



## International agrarian conflict on palm oil plantations in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

International agricultural disputes between foreign plantation businesses and indigenous Indonesians demonstrate the intricate relationship between customary, national, and international civil law. Customary law is acknowledged in Indonesian law, although formal legality that favors foreign investment hinders its application, often resulting in indigenous peoples losing access to customary land crucial to their economic and cultural well-being. This paper examines how international civil law affects multinational plantation firms' agricultural conflicts and their obligation to indigenous peoples. The research employs a normative and comprehensive-juridical approach, analyzing national rules, international legal documents like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and case studies. The findings reveal that the conflict between customary, national, and international civil law is the most significant barrier to resolving these disputes. Foreign firms often advocate for international arbitration, which undermines local and indigenous mechanisms. The absence of harmonization between customary practices, national legal frameworks, and international standards further complicates determining the applicable law. Additionally, while international corporate responsibility norms like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights exist, foreign companies frequently disregard their social obligations to indigenous communities. The study contributes to the field by emphasizing the need for harmonized legal frameworks and proposing practical solutions, including strengthening the recognition and enforcement of customary law, implementing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanisms, and embedding international principles into national policies. These measures aim to achieve equitable resolutions by balancing economic development with indigenous rights and environmental sustainability, offering a model for resolving cross-border agrarian disputes in similar contexts.

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### 1. Introduction

International private law governs legal contacts between foreigners, particularly when foreign components are involved in a dispute (Rahman et al., 2024). International private law has three

main components: jurisdiction, which is a country's legal authority to try cases with foreign elements; recognition and enforcement of foreign judgments, which is how court decisions from one country can be recognized and enforced in another; and determination of applicable law, which is which law should be used to resolve cross-border disputes (Wantu et al., 2023). These features show how complicated private international law is and how justice frequently needs many approaches.

The Indonesian government plays a crucial role in resolving land disputes through the enforcement of laws like the Basic Agrarian Law and mechanisms recognizing indigenous land rights, such as Constitutional Court decisions and policies like Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). However, these measures are often undermined by bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak enforcement, and economic interests favoring foreign investments. While progress has been made with laws protecting indigenous peoples, significant gaps in implementation persist, particularly at local levels. Data from organizations like the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA) reveal trends in increasing agrarian conflicts, especially in the plantation sector involving foreign companies, underscoring the urgent need for stronger enforcement and tailored policies to address these disputes effectively.

Foreign plantation businesses operating in Indonesia are involved in agricultural disputes in Indonesia, making international civil law significant (Arfiani et al., 2020). Foreign corporations sometimes claim land rights based on Indonesian government approvals or agreements, causing problems (Gobel et al., 2023). Indigenous and local community rights are frequently overlooked in this process. Private international law protects foreign enterprises within national legislation while respecting indigenous peoples' rights.

Jurisdiction is a major problem in such confrontations. Local communities sue international firms, but which court has jurisdiction? (Dungga & Muhtar, 2022). Foreign firms may argue that their home country courts have greater authority than local courts to escape accountability. In this case, private international law considers the site of the occurrence, the parties' domicile, and the contract or agreement's law to decide jurisdiction.

International civil law recognizes and enforces judicial judgments in addition to jurisdiction. In agricultural issues involving international corporations, Indonesian court verdicts may not be effective if not recognized by the Company's home country (Yassine et al., 2024). Indigenous peoples must go through extra legal steps to enforce an Indonesian court's compensation ruling if a firm refuses. These procedures are complicated and involve international legal cooperation, such as conventions or bilateral agreements.

However, choosing the relevant legislation is one of the main obstacles in applying international private law to agricultural conflicts. When a contract between a foreign firm and the Indonesian government causes controversy, the fundamental issue is whether Indonesian law, the corporation's home country law, or international law should be applied. This problem is complicated by indigenous peoples' rights, which are seldom officially acknowledged in national or international laws. Therefore, the method must mix local values with international law to provide justice for all parties.

The dispute between indigenous West Kalimantan peoples and a Malaysian palm oil corporation illustrates the intricacy of international civil law in agricultural disputes. A plantation business authorization from the Indonesian government gave the corporation concession rights over thousands of hectares. However, the concession area intersected local customary land that provided livelihoods. This dispute worsened when indigenous people accused the firm of forced evictions, cultural site destruction, and removing forests vital to the local environment.

Complex legal difficulties arise from this case. Because the corporations are foreign, this lawsuit concerns a jurisdictional problem under private international law. The location of the issue determines whether Indonesian courts may hear these lawsuits, although multinational firms

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regularly contest their jurisdiction. They say international arbitration should decide these problems, under concession contracts. Indigenous peoples, who typically lack access to or comprehension of international arbitration processes, face a legal challenge.

