

Analyzing Middle Actors' Influence on Land Use Policy: A Case Study in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia

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Abstract : This study applies the existing Middle-Out Perspective (MOP) as a complementing analytical alternative to the customary dichotomous options of top-down vs. bottom-up strategies of international development and commons governance. It expands the framework by applying it to a new context of land management and environmental change, enabling fresh understandings of decision making around land use. Using a case study approach in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia among a village of indigenous Dayak, this study explores influences from both internal and external middle actors, utilizing qualitative empirical evidence and incorporating responses across 25 village households and 11 key stakeholders. Applying the factors of 'agency' and 'capacity' specific to the MOP, this study demonstrates middle actors' unique capabilities and criticality to change due to their influence across various levels of decision-making. Study results indicate that middle actors play a large role, both passively and actively, both directly and indirectly, across various levels of decision-making, perception-shaping, and commons governance. In addition, the prominence of novel 'passive' middle actors, such as the internet, can provide communities themselves with a level of agency beyond that provided by other middle actors such as NGOs and palm oil industry entities – which often operate at the behest of the 'top' or out of self-interest. Further, the study posits that existing development and decision-making frameworks may misidentify the 'bottom' as the 'middle,' raising questions about traditional development and livelihood discourse, strategies, and support, from agricultural production to forest management. In conclusion, this study provides recommendations including that current policy preconceptions be reevaluated to engage middle actors in locally-adapted, integrative manners in order to improve governance and rural development efforts more broadly.

Keywords : environmental management, governance, Indonesia, land use, middle actors, middle-out perspective

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