



FairFrontiers Newsletter

Issue 5

September 2024

We have a lot to share in this issue! Here, our team has written reflections from our activities and visits during the annual project meeting in Sulawesi. We also have reflections from PECS3, and an interview with our project collaborator. Articles, organisations, and events highlighted in this newsletter have [embedded links](#).

FairFrontiers Annual Project Meeting in Sulawesi, Indonesia

22-25 July 2024

Wai Phyo Maung

Our five-day annual project meeting in Sulawesi, Indonesia was not only enjoyable, but also inspired collaboration and creativity among our team. Unlike typical formal meetings held indoors, this year's meeting was more causal and relaxed. Our partners from Forest and Society Research Group at Universitas Hasanuddin (FSRG) set up a large green tent under tall pine trees where we had our discussions, presentations, and brainstorming sessions in the forest. The peaceful, green surroundings with sunlight filtering through the leaves, made us feel calm and connected. This natural setting allowed us to think freely, unlike in rigid indoor meetings. Though meeting outdoors had its challenges, I personally found it refreshing.



The wonderfully diverse FairFrontiers project group!

Our group was diverse, with people of various genders, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Even though we had different job titles and levels of experience, we all felt equal. The focus on fairness and equity in our research made everyone feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Our partners shared updates on country cases and research progress, which led to lively discussions and new ideas. We learned and grew together, building on each other's insights. Some of the best moments were during mealtimes, where we enjoyed five meals a day, tasting a variety of delicious local foods that highlighted Sulawesi's rich culinary culture. These meals not only fed us but also strengthened our camaraderie. The event was filled with a relaxed and happy atmosphere. Working and traveling together in such a setting deepened our friendships and teamwork.

For me, there's truth in the idea that researching the wellbeing of local communities also benefits the researchers themselves. On a personal level, meeting and connecting with people from different academic and cultural backgrounds has enriched my own sense of wellbeing. Attending this single annual meeting felt like traveling half the world through the conversations, ideas, and relationships we built here.

A very big thanks to everyone at Forest and Society Research Group, Hasanuddin University for hosting this year's project meeting!

Photovoice as a political project

Grace Wong

Visual representations of environments, life and the entangled values, relations and contestations surrounding development projects are often unexplored. What we normally see are slick advertisements, commercials and political or social media campaigns presenting the rhetoric of development (whether as tree or oil palm plantations, mining or as state education forest) as enabling modern lifestyles, organizing unruly environments and as mutually beneficial for all.

FairFrontiers uses photovoice as a counter-method to include visual storytelling of those impacted by development projects. Drawing on documentary photography, feminist theory and critical consciousness theory, photovoice puts cameras into the hands of community participants and allows them to guide data collection in documenting their observations about various phenomena through photography and narratives. Photovoice leans on feminist theory in seeking to empower community members to be the “experts” of their own lives and experiences, and treats participants as co-investigators rather than the subjects of research.



BorlIS researchers and local community members discussing stories and photographs, Pitas (photos by Jeannet Stephen)



The power of photovoice is its potential to reveal the diversity of real-life experiences, to offer often

marginalized people a voice, to promote critical dialogue, and to create social change. Over the past year, FairFrontiers members and partners are implementing photovoice to capture how change is affecting wellbeing in West and South Sulawesi (see following story) and identities, hopes and future aspirations in Pitas, Sabah. We will be carrying out photovoice in Campo Ma'an (Cameroon), Upemba (DR Congo) and Northern Laos next – stay tuned for more updates on this exciting work!

A couple of useful readings:

Masterson, V. A., S. L. Mahajan, and M. Tengö. 2018. Photovoice for mobilizing insights on human well-being in complex social- ecological systems: case studies from Kenya and South Africa. *Ecology and Society* 23(3):13;

<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10259-230313>

Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking critically about photovoice: Achieving empowerment and social change. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 17(1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631>

Photovoice Exhibition in Jambua, South Sulawesi: A Firsthand Look at the Power of Community Initiative

24 July 2024

Andi Patiware Metaragakusuma

The group of FairFrontiers members moved from Hasanuddin University's education forest in Bengo Bengo Hamlet to the photovoice exhibition site in Jambua located in Limapocoe Village, Cenrana District, Maros Regency, South Sulawesi. The photovoice activities were led by researchers from the Forest and Society Research Group (FSRG) at UNHAS, who empowered the local participants to capture their changing landscapes. Armed with their phone cameras, the local people set out to document their everyday realities and the struggles they face. The photos they captured were later showcased in an exhibition, where the local people themselves decided whom they wanted to invite to hear their stories.

