita, 2024). This conflict often arises against the community and is harmed by the presence of the factory. However, in Pulo Padang Village, the establishment of the PT. PPSP palm oil factory has caused various environmental problems and has actually caused protests from the local community, and the palm oil waste from this factory also violates several regulations related to spatial planning and industrial area development and conflict with the Pulo Padang community who feel they have not been given clear information regarding the construction of this factory which was initially claimed as a public housing project. This problem is further complicated by the lack of clarity in the legal and policy arrangements governing land use. The non-transparent licensing process often benefits the company, while local communities are not involved in decision-making that impacts their lives. This creates deep dissatisfaction and disappointment, which has the potential to trigger further conflict. Communities feel that their voices are not heard, and their rights are ignored, which ultimately gives rise to resistance to the presence of the palm oil factory (Ahmad 2024).

Rejection and protests from residents who feel disturbed by factory activities, especially because of its location close to schools and residential areas. Government and law enforcement are essential to protect communities and the environment from the impacts of these industrial activities. In the case of the establishment of a palm oil mill by PT. PPSP in Pulo Padang Labuhanbatu Village, there are several problems that reflect weaknesses in environmental law enforcement, including minimal supervision, lack of community participation, and the company's strong economic influence on the local government. To address these issues, there needs to be stricter enforcement of regulations, increased community participation, and transparency in the decision-making process related to the environment. One of the ongoing debates is about the impact of establishing a palm oil mill in the middle of a densely populated settlement.

The polemic of the existence of PT. PPSP (Pulo Padang Sawit Permai) Pulo Padang Labuhanbatu Subdistrict, was demonstrated and even sued for Class Action/A class action lawsuit is a form of lawsuit in which one or more people represent a large group of people who have similar legal interests to a particular party. The polemic that emerged in the community began in 2016. At that time, the community in Pulo Padang only knew that the land before the palm oil mill was built would be used for public housing. However, what stood firmly was not public housing, but a palm oil mill. Since then, the presence of the palm oil mill has caused controversy, at the end of 2016 there was a land sale and purchase between the company and the landowner. Reportedly at that time it was going to be made into a house plot, but in the end it was only discovered that it was for the construction of a palm oil mill.

According to(sri, 2022)The people of Pulo Padang have been protesting against the presence of the palm oil mill since 2017. However, the protest by taking to the streets has not yielded results until now, and we have carried out various protests starting from hearings at the Labuhanbatu Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) office and at the regent's office, but there were no results and their voices were not heard by the authorities either. In fact, the palm oil mill has violated a number of regulations, one of which is related to the Minister of Industry Regulation No. 40 of 2016 concerning technical guidelines for the development of industrial areas. The Minister of Industry Regulation Number 40/M-IND/PER/6/2016 was stipulated with consideration.

- a. That in order to implement Article 9 paragraph (3) of Government Regulation Number 142 of 2015 concerning Industrial Areas, it is necessary to establish Technical Guidelines for the Development of Industrial Areas;
- b. That based on the considerations as referred to in letter a, it is necessary to stipulate a Regulation of the Minister of Industry concerning Technical Guidelines for the Development of Industrial Areas;

The environmental political issues related to the establishment of a palm oil mill in the middle of a densely populated settlement are very complex. Not only does it involve environmental issues such as water, land, and air pollution, but it also touches on broader social and political aspects, including the rights of local communities, social justice, and the responsibilities of government and companies in maintaining environmental sustainability. This study aims to identify gaps in environmental policies related to the establishment of a palm oil mill in the middle of a densely populated settlement, especially in Pulo Padang Village, the main focus is the analysis of the impact of the PT. Pulo Padang Sawit Permai (PPSP) palm oil mill.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Theoretical Basis

Previous research is an important reference in developing the theory and analysis in this study. One of the studies cited is the work of Nurfahmi Ahmad Wijaya (2021) which discusses the implementation of palm oil mill licensing in Tapung District, Kampar Regency, Riau Province. According to him, licensing is a government policy instrument used to control negative externalities as well as a form of legal protection and management of economic activities. The licensing mechanism must consider the balance between the interests of the government, cooperatives, and individuals, and must be followed by good and systematic public services. The importance of this previous research is as a basis for comparison and to understand the complexity of similar issues in the future, as well as a reference to enrich the theoretical study and analytical framework used in this study. This research is supported by several main theories that are relevant to explaining the conflict and decision-making process related to the establishment of a palm oil mill:

1.1 Environmental Conflict Theory:

Explaining that conflict arises because of the clash between economic interests and environmental protection. This conflict is often triggered by public dissatisfaction with the negative impacts arising from industrial development, such as environmental damage and social injustice. Environmental conflict or also called ecological distribution conflict, is conflict resulting from injustice regarding access to natural resources and a condition where there is inequality in bearing the negative impacts of pollution. This term was first introduced by Martinez Alier and Martin O'Connor in 1996 to describe a social conflict created by disparities in access to resources and the difference in consequences in receiving adverse effects (Scheidel, 2020).

