Yielding ground

Changing land use patterns threaten the livelihood of female crab collectors in Merauke, Papua, Indonesia

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Over the years, crab collection in mangrove and wetland forests has been a major source of income for women of the indigenous Asmat and Mappi communities of the island of Papua in Indonesia. These women harvest crab along the coastal areas of the Maro River, the main river of Merauke District, which is located in the southern part of Papua in the land of the Marind peoples. The Marind form a majority group and hold traditional claim of ownership over the land in Merauke, including the banks of Maro River. Apart from the Marind, other ethnic groups such as Bovendigul, Mappi and Asmat also live in the area and have ha anim rights to access resources for subsistence living. Ha anim rights accrue from a collective agreement among certain indigenous communities, granting them entitlement over resources from mangrove and wetland forests along the river, allowing for hunting, gathering of food and medicinal plants, and the collection of fibres and other materials for crafts such as noken or traditional bag weaving. Outsiders and even other ethnic communities residing in the area, such as the fishers of Sulawesi descent or North Papuans living in Merauki, require explicit consent from the customary land owners, and, in addition, must pay a mutually agreed sum in order to utilise these resources.

Mud crabs are harvested in a ten kilometre region along the mangrove forest and banks of the Maro river. The Asmat and Mappi people have their own territory for crab collection. There are several ways to reach the crab nesting zones. For the Asmat women, it takes two to three hours on foot to reach, while it is an even longer walk, up to four to five hours long, for the women from the Mappi community. Apart from walking, another option is to rent a pick up car or boat, at a cost of about USD 15.50 per trip.

Although crab collection is a daytime activity, sometimes the collectors need to camp overnight in the forest, for example, during unfavourable tidal conditions. The crab collectors usually go to the forest and look for holes in muddy areas that typically indicate a crab's nest. Once a hole is found, they stick an iron crowbar to catch and pull the crab out of the hole, using water from the river to clean the catch. The crab is then placed on banana tree sheaths and tied using ropes cut from trees. Though crabs are usually bigger in size and more in number during the rainy season and high tide, the nesting grounds are harder to access during such conditions. The cleaned and tied crabs are stored in a sack and brought to traders in Merauke city or sold directly to customers on the road.

The price of the catch depends on a number of factors: the size of the crab, whether the claws are intact, and whether the crabs are alive or dead. The price of small and medium sized crabs is about USD1.2 per kg, while the big sized ones are priced at USD 2.30 to 3.80 per crab – those with claws intact fetching USD 3.80 apiece and broken ones fetching USD 2.30 apiece. The catch usually includes many crabs with broken claws, as well as small sized and dead ones. Crabs tied with banana leaf can be kept alive for up to three days outside water-important traditional knowledge, which the women use to increase the value of their catch. The average earnings per trip, for a trip of two to three days duration, were found to be around USD 23 to 30.

The income from selling crabs is used to meet food and transportation costs. Rice, eggs, salt, sugar, coffee, fried oil, betel nuts and drinking water are commonly bought items. Food expenses alone may amount to USD 4 to 7 per day. During periods of no income, the crab collectors borrow money from kiosks near their homes, which is paid back later.

Unfortunately, changes in land use have alienated these communities from their main livelihood sources. The area available for crab collection has shrunk or moved further away, increasing overall costs. The area covered by primary mangrove and wetland forests in Merauke has steadily decreased in the decades from 1990 to 2000 and 2010. The rate of conversion of these lands for plantation and city development threatens the mangroves, which are changing from being net sinks to net sources of carbon. These land use changes generate problems for the global and local community. According to the female crab collectors, there was a time when the crab collection area was fairly close to their homes but now involves a long and circuitous walk with access routes often restricted by the new titleholders of the land.

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A woman catching crab in mangrove, Merauke, Indonesia. Although crab collection is a daytime activity, sometimes the collectors need to camp overnight in the forest.

Participative mapping revealed that over the years 20 ha of crab collection area have changed to private sea port and boat anchorage zones. Not only was the 'new area' restricted but the mangrove forests were destroyed for development, leading to livelihood loss. This form of development disregards food security and poverty among marginalised communities. In Papua, food security and nutrition are a major concern. Loss of food and nutrition will further weaken the ability of communities to deal with the issues they face. The situation becomes more difficult for female crab collectors because they access and use communal lands without the power to control the resources they need.

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The food security of the Asmat and Mappi people depends on their livelihoods derived from a communal resource in a situation where no attention is given to protect such common resources as a means to secure the wellbeing of the people. There is no acknowledgement of use rights in land use changes and no involvement of women in discussions pertaining to resources.

First, land use changes start as soon as land ownership is transferred. Land ownership transferred on customary land acknowledges traditional claim of ownership. This becomes problematic in the case of Papua because of varied rights over land, which is a mix of ownership and use rights. The owner of a piece of land might not allow the use of the land's resources, even if the local ethnic groups have traditional use rights, since no attention is given to secure the livelihoods of those who with use rights over communal land. We suggest that various rights be taken into consideration in terms of compensation during land transfer. The acknowledgement of use right in land use changes is crucial to protect the source of livelihoods of those with access and use rights. This does not imply that transfer of ownership would necessarily become more complicated. Instead, we suggest that due compensation be given to women to make up for the loss of source of livelihood they face as a consequences of land use changes. The compensation shouldn't be in the form of cash money. It could be in the form of capacity building and alternative livelihoods. The expansion of the range of activities available to female crab collectors is needed to diversify their income. The diversification could strengthen the resilience of female crab collectors in addressing uncertainty. Totally new activities could be introduced or value added to current practices such as fattening small crab. This is one way to ensure that the discussion on land ownership transfer will carefully consider impact on the daily lives of common people and on family-level food security.

Second, women are rarely involved in discussions regarding resources in Papua. In the Papuan tradition, the female is considered an outsider in a family, since she will follow her husband after marriage. Women usually access resources through inheritance from their families, similar to men. After marriage, the norms of their husband's community determines their access to resources. Women's roles are in domestic matters – taking care of the family, raising children, and being responsible for the family's food security. Most of these activities take place on communal lands as among the Asmat and Mappi female in Merauke. The woman's role in the domestic sphere is important for a family but not valued. When it comes to rights transfer and land access restriction, women are not involved in the discussion, especially in customary institutions. The representative in the customary board or the leader of a customary institution is male since men are the heads of families. The woman's position may derive from her husband's role - as the wife of the customary leader, supporting him domestic matters and providing inputs. Females have no formal place in a customary institution.

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