This exhibition features photographs not only from Limapocoe and Rompegading villages in South Sulawesi but also from Tamalea village in Mamuju, West Sulawesi. Almost half of Limapocoe Village is forested, with around 70% of the area being protected forest and the rest limited production forest. Rompegading village is in a similar situation, with more than half of its area being protected forest. The UNHAS education forest also covers a small part of the area in both villages. Meanwhile, Tamalea is a village with the same problem as the two mentioned villages above, except that the land is not delineated as a forest area by the government, but as a coal mining area by a private company. For the local people in these areas, the land is not just a resource—it is the foundation of their identity, heritage, and livelihood. For generations, the people here have relied on farming, harvesting natural resources, and living harmoniously with the environment.



Atmosphere of the photovoice exhibition: Local people and stakeholders



Showcased photos in rustic wooden frames (photos by Kusuma)

This photovoice exhibition was held alongside the FairFrontiers Project Annual Meeting and allowed FairFrontiers members to witness firsthand the power of this initiative. Several key themes emerged from the photovoice exhibition. First, there was the heartbreaking loss of ancestral lands, as villagers shared stories of being displaced from land passed down for generations. Many feared that future generations would not only lose their homes but also their cultural heritage. Another pressing theme was the environmental impact, with participants highlighting the degradation of forests, rivers, and farmland due to mining company activities. This destruction has directly impacted the village's food production and access to clean water. However, amidst the struggles, a sense of resilience and hope also radiated throughout the exhibition. The villagers expressed their determination to protect their land and reclaim their rights, united by a shared belief that their collective voice could bring about meaningful change.

Their stories are revealed through the photos they capture. Most reveal the helplessness, fear, and threats they experience when trying to reclaim their land rights. The trees they planted for their children's and grandchildren's inheritance cannot be cut down, they have lost access to the forests that have supported their lives, the land they used to grow crops is now small and some can no longer be used at all as a result of land changes. Although people recognize that change is certain, they still expect that they want to be involved in any plans for changes related to the land they use.

The narratives from all the photo discussions are being analyzed using qualitative text analysis techniques. So far, only the village of Tamalea has been fully coded and analyzed. This analysis is being carried out by multiple researchers from FSRG at UNHAS and FairFrontiers at RIHN. However, the diversity of perspectives among the researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds also presents a challenge, as differing interpretations of local narratives can also lead to debates and disagreements in the analysis. A key lesson is for all of us to keep an open mind and to learn to read the narratives as deeply grounded indigenous, and not as scientific, epistemologies.

Click [here](#) to read the [full blog](#) on the photovoice exhibition!

Rammang Rammang: A success story about a community's resistance to defend their ancestral home

22 July 2024

Azwar Azmillah Sujaswara

For this year's FairFrontiers Annual meeting, we had the opportunity to visit one of the famous ecotourism destinations in Maros before starting our intensive meeting at the Hasanudin University Educational Forest. Rammang Rammang is known as the second biggest karst area in the world. The geopark area is predominantly inhabited by the Bugis and Makassarese ethnic groups. Their way of life is deeply influenced by ancestral customs, encompassing moral and social values towards both fellow humans and the natural environment ([UNESCO 2023](#)). We listened to their story from one of the key people behind the community movement, Iwan Dento. He talked about how they feel and value their landscape, their fight to defend their homes from mining companies and the government, to the condition of Rammang Rammang today. You can read more about this on [my blog post](#).

This trip to Rammang Rammang was not only fun but also deeply inspiring. I am enjoying the nature and it was beautiful. But after learning about the story behind this place? It doubled my appreciation. I wasn't just admiring the landscape—I felt a sense of relief and joy for the people who call this place home.



Rammang Rammang is designated as one of the UNESCO Global Geoparks ([Maros Pangkep UNESCO Global Geopark](#)), with a beautiful natural landscape in the form of clusters of karst mountains. (Photo by Wai)



Rice farmers harvesting their paddy. (Photo by Wai)

When I saw the farmer harvesting their paddy, I realized that it wasn't just the aesthetics of the field that amazed me. These fields are a living connection to their ancestors, and every grain of rice holds the weight of their pride and struggle. Unfortunately, the story of Rammang Rammang is one of the few success stories where local people have triumphed in their fight against exploitation. In many other FairFrontiers research sites, communities are still struggling, often becoming scapegoats in the name of development. And when I think about it, even for the story of Rammang Rammang has not reached its final chapter, and the story and fight continues. This realization has been a wake-up call for me. It's time for me to contribute through research activities that I hope can truly benefit the communities we are studying.

Read Azwar's full reflection in the [blog post](#) on our website!

Exploring Pitas, Sabah: Unequal Development and Ongoing Struggles

Andi Patiware Metaragakusuma (Kusuma) wrote her thoughts on the complex struggles surrounding customary land rights in Pitas, Sabah. Read her blog [here](#)!

Get to know our FairFrontiers project partners!

