

## Forest Conflict and the Socio-Economic Dynamics of the Besipae Indigenous Community Post-Exclusion in East Nusa Tenggara

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### ABSTRACT

*The study aims to explain the social and economic dynamics of the community living in the Besipae customary forest area of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), particularly after their eviction by the provincial government through the use of violent means. This research employs a qualitative-critical approach, utilizing three data collection methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and observation. By using a critical perspective, the study reveals several key findings. First, the conflicting ownership status of the forest limits the community's ability to access forest products, restricting their opportunities to increase their economic income. Second, despite being evicted from the forest area and having their homes destroyed, some community members have chosen to return to live in the forest. Third, the community has endured long-term trauma associated with extracting forest products, as they continue to advocate for the recognition of their forest as indigenous community property amidst government domination. This situation ultimately compels them to participate as migrant labour in the predatory neoliberal global market.*

**Keywords:** Besipae, customary forest, socio-economy, trauma, labour migrant

## INTRODUCTION

Conflicts involving indigenous people over forest land are escalating in various countries around the globe, both in the Global North and the Global South. Each year, these issues gain increasing public attention due to the massive exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of forest areas, and the widespread disregard for the rights of indigenous communities (Acuña, 2015; Bose, 2023; Teitelbaum et al., 2023; Virtanen et al., 2025).

Globally, forests are perceived not only as vital ecological systems but also as battlegrounds for political-economic contestation among states, corporations, international networks, and indigenous communities. Numerous literature indicates that these conflicts are often sparked by government intervention such as forest conservation policies, illegal logging, the expansion of extractive mining concessions by both private and state-owned enterprises, as well as various large-scale development schemes (Acuña, 2015; Ahmed et al., 2025; Butsic, Van, Matthias Baumann, Anja Shortland, Sarah Walker, 2015; Ranjan, 2019; Sonter et al., 2017).

In Indonesia, the history of forest management has always consistently reflected a critical trend, dating from the New Order era to the present (Austin et al., 2017; Kubitza et al., 2018; Santika et al., 2017; Tsujino et al., 2016). A primary factor contributing to forest degradation is the relatively high global demand for, and export orientation of, forest products. Since the beginning of Soeharto's rule in Indonesia, driven by a legacy of colonial practices, there has been an increasing need for forest products, particularly in timber (Peluso, 1991; Supriatna et al., 2020; Tacconi et al., 2019).

Indrajaya (2022) emphasizes that deforestation and forest degradation have led to the loss of numerous habitats, the destruction of biodiversity, a decline in water quality, and even the undermining of the sustainability of forest ecosystems. The significant rise in forest conflicts has prompted the government to design at least two policies. First, the establishment of a Forest Management Unit (Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan/KPH), which is responsible for addressing the escalation of forest conflicts and managing forests, while also holding a legal obligation to communicate and collaborate with local communities and indigenous peoples. The second policy aims to grant indigenous communities access and rights to control forests, allowing them to participate in the management of customary forest areas from a local perspective. However, as Myers (2017) points out, the Constitutional Council's decision to grant indigenous communities the right to control customary forests has faced substantial challenges in practice, and in some instances has even been detrimental to these communities.

Forest conflicts in Indonesia arise from unclear territorial boundaries within state forests and the ambiguous division between areas managed by corporations and indigenous communities. The lack of clarity regarding forest management rights exacerbates conflicts between illegal loggers and local communities (Schanz, 2010). Moreover, widespread illegal logging practices stem from competing interests in the use of forest resources (Casson, 2002; Maryudi, 2016; Thompson, 2021). In Indonesia, the conflict between various stakeholders with opposing interests is particularly intense. Corporations that have obtained concessions prioritize profit maximization, while local communities prioritize access to resources and the sustainability of ecosystems (Ahmad et al., 2025; Halomoan et al., 2024).

The government's attempts to provide community access rights through social forestry programs have been met with opposition from NGOs and local communities. These groups are calling for the return of state forest lands to customary ownership. In this context, Maring (2022) highlights the necessity of integrated social forestry policies for the sustainability of forest ecosystems and the interests of local communities.

In contrast to the research described above, this study examines the dynamics of post-exclusion conflict among communities in Indonesia's eastern periphery, specifically within the Besipae forest area in the South Central Timor Regency of East Nusa Tenggara. The conflict in the Besipae forest area has been ongoing since 1987 and has never been fully resolved. In 1982, the governor of NTT province allocated 6,000 hectares of forest to Australia for an integrated cattle and agricultural development project. Five years later, in 1987, the extension contract for managing the Besipae forest expired. The NTT Provincial Government then took over management of the forest area, leading to monopolistic and elitist management practices that marginalized residents from the production base (Dhosa, 2021).