"Environmental conflicts are events that arise from the use of natural resources and their impacts on ecosystems and communities. Often, these conflicts occur when economic interests are compared with efforts to protect the environment. Deforestation for agriculture or mining can destroy habitats and reduce biodiversity, which not only threatens flora and fauna, but also disrupts the lives of communities that depend on these natural resources." (Gamal, 2021). When large companies operate in resource-rich areas, the rights of indigenous peoples are often ignored. Local communities, who have inhabited the area for many years, are often not involved in decisions that affect their lives. This creates tensions between companies and local communities, who feel they have no say in processes that impact their environment. A prime example is the conflict in Indonesia's tropical forests. Deforestation for palm oil plantations has sparked protests from environmental organizations and indigenous peoples, demanding that their rights be respected and sustainable agricultural practices be implemented. However, governments often favor foreign investment that offers short-term economic gains. Climate change is also a factor in environmental conflicts. The countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are generally developing countries, which have limited resources to adapt. When natural disasters such as floods or droughts occur, this can exacerbate existing tensions, creating competition for dwindling resources such as air and agricultural land. (Lestari, 2024).

Conflicts occur not only at the local level, but also at the global level. For example, the issue of carbon emissions and the responsibility of countries' industries for climate change often causes tension. Developing countries often feel more burdened in efforts to reduce emissions, while developed countries are considered not helping enough. This injustice can end in conflict in various parts of the world. Environmental education is also very important in the context of this conflict. Communities that do not understand the impact of their activities on the environment tend to have difficulty adapting to the necessary changes. Good education can help communities realize the importance of protecting the environment and managing natural resources wisely, thus preventing future conflicts. Resolving environmental conflicts requires an inclusive and sustainable approach. This includes involving all stakeholders in decision-making, including local communities, governments, and the private sector. Open dialogue and cooperation between all parties are essential to finding mutually beneficial solutions. (Satriyo 2023).

1.2 Negotiation Theory:

Becoming the basis for resolving conflicts through dialogue and a compromise approach that prioritizes the interests of all parties. This approach is important so that conflicts can be managed effectively and sustainably. The term negotiation comes from the English "negotiation", in the general sense negotiation is a bargaining process by negotiating to reach an agreement between the two parties (Ulinuha, 2013). Meanwhile, Robbins and Judge are quoted from the book

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Organizational Behavior (2022) by Muhammad Hasan et al, negotiation according to Robbins and Judge: "Negotiation is a process in which two or more parties agree on how to allocate scarce resources." Negotiation is the first way taken when the parties are in dispute. Negotiation in its activities has two main forms, namely bilateral and multilateral. Negotiations can be carried out through a diplomatic channel in international conferences at an international institution or organization. This method can also be used to resolve any form of dispute. Starting from economic, political, legal disputes, territorial disputes, family, ethnicity, and others.

Even if the parties have submitted their dispute to a certain judicial body, the dispute resolution process through negotiation is still possible. The weakness of using negotiation to resolve disputes is if the parties are in an unequal position. One party is strong, the other is weak. In this position, one of the strong parties is in a position to pressure the other party. This often happens when two parties negotiate to resolve their dispute between them. Because of the difficulty of the problems that arise between countries, precisely problems related to the economy. In addition, there are rarely any requirements for setting a time limit for the parties to resolve their disputes through this negotiation. And if one party is too strong in its stance. This situation can result in an unproductive negotiation process. The procedures in the implementation of negotiations need to be distinguished, such as: negotiations are used when a dispute has not yet arisen (consultation). Negotiations are used when a dispute has arisen, so this negotiation procedure is a dispute resolution process by the parties (in the sense of negotiation).

1.3 Licensing Theory:

Targeting the administrative and regulatory processes governing the granting of factory construction permits. This theory emphasizes that the licensing process must be transparent, involve community participation, and consider sustainability aspects. Licensing is one form of implementing the regulatory and controlling function owned by the government over activities carried out by the community. Licensing can be in the form of registration, recommendations, certification, quota determination and permission to carry out a business that usually must be owned or obtained by a company organization or a person before the person concerned can carry out an activity or action. Provisions on licensing have a function, namely as a regulatory function and as a regulatory function" (helmi, 2022). As a regulatory function, it is intended that permits or every permit or business premises, buildings and other forms of community activities do not conflict with each other, so that order in every aspect of community life can be realized. As a regulatory function, it is intended that existing permits can be implemented according to their designation, so that there is misuse of permits that have been granted in other words, this regulatory function can also be called a function owned by the government. The purpose of permits in general, the purpose of permits is to control government activities in certain matters where the provisions contain guidelines that must be implemented by both those concerned and by authorized officials. In addition, the purpose of the permit can be seen from two sides, namely

