

## Resisting Agribusiness Development: The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate in West Papua, Indonesia

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**Citation** Ginting, L. & Pye, O. (2013). Resisting agribusiness development: The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate in West Papua, Indonesia. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(1), 160-182.

*The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), launched in 2010 by the Indonesian government, aims to transform 1.2 million hectares of indigenous and forest land in West Papua into large-scale agribusiness estates for food and bioenergy production. This article looks both at the power structures and geopolitics behind the project and at the emerging resistance to the MIFEE land grab. What is the extent of local opposition to the project? What coalitions between local groups and organized movements and NGOs are developing and what national and international alliances are they involved in? How do they counter the state narrative of MIFEE as a development path for the region? Analyzing key documents of the different organizations and initiatives involved, we examine three distinct but connected narratives of opposition around the discourses of customary forest rights, Indonesian 'imperialist' subjugation of Papua, and land reform and food sovereignty. We argue that their relation to each other needs to be rethought in order to overcome internal divisions and to broaden and deepen the social movement opposing the project.*

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Land Grab; MIFEE; Social Movements; West Papua

*Das Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) wurde im Jahr 2010 von der indonesischen Regierung ins Leben gerufen und zielt auf die Umwandlung von 1,2 Millionen Hektar indigenem Land und Wäldern in West Papua in großflächige Agrarindustrieflächen für die Nahrungsmittel- und Bioenergieproduktion. Der folgende Artikel betrachtet die Machtstrukturen und Geopolitiken im Hintergrund des Projekts sowie die dabei entstehende Widerstandsbewegung. In welchem Ausmaß gibt es lokalen Widerstand gegen das Projekt? Welche Koalitionen entwickeln sich zwischen lokalen Gruppen und organisierten Bewegungen und NGOs und in welche nationalen und internationalen Allianzen sind diese eingebunden? Wie entgegnet diese dem staatlichen Narrativ von MIFEE als Entwicklungspfad für die Region? Auf Basis der Analyse von Schlüsseldokumenten der unterschiedlichen involvierten Organisation und Initiativen untersuchen wir drei unterschiedliche, aber miteinander verbundene Narrative des Widerstands rund um die Diskurse um Gewohnheitsrechte an Wald, die indonesische „imperialistische“ Unterwerfung Papuas sowie Landreform und Ernährungssouveränität. Wir argumentieren, dass die Beziehung zwischen diesen Diskursen neu gedacht werden muss, um die internen Spaltungen zu überwinden und die soziale Bewegung zur Ablehnung des Projekts zu verbreitern und zu vertiefen.*

**Schlagworte:** Indonesien; Landraub; MIFEE; soziale Bewegungen; West Papua

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## **Introduction**

This paper looks at the emerging resistance to a new major land grab in Indonesia, the *Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate* in West Papua, Indonesia, known more commonly by its acronym MIFEE.<sup>3</sup> Land grabs have been identified as a crucial new arena of political and social conflict, provoking local struggles for land and globally coordinated campaigns. However, there is as yet little written on these new social movements. We try to find some answers to the question of “to what extent have agrarian political struggles been provoked by the new land investment dynamics?” (Borras, Hall, Scoones, White, & Wolford, 2011, p. 212) and argue that a new alliance opposing the project is emerging that draws on different traditions of struggle. We also look at some of the “issues that unite or divide the rural poor, organized movements, and rural communities” and how MIFEE is “discursively challenged and opposed” (Borras et al., 2011, p. 212). We argue that there are three distinct but connected narratives of opposition around the discourses of customary forest rights, Indonesian ‘imperialist’ subjugation of Papua, and land reform and food sovereignty. At the same time, there is also a division between the indigenous Papuans resisting the project and migrant small farmers living in Merauke who tend to welcome the project. This creates a key dilemma for the resistance. Although alternatives such as indigenous customary rights to land and forests, land reform and “food sovereignty” are all “relevant and useful” (Borras et al., 2011, p. 212), we argue that their relation to each other needs to be rethought in order to overcome these divisions and to broaden and deepen the social movement opposing the project.

### ***MIFEE: A Textbook Land Grab?***

MIFEE is in some ways a textbook land grab: “Powerful transnational and national economic actors from corporations to national governments” have identified Merauke as an “‘empty’ land” and a site for “fuel and food production” (Borras et al., 2011, p. 209). Indeed, the very name of this land grab points to the convergence of

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<sup>3</sup> A draft version of this paper was first presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing in April 2011, organized by the *Land Deals Politics Initiative* (LDPI) in collaboration with the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and hosted by the *Future Agricultures Consortium* at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

agribusiness and agrofuel interests. Key players behind the project are large domestic conglomerates, joint venture capital from South Korea and Japan, local authorities, and the national government.

