



FairFrontiers Newsletter

Issue 4

May 2024

In this issue, we share reflections from field trips to Sabah, Sarawak and Laos, as well as the 5th International Forest Policy Meeting. Articles, organisations, and events highlighted in this newsletter have [embedded links](#).

Public Seminar: Methods for Examining Local Voices and Discourses Around Forest and Land Change in Sabah

23 January 2024

A public seminar jointly organised by [Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies \(BorIIS\)](#), FairFrontiers, and [PACOS Trust](#) was held in January at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Moderated by Dr. Jeannet Stephen at BorIIS, the seminar revolved around four talks related to local voices and discourses around forest and land change in Sabah. The seminar was attended by about 50 people, including community members and youths from Pitass, UMS students and faculty, and government-appointed local representatives.



Gordon from PACOS Trust presenting at the seminar

The first talk was on the history of local contestations around forest change and tree plantation development in Borneo Peninsula. Gordon John from PACOS Trust presented the major ongoing issues related to land rights that indigenous communities in Sabah are facing, such as how land grabbing by external actors is driving competition for land between communities or villages, and has also sparked conflict amongst stakeholders. The lack of channels that communities can use to clarify or make grievances in regards to land-use decisions made by the government is also a major issue. Approaches like participatory land mapping and building local capacity by keeping communities informed are some ways to address these issues.

Grace Wong then introduced photovoice, as a method where participants take photos of their daily realities, and later discuss and reflect on the issues they are facing through the photos. The third talk by Maria Brockhaus was on “Infrastructures of inequality,” which provides a conceptual frame for examining the project’s question about *who* benefits from development and *how*. Various methods and approaches for examining these flows, policy influence, and discourse and advocacy coalitions were introduced. Lastly, Ayami Kan presented the media-based discourse

analysis of Sabah’s Nature Conservation Agreement (NCA), a carbon trading policy that has been highly debated since details of the agreement was first publicised in November 2021.

The talks led to intense discussions with the audience, including the legal and political issues that indigenous communities face in order to attain legal titles for their land, like how their inquiries and applications are left without any response or progress, or the lack of transparency regarding the decisions made by government agencies.



Group photo following the public seminar

Photovoice in Pitas, Sabah

Andi Patiware Metaragakusuma

January 2024

Following the public seminar, FairFrontiers, BorIIS and PACOS Trust held a workshop on photovoice with our youth researchers from Pitas. Photovoice is a research method based on participant-led photography and critical dialogue that allows participants to share their stories and perspectives through images, thus a key part of the workshop was spent discussing the research questions and understanding the relevance of the activity relative



In Pitas, where the project and photovoice activity was introduced to community members

to the changing local socio-political contexts and priorities. The research team then went to Pitas to introduce and invite the community to participate in the photovoice activities. We are excited to return to Pitas in the next few months and meet with the participants and to hear the stories behind their photos. We hope this activity can be an empowering experience and provide an opportunity to amplify their voices and perspectives.

Listening to the Stories Behind Oil Palm Expansion in Sarawak

Azwar Azmillah Sujaswara

January 2024

FairFrontiers team held a three-day methods workshop at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) on January 2024. We were joined by [Dr. Benjamin Loh](#) from Taylor's University in Kuala Lumpur, who introduced approaches to examining discourses on various social media platforms, and how to analyse online interactions from the perspective of digital anthropology. Three Masters students from University of Copenhagen also joined the workshop to present their preliminary findings and data, having just returned from spending three months collecting field data in Kg. Kiding in Padawan district using FairFrontiers' methods.