In 2012, when the Land Use Rights (Hak Guna Usaha/HGU) ended, the Besipae community urged the government to return the forest to its rightful owners, namely the indigenous people. The NTT provincial government insisted on maintaining forest control rights, while the local community continued to fight

for their rights. To assert their claims, the local community implemented three strategies. First, they reoccupied the Besipae forest area by constructing houses for 37 families. They cultivated the land, planted commodity crops, and managed the forest using traditional methods to preserve the ecosystem. Second, they organized a food festival in the Besipae forest area to celebrate their local culture. The food products showcased at the festival were sourced from the Besipae forest area. Lastly, they conducted street demonstrations both in the Besipae forest area and on El Tari road in Kupang, the center of the NTT provincial government. This struggle was not only carried out by the local Besipae community but also involved several alliances concerned about the future of the local community.

However, the long struggle of the Besipae community ended in tragedy. The government deployed security forces, including police, the Indonesian national armed forces, the civil service police, and paramilitary units, to intimidate, assault, and forcibly evict the community from the Besipae forest area. Members of the Association of Indigenous Leaders Seeking Truth and Justice (ITAPKK), a local cultural organization used as a tool for struggle, were criminalized and imprisoned in South Central Timor. Furthermore, all houses built in the area were destroyed, and the government's actions led to the repossession of agricultural lands. As a result, the local community faced an incredibly tragic fate following the forced eviction.

Since then, they have lived on land that is not theirs. Some reside on government land, from which they are occasionally forcibly evicted. Others temporarily stay on the lands of relatives, including the Nabuasa family, who are the political and cultural leaders of the region. Their access to the forest, which is utilized for plantations and livestock farming, is also limited. As a result, they experience social and economic uncertainty.

The regency and provincial government's approach in the Besipae forest area has largely focused on state-led development (Dhosa, 2021), and at the same time, they are working to restore its damaged reputation and regain public trust (Museng Ola, 2023). The provincial government has monopolized forest management, which had previously served as a livelihood source for local communities engaged in livestock farming and forest stewardship. By monopolizing forest management, the government displaced all residents living in the area. This reaffirms the state's central role in forest destruction through concessions to large corporations (Abood et al., 2015; Dhialulhaq et al., 2018; Tacconi et al., 2019) and predatory collaboration between central government, regional government, corporations, and individual actors that results in forest destruction (Hidayat, 2016).

A number of studies mentioned above tend to explain ecological damage in conflict areas but fail to examine the dynamics of community struggles in the post-conflict period. A focus on ecology alone is insufficient to fully understand the lives of indigenous communities. Based on the limitations of these studies, this research aims to explore community life in the Besipae forest area in NTT following exclusion. Specifically, this article seeks to answer several key questions, namely: (1) what are the socio-economic conditions of the residents, and (2) how do people of Besipae organize themselves amid economic pressures after being forcibly evicted by the government and security forces, and displaced from their homes? The main contribution of this research is to shed light on the turmoil and struggle faced by local communities in the Besipae forest area as they strive to survive. This struggle ultimately pushes them into the neoliberal market, whether as small-scale farmers and livestock breeders grappling with unclear land ownership or as migrant workers.

This research employs the framework of political ecology and social exclusion as its main analytical tool. Political Ecology, as a critical approach, combines elements of political economy and ecological perspectives to examine the relationships among state actors, businesses, international supra-state institutions, NGOs, and local communities. These relationship contributes to deforestation and ecological destruction (Hidayat, 2016; Robbins, 2012). While studies conducted by Dhosa (2021) and others only capture conflicts between socio-cultural actors and the state from 2012 to 2024, this research seeks to uncover the issues that have emerged as a result of social exclusion.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This qualitative research aims to examine the social and economic dynamics of the Besipae community following the government's eviction. Qualitative research utilizes a descriptive-critical approach to uncover the relationships and phenomena that appear on the surface (Corbetta, 2003; Okoko, Janet Mola, Scott Tunison, 2023). Additionally, it seeks to trace human thoughts and actions while delving into the workings of society in greater detail (Liamputtong, 2023).



