



## Sakai Community in the Squeeze of Development: Community Development Program and Social Disintegration

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### A B S T R A C T

Community empowerment programs seem to be a necessity, especially when development and industrialization programs have negative impacts on various groups, including indigenous communities. However, community empowerment, which is intended to improve the lives of affected communities, in practice often has unanticipated impacts. This study analyzes the social dynamics of the Sakai community in Riau Province related to the empowerment programs received by the community. This study used a mini-ethnography method by conducting participant observation and non-participatory observation techniques as well as in-depth interviews in data collection. To complete the data, secondary data collection was also carried out, including those that could be obtained online. The results of the study indicate that the empowerment programs that have been carried out, in addition to providing benefits to some members of the community, have also created gaps among community members which have led to the social disintegration of the Sakai community. The implementation of community empowerment programs by companies evenly and the involvement of the government and other stakeholders in program implementation are necessary.

### A. INTRODUCTION

Development is believed to be a necessity to improve people's welfare. In line with this, development must pay attention to the interests and involvement of the community directly or indirectly, not the other way around, eliminating them (Teja, 2015). Development, is often considered as a way to improve the community's economy. However, in various cases, many people are marginalized because of the development carried out. Citing a number of articles Stammner & Wilson, (2007) stated that, in a number of cases, development has marginalized people who have been uprooted and even plunged into alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide. Tampubolon (2010) stated that various community groups are often negatively impacted by development activities carried out, including community groups categorized as Customary Law Communities or indigenous people.

The impact of development on indigenous communities has been reported by various studies. For example, Andrianto, et al. (2019) and Colchester et al. (2010) highlight that the development of oil palm plantations has had adverse effects on groups such as indigenous communities. Similarly, oil palm plantation activities in Jambi Province, Indonesia, have encroached upon the rights of the Orang Rimba indigenous community over forest areas where they have long resided and lived nomadically (Pahmi et al., 2023). A similar issue is also evident in coal mining cases, as reported by Nasir et al., (2023), where development in Indonesia has often negatively impacted and caused conflicts between companies and indigenous communities.

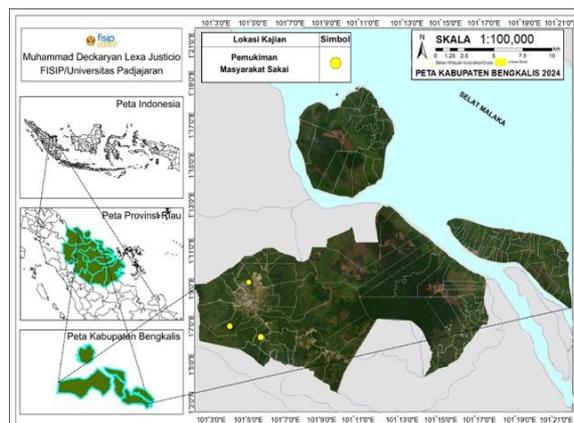
The displacement of indigenous communities also occurs in the context of oil and gas industry development. Finer et al. (2008), and Howitt and

Lawrence (2017) argue that the oil and gas industry significantly negatively impacts the environment and communities, particularly indigenous groups whose subsistence economies depend on the surrounding environment. These activities threaten their livelihoods. Therefore, the state is obligated to ensure the human rights and survival of indigenous communities potentially threatened by such extractive activities.

In response to various issues arising from development activities in sectors such as plantations, coal and mineral mining, as well as oil and gas extraction, governments worldwide and companies operating in these sectors have initiated efforts to empower communities near these activity sites, particularly those classified as indigenous. Tulaeva and Tysiachniouk (2017) reported efforts to manage the social impact of the oil and gas industry in Northern Russia by involving indigenous communities in benefit-sharing mechanisms. Despite its shortcomings, the benefits received by these communities are considered relatively well-distributed. In Indonesia, community development activities targeting communities affected by oil and gas extraction have been implemented in many areas, although the results are deemed not fully aligned with the socio-environmental conditions of the target communities (Cahyandito, 2017).

However, not many studies specifically highlight the social and economic dynamics that occur within communities after they receive compensation or assistance, particularly in the context of empowering affected communities. One concrete example is the case of the Sakai community in Riau, which has long coexisted with various activities: logging, palm oil, and oil companies.