State entities play an active and decisive role in the MIFEE land grab. The national government developed a “grand design” for the project as part of plans to “turn the food and energy crisis into an opportunity” and “to feed the world” (President Yudhoyono) (Takeshi, Rachman, & Savitri, 2013). The Presidential Instruction 5/2007 on the Acceleration of Development in Papua and West Papua (the names of the two provinces now comprising West Papua) and the Government Regulation No. 39/2009 on Special Economic Zones (*Kawasan Ekonomi Khusus*, KEK) established Papua as a strategic location of national development fantasies. In 2010, Government Decree No. 18/2010 on Agricultural Crops created the format of Food and Energy Estates and Merauke became the flagship estate project. At the launching of the project in August 2010, Agriculture Minister Suswono proclaimed MIFEE as a future “bread basket” of Indonesia and that it would eventually produce “almost two million tons of rice, two million tons of corn and 167,000 tons of soybeans” as well as “2.5 million tons of sugar and 937,000 tons of palm oil” (Ekawati, 2010). Takeshi, Rachman, and Savitri (2013) identify this “creation of the corporate agricultural estate to solve food and energy crises” as the key discourse through which “the process of accumulation by dispossession was legalized” (p. 26).

Locally, the MIFEE project was preceded by a program developed by Merauke’s then regent head, Johannes Gluba Gebze, called the *Merauke Integrated Rice Estate* (MIRE). Investors were wooed in order to transform the regency into a rice basket of Indonesia. When the plans failed to materialize, Gebze was quick to take up the opportunities offered by Indonesian’s president Yudhoyono’s declaration to seize the international food crisis as an opportunity. The district government promised to “provide the necessary infrastructure (construction of a sea port and airport expansion, procurement of three Boeing 737 aircraft, and irrigation)” and proposed themselves that the estate should cover 1.2 million hectares, or over one quarter of Merauke’s total area (Takeshi et al., 2013). Gebze was to play a crucial political role in overcoming legal problems to the project posed by customary land rights.

A closer look behind the companies who have been awarded permits within the MIFEE scheme reveals that transnational capital from East and South-East Asia plays

a major role. Korean capital, which has long been active in Indonesia, has secured permits for industrial tree plantations and oil palm. In 2009, *LG International* (2009) announced that it had secured a “massive forestry concession in Papua” through a joint venture with the Indonesian *Medco Group* in a company called *Metra Duta Lestari*. Meanwhile, *Mitsubishi* is a major shareholder in *Medco Energy* (AwasMIFEE, 2012). *Wilmar*, an agribusiness giant based in Singapore, has also been reported to have been offered 200,000 hectares, this time for sugar cane (“Wilmar begins”, 2010).

The Medco Group, an oil company whose owner Arifin Panigoro was an influential politician with the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* (PDI-P), has an influential role. Typically, Medco is a conglomerate that is involved in energy, agribusiness, finance, manufacturing, and real estate and hotels. Through its subsidiary, *PT. Selaras Inti Semesta* (SIS), it is already developing a 300,000 hectares timber plantation in Kurik, Kaptel, Animha, and Muting districts. Its chipwood mill, *PT. Medco Papua Industri Lestari* (MIL), needs 10 million tons per annum for chipwood production and another 2 million tons annually for pulp production. While waiting for the timber plantation, which will need eight years to mature, the mills utilize tropical timber from community forests and their concessions. Medco is an active proponent of the whole MIFEE concept and has established its own *Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate Research Centre* that is “promoting bio fuel experiment [sic] that will support energy resilience for the country” (MedcoFoundation, n.d.).

The second major group of MIFEE investors are agribusiness and logging conglomerates that reaped super profits under general Suharto’s export-oriented New Order. Apart from state corporations that are involved, key players from the private sector are politically well-connected. *Kertas Nusantara*, for example, with a permit for 155,000 of industrial tree plantations, is owned by the notorious *ex-Kopassus* general and Suharto son-in-law Prabowo Subianto. Another company, *PT. Bangun Cipta Sarana*, is connected to former Suharto minister of interior and minister of transmigration Siswono Yudo Husodo. A third important group, *Artha Graha*, is owned by Tommy Winata, who is well-connected to the military in West Papua and has been involved in various infrastructure projects (Klute, 2010; Papua Forest Eye, 2010a). The involvement of Suharto cronies is a sign of the special circumstances surrounding the project in West Papua.

### ***Or a Papuan Exception?***

At the same time, West Papua is in many ways an exception to most land grab contexts. It has been under Indonesian military occupation since 1962 and was coerced into joining Indonesia in 1969 (Drooglever, 2009). Since then, the politics in West Papua have been characterized by military repression of the widespread underlying separatist sentiment of the Papuan population and a West Papuan political elite that is co-opted by the Indonesian state. Freedom of speech is massively curtailed and activists often jailed or harassed. Occasional raids by armed separatist forces (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, OPM) are used to legitimize continued occupation and the criminalization of any discussion about independence, including raising the flag of West Papua, the Morning Star (Widjojo, 2006). The special Papuan context of the MIFEE land grab and how resistance to it develops is defined by this historical experience and how the relationship with Indonesia has changed since the *reformasi* movement and the fall of Suharto in 1998.

Mega projects have a long and painful history in West Papua, reflecting development fantasies of Jakarta. As Carolyn Marr (2011) argues, natural resource exploitation has been a consistent feature of Indonesian intervention, characterized by “a steady marginalisation of indigenous Papuans, with top-down projects imposed from outside, and often accompanied by the threat of, or the use of violence to enforce plans”. Previous mega projects include the 8 million hectare *Mamberamo* project that was promoted by then prime minister Habibie and aimed to combine a series of dams with agro-industrial estates (Carr, 1998) and the infamous *Scott Paper* plantation and pulp factory project. Above all, Indonesian timber companies have used military occupation to log West Papuan forests, a trend that has increased in recent years (for a comprehensive list of activities cf. Marr, 2011).

