

# Proposed Webinar Series on Human Rights, Climate Change, Business and Indigenous Peoples – The Challenge of Indonesia’s Food Estates in West Papua

## Project Brief

Project Name	Human Rights, Climate Change, Business and Indigenous Peoples – The Challenge of Indonesia’s Food Estates
Date	September - November 2025
Project Partners	DTP’s Indonesia alumni networks, Business and Human Rights alumni networks, and Yayasan Pusaka Gentala Rakyat.
Project Overview	<p>This webinar series, proposed by DTP alumni, will bring attention to the threats to Indigenous Peoples rights, biodiversity and the environment posed by the rapid expansion of Indonesia’s Food Estates strategy in Merauke, West Papua, Indonesia.</p> <p>Local and international NGOs and the UN have raised their concerns about the impacts of the planned developments. The Food Estate strategy has been pursued by successive Indonesian governments, with the involvement of Indonesian and international companies as implementers and beneficiaries.</p> <p>The concerns about the impacts of the planned deforestation in Merauke extend beyond Papua and Indonesia to concerns about what the impacts will be on the climate – with the forests of Papua being described as “the lungs of Asia” – and Asia’s Amazon.</p> <p>The plans have been criticised as inconsistent with Indonesia’s commitments under the CBD – Kunming-Montreal Framework and UNFCCC Paris commitments. The involvement of companies also raise issues in relation to Indonesia’s commitment to join the OECD with its clear commitments to responsible business conduct.</p> <p>This destruction of the forest is taking place behind the veil of secrecy that Indonesia maintains across Papua, denying access to the UN and independent human rights monitors.</p> <p>This project aims to canvass these issues and provide spaces for the voices of those affected and concerned to be heard.</p> <p><b>Food Estate towards Food Security?</b>  Suharto's regime initiated the Food Estate program in 1995 as the Mega Rice Project (Proyek Lahan Gambut/PLG) or Peatland Project, spanning 1 million hectares in Central Kalimantan. However, the project failed due to inadequate studies on peatland conditions and their environmental and social impacts, resulting in its termination in 1998 under President BJ Habibie's administration.</p>

In 2010, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono launched the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), aiming to develop 1.2 million hectares of agricultural land. Unfortunately, the project faced significant delays, with only 100 hectares developed. President Yudhoyono subsequently introduced additional food estate initiatives in North Kalimantan (2011) and West Kalimantan (2013), targeting 30,000 and 100,000 hectares of rice fields, respectively. However, progress on these projects remains limited.

In October 2020, President Joko Widodo, introduced new regulations allowing the conversion of protected forest areas into agricultural land to support the Food Estate program.

According to IPB University Professor Dwi Andreas Santosa has concluded that President Joko Widodo's food estate initiative, including the project in Gunung Mas, Central Kalimantan, is unsuccessful. Despite achieving a harvest in Block A2, the yield was only 0.8 tons per hectare, significantly below the 4 tons per hectare needed for farmers to break even.

The historical evidence suggests that the food estate program is not a panacea for addressing food security or improving Indonesia's Global Hunger Index ranking. As of 2023, Indonesia ranked 77th out of 125 countries in terms of food security.

**Deforestation** According to research by the Center of Economic and Law Studies (CELIOS), deforestation of 2 million hectares in Merauke is projected to release approximately 782.45 million tons of additional CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, equivalent to a carbon loss valued at IDR 47.73 trillion. This situation contradicts Indonesia's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. The upcoming COP31 international climate change summit, scheduled for 2026 in Australia under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), presents a crucial opportunity to highlight this issue and foster collaboration with participating civil society organizations.