In this regard, this study aims to examine the social dynamics of the affected indigenous community, as they receive and become the target of community development programs conducted by companies. This study focuses on the impact of community development programs implemented for the indigenous Sakai community in a village in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
Map of the Study Location

## B. METHOD

This research utilized the mini-ethnography method, an approach that adapts the principles of traditional ethnography but is conducted within a shorter timeframe and narrower scope. Unlike traditional ethnography, which requires a relatively long period to fully understand cultural or social dynamics, mini-ethnography focuses on specific aspects within a relatively short duration. Its advantages include time and resource efficiency, flexibility in addressing specific research questions, and high relevance to particular contexts. However, this approach has limitations, such as a lack of analytical depth, limited generalizability, and the risk of bias due to data collection over a brief period. Nevertheless, mini-ethnography remains effective for preliminary exploration or contextual research requiring rapid results (Fetterman, 2010). Earlier, Muecke (1994) noted that the mini-ethnography approach is capable of examining specific issues in a relatively short time.

Data collection was carried out through observation: participant observation and non-participant observation techniques. The researcher lived with the Sakai community for a period, from August 10, 2021, to October 23, 2021, to observe and communicate intensively with them. During the communication process, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with several members of the Sakai tribe selected using the snowball sampling technique. Several community figures, especially traditional leaders, served as key informants for this research. In addition to primary data collected directly in the field, the researcher also gathered secondary data from previous studies and media sources, particularly online media.

The research began by collecting secondary data at the village office. Based on the village profile and secondary data, the researcher confirmed the information available at the village office with data collected in the field through observation and in-depth interviews. To maintain anonymity, the researcher anonymized the names of places and parties involved.

This step was taken to protect the privacy of those participating in the research.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Sakai Population and Settlement

The Sakai community in the study site has a population of about 75 households or 275 people, consisting of two groups that are related by kinship. In 1977, the two Sakai communities joined a resettlement program implemented by the government through the *Pemukiman Kembali Masyarakat Terasing* (PKMT) program, a program intended to resettle indigenous communities out of a remote forest area. They were settled in a settlement location that administratively was part of a village where the dominant population was the Riau Malays.

Prior to the resettlement program, the Sakai people were a community group that had lived nomadically in forest areas. Since the 1970s, and even before that, management rights of the forest areas were granted to logging companies, oil palm plantations, and oil companies. The nearest Sakai settlement is about 2 km from the forest area managed by an oil company, the forest area where the Sakai used to live nomadically.

### 2. Sakai Community and Livelihood System

#### a. Livelihood system

The Sakai community, in the past, lived in a nomadic lifestyle within forest areas, moving from one place to another. In the forest, the Sakai people survived by gathering food, hunting, and fishing in rivers. Traditionally, they maintained a close connection with the forest and their surrounding natural environment (Putra & Effendi, 2017).

In addition to gathering forest products, the Sakai people also engage in cultivation activities to meet their subsistence needs. They clear and utilize forest land for gardening, planting crops such as rice and *ubi mangalo* (a type of cassava). *Ubi mangalo* serves as a staple food and is typically planted alongside paddy when the paddies are about two months old. In some cases, it is planted after the rice harvest. The fields or gardens planted with paddy and *ubi mangalo* are used for 3 to 4 years or for 3 to 4 planting seasons. Once the land is considered infertile, they move to a new location to cultivate or farm (Arsyistawa & Ananda, 2023).

In hunting, the types of animals that are commonly hunted by the Sakai community include wild boar, deer and mouse deer. Hunting activities are usually carried out at the same time as their activities in the

gardens or deliberately done at a time when activities in the fields do not take up much of their time.

As part of hunting activities, Sakai people also catch fish in the river for daily consumption (Suprpta, 2006). In the swamps or in small rivers they catch fish using fish trap (*lukah*) and nets. They put up the fish trap in the afternoon towards night and take the results the next day. The use of poison is forbidden to be carried out. Violation of the prohibition can result in customary sanctions in the form of *uang adat* set by the community leader, the *Bathin*.

In line with the nomadic livelihood system, in the past, when opening new fields, they also built houses in the middle of their gardens, usually not far from a spring, creek or river (Effendy, 1997). In the past, the houses of the Sakai people were constructed without nails. Instead, rattan was used as a binding material to tie one piece of wood to another. Today, the use of nails to strengthen their houses has become more common.

The nomadic lifestyle practiced by the Sakai community is, to some extent, still carried out by a small portion of them today. However, the majority, while still dependent on forest resources, have settled permanently, especially since the government implemented resettlement programs for isolated communities in the 1970s.