Of major economic, political, and symbolic significance is a huge gold and copper mine in the central highlands of West Papua owned by the mining corporation *Freeport* (Leith, 2003). Based on the violent expropriation of indigenous lands, the exploitation of migrant labor, and the environmental degradation of rivers, Freeport generated billions in revenue for the Suharto regime. Military occupation and human rights abuses were intimately connected to the Freeport mine. Recently, the Amungme people sued Freeport for 32.5 billion dollars for the legal appropriation of their

land. Other foreign investment and the exploitation of Papuan natural resources are therefore always seen within the context of this violent history.

Another characteristic of Indonesian occupation was its integration within the state-organized transmigration program that sought to relocate millions of landless farmers from densely populated Java to the “idle lands” of the “outer islands” (Adhiati & Bobsien, 2001). In West Papua, the transmigration program was closely connected to political and security considerations. The national government in Jakarta wanted to change the demographic character of key lowland areas and build up a political base of Muslim Javanese to counter the Christian Papuans. Military occupation regularly used the symbolism of Muslim festivities in order to shore up the identification of the migrants with the Indonesian state and the occupation project. From the Papuan perspective, therefore, transmigration is seen as part of an Indonesian strategy of domination.

The national *reformasi* movement that toppled Suharto and his New Order in 1998 represented a historical shift in this history of occupation. Crucially, the *national* movement in Jakarta adopted the demand for the autonomy of Aceh and West Papua as part of their list of ten demands (Lane, 2008). The resultant Special Autonomy status passed by the Indonesian parliament in 2001 was a partial fulfillment of this demand. It included a much larger share of taxes from West Papua being returned by the national government, with transfers rising from under IDR 5,000 billion (USD 500 million dollar) in 2001 to over IDR 20,000 billion in 2008 (World Bank, 2009). However, ten years down the track, these extra billions have not reached most of the Papuan inhabitants. Instead, the political elite use the funds for their own (private) version of development whilst basing their power on compliance with Jakarta, the military, and votes from the increasing number of Javanese migrants. Papua has become a kind of New Order ‘time warp’: Military business involvement is as ubiquitous as it used to be for Indonesia as a whole. West Papua has become their favored ‘retreat’ from the less friendly atmosphere in many other parts of Indonesia. It remains an attractive destination of the more informal public-private forms of transmigration (Li, 2011, p. 288).

The MIFEE project is set firmly within this framework of military-business-politicians networks and of political intimidation and oppression. According to an NGO report by the *Environmental Investigation Agency* (EIA) and *Telepak* (2009), the combi-

nation of Gebze's political aspirations, central government interests and the potentially huge investment in plantations expansion, has created a climate of intimidation towards anyone who opposes the plantations or new province. Local sources report that irregular groups allied to Gebze work in unison with the state security forces to monitor and intimidate any dissenters in the region (p. 20).

Military personnel is very visible in the proposed project area and the recent suspicious death of the journalist Ardiansyah Matra'is, who had been writing critically about the MIFEE project, is seen by NGOs as a sign of the authorities' determination to squash any dissent to the plan (Tapol & Down to Earth, 2010).

### ***Emerging Resistance***

Although portrayed as a "food and energy estate", the largest part of the MIFEE project is slated for industrial plantations (over 970,000 hectare), with oil palm (over 300,000 hectare) and food crops (69,000 hectare) in second and third place (Tri & Haksoro, 2010). Most of the major companies involved and most of the activities on the ground have prioritized wood plantations, palm oil, and sugarcane and very little food production has taken place at all. The large-scale nature of the plantations, their location within forested areas and the fact that the permits were handed out for customary owned land led to concern by environmental and indigenous organizations that a major land and forest grab was underway. Government plans and media hype on projected huge investments in Merauke soon alerted NGOs in West Papua and Jakarta, who were already operating within established networks. Successful campaigns that had thwarted previous mega projects such as the Scott Paper project and the Mamberamo mega development had led to established networks, both within West Papua and Indonesia and with campaigners in Australia and Europe.

During 2010, a loose coalition came together as the Civil Society Coalition Against MIFEE (*Masyarakat Sipil Tolak MIFEE*) that coordinates exchange among around 30 local and national organizations. A key member is the Papua NGOs Cooperation Forum (*Forum Kerjasama Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat Papua*, Foker LSM Papua), the NGO umbrella for 118 member organizations all over Papua that was founded in 1991. Foker LSM Papua has a strong focus on human rights, natural resour-

es exploitation, and development issues. Church organizations are also central to the alliance, for example, the *Sekretariat Kemanusiaan dan Perdamaian Keuskupan Agung Merauke* (SKP-KAM), a Catholic church's organization dealing with peace and humanitarian issues. Important national organizations include the indigenous peoples' alliance *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN), Friends of the Earth Indonesia (*Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*, WALHI), the mining advocacy network *Jaringan Advokasi Tambang* (JATAM), *Greenpeace Indonesia*, and the think tanks *Pusaka* and *Sawit Watch*.