Determining the appropriate legislation is also crucial. The corporation claims that Indonesian law protects its land rights via government approvals. Indigenous groups want acknowledgment of their rights based on customary law, which is recognized in Indonesian law but seldom protected. This conflict involves customary, national, and international civil law, all of which have valid dispute resolution claims.

Recognition and execution of court rulings is another aspect of this issue. In other comparable situations, Indonesian courts have decided in favor of indigenous peoples, but multinationals have refused to cooperate and brought the cases to their home nations. However, indigenous peoples cannot file cross-border cases, therefore power imbalances frequently hinder justice.

CSR is also involved in this fight. International rules like the UN Guiding rules on Business and Human Rights oblige foreign enterprises to respect human rights (Rs et al., 2023), incorporating indigenous land rights. In reality, these obligations are frequently overlooked or applied metaphorically. Companies may use this legal gap to escape their moral and legal commitments. Considering these factors, this case shows how foreign company agricultural disputes complicate private international law. Conflicting legal issues and uneven access to justice between local populations and international enterprises complicate matters. Thus, addressing issues like these needs an integrated strategy that protects indigenous rights, applies social justice, and uses private international law mechanisms.

Based on explanation, issue formulation: (1) How does international civil law affect foreign plantation company land rights disputes? (2) Does the corporation preserve indigenous rights in plantation concession areas?

## **2. Method**

This study uses a normative legal research method with a comprehensive-juridical approach to analyze international civil law's effects on land rights disputes involving foreign plantation companies and the company's responsibility to protect indigenous peoples in plantation concession areas (Ishaq, 2017). This study analyzes international, national, and Indonesian customary law concepts relating to agricultural law. Agrarian laws, international agreements on indigenous peoples' rights, and other pertinent legal instruments are employed. This research also uses legal literature, scientific publications, and comparable case studies from other countries for a wider perspective.

This research adopts a normative descriptive technique to solve the first issue formulation: how international civil law affects foreign plantation company land rights conflicts. This method maps international civil law fundamentals including jurisdiction, relevant law, and foreign decision recognition and enforcement. This research also shows how national law, customary law, and international norms shape cross-border conflict resolution. Global corporate responsibility principles like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) are examined in the context of international civil law and its implementation in Indonesia.

While the normative approach provides a solid foundation for analyzing the theoretical aspects of private international law in cross-border disputes, its practical limitations necessitate supplementary empirical insights to capture procedural realities, power dynamics, and socio-political contexts. To ensure the analysis of customary law extends beyond legal texts, the study must incorporate the lived experiences, practices, and social values of indigenous peoples through interdisciplinary collaboration, qualitative research, and field studies. Furthermore, addressing significant differences in legal systems, cultures, and social structures across comparative jurisdictions requires contextual analysis of each system's historical and social influences while identifying shared principles like human rights norms and corporate

accountability standards. By critically evaluating these elements, the study can provide a nuanced and realistic framework for resolving cross-border disputes that respects local specificities while incorporating international best practices.

### **3. Analysis and Results**

#### **3.1. Implications of International Civil Law on Land Rights Disputes Involving Foreign Plantation Companies**

One of Indonesia's difficult legal challenges is international civil law's impact on multinational plantation company land rights conflicts (Gobel & Muhtar, 2022). A global firm operating in Indonesia faces land rights demands from local populations, including indigenous peoples. In private international law, concerns include judicial jurisdiction, relevant legislation, and judgment recognition and execution. When foreign corporations employ concession contract terms to push dispute resolution to international arbitration, court jurisdiction is typically a serious issue. (Gobel et al., 2024) In Article 3 of the Basic Agrarian Law No. 5 of 1960, customary rights and the rights of customary law communities are recognized as long as they still exist in reality and are in accordance with national interests.

Due to economic interests, such as foreign investment in plantations, this recognition is frequently difficult to accomplish. In foreign company land conflicts, Article 1338 of the Civil Code (KUH Perdata), which governs freedom of contract, is commonly used to protect rights. All legal agreements apply as laws for their parties, according to this article. However, indigenous peoples often base their claims on customary law, which is recognized and respected in Article 18B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution.

The controversy involves international law, notably human rights. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) emphasizes preserving indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, territories, and resources. Foreign corporations routinely flout this premise, claiming they have concession rights from Indonesian government authorities (Arfiani et al., 2020). This complicates matters by pitting indigenous rights against national government-backed company claims. Article 1343 of the Civil Code, which governs agreements formed in bad faith or for illegal or immoral reasons, may also be used to evaluate concession agreements that violate indigenous peoples' rights.

