

# Indonesian President Joko Widodo: Killing Papua with Rice - Indonesia Agrarian Crisis

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After two years occupying the Presidential Palace, Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) has not been able to meet his promises to engage meaningfully with the people of Papua. Early on in his presidency he made a trip to Papua and released political prisoners but since then he has prioritised infrastructure development. He failed so far to understand the Papuan indigenous needs and demands. This is no more evident than in his foundering plans for a rice estate in Merauke.

In May 2015, Jokowi announced an ambitious plan to convert 1.2 million hectares of the ancestral domain of the Marind-Anim indigenous people into rice plantations - within just three years [1].

## Indonesia Agrarian Crisis

December 2015, the Consortium of Agrarian Reform (KPA) of Indonesia released their annual report [2]. It recorded 5 deaths, 39 people were shot, 124 peasants and agrarian defenders were tortured and 278 others were arrested. All these figures are related to agrarian conflicts in Indonesia which increasingly improved. Last year also marked the peak of land disputes cases since the last five years.

Furthermore, the report mentions that the perpetrators of violence in various agrarian conflicts in Indonesia, dominated by companies/firms (35 cases), police force (21 cases) and army (16 cases). From the total number of agrarian cases above, 50% of conflicts were happened on the plantation sector. The other half related with infrastructure development (28%) and forestry (9%). Other conflicts also occurred regarding mining activities and land grabbing on the coastal regions.

Since the 2008 financial crisis subsides, we are witnessing a new global phenomenon of an extraordinary and massive land grabbing. An expropriation model of land in poor or developing countries by multinational companies. *The Economist's* in 2009 noted that in total there are about 37-49 million hectares have been successfully robbed since 2006. This number was predicted to be increased in subsequent years after the 2008 crisis.

A report in early November 2014 from Lund University of Sweden [3], confirmed the predictions above. The report gave a terrible picture of the expansion of land-grabbing. Of the total 195 countries that recognized the United Nations, 126 of it involved on global land trade where China (trade with 33 countries), the UK (30 countries) and the US (28 states) emerged as a major players who diligently purchased land in Africa and Asia. Ethiopia for example, had mortgaged its land to 21 countries. The Philippines and Madagascar had opened itself to 18 different countries. While Brazil, Sudan, Mozambique and Tanzania are selling land to investors from 17 different countries.

This kind of transaction model called as “new virtual trading form” by von Witzke [4] which allows a

company can import a thing that should not be traded previously as contrast to the old form of virtual trade which simply defines the process of buying and selling on the stock market. This new form of trade taking more radical step forward by trafficking water and pollution for instance, across national borders.

### **For neoliberalism, virtual trading has several advantages**

For example, countries with four seasons has problems for cultivation of tropical fruits, can buy land in tropical countries to then be converted into large-scale plantations. It will not only to meet domestic demand, but also to fulfill the ambitions of exporting tropical products to another country. Another way of doing is by changing the countries who still have enough land into barns world. For exchange, those countries that volunteered their land, received the ease in filing the debt scheme, as well as political guarantee for greater involvement in terms of foreign policy through regional trade agreement.

This new form of virtual trade has the purpose to prevent the state monopoly upon natural resources. Monopoly by the state is considered bad because it is inconsistent with the scheme of total liberalism where the market will be given full power and the corporation is the main controller. It helping rich countries to able to have legal access to extract natural resources of poor or developing countries to increase their own capacity of domestic consumption.

### **Food Market**

The outbreak of this new type of trade, also due to the rising price of oil and coal in recent years which weighed the cost of production and the facts that the oil reserves are dwindling. Therefore, the demand to find new energy sources is getting stronger. It was one of the driving power behind the trend of 'alternative energy' which bustling since the beginning of 2009. The issue of global warming since last decade has been recuperated by neoliberalism clearly shows by it moves to revitalize itself after the crisis. The increasing rate of population around the globe at some point making the issue of foods availability becomes an undeniable.

Although important to understand that the expropriation of land and the natural resources within it is not new. The same brutality has happened since hundreds of years ago. An example is the arrival of European colonists to the New World which eventually paved the way to the dispossession and exclusion of indigenous peoples. Examples of cases stretching from Amazon, the Sahara desert to what is happening in Papua today. The violence who essentially similar with differences on forms. In Indonesia, one can found how conservation was used as an excuse for the state, company and conservationist groups to evicted indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories.

But something more brutal just started after food crisis 2007 and financial crisis 2008 has successfully opened new avenues for the discovery of neoliberalism war on land. The first one is about food security. Most of developed countries had hung itself from foods' import for many decades. It was always worried with market control mechanism from the food producer countries.

But the opportunity and ability to purchased land and planting foods abroad, these countries able to overcome their previous limitations on foods. The other thing is the fact that investments on agriculture are deemed much safer and guarantee long-term profitability in form of 'food outsourcing'. The trick by taking over control of food production in poor developing countries through the hands of multi-national corporations -with advanced technology running with low cost.