**Figure 1.** (a) Map of East Nusa Tenggara Province, and (b) Map of Timor Island. Source: Google My Maps, marked by Alo Tanouf

To gather field data, this study employed several methods: (1) in-depth interviews; (2) observation of the Besipae community's daily economic activities, including the sale of goods at kiosks, the harvesting of forest products, and various agricultural activities; and (3) focus group discussions. The main criteria for informants in this study included traditional leaders directly involved in the conflict since 2012, women who lost access to their gardens, and a number of activists advocating for indigenous communities. These informants have sufficient knowledge and information about the dynamics of the conflict, especially regarding the key actors in the long-standing struggle between the government and indigenous communities.

Therefore, interviews were conducted with the ITAPKK, members of the indigenous community in Besipae, the NTT Forum for the Environment (WALHI), and a civil society alliance that supports the Besipae community. Interviews were also conducted with a group of women who have been affected by development efforts by the provincial government. These women run small-scale trading businesses in the Besipae forest area to support their families' economic needs. In total, 15 informants were interviewed at the research site.

Immediately following the interviews, the researchers held FGDs with several participants who met the established criteria. The researchers then spent time in the field to gain a deeper understanding of the post-exclusion struggles faced by the Besipae indigenous community. This series of activities took place from May to December 2024.

Furthermore, the data presented and analyzed in this article are the result of extensive research conducted by our third author, Didimus Dedi Dhosa, who has been intensively involved since early 2019. He engaged in community advocacy before they experienced intimidation, violence, and forced eviction from the conflict area. He spent several days at Ima Tampani's home, the head of ITAPKK, discussing issues with the indigenous community and observing their resistance efforts to assert their rights and gain government recognition of forest areas. Dhosa also made periodic visits to the research site to document the socio-economic developments of families living in the Besipae forest area.

Lastly, the validity of the field data was rigorously verified using a data source triangulation scheme, which was supported by access to news reports from NTT-based mass media. The data was then analyzed through theoretical perspectives derived from several journals and books relevant to the research topic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Return to the Forest amidst Intimidation

For the indigenous people of Besipae, the forest is both a nurturing mother and a bountiful provider that sustains their lives. The relationship between indigenous people and the forest is incredibly close. The forest supplies them with essential materials, and in return, indigenous people actively protect its sustainability from those who destroy it.

The forest land serves as a crucial source of livelihood for these indigenous communities. It provides space for cattle raising, areas for cultivating commodity crops, and access to resources such as dry wood

and tamarind. By utilizing various forest products, the indigenous people enhance their income and ensure their economic stability.

However, the communities living in this forest area have suffered a tragic fate for a long period. Studies conducted by Dhosa (2021, 2022) on the Besipae forest conflict revealed three key findings. First, the government has monopolized management of the Besipae forest since 1987, shortly after Australia transferred forest management back to Indonesia from 1982 to 1987. Second, the East Nusa Tenggara provincial government has been clearing 1,050 hectares of forest under the guise of forest rehabilitation. Third, the government's cattle aid program for the community is highly elitist, prioritizing those with close ties to and who contribute to the government.

These issues ultimately marginalized local communities from access to the Besipae forest. Therefore, based on their memory of the forest as a mother that provides livelihood, they refused the government's contract extension and rejected its claim to be the rightful owner of the Besipae forest. This rejection has been manifested in various forms, ranging from street politics to cultural activism (Dhosa, 2021).

With the support of WALHI, the National Student Front (FMN), and the Agrarian Reform Movement Alliance (AGRA), the Besipae indigenous people united to reclaim the status of their forest in two significant ways. First, they reclaimed and reoccupied the Besipae forest area. They constructed homes within the forest, evicted the NTT provincial government's livestock department, which lived in the Besipae forest area, and took over the management of the forest. Second, they organized a food festival in the Besipae forest area. This event was facilitated by ITAPKK, which invited the provincial government, traditional leaders, Rajas Nabuasa, along with his extended family, and all residents living adjacent to the Besipae forest to join in the celebration. The indigenous community showcased local food products they had creatively cultivated from forest resources. For them, the festival served a dual purpose: to demonstrate to the government that local communities can effectively manage forests, thereby boosting economic productivity while also ensuring the sustainability of these resources rooted in local wisdom.

Unfortunately, this strategic initiative by the local community was short-lived, as the provincial government viewed the Besipae indigenous people as encroaching on government land. The government retained management rights over the Besipae forest. Despite multiple attempts by the government to relocate them, the residents continued to inhabit the forest area.