Indigenous peoples lack adequate legal procedures, compounding this complexity. Indigenous peoples can sue in Indonesian courts, but exorbitant fees, the power imbalance between indigenous peoples and multinational enterprises, and a lack of legal knowledge frequently impede the process. Enforcement of Indonesian court rulings in favor of indigenous peoples is challenging, particularly if the firm moves assets or assigns duty to a domestic body. This shows that national and international legal procedures have not properly handled transnational agricultural issues.

Thus, this dispute's private international law ramifications demand a full review of national, customary, and international law. Resolving this dispute requires focusing on justice and human rights as outlined in the Indonesian constitution and international conventions. A comprehensive legal framework is required to reconcile commercial interests, national legal sovereignty, and indigenous land rights.

Court jurisdiction, relevant legislation, and judgment recognition and enforcement are the primary topics of international civil law's impact on foreign plantation company land rights conflicts. These three factors interact to resolve cross-border issues like those between multinational plantation firms and indigenous Indonesian populations.

It's sometimes unclear which court has jurisdiction over international company conflicts. Companies typically allege that concession contracts need international arbitration rather than Indonesian courts to handle issues (Dewi, 2022). The Civil Code's Article 1338 freedom of contract permits parties to choose their own contract conditions, including a dispute resolution

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venue. Indigenous peoples view this claim as a form of abdication of the company's responsibility to local jurisdictions, aimed at avoiding national law and indigenous peoples' rights protected by the Basic Agrarian Law and Article 18B paragraph (2) of the Constitution of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Muhtar et al., 2024).

National law, customary law, and international law sometimes collide in these situations. The Basic Agrarian Law of Indonesia respects indigenous peoples' traditional rights, although pro-investment economic policies generally ignore them. However, customary law, which underpins communal claims, has little legal power in national conflict resolution (Iza Rumesten et al., 2024). Indigenous peoples may exercise their rights using international legal concepts like UNDRIP, although these ideas are seldom enforceable in local legal systems. This legal overlap and ambiguity makes dispute resolution problematic.

These conflicts also include judgment recognition and enforcement. Many firms have little motive to comply with Indonesian court rulings in favor of indigenous peoples, particularly if their holdings are abroad. Indigenous peoples must enforce rulings in the company's home nation, which frequently doesn't support their claims. Differences in legal concepts between the two nations make this procedure time-consuming, expensive, and sometimes unsuccessful. These conflicts also include corporate social responsibility. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights require multinational corporations to respect human rights worldwide. This approach is frequently useless in practice, particularly without a clear legal framework. This indicates that despite an international legal framework, corporation will and local government policies determine its execution.

This whole conversation indicates that foreign plantation company land rights conflicts demand a comprehensive strategy. Understanding international civil law and developing national legal systems to safeguard indigenous peoples and hold foreign enterprises accountable are needed. Sustainable conflict resolution requires balancing economic interests, national legal sovereignty, and human rights.

### **3.2. Corporate Responsibility in Protecting the Rights of Indigenous Communities in Plantation Concession Areas**

Customary law is a cornerstone of Indonesian law and national identity (Abdussamad, Bakung, et al., 2024). Indigenous customary law embodies generational beliefs, customs, and traditions.(Abdussamad et al., 2023) Article 18B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution declares that the state protects customary law communities and their traditional rights (Abdussamad, Harun, et al., 2024), as long as it aligns with social progress and Indonesia's Unitary State ideals (Bakung et al., 2024). The Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) No. 5 of 1960 regulates indigenous peoples' customary rights, especially Article 3, which states that their implementation must be in accordance with national interests and laws and regulations.

However, in practice, customary law is often marginalized in the face of more dominant economic and legal forces, especially when dealing with foreign plantation companies that have concessions on land claimed as part of the customary rights of indigenous peoples. Customary rights, which are an integral part of customary law, give indigenous peoples collective authority to manage, utilize, and protect land that is part of their lives culturally and spiritually. However, because the national legal system often prioritizes land certification and administrative-based concession permits (Paramitha et al., 2023), Formal law typically invalidates indigenous claims. This means customary law, which should safeguard indigenous peoples' rights, isn't recognized in land disputes.

Foreign firms with government concession rights typically flout customary rules in indigenous lands. According to national and international law, corporations must follow the laws of the country in which they operate and respect the internationally recognized rights of local populations. UNDRIP declares that indigenous peoples have rights to the lands, territories, and resources they customarily utilize and requires governments and other parties, including

businesses, to respect these rights. Companies must guarantee that their activities do not infringe indigenous peoples' rights legally, morally, and socially (Pramuji & Putri, 2020).

Companies frequently violate customary law by claiming government authority. This argument relies on concession agreements and national administrative business licenses' formal legitimacy. This illustrates an overlap between customary law and national law, where land control decisions seldom emphasize customary law. Thus, indigenous peoples lose their rights to land that has always been important to them, while multinationals get official protection.