The Foker LSM Papua member *Yayasan Santo Antonius* (YASANTO), a local development NGO that provides education and health services to communities in Merauke, is one of the most active groups dealing with MIFEE. YASANTO has become a focal point for the NGOs/groups from outside who are concerned with the MIFEE issue. It plays a key facilitating role, connecting local communities and indigenous people from the area with NGOs from Jayapura, Jakarta, and beyond. Foker LSM Papua also helped set up the Papua Peoples Solidarity against MIFEE (*Solidaritas Rakyat Papua Tolak MIFEE*, SORPATOM) that is a mainly student activist group. This offered students and other interested citizens in Merauke and Jayapura the chance to become active against the project without being a member of one of the established NGOs.

Indigenous representatives on the official Papuan Adat Council (*Dewan Adat Papua*) were among the first to reject MIFEE. The secretary general of the Papuan Adat Council of Region V (Ha-Anim), Johannes Wob, denounced the agribusiness interests behind the project as a threat to the indigenous people of Merauke. He criticized that indigenous people were structurally disadvantaged versus companies in legal procedures and announced that indigenous peoples land was "not for sale" (Hardianto, 2010). On 18 July 2010, the Papuan Adat Council of Region V sent a letter to president Yudhoyono stating that they reject the MIFEE project. They warned that continuing with the project would cause serious dissatisfaction with the government. The council proceeded to map their territory and to provide legal assistance and training to the indigenous people in the area. The Adat Council enjoys the support of local Malind people and also works together with NGOs such as YASANTO and with the Catholic church organization SPK-KAM. As members of the Alliance of the Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), they are also well-connected nationally (J. Wob, personal communication, August 13, 2010).

The first primary objective of the NGO coalition was to exchange information and research about MIFEE. In addition to research such as the Pusaka report *Beyond Malind Imagination*, groups cooperated to develop a spatial analysis on who will be affected and the environmental impact of the project. Another area of cooperation was awareness raising and trainings for local people in the area. Various members of the alliance organized a series of consultations, public meetings, and trainings for local people in the area (12 of which are listed by Zakaria et al., 2010, p. 5-6). SPK-KAM ran a series of research and training for communities while other Foker LSM Papua members gave trainings on rights of communities, the principle of Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) or local reporting via sms. Meanwhile, Jayapura-based members lobbied the provincial governor and parliament, who were side-tracked out of the decision-making process by the direct agreement between president Yudhoyono and regency head Glebze.

Very quickly, the established NGO networks transnationalized their protest. In 2010, AMAN, with the support of 26 indigenous and related organizations issued a statement before the 9th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York (AMAN, 2010). They urged the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Food to visit Merauke and conduct an independent report into MIFEE. In 2011, the NGO coalition appealed directly to UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Food (Tarigan & MacKay, 2011). Both rapporteurs and the *UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* (CERD) responded by expressing their concern to the Indonesian government and to halt further activities until UN bodies could investigate the project. However, Indonesia rejected the recommendation that the Rapporteurs be allowed to visit the area (Down to Earth, 2013).

If international pressure did not have the desired effect of at least stalling the project, resistance at the local level, although slower off the mark, was to have a bigger impact. Most of the land earmarked for MIFEE is part of the Malind Anim-ha, that is the customary *boan* land of the Malind People consisting of various clans (Balagaise, Basik-Basik, Gebze, Kaize, Mahuze, Samkakai) (Zakaria et al., 2010). The “right to use *boan* land is held by the clan, not by the individual headman of the clan, and only a member of the clan can access and use *boan* land” (Takeshi et al., 2013). Even though this indigenous control over land is overwritten by state ownership (and permit al-

location), it remains the biggest obstacle to developing the MIFEE project. Of major symbolic and political significance was therefore the 'adoption' of Medco head Ari-fin Panigoro into the Gebze clan, which was facilitated by the then regent Johannes Gluba Gebze (Takeshi et al., 2013). By becoming a clan member, Panigoro could then receive permission to use hundreds of thousands of hectares of clan land for his industrial tree plantation.

Most companies with permits to develop plantations within MIFEE have tried to secure clan permission to do so. At first, promises of development, including roads, schools, and jobs persuaded many clan leaders to sign agreements with the companies. However, indigenous feelings changed as negative impacts of some of the first projects came to be felt and some of the promises of development were not forthcoming (YASANTO, 2010). Medco, the most active company so far, has become embroiled in various conflicts (Zakaria et al., 2010, pp. 37-44), culminating in direct action by Sanggase villagers, who blocked a wood chip factory located on their land, occupied the Medco office and finally received IDR 3 billion compensation in October 2011 (AwasmifEE, 2012, p. 17).

By 2011 dissatisfaction and conflicts on the ground had spread across Merauke. An overview in the *Tempo* weekly journal shows that most of the companies with permits who had started logging or plantation activities were involved in some kind of dispute (Aliansi Gerakan Reforma Agraria [AGRA] & Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific [PANAP], 2012, pp. 10-11). These were often related to the terms of agreements made with the company which were disputed by other communities or by people within the same community. In Ulilin, Muting, Jagebob, Okaba, and Malind districts internal conflicts within and between communities developed over the delineation of concessions and size and distribution of compensation. In Ngguti and An-imha districts villagers protested about the size of the compensation offered whilst locals in Kaptel district managed to double the amount of compensation paid by the company. In Kurik district, communities refused to hand over any of their land. In Ilwayap district, protests led by village head Leo Mouyuend managed to stop a MIFEE road being bulldozed through the sacred grounds of Bibikem village (Boy, 2012).