The evicted residents were housed in a church in the South Amanuban District for several months. The government promised them land and housing outside the forest area. Shortly thereafter, they were moved by the government to the South Amanuban District Office. They felt abandoned, moving from one place to another, without any clear and definite guarantees for their survival. Access to food and water was uncertain while they were in the shelter. They had to fend for themselves. Additionally, some individuals were forced to leave the shelter and stay with relatives for extended periods.

Their presence in their relatives' homes actually created new burdens for the family. The evicted residents felt both economically and socially pressured. Amidst the uncertainty of securing enough income to meet their daily needs, some residents who had been evicted by the provincial government chose to return to the Besipae forest area. For them, returning to the Besipae forest was a rational choice that could save them from acute poverty. Therefore, the first step upon returning was to build new simple houses in Besipae.

They have two main reasons for returning to the forest amidst intimidation from the provincial government. First, they want to reprocess the forest products that once supported their families and enable them to survive. They can work, harvest forest products, and develop forest products to increase household income. Second, they seek to alleviate the burden on the families who took them in during their eviction. They live in a family home with limited space and economic problems that have created additional poverty for their families.

While in the forest, they have to compete with others from various nearby villages who also seek resources in the Besipae forest area. During the tamarind harvest season, people from various villages come to gather tamarind. The large number of people, consisting of those who live in forest areas and those who live outside the Besipae forest area, means fierce competition for these resources. Additionally, they search for dry wood, which they can sell to those who need wood.

The return to the Besipae forest and the dynamics that follow are integral to what Matiwos Bekele (2025) calls "resistance as agency," an analysis he develops from James C. Scott's perspective of everyday resistance, namely avoidance, breaking, and constructiveness. Here, the strategy of returning to the

forest is not merely a means of survival, but also a powerful strategy for marginalized groups to articulate their interests in protecting and nurturing the forest ecosystem. The following is a table highlighting the Besipae forest conflict from 1982 to 2023:

**Table 1.** Besipae forest conflict trajectory

Time	Event
1982 - 1987	Cooperation between the NTT Provincial Government and Australia for a livestock intensification project in the Pubabu forest
1988 - 2008	Through the HGU scheme, forest areas are used as cultivation areas for commodity crops (teak and mahogany)
2003 - 2008	The Forestry Service of South Central Timor Regency cleared and burned 1,050 hectares of the Besipae customary forest
2008	Mass action rejecting the extension of HGU for the forest rehabilitation movement program (GERHAN)
2011	The indigenous community and ITAPKK created a letter canceling the contract extension of the NTT Provincial Animal Husbandry Service in Besipae, with letter number: 03/ITAPKK/II/2011
2012	Wave of citizen protests
March 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	Issuance of the Right of Use certificate by the NTT Provincial Government with number: 00001/2013-BP.794953, with an area of 3,780 hectares
February 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	The demolition of indigenous people's houses was executed by a collaborative effort from the police, civil service police, and the Indonesian national armed forces
August 18 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	The eviction and demolition of 29 indigenous people's houses by a joint team of police, civil service police, and the Indonesian national army

Source: compilation from floresa.co dan other online media

### Living in Uncertainty

Despite living in houses built by the provincial government and in houses they rebuilt after the eviction, the Besipae community still feels uncertain. They live in a state of anxiety and fear that someday the government will come into the forest and deploy security forces to evict them.

The community acknowledges its commitment to stay in the Besipae forest area and to continue fighting for its rights to the forest. They refuse to submit to a government regime that, despite its promises, has only brought division among them.

Despite their resilience, the indigenous people remain anxious due to the uncertainty surrounding the legal status of the Besipae forest. Under the government of Viktor Bungtilu Laiskodat (2018-2023), it was firmly stated that the Besipae forest belongs to the provincial government, as demonstrated by the reissued certificate following the loss of the original. This certificate legitimizes the government's authority to deploy security forces to monitor the forest.

The unclear status of the forest prevents the indigenous people of the Besipae forest from cultivating crops. Based on years of experience in gardening within this area, they have been able to produce abundant agricultural yields. They grow rice, corn, vegetables, and other crops in forest gardens to support their children's education and meet their daily needs. However, in 2020, security forces forcibly evicted the residents, violently destroying their gardens and all agricultural produce. Since that time, the Besipae indigenous people have been reluctant to cultivate their gardens.