Tina Lain, Forgotten Parks/Upemba National Park



Tina at the photovoice exhibition

Tina Lain is currently the Director and Site Manager at [Upemba National Park](#), which is located in the southern part of DR Congo. She has worked in DRC for over 15 years, collaborating with conservation initiatives and local civil society organizations that focus on communities and conflict resolution.

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

First, I always see the frontiers as a whole landscape, and not just the park. The frontiers are where the last habitats for wildlife are still intact, and ecosystems are still functioning. I also see, very visibly, that “development” is closing in towards these frontiers at a rapid pace. Every week, we see new roads being constructed to transport minerals across the land, and along these roads come with new settlements. Second, frontiers are also a place where there is a sense of isolation, a space placed between where preservation and development are both taking place.

How did you become involved in what you are doing today?

I previously worked for and with local civil society organisations in DRC, as an “activist” contesting, among other things, oil development in different regions and especially in and around protected areas. We worked on capacity building and facilitating development for local communities, to bring their voices to top level decision-makers. I moved away from activism to manage the Upemba National Park, but the fight is still the same—to protect landscapes, and also work towards sustainable development. One thing I learned from my experiences is that without long-term support from donors and partners, we cannot carry out and follow-up with the work we proposed to do, because the changes we want to make requires a lot of time and effort.

What does a fair and equitable future in forest-agriculture frontiers in Upemba look like?

Where both people and nature are respected, for their own values. I still see development taking place where humans and nature are discussed and treated as either/or. If we are to work towards an equitable future, we need to value and recognize the interconnection between humans and nature, because when we stop caring for one, we also stop caring for the other. We are still not looking at nature as equal to humans, at a spiritual level either.

There are strong examples of this in indigenous traditions, such as Pachamama and Mother Earth. In Latin America, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, these values are embodied in the Rights of Nature, which is adopted in the Constitution. Article 71 of Ecuador’s Constitution states that Nature (Pachamama) has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.

I think one of our responsibilities is to remember this connection, and fight for this recognition and respect. In Upemba, we are still finding pathways for what that would look like.

(Interviewer: Ayami Kan)

Program on Ecosystem Change and Society Conference (PECS-3):

Pathways to Sustainability

12-15 August 2024

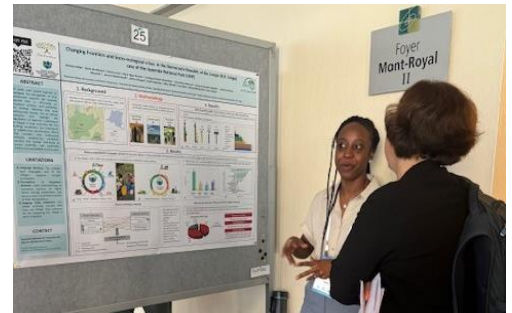
Alimata Sidibe

Attending the [PECS-3 Conference](#) in Montreal was an enriching experience. The conference’s unique format, which included engaging discussions, innovative sessions, and workshops and training, provided a dynamic and interactive learning environment.

I had the opportunity to contribute to PECS-3 in two significant ways. First, I presented some preliminary results of the FairFrontiers research project, titled “Capital and Lives in Commercializing Landscapes in Northern Laos.” I also did a poster session on “Changing Frontiers and Socio-Ecological Crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R. Congo): Case of the Upemba National Park.” I was able to engage in deep discussions with diverse audiences. The

positive feedback I received highlighted the importance of the FairFrontiers project's work in various regions. Attendees were particularly impressed by the research conducted in northern Laos, which involved surveying influential actors such as local authorities and foreign investors who were willing to engage in open discussions. This experience was enriching, offering valuable insights and networking opportunities with academics from different backgrounds, which I am excited to apply in my professional career.

One of the standout features of PECS-3 was the 90-minute innovative sessions. Unlike typical symposium talks, they required full engagement and deep reflection from attendees. For instance, the session on "Engaging with Nature for Co-producing Knowledge and Action" that I attended involved participants walking to McGill campus park for outdoor exercises and discussions. This session focused on integrating nature experiences into the co-production of knowledge, emphasizing relational values and human-nature connections. The activities included outdoor relational learning and photovoice exercises, which helped participants reconnect with nature and explore diverse values and worldviews, demonstrating the power of these exercises.



Poster session at PECS3



Innovative session on Engaging with Nature for Co-producing Knowledge and Action; McGill Campus

Despite being from different parts of the world, participants were able to connect with each other through their shared connection with nature. Even though the landscape in Montreal was not necessarily similar to all of the participants' original countries, the smell, sound, sight, or touch of a single plant, bird, or other natural elements could allow them to connect. Attendees felt particularly refreshed after the session, as they could take some time to connect with nature, discuss their feelings towards it, and share stories.

