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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

## The Domination of Community-Based Decision-Making by Village Level Elites in Oil Palm Conversion in Borneo

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### Abstract

The forests of Southeast Asia are tremendously rich reservoirs of biodiversity, store large amounts of carbon and are home to a number of indigenous tribes. The oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis*, is grown in humid tropical regions and has recently begun to play a key role in the transformation of these forests. While some present this development as a way for poor farmers to escape poverty, others warn of extreme harm to local and global environments and human rights violations associated with the crop. In Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, much of the land currently targeted for oil palm expansion is communally managed forest land and subject to ‘native customary rights’ (NCR). There is a lack of detailed information on the roles played by different stakeholders within communities with NCR land in decisions regarding land use.

We conducted a two-week field study in a village in Sarawak of 32 households which has recently leased several thousand hectares of their forested communal land for conversion to oil palm plantation. An interdisciplinary approach was applied using both natural and social science methods such as semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, PRAs, soil and water analysis. Our study sought to understand how social structures within the village impacted on the decision-making process regarding the plantation and what the consequences of this were on social relations and on aspects of the natural environment.

A key finding is that the access to information in the decision-making process appears to be connected to the distribution of both formal political power and informal power related to factors such as wealth, education level, and social status. Leasing the communal land has cemented already existing unequal wealth and power distributions and has caused a socially disruptive conflict within the village, involving a court case between family members and former friends. Furthermore the conversion to oil palm has resulted in degrading soil fertility and pollution of local rivers. Concern for the availability of natural resources for future generations was present among villagers, but opaque dissemination of information, government pressure and financial incentives for community leaders prevented these concerns from impacting on the final decision.

**Keywords:** Communal land, decision-making, deforestation, native customary rights, oil palm, Sarawak