For the governments of 'food host country' will be granted with benefits in form of loan and funds for expanding infrastructure development and financial support on business property which previously has been failed and triggered the crisis in 2008. These reasons has encourage China, US and UK actively seeking 'new lands' in Africa and Asia as food reservation. For humanity reasons, they called these food colonies as 'the world foods barns'.

It succeed to answer two questions at the same time. First, to ward off doubts regarding the upcoming food crisis (both in access and reserves) because the over-population problems. In different smart way, the over-population giving a bright future on the issue of foods in terms of huge number of future customers.

For instance, since March 2008 the government of Saudi Arabia, Japan, China, India, Korea, Libya and Egypt has sent their senior officers to negotiate and to seek for fertile farmland in Uganda, Brazil, Cambodia, Sudan, Pakistan, India, the Philippines and Indonesia (in particular in Papua).

It was done through a bilateral and regional diplomatic practices. Ironically these countries that were targeted, having it domestic food crisis. In Indonesia, rice prices keep climbing continuously since 2008 in line with how poverty widespread and making access on foods more difficult than before. Ironically to overcome these problems, the host government rely on regular and massive food imports.

The second track was financial gain. Given the current financial crisis, all kinds of players in the financial industry and food -through investment houses that manage workers' pension funds and private equity funds- have been moving actively seeking new formulations for quick and consistent grow of benefit. Hedge funds in large quantities had been regularly being transferred from the derivatives market whose now collapsing. Financial traders looking for new way switching to ground, as an alternative sources for foods and production.

The land itself originally was not a familiar investment to many transnational companies. It was caused by the fact that land rights always problematic in regards of ownership forms where in many cases, these obstacles prohibited foreign companies to purchase land. Trading and investing on land in form of agriculture was never cheap and quick job. To get benefit, investors should increase the production capacity of land which of course takes times and costs.

It workload is heavier compared to financial business or mineral mining. The land values changed simply not only caused by food crisis 2007 and financial crisis 2008 but how the land prices has decreased and keep decreasing in many poor countries because of these crises. It was influenced by the currency weakening towards exchange rates of US dollar, UK pounds and EU euro. The other role was the debt policy against southern countries that has lasted for decades.

Advanced capitalist countries that has long since handed over control of the public interests' management into the hands of corporations. It made these countries face no problems mandating the multinational or transnational companies to be involved. One should not be surprised if found that food production is carried out by the undeveloped and poor southern countries will never aimed to answer the problem of hunger, malnutrition and so on.

China, for example, facing with drastic reduction of productive agricultural lands and the declining number of peasants for last ten years. Depreciation which related with the massive industrialization and huge number domestic migration from rural areas to urban cities. Peasant numbers in China ranges about 40% of total farmers in the world, but shared only 9%t of the total area of productive land in the world with 1.3 billions people in need for foods. Briefly said, China has 'no other choice' but encouraging food investment overseas [5].

In addition to China, the Gulf countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are also moving to engaged with food outsourcing. Built in the desert, these countries have a problem of scarcity of land and water as a prerequisite to agricultural production. Greenhouse technologies that were used so far, gaining critics in regard to climate crisis and carbon emission. For instance, when the Merauke Integrated Rice Estate (MIRE) was first launched by then Indonesia's Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2006, Bin Laden Group has agreed to finance the investment. Later they has to withdrew because of the financial crisis [6].

The financial crisis itself has delivered a clear sign of the urgency for Gulf countries to involved with food outsourcing. In 2008, low-wage migrant workers which is the majority of the population in these countries were facing difficulties to access the foods, forced these countries to subsidized basic foods with

affordable prices in order to prevent social unrest [7].

Through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), these countries later formulated a joint strategy on food outsourcing business in particular in rice producing countries in Southeast Asia. The idea is not completely original by providing low-interest loans. In between March and August 2008, the GCC countries through a consortium or a single company has successfully secured a lease of millions of hectares of farmland and started plantation activities in mid 2009 after the previous regional strategic meeting held in January 2009. The regional meeting agreed to lift up food outsourcing as official joint policy official [8].

Another big player is South Korea, which has long been completely rely on rice imports to meet food requirements in respective country. For instance, 90% of South Korea Japanese domestic rice consumption filled by import. At the beginning of 2008, the South Korean government announced it plan to facilitating land acquisitions overseas in order to meet the production needs of domestic needs by targeting Sudan, Argentina and Southeast Asia [9].

## **Papua as Food War Zone**

Merauke was to be transformed into Indonesia's food basket, and named an Agricultural Production Centre (KSPP).

The project's first stage targeted an area of 274,403 hectares spread over Jagebob, Tanah Miring, Kurik, Sota, Malind, and Semangga districts. This was to be followed by 285,249.10 hectares in Animha, Muting, and Jagebob districts, 171,701.84 hectares in Okaba and Animha, 278,390 hectares in Tubang and Ngguti districts and finally 200,042 hectares in Okaba district.