Furthermore, they are also reluctant to raise cattle in forest areas due to the painful memories of the tragic experience of eviction and destruction of all their agricultural and livestock products by the NTT provincial government and security forces, which culminated in 2020. The Besipae community does not want to raise cattle in forest areas because they fear that at an uncertain time, the government and coercive apparatus will come to Besipae and take or kill all their cattle. This fear has persisted for a long time and continues to haunt their lives every day.

As a result of not cultivating their gardens for farming, they experience shortages of two primary local food sources: rice and corn. Consequently, the forest products they sell are also used to purchase rice and corn at the market and from residents' gardens in the South Amanuban District. To compensate for this scarcity, they have to work exceptionally hard to gather sufficient forest products. Some of these forest products are used to buy food and drink, while others are allocated for their children's education and social expenses. The same applies to the livestock they raise. With cattle, dogs, and pigs, the Besipae indigenous people earn additional income.

As a result, there is a significant difference in farming and animal husbandry practices within the local Besipae community. Before the forced evictions, they had the freedom to cultivate their gardens, allowing them to grow rice and corn in abundance without facing food shortages. They were also able to raise livestock effectively. However, this situation has changed drastically following the arbitrary evictions carried out by the NTT provincial government and security forces.

### **Trauma and Neglect**

The evictions carried out by the NTT provincial government and security forces have left lasting trauma for the Besipae community, particularly among children and women. Mama Damaris, a prominent figure and forest rights activist, admitted that they have endured a long period of fear since the brutal evictions. Security forces used violence, threats, intimidation, and beatings against them.

Niko Manao, a cultural figure of ITAPKK, explained that his children often feel frightened whenever foreigners park their vehicles in front of their home. He is responsible for the protests against government domination in the forest area. Because of this, Manao is frequently targeted for arrest by security forces. The children have not only witnessed but have also experienced the brutality of security forces as they forcibly expelled families from the Besipae forest area. These traumatic experiences have instilled a deep sense of fear in the children.

Niko Manao was arrested by the police and ultimately sentenced to six months in prison. Since his arrest and imprisonment, his wife and children have lost a father and husband who guaranteed their family's security. The Besipae community also feels the loss of someone who could organize their resistance against the NTT provincial government.

Manao confirmed that shortly after his release from prison, he was summoned to the governor's office by East Nusa Tenggara Governor Viktor Bungtilu Laiskodat on August 16, 2023. During this meeting, Manao requested that the government promptly clarify the land status for indigenous communities and issue land certificates for areas within forested regions to residents. However, these requests and demands have remained unanswered by the government.

The negligence displayed by the NTT provincial government in addressing housing needs within the Besipae community has been alarmingly blatant. The residents had previously constructed modest dwellings in the forest region, yet these homes were systematically dismantled, destroyed, and burned by the governmental authorities. The government then rebuilt 12 new homes. Each home had boundary pillars, and the houses measured 20 x 40 meters. This land area was very small because it did not accommodate land for community gardens. After the construction of these new homes, in a perplexing turn of events, the government opted to demolish them once again.

Niko Manao explained that "if the land status is clear, we will feel safe. People don't really think about government assistance. We live on our own, find our own food. We've been neglected. We think we can live in peace, and thus we can try to do our best" (interview, September 20, 2024). Therefore, the Besipae community's greatest desire is clarity of land ownership status and recognition of indigenous rights to the Besipae forest area.

The neglect of the local community also occurred in 2020, with 37 families living in the Besipae forest. Following the eviction in 2022, 21 families were moved to the outskirts of the area, and six families were relocated near the cattle pen.

Furthermore, 16 heads of families were staying at the church in Meskolen. While at the church, they were asked by government and police officials to sign a statement asserting that they were not allowed to join the group led by Niko Manao. The letter was not written by the Besipae community, but they were forced to sign it.

The following is an excerpt from the statement:

*“Declare truly that I and my family as attached are willing to join the Nabuasa Big Family and declare to support the Government Program at the Besipae Installation Site and reject all forms of activities carried out by the Association of Indigenous Leaders Seeking Truth and Justice (ITAPKK) in Besipae. If my statement turns out to be incorrect and/or it turns out that I violated the statement, then I am willing to receive customary sanctions according to customary law and legal sanctions in accordance with the provisions applicable in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia”.*

As a result, the sixteen families felt abandoned by the local government. They didn't even have land to build houses and cultivate crops. Subsequently, after being relocated to several different locations and in response to the neglectful practices of the NTT provincial government, six families chose to return to the Besipae forest area. Meanwhile, eight families remained in their family homes, and two families settled in a new village on land with unclear ownership. Although the land was promised to be donated to them, the uncertain ownership status would lead to further systematic neglect and potential evictions by the government.