These local disputes were in part facilitated by information provided by the NGO networks involved in opposing MIFEE. They also led to networking between local activists themselves. On 18 December 2012, 23 indigenous community members from

Baidub, Boha, Bupul, Erambu, Kindiki, Kweel, Muting, Pachas, Poo, and Tanas villages signed the *Demands and Aspiration of Indigenous Peoples of River (Kali) Ban – River (Kali) Maro, Papua, Merauke*, in which they questioned the leasing of their land by the regency government (Down to Earth, 2012). Also in December 2012, the Malind Bian Customary People’s Association (*Malind Bian Lembaga Masyarakat Adat*, Malind Bian LMA) called on the government to revoke all the plantation permits in Merauke. The association that is made up of representatives from all the indigenous groups in the area was worried about the effects of logging that was underway to establish the plantations and that were jeopardizing people’s access to forest products. They criticized the lack of consultation and warned that by agreeing to the permits, the locals were effectively signing away their customary rights, as the land would be returned to the state after the lease period expired (Aliansi Demokrasi Untuk Papua [ALDP], 2012a).

The overall result of widespread opposition to investment plans and/or negotiations over the terms of such investment has cooled the excitement of potential investors and has changed the political atmosphere in Merauke itself. In 2011, the new regency head, Romanus Mbaraka was elected on a platform that claimed “to uphold the people’s rights against aggressive companies” (AwasmifEE, 2012, p. 22). After being elected, Mbaraka “even repealed Medco’s license to cut further into the forest, and asked villagers to report any investor who came secretly to their village trying to trick them into a deal” (AwasmifEE, 2012, p. 23). By 2012, only 10 of 46 companies with permits were actively developing their plantations (ALDP, 2012c).

### ***Counter-Framing MIFEE***

The emerging resistance against MIFEE is located within a national (and international) alliance against land grabs *and* within the movement against Indonesian occupation and exploitation. Both operate with preconceived assumptions, ways of working, frameworks, and networks and both, on their own, can lead to different strategies of resistance. As Widjojo (2006) argues, in the history of West Papuan activism, two connected but distinct strategies and discourses – one focusing on independence, the other on human rights – developed. Under Suharto, mega development projects

in West Papua resonated with activists in other parts of Indonesia. The Freeport mine “became a focal point for NGO protests on issues ranging from environmental pollution to the violation of human rights” (p. 413) and led to a broad coalition between Jakarta-based organizations such as WALHI and *Lembaga Studi & Advokasi Masyarakat* (ELSAM), and indigenous and church organizations based in West Papua that “replaced the symbols and discourse of Papuan independence with those of human rights, justice, and environment” (p. 415). The *reformasi* movement that toppled Suharto in 1998 with its demand for more autonomy for regions affected by military occupation opened up new space for calls for independence. Unfortunately, renewed separatist violence (and some military provocations) was used by the military to justify their continued and increased presence (p. 418). The ‘threat’ of separatism is used to shore up a nationalist discourse for continued occupation and repression, which then reinforces separatist, anti-imperialist discourses among West Papuan activists.

In the face of the MIFEE project, the West Papuan activists engage in critical dialogue with the international campaigners around land grabs, leading to new and innovative ways of criticizing and stopping the project. The groups opposing MIFEE operate with three different basic frameworks that are used in varying intensity and combinations. Because of their different background, they discursively challenge and oppose the MIFEE deal in different ways and this is relevant for how resistance is organized and developed (Borras et al., 2011). These are firstly, a narrative of indigenous peoples living within the forest and threatened by commercial interests, secondly, a story of resistance against the occupation and exploitation of West Papua by foreign interests, and thirdly, a framework of land reform and food sovereignty against agribusiness food estates.

The potentially huge conversion of forests by MIFEE has been criticized by environmentalist organizations, and the NGO *Greenomics Indonesia* estimates that up to 90 percent of the area is still covered by natural forest (Ekawati & Satriastanti, 2010). Locally, forest protection is usually associated with the defense of indigenous customary land rights. The discourse around indigenous peoples and their harmonious relation with forests has been a powerful one in Indonesia and in related international campaigns. It has been systematically developed in Indonesia by the environmental justice movement, particularly by AMAN and WALHI, in order to defend customary

land rights against the territorialization of state control (Peluso, Afif, & Rachman, 2008). Reminiscent of the situation in Indonesia under the Suharto regime, the forest issue is also seen by Foker LSM Papua as something that activists can work on without seeming “too political”. The basic strategy of this framework is to strengthen the traditions that celebrate indigenous knowledge and reinforce the position not to sell land but only to rent it and even then not for huge plantations (S. Manufandu, secretary general of Foker LSM Papua, personal communication, March 28, 2011).