**Figure 2**  
House of the Sakai People

#### b. Changes in livelihood systems

Changes in the livelihood system of the Sakai community began when the forest areas they inhabited were converted into areas managed for timber exploitation by companies holding forest concession rights in the 1970s. Timber utilization increased further when illegal logging occurred in the 1990s, particularly in the Mandau region, which was the center of Sakai community life. Martodirdjo (2005) reported that the Sakai community began to fear the depletion of their forests, as the forest was the source of all their food and livelihoods.

The decline in forest area is also caused by the growth of palm oil companies that convert forest areas into oil palm plantations. Palm oil plantation companies, which converted forest areas into plantations as happened in the Jambi Province (Pahmi et al., 2023), narrowed the living space of various Sakai communities.

The conversion of forest areas into oil palm plantations is also carried out by many migrant residents. The presence of migrants in the areas around the forests where these Sakai communities live also contributed to this change (Arsyistawa & Ananda, 2023).

Purba (2011) analysis revealed that companies controlled approximately 561,768.09 hectares of Sakai land in Siak Regency, based on 2008 data. 106,649.43 hectares utilized for palm oil plantations, 34,968.66 hectares for rubber plantations, and 217,000 hectares for forest concessions holders. Meanwhile, in Bengkalis, companies controlled a total of 1,420,500.71 hectares of Sakai land, with 272,924.59 hectares for palm oil plantations, 12,676.12 hectares for rubber plantations, and 492,000 hectares for forest concession holders or forest plantation. Only 445 hectares of land remained under the control of the Sakai community. In line with this, Hijang et al., (2023) report that the Sakai community only managed 1,129 hectares, excluding customary forests covering 500 hectares.

The pressure on the Sakai community's livelihood system seemed to intensify when the forest areas they inhabited were also controlled by an oil company. In line with the above description, Colchester et al. (2023) concluded that the development activities of palm oil plantations, logging, and oil extraction, including transmigration programs, have taken over much of the forest area that has long been inhabited by various Sakai communities.

Currently, the nomadic lifestyle of the Sakai community, moving from one forest area to another, is rarely practiced. In the past, (Koentjaraningrat, 1980) noted that various Sakai communities have begun to experience changes in their livelihood systems. The transformation of the Sakai community's livelihood system occurred when they no longer hunted and gathered natural resources but transitioned into "farmers" and settled down. As mentioned earlier, various Sakai communities have settled and most of them no longer practice a nomadic lifestyle, although their dependence on forest resources remains high. In general, the presence of various companies, has impacted the Sakai community and changed their livelihood system.

### 3. Sakai Community Development

#### a. Community development and resettlement programs, 1970s-1990s

The utilization of forest resources in areas inhabited by various Sakai communities, which began particularly in the 1970s as previously mentioned, is believed to have had a significant impact on the livelihood system of the Sakai people. Recognizing this, logging and palm oil plantation companies, and others, provided assistance through community development programs to address the adverse social impacts on the Sakai community. However, these efforts yielded limited benefits for the community. A recent study by Colchester et al. (2023) revealed that efforts made, for instance, by a pulp and paper company trying to meet the requirements set by the Forest Stewardship Council, have yet to demonstrate how the company acknowledges the Sakai people's rights to forest areas.

Community development program intended for many indigenous communities, such as the Sakai was also carried out by the government. In 1970s, the government implemented a resettlement program as part of a social program for the Sakai community. The program, which began in 1977, was implemented by the Bengkalis Regency Government, including social programs and housing development for the Sakai community. Around 75 households occupied government-built houses and received assistance to support their livelihoods for nine months. They also received agricultural equipment and rubber tree seedlings. At that time, although they lived in resettlement areas and participated in agricultural and plantation training programs, some of them still hunted and gathered food in the forests.

The community empowerment program initiated by the Bengkalis Regency Government was later taken over by the central government (Department of Social Affairs) under the name *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Masyarakat Terasing* (PKMT) [Suparlan, 1977]. Several new settlement areas were developed, including lands designated for rubber plantations and forest areas allocated as customary forests. Each family participating in the program also received living allowances for two years. Dina et al., (2021) noted that the Sakai community accepted the resettlement program with the consideration that it would make it easier for them to receive various government assistance.



**Figure 3**

Sakai Residential Settlement and PKMT Program Houses

b. Community development programs 1990-present

During the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, various Sakai communities also received community empowerment programs implemented by oil company that had long been operating in the area. These programs included social initiatives, education, and infrastructure development, as well as food aid (basic necessities) for the community and even cash allowances for the Sakai leaders.