### **The Impact of Food Estates on Indigenous Papuans**

The planned clearing of 2 million hectares of forest for the food estate project in Papua is anticipated to have profound economic, social, cultural, and political implications for indigenous Papuans. The Indonesian Human Rights Commission has documented serious human rights and environmental violations, including inadequate community involvement, coercion, and militarization, which have instilled fear among local residents. The symbiotic relationship between indigenous peoples and forests, rooted in local wisdom, fosters a natural cycle crucial for sustainability. Given the severity of

	these issues, it is imperative that this topic be addressed at COP 30 in Brazil (November 10-21, 2025), highlighting the need for sustainable practices that respect indigenous rights and preserve the environment.
Goals and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raise awareness of the plans for Food Estates/deforestation of Merauke</li> <li>- Highlight the human rights and environmental issues involved with Indonesian and Asia Pacific civil society organisations</li> <li>- foster and strengthen cooperation between Indonesian and Australian civil society on human rights and the environment</li> <li>- Building on existing advocacy efforts.</li> </ul>
Constraints and Assumptions	Before COP 30 (November 10-21, 2025), to stay relevant
Project scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Target audience: Indonesian civil society members, Asia Pacific civil society members, indigenous peoples and human rights advocates, environmental advocates.</li> </ul>
Suggested Sequence	<p><b>Webinar 1:</b> Food Estate in West Papua and the impact on the community.</p> <p><b>Webinar 2:</b> Human Rights Situation in West Papua</p> <p><b>Webinar 3:</b> What advocacy is currently being undertaken and how could these issues be taken up through COP 30 in Brazil.</p>
Suggested format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Zoom as a platform</li> <li>- 1 facilitator and up to 3 speakers each presenting for 10 minutes, followed by Q&amp;A</li> <li>- Sharing of resources/weblinks in the chat</li> </ul>

## I. Issue raised

This project aims to create crops of sugarcane and rice in the region of Merauke, West Papua, where currently Indigenous Peoples are living. The current project builds on the earlier Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) program launched in 2010, which has been revived and expanded as a project of strategic national importance.

However, because of this project, Indigenous Peoples are displaced, the forests, their lands, which have sentimental (as well as financial) value are taken away from them (no discussions relating to compensation) without their free prior and informed consent. The military has been deployed in the region, causing intimidation and fear to the population. The BBC Indonesia said local people say it looks like a war zone since there are so many military officers. Some people also mentioned the manipulation of signatures and coercion by military personnel to suppress resistance. Furthermore, the deforestation of the zone causes a loss of biodiversity and the land is more at risk of droughts and floods.

Because of these issues, Indigenous Peoples rights like the right to have a safe accommodation, right to free speech, right to security and freedom or right to a healthy and safe environment are not respected

## **II. The government's answer**

The Indonesian government has rejected the allegations, claiming compliance with national laws, and saying the project boosts food security and that Indigenous rights and environmental safeguards are respected — despite civil society calling these claims misleading.

The government also affirmed the populations need to submit an application for their land to be considered customary land and they did not so the state has the right to take these lands for agriculture. However, it is known that Indonesia has historically been reluctant to recognize Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands and forests. The process to apply for a land to be classified as customary is lengthy and costly. It can take years to decades.

The population affirms that many communities have submitted documents seeking this recognition, but the process is extremely slow, whereas permits for investors are granted quickly.

The government also claimed the food estate project has gone through environmental impact assessments, and that environmental sustainability is a priority. However, no details as to which assessments have been conducted have been revealed.

The government referred to the concerns over the military in the zone as merely a “sense of discomfort” expressed by Indigenous communities over the increased military presence in Merauke, rather than fear or intimidation. It also said the military hadn't received any direct complaints about alleged intimidation committed by its personnel in Merauke.

## **III. Actions**

NGOs are urging stronger U.N. monitoring, a fact-finding mission, and genuine FPIC processes, warning that the project risks erasing Papuan Indigenous culture while facilitating corporate land grabs.

A coalition of civil groups advocating for Indigenous rights in Merauke, called Solidaritas Merauke, has criticized the government's response and has written a declaration to defend Indigenous Peoples rights and reject the project.

[UN calls out Indonesia's Merauke food estate for displacing Indigenous communities](#)

[Food Estate: Keterlibatan militer di lahan proyek lumbung pangan Merauke bikin warga 'ketakutan' - BBC News Indonesia](#)

[Solidaritas Declaration Merauke, an emergency call from Papua: stop the Merauke National Strategic Project | World Rainforest Movement](#)