The second framework is one of Papuan independence. Here, MIFEE is seen as a continuation of occupation and exploitation of the Freeport kind: foreign companies moving in to extract maximum profit from the natural resources of West Papua. In this view, MIFEE, and politicians like Gebze who pursue it, are merely serving imperialist interests, particularly the US, who want to use West Papua to solve their food and energy crisis (SORPATOM, 2010). The presence of a large number of army units in the MIFEE area testifies to the role of the military in protecting the interests of foreign investors against the local population (S. Manufandu, secretary general of Foker LSM Papua, personal communication, March 28, 2011). In this context, the potential recruitment of migrant workers to work the food and biofuel estates is interpreted as a calculated means of control and ethnic subjugation by Indonesia. Huge numbers of migrant workers are predicted to arrive with the MIFEE project. Several accounts predict 4 million workers coming in from outside. SORPATOM (2010) extrapolates this (with wives, children, and relatives) to a total of 24 million, concluding that “*genocide or extermination of the indigenous community will occur spontaneously*”. AMAN (2010) also speaks of the “*structural and systematic genocide*” that will occur if the Papuans (already in a minority in Merauke) are marginalized by an influx of migrants.

The third framing argues for land reform and food sovereignty against agribusiness food estates. Here, the main contradiction is seen as between big business interests and small farmers, although, again, foreign capital is seen as paramount (Idham, 2010; Serikat Petani Indonesia [SPI], 2009). As part of the neoliberal restructuring of agriculture, the food estates will exacerbate the food crisis by feudalizing independent peasants into cheap laborers and dependent smallholders, thereby undermining food sovereignty (SPI, 2009). WALHI connects the large-scale destruction of forests with the loss of food sovereignty and draws a parallel with the *Central Kalimantan Mega Rice Project* that had converted forests and swamps into rice fields

with the help of transmigrant labor. The project collapsed mainly because of inappropriate land use and environmental problems, and was cancelled after the fall of Suharto. Sustainable and family based farming is put forward as the alternative to the predicted failure of the food estate project.

### ***Strategic Questions in Resisting MIFEE***

In view of the relatively young status of MIFEE and the modest amount of actual investment and 'land grabbing' on the ground, the speed of indigenous and NGO reactions to the project has been impressive. Also, the breadth of involvement of and cooperation between NGOs at the local and national level and good links with the indigenous population in the area promise a potentially sophisticated, enduring, and even successful campaign against the project. There is a real possibility that a lot of the land grab can still be stopped before it materializes. However, resistance is still in a very early stage and to date basically involves information gathering, networking, and awareness raising. It is still a long way away from 'grabbing land back' (Borras et al., 2011, p. 212). This will depend on how the emerging coalition can extend the base of the opposition beyond existing NGOs, how political pressure can be built up (so that the national or district/provincial governments back out), how economic pressure can be developed (targeting existing and potential investors), and what people living in the area can do to prevent agribusiness development if the project does go ahead.

The early stage of both deal and resistance opens up the opportunity to think through some of the strategic questions in developing a successful campaign. In this sense, the campaign coalition against MIFEE can benefit from international linkages and experiences, and also critical reflection by and dialogue with activist scholars. This is particularly important in Merauke because of the way the resistance builds on existing networks and 'modes of resistance'. This is at once a strength and a weakness because these modes of resistance operate within certain assumptions and ways of working that may not be helpful for tackling some of the key challenges posed by the land grab. This also applies to international networking and campaign strategizing that can fall into a 'default mode' – paths of connection and ways of operating that have been in place and are therefore repeated.

### *The Forest Option*

Using ‘indigenous peoples and forests framing’ could be a way of generalizing resistance amongst the indigenous Malind Anim. It also seems to be promising in terms of creating a split within government agencies, particularly between the ministry of forestry and the ministry of agriculture. The forestry minister has already declared that much of the land earmarked for MIFEE is forest land and cannot be converted into farm land (Simamora, 2010). Zoning issues have already slowed up project implementation and could lead to MIFEE being scaled down to only 500,000 hectares. These turf wars between ministries can be understood within the context of REDD, which could redefine forest conservation as a major source of funding via the carbon market. The ministry of forestry is therefore reluctant to relinquish control over potentially lucrative areas. REDD money could also be a powerful economic alternative to agribusiness investment.

However, the celebration of indigenous forest communities on its own will not be enough to stop agribusiness development. In the indigenous communities themselves, people are not content with just continuing the traditional ‘hunting and sago’ way of life, but want some kind of cash income as well. This is shown clearly by the nature of many of the local protests that demand a just development including jobs, hospitals, and education. The indigenous way of life strategy is further complicated by that fact that the “clans” in Papua represent “pseudo-tribal entities” and “neotraditional political communities” (Filer, 2012, p. 602) in which people like Gebze compete for political power. The practice of renting out land for logging and receiving a commission per cubic meter is one way of generating income, even if it undermines the traditional subsistence economy.