1. From the government's perspective, the purpose of granting the permit is as follows:
 - a. To implement regulations, whether the provisions contained in the regulations are in accordance with the reality in practice or not, and at the same time to regulate order.
 - a. As a source of regional income, with the existence of a request for a permit, the government's income will directly increase because every permit issued by the applicant must pay a fee first. The more income in the field of transportation, the ultimate goal is to finance development.
2. From the community's perspective, the purpose of granting permission is as follows:
 - a. For legal certainty
 - b. For certainty of rights

To facilitate obtaining facilities. If the building that has been built has a permit, it will be easier to obtain facilities. By binding actions to a licensing system, lawmakers can pursue various purposes of permits, including:

- a. The desire to direct or control certain activities, for example building permits, HO permits, etc.
- b. Preventing environmental hazards, for example logging permits, industrial business permits,
- c. Protecting certain objects, for example permission to dismantle monuments, permission to search for or find buried relics, etc.
- d. Distributing objects, land or limited areas, for example permits to live in densely populated areas (SIP) and others. Directing or directing by using selection of certain people and activities, for example permits to transmigrate, and others.

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“On the other hand, licensing can also be a tool to regulate competition in the market. By granting licenses only to entities that meet certain requirements, the government can prevent monopolistic practices and ensure that the market remains competitive. However, it should be noted that improper or misused licensing can lead to corruption and abuse of power.”(mccubbins, 2024).

1.4 Environmental Political Theory:

Analyzing the relationship of power and interests in environmental decision-making, including how governments and companies influence policies according to economic interests, sometimes ignoring the rights of local communities. Environmental politics is a political interaction with the environment that has a primary view regarding environmental protection and management. Environmental politics is present as a form of concern about the condition of environmental sustainability. Initially, issues regarding the environment were only echoed by environmentalists, however, issues regarding the environment have now become issues that have received attention from the world community. This began in 1972 when there was a UN agenda regarding the realization of an environmental conference held in Stockholm, with a discussion "regarding international environmental law which of course also included discussions regarding environmental problems, in the end the conference produced the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, which underlines the importance of environmental conservation.

Environmental pollution control is the influence of chemicals on the environment and how to control it so as not to violate established regulations."(afidatul muadifah, 2022) Since then, environmental issues have continued to develop and become a concern for the governments of each country. Therefore, the government as a stakeholder, in the process of making regulations and implementing regulations, needs to take part in the environmental perspective, one of which is through environmental political involvement. Environmental politics is politics regarding the management of natural resources. The government must design appropriate policies in dealing with environmental problems and environmental politics offers various options and alternatives that can be taken in dealing with natural resource management. Environmental politics can be defined as an instrument for understanding the complexity of ownership, access and control over resources and their impacts on environmental health and sustainability.(Siahaan, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted in North Sumatra Province, Labuhanbatu Regency, Pulo Padang Village. The research method uses a qualitative approach with a case study research type. Data sources come from primary and secondary data obtained directly from related parties and indirect data obtained from various information, both research reports, journals, articles and relevant documents. Meanwhile, data collection techniques are carried out through interviews, observation and documentation. The data collection technique is carried out through an in-depth interview process, field observation, literature study (Sugiyono, 2019). The selection of informants was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, where researchers deliberately determine individuals who are selected as informants because they are considered to represent the objectives and focus of the research. After the data is collected, the analysis process is carried out through the stages of data simplification and interpretation, which includes the process of collecting, reducing, presenting, and drawing conclusions and interpretation of all the information that has been obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data collection conducted through interviews, observations, and document studies from various related parties, it can be concluded that the construction of a palm oil factory in Pulo Padang Village has caused various aspects that influence social and environmental conflicts. The presentation of research results includes aspects of licensing policies, community reactions, environmental impacts, and conflict resolution processes. Reasons Why the Government Grants Factory Permits. The government granted a permit to a palm oil company in Pulo Padang Village on the basis that all licensing procedures had been met and supported by some of the local community. This is in accordance with the theory of environmental politics which emphasizes that development policies are often based on economic interests and political support. The government believes that the existence of this factory can improve the regional economy through job creation and increasing local revenue. The granting of a permit to establish a palm oil factory for PT Pulo Padang Sawit Permai (PPSP) in Pulo Padang Village has actually gone through an official administrative process and in accordance with procedures.

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According to Sarbaini Harahap from the Licensing Service, he stated that:

“...This company has already obtained a Plantation Processing Business Permit (IUP-P) issued by the DPMPTSP of Labuhanbatu Regency since 2018. So legally, they have met the requirements to operate...” (interview March 10, 2025).