Overall, PECS-3 did not only provide me with the opportunity to engage with academics from various backgrounds and broaden my perspectives but also reminded me of the importance of pausing to breathe in fresh air, appreciating the beauty of a tree or a bird in flight, or even feeling

the texture of leaves. Taking a moment to connect with nature can be incredibly refreshing, allowing us to recharge and gain a fresh perspective. Have you taken a moment this week to step outside, breathe deeply, and reconnect with nature? If not, now's the perfect time to do so!

Publications

• Data and information in a political forest: The case of REDD+

Maria Brockhaus, Veronique De Sy, Monica Di Gregorio, Martin Herold, Grace Y. Wong, Robert Ochieng, Arild Angelsen. (2024). Data and information in a political forest: The case of REDD+. *Forest Policy and Economics*, Volume 165, 103251, ISSN 1389-9341, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2024.103251>.

Using the case of REDD+, this paper examines how data and information are not merely technical and apolitical procedures, but are dependent on the interests represented in the policy processes they aim to inform. To read the full paper, please email Ayami.

• When Policies Problematize the Local: Social-Environmental Justice and Forest Policies in Burkina Faso and Vietnam

Wong, G. Y., Karambiri, M., Thu Thuy, P., Ville, A., Hoang, T. L., Linh, C. D. T., Downing, A., Jiménez-Aceituno, A., & Brockhaus, M. (2024). When Policies Problematize the Local: Social-Environmental Justice and Forest Policies in Burkina Faso and Vietnam. *Forest and Society*, 8(1), 296-313. <https://doi.org/10.24259/fs.v8i1.34276>

This paper is part of the FairFrontiers special issue, and examines social-environmental justice in forest governance by asking who is problematized as drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. The implementation of the community forest (CAF) model in Burkina Faso and the Payment for Forest Environmental Services (PFES) in Vietnam are examined using Bacchi's "What is the problem represented to be" approach.

• **Radical incrementalism: hydropolitics and environmental discourses in Laos**

Koh, N. S., Wong, G. Y., & Hahn, T. (2024). Radical incrementalism: hydropolitics and environmental discourses in Laos. *Environmental Politics*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2372236>

This paper examines the role of safeguards in hydropower, and how stakeholders have discussed its use, through discourse analysis of a literature review and stakeholder interviews. The paper argues for a broader understanding of discourses to include Radical Incrementalism as one strategy for change of careful and considered actions over time.

• **Book review: Transforming Borneo: From Land Exploitation to Sustainable Development**

Wong, Grace. (2024). Review of Transforming Borneo: From Land Exploitation to Sustainable Development. Chun Sheng Goh and Lesley Potter. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12557>

Grace Wong wrote a review of the book Transforming Borneo: From Land Exploitation to Sustainable Development by Chun Sheng Goh and Lesley Potter, which examines the trends in the development and exploitation of land and forest resources from 1970-2020. For those interested in reading, please email Ayami.

• **Fatal attraction to win-win-win? Debates and contestations in the media on Nature Conservation**

Agreement in Sabah, Malaysia

Kan, A., Brockhaus, M., John, G., Varkkey, H., Wong, G. Y. (in press). Fatal attraction to win-win-win? Debates and contestations in the media on Nature Conservation Agreement in Sabah, Malaysia. *Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change*.

Using the discourse network analysis approach, this paper examines how the Nature Conservation Agreement (a carbon trade deal) and issues related to forest and land are debated in local print media, to identify the narratives and understand the underlying politics and power that are shaping ‘sustainable’ development in Sabah.

• **Publications translated in French**

We have translated a few of our works focusing on Cameroon and DR Congo to French using DeepL (an AI translation tool). More will be uploaded on our website.

Calls for papers: IFPM5-related Special Issues in *Forest Policy and Economics* & *Forest Monitor*

Following on the IFPM5 in Helsinki in April 2024 (see the reflection on IFPM5 by Ayami Kan [in this blog post](#)), the conference organizers have organized two special issues and encourage paper submissions!

Forest Policy and Economics

Special issue: “A political forest – an examination through critical political economy and ecology perspectives”, for contributions that apply critical political economy and/or political ecology lenses.

Forests Monitor

Special issue: “Political forests of Europe”, on forest policy related issues, specifically within EU or member states.

More details regarding aims and scope of the special issues can be read [here](#). The deadline for manuscript submissions for both journals is **March 15, 2025**.

Upcoming Activities and Events

2024	
November 4-8	Global Land Programme 5th Open Science Meeting : Pathways to Sustainable and Just Land Systems, Oaxaca FairFrontiers team/collaborators will be chairing 1 panel, and presenting 3 papers
November 26-28	RIHN General Meeting
2025	
January 6 – March 5	Nancy Lee Peluso will visit RIHN as Visiting Scholar! A public seminar and a workshop with FairFrontiers members are being planned during her stay.