Following the workshop, we went to Kerangas Village, Pantu and conducted focus group discussions and household surveys. As we approached the village, the landscape was dominated by oil palm plantations. This expansion of oil palm though, is not simply because of market demand. We heard a story where oil palm companies deceived villagers into surrendering their land unwittingly by signing an unclear document. More recently, they were approached by another company to do a joint venture, but the socio-economic benefits from this are unclear. Elsewhere in Pantu, villages were coerced into "lending" their customary land to join ventures for oil palm in the 1980s and 90s. Though they receive profit from these ventures, it is fixed and only a small percentage. Like in other parts of Sarawak, rapid large-scale conversion to oil palm is driven in large part through policies that have created barriers for indigenous



Oil palm plantation (left) and the forest behind which will soon be converted into an oil palm plantation

communities from claiming their customary land, while enabling private companies to carry out their large-scale agricultural projects. As I was guided around the village, I was told that the forest I was looking at was soon to be converted into oil palm too. I wondered if this would be the last time I would see this forest. I also wonder, what were these lands used before oil palm? Were they swidden and rice cultivation fields? What would be lost from this conversion?

We rode a car to explore the surrounding land, and saw more vast areas of oil palm plantations, before reaching the border of the recently established Gunung Lesong National Park in 2013. Research will also be carried out in the village of Menuang, which is located on the boundaries of the park. The UNIMAS team will be back in the field on May 2024.

Methods training workshop and field surveys in Luang Namtha, Laos

Wai Phyo Maung

March 2024

After a series of method training workshops in collaboration with our partners from National University of Laos (NUOL), we are excited to share that we have completed field surveys in Luang Namtha in March. Our fieldwork activities have been extensive, ranging from conducting household surveys to informal interviews with village heads and local residents to gain a deeper understanding of well-being and ecosystem services. Additionally, we collected soil samples and ground truth data points for land use analysis.



Methods training workshop at the University



Soil sampling in the field

While in Vientiane, we had a productive meeting with researchers from the [Center for Development and Education \(CDE\) under the K4D research project](#). This meeting has significantly enhanced our understanding of land use and land cover dynamics in Laos, and a collaboration with CDE will enable further sharing of data and advancing analytical methods. The NUOL team are currently planning to collect quantitative and qualitative data (household surveys, soil sampling and interviews) in Oudomxay province in May.

Wai wrote a blog post on his thoughts and impressions from his first visit to Laos, which can be read on [the FairFrontiers website](#)

Get to know our FairFrontiers project partners!

Anne Lasimbang, [PACOS Trust](#)

Since learning about social issues as a university student, Anne has been involved in community organising for more than thirty years. These activities eventually led to the formation of PACOS Trust, our partner in Sabah, Malaysia. As founder and Executive Director of PACOS Trust, Anne was invited to speak at this year's [RIHN International Symposium](#) to talk about the organisation's involvement with indigenous communities in Sabah.



How do you see the frontiers? What does it mean to you?

Frontiers can mean a lot of things. Some mention the “final” frontiers, meaning the last place that is well kept after everything has been extracted. For me the frontiers always mean a space. For us indigenous people, it is our territory, where communities are staying, looking after the resources around them and are surviving.

But in a lot of the situations in Sabah, those frontiers are being taken away from communities, and they are being pushed out. They are in the margin, the periphery, in a way that makes them poor. They face injustices. They have been staying in this frontier for a long time. They don't know how to read and write, but that doesn't mean they don't have knowledge—they have lots of knowledge regarding their territory, but maybe they didn't write it down as most of the traditions and knowledge are oral.

How do you mediate the different voices in the community?

In PACOS we work with many communities, and they are very diverse. Although there are some common threads, such as their connection to their land, they may have different values or cultures. The Muruk community are very patriarchal, so we face more difficulties with working on women empowerment, and our approach to these issues are different compared to more matriarchal communities, where we can encourage men to support women leadership. In normal societies, it is always the men who are appointed. The diverse interests are difficult, but we should listen to what is important to the community, and consider the different voices within. It's a long process, to talk, and negotiate. You also have to talk to policy-makers, community representatives, and those in the government, to inform them what the community's needs are.

What would a fair future in forest-agriculture frontiers in Sabah look like?

When we talk about fairness, we are talking about justice. Our vision is having a community that is empowered and healthy, and can live a sustainable life. They can be who they are, and if they want to send their children to school, they should be able to. They should be allowed to maintain their culture, to continue to live a life that is meaningful, by practicing what they know.

