

Villagers' Lives Rely on the Sabintulung River, Indonesia



By Erwin Prayogi
Kutai Kartanegara University, Indonesia

The name of Sabintulung Village means "to help others"; it is populated by Islamic Muslims who speak Kutai language. The community practices fishery and harvests fish from the river surrounding the village. Throughout time, Sabintulung became known as an abundant source of freshwater fish. The current village government has been running for the last ten year, and the head of the Sabintulung Village is closely aligned to private companies that are present in the village, i.e., coal, palm oil, and wood paper companies.

The actions of the village government are often misjudged as they assist all citizens equally. The assisted citizens are usually farmers who receive help for fish cultivation while the assistance for fishers is often selective and uneven. In the Sabintulung community, only certain people, usually those who know the government officials are either first to receive the help or those who receive any help at all. The villagers' political views tend to be influenced by local politicians. Meanwhile, the majority of people choose to work in the private sector. Becoming a fisher is considered a last resort.

Photo: *Sabintulung Villager.Sabintulung, Indonesia.2019* © Erwin Prayogi

Location:
Sabintulung Village, East Borneo Province, Indonesia

Ecosystem type:
Freshwater

Main gear:
Gillnet, harpoon, lift net, poison / explosive, traps, trawls

Target species:
Catfish, Snakehead, Snakeskin gourami, Kissing gourami, Chitala, Marble Goby, Giant freshwater prawn

Vessel type:
small boat

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:
305

No. of small-scale fishers:
2000

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- Market
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

The negative impact of palm oil production started in 2004. Since then, the chemical fertilizers used to accelerate the growth of oil palm have been polluting the upstream river. As a result, the river water changes colour to a thick black, and fish gets poisoned. When the Sabintulung villagers call on the government to act, the relevant officials are sent to test the black water. At that time, the palm oil company introduces neutral chemicals (i.e., alum) into the upstream to mask their destruction. Consequently, the water instantly turns clear and government officials don't find any concerns regarding water pollution.

On the other hand, the paper timber companies that began to operate in the 1990s have not had any negative impact on the fishery, even though they also use chemical fertilizers for tree growth. The new coal mining company that began to function in 2007 has not had a significant impact on the fishery sector either. The agricultural sector, however, has suffered from the mining activity.

The current condition of the river in Sabintulung Village is very concerning. Many villagers are still forced to use polluted water for daily needs, e.g., for bathing, washing clothes. They also use the water for cooking since the river is their only source of water. On top of that, most of the fish disappeared from the river or died. Back in the day, fishers could harvest 10 kg of fish in just one hour. Nowadays, they might not catch any during the entire day because the only fish that is left is small or difficult to capture, which forces the families to sustain themselves with only small fish.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

All of the activities related to the management and utilization of fish resources and the environment starting from preproduction, production, cultivation to marketing, which are implemented in a fisheries business system.

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Dealing with justice

Today, due to complex social affairs in the village, no serious actions have yet been taken to help the community. The company's owner is intent on covering up any peculiarity that occurs, regardless of whether they concern damages to the environment or people's livelihood and wellbeing. The relevant board supervises these actions and if there is someone who wants to reveal or investigate these circumstances, they will not get attention as most people in the local government are getting paid under the table.

It seems that some NGOs and academics are not keen on helping the villagers because they fear the repercussions they might face if they confront the private companies. The government is not very concerned about the damage that occurred in the Sabintulung River and if the villagers turn to outside parties for help, chances are the government will block them.

The villagers often feel desperate in their fight for justice as there had been no significant changes for a long time. They no longer trust the government or their neighbours and they don't know where to turn for help. This situation is worsened by the lack of villagers' knowledge about fisheries resources.

The circumstance described above are based on the opinion of fishers and to date, there has been no report or research done about this case. Hopefully, this paper will raise awareness about this situation and assist the villagers in getting much-needed support. What is ultimately needed is a sustainable management of fisheries resources that is supported by good management policies.

How to cite

Prayogi, E. (2020). Villagers' Lives Rely on the Sabintulung River, Indonesia. In: Kerezi, V., Pietruszka, D.K., & Chuenpagdee, R. (Eds.) Blue Justice For Small-Scale Fisheries: A Global Scan. TBTI Global Publication Series, St. John's, NL, Canada.

