

In the name of poverty alleviation: Experiments with oil palm smallholders and customary land in Sabah, Malaysia

Abstract

Oil palm in Sabah is grown in large plantations or smallholdings, the latter mostly managed by indigenous peoples on untitled customary land. Government development agencies have long focused on improving the productivity of smallholders for poverty alleviation. For most smallholders, the main issue is tenure insecurity: as long as lands remain untitled they are subject to changes in land allocation and land use at the discretion of the State Government. Indigenous claimants seek recognition of the right to use and occupy ancestral lands via individual Native Titles (NT), as provided for in the Sabah Land Ordinance (SLO). Recent official push for converting such 'idle' customary lands by promoting large scale joint ventures between customary landowners and oil palm companies is creating anxiety among many indigenous groups. The joint-venture approach has been enabled through a crucial amendment to the SLO that promotes the granting of communal titles (CT) with conditions attached. This tenure instrument empowers state-appointed trustees to make key decisions concerning land use where commercial crops (especially oil palm) are favoured and on the eligibility of descendants (pewaris) to participate in the joint venture or not. The complexity of local concerns and official responses is captured via a case study at Lalampas in the Tongod District of Sabah.