The oil company operating near the forest areas inhabited by various Sakai community groups underwent changes in ownership, transitioning from a foreign-owned entity to another foreign company in 2006, and subsequently to a state-owned enterprise in 2021. Despite these two changes in ownership, the community empowerment programs provided by the oil company continued uninterrupted.

In addition to education and health programs, other community empowerment initiatives provided by the oil company included integrated agricultural development and institutional capacity building programs starting in 2012. Members of the Sakai community were given opportunities to develop their skills in the field of agriculture.



**Figure 4**

Agricultural and fish farming programs in the Sakai Pematang Pudu Community Integrated Farming Group (KPTMSPP)

The integrated farming program implemented included dryland farming activities and freshwater fish farming in ponds. The agricultural commodities developed and cultivated encompassed various vegetables such as water spinach, spinach, chili, long beans, cucumbers, eggplants, and bitter gourds, along with several spices like lemongrass, turmeric, ginger,

and galangal. The integrated farming activities also involved planting fruit trees such as durian, rambutan, matoa, and papaya. Meanwhile, in fish farming activities, the types of fish cultivated included gourami, tilapia, catfish, striped catfish, baung, and carp.

This empowerment program was supported by researchers from two state universities in Riau Province and the Bengkalis Regency Plantation and Agriculture Office. Dozens of families participated in these integrated farming activities, along with several other individuals who worked daily on the developed farmland.

In addition to this integrated farming program, a *Local-Based Development* program was introduced in 2013, prioritizing Sakai residents to participate in workforce training aimed at equipping them with specific skills. Consequently, they became ready to work or capable of creating new job opportunities. Sakai residents who completed the training later worked in oil company or their subsidiaries.

The oil company also provided affirmative opportunities to Sakai community members with business capacities, allowing them to supply certain company needs, secure contracts for refinery cleaning projects, or perform other tasks manageable by Sakai entrepreneurs. This company took constructive steps by supporting the Sakai community's aspirations to establish businesses, mentoring, and even supervising the management of these businesses to ensure they could operate independently.

Several Sakai individuals obtained employment opportunities in oil company and palm oil plantations. As mentioned earlier, they also had the chance to participate in local business development programs, where Sakai residents were trained to undertake projects with the oil company. After 2012, the availability of these opportunities encouraged Sakai entrepreneurs to establish the Sakai Business Association, the Sakai Community Communication Forum, the Sakai Youth and Student Association, and the Sakai-Minas Customary Council, which comprises the Customary Deliberative Council (*Majelis Kerapatan Adat* or MKA), the Sakai Assembly, and the Sakai Cultural Institution of Riau. Through these organizations, Sakai leaders gained a platform to directly engage with various stakeholders, particularly the government and companies operating in Sakai customary areas.

**4. Community Development Programs and Community Disintegration**

The changes in the forest environment where the Sakai people lived have led to significant socio-cultural shifts (Ningsih, 2017). These changes occur when the Sakai community faces external influences such as modernization, urbanization, or interaction

with other ethnic groups. These influences can lead to changes in values, norms, and lifestyles. Differences in perceptions and adaptations to these changes may cause tensions and conflicts among individuals or groups within the Sakai community. Such conflicts often arise due to misunderstandings of traditions, disputes over limited resources, or competition for jobs and economic opportunities.

As forest areas traditionally inhabited by the Sakai people became increasingly inaccessible, empowerment and community development programs implemented by various companies particularly oil company operating in this forest areas have become alternative measures to support livelihood of the Sakai people. This scenario mirrors the experiences of other indigenous communities across Indonesia.

However, regarding the distribution of limited resources and competition for economic opportunities, inequity among parties in accessing and benefiting from available opportunities has been evident. At the study site, this has led to the division of the Sakai community into two competing groups seeking access to new resources provided through corporate community development programs.

The community development programs for the Sakai communities have received positive responses from the people. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with program implementation has emerged among some members. Disputes between Sakai community groups targeted as beneficiaries began to arise when some felt excluded from the benefits of these corporate programs.

One notable conflict stemmed from a CSR agricultural program provided by an oil company to the Sakai community. The program was granted to two community leaders representing two Sakai communities. One of these leaders owned the land leased by the company for the agricultural, livestock, and fisheries development program. Initially, the program involved 19 households from a specific community group led by a *batin* (traditional leader) who had kinship ties with both community leaders. This arrangement was perceived as unfair by other group, who argued that only relatives of the managing community members benefited. This sentiment was echoed by the head of another *batin* group, who stated that his members had never received any results from fish harvests, vegetables, or sales revenue generated by the program.