Indigenous peoples have uneven access to justice, which compounds the official legal system's rejection of customary law. Many lack the legal expertise and means to defend their rights in court (Prihartono et al., 2023). Native peoples frequently win court challenges, but multinational firms may transfer their obligations or assets to other jurisdictions, making enforcement difficult. This shows that although acknowledged, customary law needs institutional reinforcement and better protective measures (Supriadi, 2023).

Customary land disputes between the Suku Anak Dalam village in Jambi and a Malaysian palm oil plantation enterprise illustrate the interplay between customary law and international civil law. The corporation received a concession permission from the local authorities to construct a thousands-hectare plantation in an area the Suku Anak Dalam had long utilized for their everyday existence. The region is customary land used for farming, living, and religious rites. The corporation cleared ground using heavy machinery and planted oil palms without informing the customary community, using a government concession permission. The customary community objected, claiming the firm had infringed their customary rights under Article 18B paragraph (2) of the Indonesian Constitution and Article 3 of the Basic Agrarian Law. The corporation and local authorities disregarded this objection, believing the concession authorization was lawful. Indigenous peoples lose culturally and spiritually significant territories (Harsono, 2005).

The indigenous people sued the firm, saying its operations infringed their customary rights. The indigenous people also used the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in the complaint. The corporation had to respect their rights under national and international law, they said. The corporation countered that it had legitimately gained land rights via government permissions, which is recognized by Article 1338 of the Civil Code on freedom of contract. The corporation even filed a jurisdictional objection, claiming that international arbitration should decide the case under its concession agreement (Anand, 2011).

After much litigation, the first instance court found that indigenous people had rights to portion of the contested territory. Due to its lack of indigenous participation in permit issuing, the court found that the corporation violated Article 1339 of the Civil Code's good faith norm. Companies disputed this ruling, therefore the legal procedure went to cassation. In addition to harassment from parties accused of having links to the enterprise, indigenous people have little legal options to continue their campaign (Wantu et al., 2023).

This case shows the conflict between customary, national, and private international law. Constitutions and laws acknowledge customary law ideas, but economic power and formal legality favoring foreign firms hinder their application. Indigenous peoples are frequently unable to use private international law that allows cross-border conflict resolution, such as arbitration, owing to power and resource disparities. This case emphasizes the need to improve indigenous peoples' rights protections in national legal systems and incorporate international law concepts into local decision-making (Putri et al., 2023).

Conflicts between customary law and international civil law involving foreign plantation firms must be resolved holistically, including legal, institutional, and social factors. Starting with customary law recognition in the national legal system is crucial. This may be done by giving indigenous peoples customary rights equal legal status as concession permit land rights. According to Article 3 of the UUPA, more comprehensive customary rights recognition

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legislation must be created quickly to provide indigenous peoples legal certainty in defending their areas. Second, enterprises must adopt an FPIC consultation and consent system before initiating operations in customary areas. So indigenous peoples may express their hopes and concerns without pressure or intimidation, this process must be open and inclusive (Arba, 2021).

To resolve indigenous agrarian problems, national and local institutions must be strengthened. Customary courts and special entities that decide agricultural disputes must be empowered to do so honestly. In addition, government initiatives or civil society partnerships could strengthen indigenous peoples' legal assistance access. Nations must urge foreign enterprises to follow corporate social responsibility norms like the UN Guiding norms on Business and Human Rights, which require corporations to respect human rights in all their operations. Thus, national laws must include more comprehensive restrictions that tie foreign enterprises to these international norms (Bakung et al., 2024).

A paradigm change in development is needed to combine commercial interests with indigenous peoples' rights and environmental sustainability in conflict settlement. The government must guarantee concession permits do not violate sustainability and social fairness. These approaches should help indigenous peoples and foreign plantation businesses handle issues properly, balancing local, national, and international interests.

#### 4. Conclusion

To address international agricultural disputes between multinational plantation businesses and indigenous Indonesian communities, national legal systems must integrate customary law into formal frameworks, ensuring enforceability and alignment with national and international laws. Mandatory Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) should be implemented with oversight mechanisms to protect indigenous rights, while land titling and legal aid programs should formalize ownership and provide representation. Jurisdictional clarity and cross-border legal agreements are essential for recognizing and enforcing judgments, alongside alternative dispute resolution mechanisms tailored to such conflicts. National policies must adopt international norms like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, requiring human rights impact assessments and corporate accountability measures. Environmental safeguards and community-based monitoring should ensure sustainability, while benefit-sharing and cooperative agreements empower indigenous communities economically. Comprehensive judicial and community training, coupled with participatory policymaking, would foster inclusivity and fairness, creating a balanced framework for resolving disputes equitably.

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