In this context, REDD money could also be attractive for indigenous communities as an alternative way of generating cash income. But using REDD as an alternative to MIFEE has its own dangers. The forestry sector is firmly in the hands of the Indonesian government and powerful timber companies and in West Papua, it is entwined with the military and is notoriously corrupt (EIA & Telepak, 2005, 2009). It could become a Trojan horse, facilitating a ‘forest grab’ by military-linked companies and further marginalizing indigenous communities by plugging their forests into a global carbon market controlled by carbon brokers and hedge funds (as in Papua New

Guinea, cf. Filer, 2012). There is also the risk that, with the help of large conservationist NGOs like World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and *Conservation International*, it 'greenwashes' MIFEE by taking out some of the most 'high conservation value' areas in 'partnership' with the large agribusiness corporations involved. For example, the Medco Group is one of Conservation International's corporate partners. Foker LSM Papua is therefore skeptical towards REDD and has adopted the position of "No Rights, no REDD" (S. Manufandu, secretary general of Foker LSM Papua, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Nevertheless, this glosses over different positions within the coalition against MIFEE. While WALHI rejects REDD, AMAN, for example, has adopted a position of critical engagement in order to use REDD to strengthen indigenous rights to forests. A REDD-based strategy to stop MIFEE would therefore generate intensive debates between the different opposition groups and could potentially split the coalition.

#### ***The Autonomy/Independence Default Mode***

Based on the framing of MIFEE as an example of (Indonesian) imperialism marginalizing the Papuans with a kind of military/corporate/transmigrant block, this uses Papuan identity as a resource to mobilize local communities to reject the project. The strength of this option is that it is integrated within the broader movement for Papuan independence, which is gaining strength with the rejection of the Special Autonomy status. Disgust with the connivance of local political representatives with military and Indonesian business interests finally burst in January 2011, when thousands of people, including thousands of church members and hundreds of students from the Indonesian Christian Students Movement (*Gerakan Mahasiswa Kristen Indonesia*, GMKI) (a member of the *World Student Christian Federation*) occupied the Papua People's Council (PRC). In an extraordinary statement, Church leaders criticized the "present tyrant state authorities, who is on a rampage of internal colonialism, ethnic cleansing (genocide), and disguised slavery against your own Nation" and called for the rejection of the Special Autonomy status and a referendum on the future of West Papua mediated by a third party (Doirebo, Giay, & Yoman, 2011).

It also plugs into an existing network of international West Papua solidarity groups (and churches) that can help to fund activities (particularly *Christian Aid*), organize

watch dog and solidarity actions, and generate international pressure on Indonesia. This path is already being followed by Foker LSM Papua in order to generate political pressure (pressuring the new district head of Merauke who is less gung-ho about MIFEE, lobbying the provincial parliament and governor who were sidelined by MIFEE) and also to ward off (potential) investors. Here, the threat of indigenous rejection and potential unrest is used as a resource to undermine trust in the viability of MIFEE as a safe investment (S. Manufandu, secretary general of Foker LSM Papua, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Internationally, MIFEE has already become quite well known via the solidarity groups and church networks in operation.

However, there are two major problems with this strategy. The first and fairly obvious one is that a movement for Papuan real autonomy or independence that is based on indigenous identity opposition and international solidarity and pressure has not been successful for perhaps 50 years. The whole modus operandi of Indonesian control over Papua is to ignore and criminalize any sentiment for independence. Military occupation and repression is backed up by building a political base amongst an increasing number of Muslim migrants and among some Papuans and creating enough profit via the exploitation of Papuan natural resources to do so. While West Papuan solidarity is important in providing a space for activists to operate and to prevent some of the most atrocious human rights violations, it will not upset this Indonesian occupation regime. In fact, significant progress in the direction of autonomy was only made in the context of the *reformasi* movement – that is a national movement for more democracy that challenged key political cornerstones in Jakarta (Lane, 2008). ‘Nationalizing’ the Papua question, perhaps by creating Papua solidarity groups *in Indonesia* could be one way of encouraging policy change on this issue.

The second and perhaps most challenging question is that of the transmigrants. Migrant small-scale farmers from Java, Sulawesi, and from other parts of Papua now make up more than half of Merauke’s population. Although understandable given the political and economic marginalization of the indigenous Papua and the role migrant farmers play in this process, polarizing against these migrants can only be counter-productive because it encourages unity within the military-corporate-transmigrant block. On this basis, politicians like Gebze can continue to control the district government by mobilizing the migrant votes. Some of the anti-MIFEE arguments also tend to sensationalize the problems of immigration by exaggerated numbers and by the claim

of “structural genocide”. As Li (2011, p. 282) points out, the labor required for plantation agriculture and forestry are grossly exaggerated by government and corporate land grabbers and range from 10 to 400 per 1000 hectares depending on the crop. A rough estimate using an average of 150 workers per 1000 hectares would give us a total number of migrant workers of 180,000 for 1.2 million hectares of fully developed MIFEE. This is still large in relation to the current population, but nothing like the often quoted number of 4 million and the extrapolated 24 million migrants (!) feared by SORPATOM.

In the Merauke context, therefore, rejecting the land grab by defending indigenous customary rights based on “ethno-territorial identity” that excludes migrants who have been living there for some time creates a particularly “troubling dilemma” (Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011, p. 11). In this dilemma, “counterclaims” based on “indigeneity and ethno-territory” collide with those based on land reform and the “need for land as the basis of an agrarian livelihood” (Hall et al., 2011, p. 183). Creating a “migrant scare”, albeit from an indigenous rather than a supremacist perspective, also risks the more sinister danger of “ethnic violence” witnessed under similar circumstances between indigenous Dayaks and Malays and Madurese transmigrants in Kalimantan and Acehese and Javanese migrants in Aceh at the end of the 1990s (Hall et al., 2011, pp. 176-177; Peluso, 2008). This can lead to local elites using “ethnic identity as a resource” (van Klinken, 2008, p. 44) in order to create “racialised territories” (Peluso, 2008, p. 62) and in the Papuan context, could well be answered with a military or para-military crackdown against the Papuans.