The results of the interview above can be concluded that this company has obtained a Plantation Processing Business Permit (IUP-P) from the DPMPTSP of Labuhanbatu Regency since 2018, which means that legally they have met all the requirements needed to operate.

This was also reinforced by Ir. Safrin Hasibuan from the Environmental Service who added, stating that:

“...We have provided spatial planning recommendations based on Regional Regulation No. 3 of 2016 concerning Regional Spatial Planning. So, this factory is in accordance with applicable spatial planning regulations...” (interview March 10, 2025).

Community Rejection

However, community rejection of the existence of the palm oil factory is quite large. The main reasons for rejection include concerns about environmental impacts, such as water and soil pollution, and damage to the ecosystem that can affect the health and lives of local people. In addition, the community feels that their land rights are being ignored, and the decision-making process is not transparent, causing dissatisfaction. This rejection began in 2016 when the community learned that the land that was previously promised to be used for public housing was instead converted into a palm oil factory.

Tina added by stating that:

“...At the end of 2016, there was a land sale between the company and the landowner. It was said that at that time it was going to be used for a house plot, but in the end it was discovered that it was for the construction of a palm oil factory...” (interview April 8, 2025).

Environmental and Social Impact

The environmental impacts arising from the existence of the factory include industrial waste pollution which results in damage to water and soil quality. Meanwhile, socially, there is tension and prolonged conflict between the community and the company. This study shows that the conflict is not only economic but also closely related to aspects of social justice and community participation in the decision-making process. The environmental impacts caused by the factory are also a serious concern for environmental organizations. Syamsul Bahri Siregar, coordinator of the Community Concerned for Environmental Sustainability, explained that the factory causes various problems, including environmental pollution and the potential for prolonged disease outbreaks, stating that:

“...The distance from the settlement to the factory location is very close, from the city to the factory is less than 15 km, and the distance from the river to the factory is very close...” he explained (interview on March 10, 2025).

Conflict Resolution

The results of the study show that the resolution of the existing conflict is still temporary and has not reached a comprehensive solution. Dialogue between the company, government, and community is carried out in a limited manner and shows distrust between the parties involved. A more inclusive approach based on the principle of social justice is needed to achieve a sustainable solution. The regional government of Labuhanbatu Regency, through the Head of Rantau Utara District, Napsir Hasibuan, claims to have made mediation efforts between the community and the company, stating that:

“...We continue to encourage dialogue and supervision so that factory operations do not harm the community...” he said (interview on March 12, 2025).

However, mediation held in November 2023 failed to reach an agreement, because the community considered that technical solutions such as soundproof schools did not solve the root problem of environmental pollution.

Labuhanbatu DPRD member M. Ruben Simangunsong emphasized the need for a holistic approach, stating that:

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“...The government must balance economic and environmental interests. If the factory is proven to have violated, strict action must be taken...” he said (interview on March 13, 2025).

Discussion

This discussion highlights the main aspects that influence the dynamics of conflict and efforts to resolve it.

Environmental Politics and Licensing Decisions

The government's decision to grant a palm oil mill permit in the middle of a densely populated settlement is based on administrative and economic considerations, namely fulfilling all licensing requirements and gaining support from some of the community. However, social and environmental aspects do not seem to be sufficiently accommodated in this decision-making process. According to environmental politics theory, power factors and economic interests tend to dominate the political process, so that the rights of more vulnerable communities and aspects of environmental sustainability are often neglected.

Social Conflict and Justice Aspects

Communities feel that their land rights are being ignored, and that the permitting process is being carried out without active community participation. This triggers social injustice that is at the root of the conflict. This conflict is exacerbated by the lack of transparency and community participation in the decision-making process, as outlined in environmental conflict theory. These tensions are compounded by concerns about the health and environmental impacts felt directly by the community.

Conflict Resolution Efforts

From the results of research and literature review, an effective negotiation process must involve open dialogue, respect for community rights, and the application of principles of sustainability and environmental justice. A participatory and inclusive approach must be the basis for developing long-term solutions that are harmonious between economic interests and environmental protection.

CONCLUSION

So it can be concluded from the thesis above that:

1. The government grants permission to build a palm oil mill in Pulo Padang Village with the aim of encouraging regional economic growth through job creation and increasing local revenue. In addition, the government may see the potential of the existing land as a strategic opportunity to attract investment and accelerate local economic development. However, these decisions are often taken without considering the social and environmental impacts that may arise.
2. Community rejection of the establishment of a palm oil mill in a densely populated area is due to several reasons. First, the community is worried about the negative impact on the environment, such as air pollution, and damage to the ecosystem that can affect their health and daily lives. Second, there are concerns about land ownership, where the community feels that their land rights are ignored and do not receive proper permits. Third, dissatisfaction with transparency and participation in the decision-making process is also a factor in rejection. Resolving conflicts between residents and factories is often difficult to achieve due to long-standing mistrust and tensions.

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