They should also be able to participate in what the government is doing. There is a lot of development, but because these communities are in the margins of society, the schools are still poor. We have been working there for a long time. We hope to see communities getting equal access, knowing their rights and their voices heard. We do leadership training, so that communities know how to voice themselves. Dignity is very important. If you can find your dignity, then whatever you become, even if you remain in the village, you can be proud.

What kind of research or data would contribute to the activities of PACOS?

Recording the knowledge that the communities have, and highlighting that knowledge. Using the research results to show what is happening in these communities. At the district office, people think rural communities have no knowledge. They make decisions in the office on behalf of the communities. We need to highlight that communities do have knowledge and present it them. When researchers publish or present their research, they can also share the knowledge back to the community. By sharing the results with them, it gives them pride, that sense of dignity that I was talking about.

5th International Forest Policy Meeting (IFPM5)

Helsinki, 10-12 April 2024

The International Forest Policy Meeting is a biennial event addressing forest and forest-related issues from a social science perspective and bringing together scholars and research from different parts of the world.

Grace Wong, Maria Brockhaus and Moira Moeliono co-organised a panel at IFPM5, titled "The intersection of discourses, finance and politics driving 'development' in forest frontiers". The panel featured research that examined how histories and distal flows of ideas, commodities and finance shape assemblages of actors, interests and discourses in forest

frontiers. Presentations include: the case study of financial flows shaping forestry governance in Mai Ndombe in DR Congo (see [research brief](#)); a research proposal to critically examine the transition to renewable energy in the Caatinga biome in Brazil amidst concerns for community displacement and dislocation; and how the importation of American gospel discourses to communities in Brazilian Amazon champions capitalistic "development" and contributes to the destruction of the Amazon's ecological and social landscape. For more details of what was presented from the panels, see Day 2, Parallel 4 and 5 from the [Conference Programme](#).



Alif Sahide and other panelists at the opening keynote, discussing decolonial research practices in forest policy education

One key discussion that emerged from this panel, highlighted in the opening keynote of the conference, was how harmful narratives that serve the interests of those in power—often since colonial times—are still present in research on forest policy. The keynote speaker, [Prof. Dr. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni](#), Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South at University Bayreuth encouraged the conference participants to reflect on the contemporary politics of knowledge and calls for a radical decolonial turn towards pluriversality in education and research. Panelists described how research in forest policy has made some positive steps towards decoloniality, such as greater recognition and inclusion for indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge, but also highlighted growing concerns for critical social science amidst growing censorship and cuts in research funds.

Read Ayami's reflections from IFPM5 [here](#), and a blog by University of Helsinki's International Forest Policy Research Group [here](#)

Publications

• IUFRO Report - *International Forests Governance: A critical review of trends, drawbacks, and new approaches*

Produced by the Science-Policy Programme (SciPol) of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO), [this report](#) synthesises the most pivotal developments in international forest governance since 2010. The findings provide actionable insights for land use and climate policymakers to spur the implementation of just and effective forest policies. FairFrontiers project members and collaborators are lead and/or contributing authors of the report.

• FairFrontiers Field Methods Guide

The full guide of field methods for Module 2 and 3: Ecosystem Services and Well-being Bundles is now [available on the website](#).

Upcoming Activities and Events

2024

May 20-29	Field survey in Pitas, Sabah FairFrontiers researchers will carry out field work together with PACOS Trust and BorIIS
June 23-28	26th IUFRO World Congress , Stockholm PL Grace Wong will be presenting a paper and co-authoring on 3 other papers.
July 22-26	FairFrontiers 2024 Annual Meeting hosted by the Forest and Society Research Group at Universitas Hasanuddin
July 27	1 st Forest and Society International Conference, Makassar
August 12-15	Program on Ecosystem Change and Society (PECS)-3 conference : Pathways to Sustainability, Montreal Alimata Sidibe will be presenting a paper and a poster
November 4-8	Global Land Programme 5th Open Science Meeting : Pathways to Sustainable and Just Land Systems, Oaxaca 1 panel and 4 papers by FairFrontiers team/collaborators were accepted