Dissatisfaction with the community development program implemented by the company has occurred for a long time. As stated above, in the research village, there were two Sakai community groups. Instead of getting the same benefits from the community development program implemented by the company, one of the groups admitted that they did not get the same opportunity, for example to access the educational scholarship program. The opportunities available were dominated by another group.

In addition to the lack of access to better education, inequality in obtaining program benefits

was also marked by a socioeconomic gap between the two groups. While the group that benefits more was able to develop economic enterprises by becoming partners of oil companies or other economic development opportunities, most of the members of the second group worked as farmers or farm laborers in palm oil plantations.

Inequality in access to various community development programs resulted in segregation and latent conflict between the two Sakai community groups in the research site. The problem has also resulted in demands from the group that felt they did not benefit from the community development program against the oil company. They demanded that the oil company returned the forest area that became their customary territory where in the past they lived and depended on forest resources. This demand was supported by various other Sakai communities and advocated by two prominent NGOs concerned with environmental and indigenous people issues.

## 5. Development of Affected Indigenous Communities: Future Challenges

The study found that empowerment and community development programs implemented by various companies, particularly oil companies operating in forest areas inhabited by the Sakai community, have significantly benefited the livelihoods of marginalized groups. This is especially pertinent as the forests traditionally inhabited by the Sakai have become increasingly difficult for them to access, a situation commonly experienced by many indigenous communities across Indonesia.

However, as Lakhman (2021) pointed out, while community development initiatives are considered programs aligned with the primary policy agenda of a nation's government, particularly in providing assistance to the Sakai community, field observations reveal that these initiatives are not without challenges. These challenges often emerge as a consequence of the implementation of such programs.

The study identified several issues indicating disputes and disintegration among members of the Sakai community, directly or indirectly resulting from the community development programs provided by companies operating within the Sakai territory, particularly in the agricultural development and business development sectors. The studied community is divided into two competing groups seeking access to these programs. The unequal distribution of programs has created social and economic disparities, leading certain groups to feel marginalized. In line with Ansor (2007), such disparities are reflected in limited access to education, job opportunities, healthcare services, and infrastructure.

Disputes arise not only from unequal opportunities in accessing new resources but also from differences

among community members in responding to changes that demand adaptation to evolving conditions.

Conflicts among community members were triggered by the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, which, albeit unintentionally, have resulted in the disintegration of the Sakai community. This disintegration is evident not only in social life but also in the form of dual leadership structures within organizations related to business activities in collaboration with oil companies.

Field findings highlight significant challenges in formulating appropriate solutions. As Machdum et al. (2024) argue, the emergence of economic disparities in certain regions, compounded by the social conditions of the community, presents unique challenges in implementing effective solutions.

In line with the perspective of Black and Hughes (2001) to prevent conflicts leading to social disintegration, the study concludes that there must be a system capable of tolerating disruptions while maintaining its structure and functions amidst prevailing challenges.

Consequently, this study emphasizes the need for implementing community development programs integrated with government initiatives. As Zautra, Hall, and Murray (2009) noted, community development programs integrated with government schemes are more likely to maximize the capabilities and welfare of targeted community groups.

#### D. CONCLUSION

The study found that empowerment program carried out by companies, to some extent has generated benefit for the Sakai community. However, unanticipatedly the program has also caused segregation among the community members which were divided into a group that benefit more and another group who feels less benefited. This problem has given rise to new problem in the form of conflict among the community members.

The dispute that occurred among the Sakai community due to the provision of business opportunities by oil and gas company indicates weaknesses in the planning and implementation of program that did not pay attention to the social conditions and dynamics of the target community. This conflict implies the need for increased transparency and involvement of all community groups in the planning and decision-making process that should be inclusive.

By involving the community in the planning and decision-making process, and by respecting local wisdom, empowerment programs can create a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. This will not only reduce the potential for conflict, but also strengthen social cohesion and improve the welfare of the community as a whole.

Accordingly, the study suggests the importance of implementing community empowerment programs that pay attention to relatively even and fair distribution of the program to the community and which are also integrated with government programs. This study also suggests efforts to strengthen local leadership structures through customary mechanisms facilitated by the government so that communities can manage internal conflicts more effectively.

#### POSTSCRIPT

In August 2024, the author conducted a field visit to complete the data. During this visit, new information was obtained that the conflict between the two Sakai community groups had subsided. Internally, the conflicting groups had been able to resolve their disputes.

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