Jokowi instructed the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) to play an active role in accelerating the program. Jokowi targeted 3,200 hectares of indigenous rainforest to be converted and ready for planting by the end of 2015, and asking to completed the first stage by early 2017. The program has been a spectacular failure. As of June 2016, soldiers had only managed to plant 1,800 hectares.

The mega food plantation of Jokowi is essentially a replica of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's failed Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) [10]. Launched in 2010, the MIFEE planned to convert 2.5 million hectares of Marind indigenous forest. It was considered as the exit way for Indonesia crisis on food and energy. MIFEE was designed to spare 1.2 million Ha to be converted into paddy plantation, 500 thousands hectares transformed as palm oil, and the rest will be planted with sugarcane.

By 2014, the government had managed to secure nearly two million hectares [11]. But rather than prioritising rice or food production, the pattern of land allocation appeared to follow the general preference for large-scale industrial plantations seen across Indonesia. About 973.057 hectares (50,48%) were earmarked for timber plantations, 2.800 hectares (12,14%) for wood processing, 433.187 hectares (22,47%) for palm oil plantations, 415.094 hectares (21,53%) for sugarcane plantations, and just 103.219 hectares (5,38%) for rice.

The MIFEE project violated the rights of the Marind-Anim indigenous community. UK-based nongovernmental organisation Forest Peoples Programme documented severe food insecurity, malnutrition, and the deaths of at least five children following deforestation and pollution near Zanegi village as a result of the MIFEE project [12]. The project also affected Marind-Anim culture. The Marind people have a strong connection to the forest. Deforestation does not only entail loss of livelihood, but also can result in disconnection from their ancestors, history and culture.

Grabbing indigenous land for mega projects has always led to agrarian conflict. Tempo has reported about how the MIFEE led to conflict in Merauke - one of the few areas in Papua that historically been considered free of conflict.

Olivier De Schutter [13], UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food [14] warned that the MIFEE had the potential to affect the food security of 50,000 people [15]. In their submission to the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, Franciscans International, the Faith Based Network on West Papua, and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) also cautioned the Indonesian government over the potential ramifications of the MIFEE.

But these facts were ignored by Jokowi. Plans for the food estate have continued to move forward. On 18 September, Jokowi announced that the rice project will be supported by a new body called as Papua International Rice Research Center (PIRRC) [16]. Indonesian experts and academics who live in the United States were to be invited to take part.

Jokowi has stood by the project and said that he believes Merauke will be able to meet 30 per cent of the national demand for rice. Jokowi has said that the Merauke estate will be managed in a similar manner to modern rice plantations in Europe or United States, and has confidently predicted that each hectare will be able to deliver about 6 tonnes of rice annually.

But the vast majority of Indonesian rice is produced by smallholders operating plots of less than 1 hectare. The average rice yield across the country has increased over recent years, but is still only 5 tonnes per hectare [17]. Indonesia has very little experience with large-scale agricultural production outside of palm oil and timber plantations and the experience it has had has not been positive.

The Dutch spent 50 years on the so-called Kombe Project in Kurik of Merauke, which was designed to meet the rice needs of the South Pacific. After 50 years, only 46,000 hectares had been developed. One of major obstacles was that there was no farming culture in Merauke –the Marind-Anim preferred to gather food from the forest – and locals ate sago rather than rice. With no other options, the Dutch brought in Javanese migrants to farm the land.

The most notorious of all Indonesian government failures, however, was the Mega Rice project in Central Kalimantan, launched by former President Soeharto in 1996. One million hectares of peatland forest in Kapuas was cleared, and Dayak Ngaju indigenous communities were evicted. The project failed, and Indonesians are continuing to pay the price through annual forest fires and haze. Papua now are moving toward similar direction. PUSAKA recent in-depth investigation exposed how that over the past five years, Merauke has begun to contribute to forest burning due to the rise of mega plantations [18].

The obsession to transform Merauke to be the Indonesia's food basket, Jokowi closed his eyes before the ongoing deforestation and land clearing against sago forests of Papuan indigenous. The president denied to understand that sago is the main food for Papuan indigenous and he has extensively forcing Papuan to eat rice. Continuing the massive Indonesia's politic of rice towards Papuans since early 70's. Jokowi ignored to see the bond between the Papuans and their ancestral domains simply because he needs the forest and land for mega plantations [19]. Despite the fact that Indonesian have different options for overcoming the national problem regarding massive rice demands, Jokowi has learned nothing. His colonialist thoughts are driving the repression upon Papua getting worse day by day.

As his predecessors, the current Indonesia president is only looking for extracting Papua richness in the name of development. And this is one of the reason why Papua shall be free from Indonesia.

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 41689), [Indonesia & Papua: Jokowi relaunches MIFEE, wants 1.2 million hectares of new ricefields within 3 years!](#).

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