### ***Land Reform and Food Sovereignty***

The critique of MIFEE as part of agribusiness expansion at the cost of small farmers can be seen as the default resistance strategy of national organizations SPI and WALHI. The advantage of this strategy is that it offers a way of struggling for an alternative kind of development rather than harking back to a solely traditionalist (indigenous people living in harmony with the forest) or a nationalist/ethnic perspective. The fight against MIFEE in Merauke could thereby become part of a generalized movement against food and energy estates in Indonesia and be connected to a global reaction against land grabs.

However, there are various complications in the Merauke context that mean that the strategy would have to depart from its default mode and become something else

and new. The first is fairly blatant: Neither SPI nor WALHI have local organizations in Papua, let alone Merauke, which means there is as yet no organized social force that could struggle for land reform or food sovereignty as an alternative to MIFEE. The polarization between Papuans and migrants also complicates things. If land reform is seen as distributing land “in areas where population is sparse” to smallholders rather than to agribusiness, and in providing supporting government services (Li, 2011, p. 285), would a call for food sovereignty include handing out indigenous land to landless migrants instead of to palm oil companies? What would this mean in a situation where the “potential for conflict between locals and transmigrants over both land and jobs is clearly very high” (Li, 2011, p. 288)? How would an alternative development path based on food sovereignty look like for Merauke? How would it polarize successfully against the government framing that appeals to a nationalist ‘food security’? And how could a different future look like that could balance a wish to maintain traditions and a successful co-existence with the forest with the desire for some kind of development, perhaps along the lines of successful smallholders?

### ***Conclusion***

The MIFEE land grab is a show case piece in many ways. The proactive role of the national and local government, the key involvement of domestic agribusiness conglomerates, and also the state condoned violence are some aspects that are typical for other land grab projects. Indeed, this particular constellation of forces could be part of one type of land grab that is different from those characterized more by the role of foreign investment and financial equity funds. Another typical feature of the MIFEE land grab is the gap between planned territorialization and investment and real investment and action. This opens up the opportunity for resistance to the land grab. As we have argued, this resistance is already quite well organized and therefore, has a real chance of stopping or seriously downsizing the planning fantasies of the government officials and corporations involved. At the same time, the emerging resistance also shows some of the potential strategies and also some of their limitations. There are serious contradictions between the forest-livelihoods strategy, the ethno-territorial strategy, and the land reform strategy which are probably relevant for many other resistance set-

tings in other parts of the world. In particular, the forest-livelihood strategy underplays the development aspirations of local communities, while the ethno-territorial strategy prevents a class-based alliance between indigenous and migrant small-scale farmers. However, all three strategies are also very much interconnected, and finding those connections that can complement and enhance each other might be the key to developing new and successful models of resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Opposition to MIFEE is not solely fueled by an outright rejection of the project in order to preserve traditional sago and hunting lifestyles. Rather, much of the dissatisfaction arises from the failure of the development promise to deliver: low wages in the plantations (ALDP, 2012b), and a lack of jobs and of social and infrastructure projects. Sebastianus Ndiken, the head of Malind Bian LMA, for example, argues that he would like to see progress “that doesn’t deceive the people” (*pembangunan yang tidak menipu masyarakat*) and that delivers the promised jobs, schools, and hospitals (ALDP, 2012c). Following De Schutter (2011, p. 258), the challenge for the emerging resistance to MIFEE would be to develop an alternative and better way of agricultural investment around a locally adapted program of land reform. As Li (2011, pp. 289-292) shows, the success of such an alternative would depend very much on *how* it is developed, and particularly, on whether smallholders are in the driving seat and supported by the government or become indebted contract workers within a corporate-dominated landscape of liberalized agrarian relations. “Hard-fought struggles” (Li, 2011, p. 292) will be necessary for this and, given the current schism between indigenous people and transmigrants, imaginative and creative strategies will be needed in order to create an alternative that could appeal to both groups of small-scale farmers. One step in this direction has been taken by Foker LSM Papua and allies. After the two separate consultations with Papuans and migrants had led to seemingly irreconcilable positions, Foker LSM Papua then brought the two groups together. Migrants and Papuans listened to each other’s problems and agreed that neither of them were to blame, but the government was (S. Manufandu, secretary general of Foker LSM Papua, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Without representing a common program of any kind, these discussions could be the start of one.

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4 For example, a broad coalition of Papuan and Indonesian organizations (WALHI, Pusaka, Sajogyo Institute, Sorpatom, Papuan NGOs Working Group, Sawit Watch, AMAN, Huma, Jaringan Kerja Pemetaan Partisipatif, Consortium for Agrarian Reform, Kontras, Greenpeace Indonesia, Down to Earth) have combined elements of all three frames without polarizing against migrants, cf. WALHI et al., 2011).

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