While living in the family home, these eight heads of families worked as cultivators on other people's land. Their presence in the family brought new burdens. Therefore, they attempted to cultivate other people's land through an agreed-upon profit-sharing system. Thus, there was a shift in the quality of life and struggles of the Besipae indigenous people, from a productive life in the forest to the post-eviction period. They greatly enjoyed the work and the rich forest resources that helped increase their economic productivity. They also maintained the sustainability of the forest ecosystem while living in the forest area.

This situation turned into a tragic and struggling experience for them after the exclusion by the government through land policies, specifically the issuance of certificates, and the use of coercive schemes, as emphasized by Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011). In the scheme of the power of exclusion in Southeast Asia, Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011) creatively demonstrate how the process of exclusion begins with regulation, market, coercion, and legitimacy. They emphasize that these four factors often do not occur simultaneously in one place. From this perspective, the conflict in the Besipae forest area demonstrates the existence of regulation through the reissuance of land certificates belonging to the NTT provincial government. Furthermore, a state of coercion is also practiced against local communities. As a result of these exclusionary schemes, the victims of Besipae forest development are neglected.

### Women and Small-Scale Economic Empowerment

Women and children are the victims who suffer the most from exclusion by the local government. They bear multiple burdens within the family, from caring for the family and cleaning the kitchen to helping increase income. They do not rely solely on men to build the family economy. Therefore, in addition to following men working in the forest, women also engage in small-scale businesses from their homes.

In the Besipae area, there are four kiosks selling household goods. These kiosks primarily aim to help families in Besipae, as their homes are relatively far from the shopping center in the South Amanuban District. They sell food and beverage items such as sugar, coffee, tea, onions, soap, and other necessities. In addition, there are nine families selling gasoline in the forest area. The fuel sales target not only families in Besipae but also everyone who passes through the forest.

Interestingly, the people who manage the kiosks and sell fuel for vehicles are women and children. They stay at home to take care of daily needs and to serve customers. They also sell forest products such as bananas and honey at prices that are affordable for all. They admit that the proceeds from these sales significantly help them pay for their children's school fees and fulfill their family's socio-economic needs.

In addition to managing the stalls, women also help their husbands gather forest products. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Besipae forest provides a wealth of forest products for the local community, including tamarind, honey, wood, bamboo, and vegetables. Tamarind trees grow abundantly and are scattered throughout the forest. During the tamarind season, indigenous communities fighting for their rights, including those affiliated with the ITAPKK, and other communities living outside the forest area, gather and harvest tamarind.

**Table 2.** Commodity prices

Commodity	Price in Rupiah (IDR)
Tamarind (per kg)	5.000 – 10.000
Bamboo (per stem)	5.000
Honey (per bottle)	100.000
Firewood (per 4 stems)	2.000
Bitter Melon (1 small plastic bag)	5.000

Source: data from interview

There is a division of labor between men and women. Men are responsible for climbing the tamarind trees, while women collect the tamarind. Once collected, tamarind is brought home, where both men and women work together to clean it. The following is a table of forest product prices:

Mama Damaris, a women's figure and indigenous rights activist, explained that the Besipae indigenous people felt that their lives were better, and even their relationship with the forest seemed more harmonious before the eviction by the government and security forces.

While in the forest, the Besipae indigenous people always clear roads, anticipating forest fires. They play an active role in protecting the forest. When a forest fire occurs, they work together to quickly extinguish it. Furthermore, there are illegal logging practices by people from outside the Besipae forest area. They cut down trees illegally without official permits. Niko Manao explained that they often catch residents cutting and stealing wood in the forest. After the arrest, the perpetrators are warned by ITAPKK not to steal wood and to keep the wood stored in the forest. Some of the wood is collected in the Besipae indigenous community village. The involvement of indigenous people in guarding the forest has resulted in the forest being well-maintained (interview, September 20, 2024).

Following the eviction of the indigenous community, the Besipae forest has frequently been burned by irresponsible parties who have disrupted the sustainability of the forest ecosystem. One significant consequence of these forest fires has been the destruction of the bamboo forest, which had previously served as a vital source of income for the Besipae indigenous community. In light of this situation, Mama Damaris shared her perspective:

In light of this situation, Mama Damaris shared her perspective:

*"Before we were evicted, we felt better. We protected the forest, and it was safe. People burned the forest, and we put out the fires. After we left, the forest was destroyed. The bamboo forest has been destroyed since our eviction, and it remains to this day. Bamboo used to be abundant. People could make a living from it because a single bamboo stalk could be sold for 5,000 rupiah. Now, the bamboo is being destroyed because people are burning the forest"* (interview, 15/9/2024).

The involvement of women in forest preservation demonstrates the local wisdom of the Besipae people. This directly counters the provincial government's accusation that indigenous communities are responsible for forest destruction and illegally occupying government land.

### Become Migrant Labour

The economic uncertainty during the period of eviction and the government's prohibition on residents from occupying the Besipae forest led some people to choose to become migrant workers. Niko Manao explained that several families from groups that had fought to reclaim forest rights chose to become migrant workers in Kalimantan (interview, September 20, 2024). This decision came after they struggled to survive following their eviction by the government. They moved from the forest to the Protestant Christian church hall in Meskolen, then relocated to the south Amanuban district office. Eventually, they could no longer tolerate the unfulfilled promises made by the government and a local royal family named Nabuasa, who would give them land in exchange for land in the Besipae area. Dhosa (2022) later called this the "illusion of the promise of prosperity".

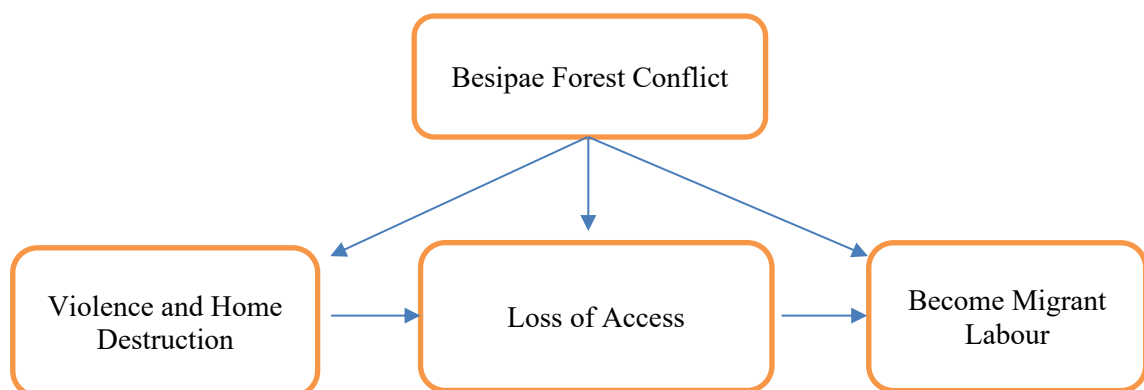


Figure 2. xxx

The migration of the Besipae people from forest areas to Kalimantan demonstrates the uprooting of the masses from the production base, which is essential for their survival. The choice to migrate from their hometown to become migrant workers also signals disruption and a fracturing of the intense relationship between society and the environment. The abundant forest resources should serve to enhance community prosperity and promote ecological sustainability. However, the government is undermining these resources in the name of integrated livestock and agricultural development in Besipae.

Several studies of Indonesian migrant workers abroad show that they are highly vulnerable to unfair exploitation by employers. Workers often do not receive their salaries as outlined in their employment contracts, particularly when they work more hours than agreed upon. Migrant workers frequently endure violence, intimidation, physical assaults, and the confiscation of their identity documents. In some tragic cases, they face even more severe consequences, including murder, at the hands of their employers (Prasetyohadi, 2010).

East Nusa Tenggara Province has a significant number of undocumented migrant workers. The main reasons these workers lack complete documentation are (1) lengthy and complicated procedures; (2) the high cost of renewing passports abroad. These two factors make NTT residents more likely to become illegal migrant workers. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Malaysian government has carried out mass deportations of migrant workers from Indonesia, particularly from NTT.

By using Scott's (1998) perspective, Juliawan (2018) explains that undocumented Indonesian migrant workers are often seen as criminals who must be deported. In contrast, the Indonesian government perceives these deported workers as victims. Unlike the Malaysian and Indonesian governments, undocumented migrant workers see themselves neither as criminals nor as victims.

Given the dire conditions facing migrant workers both domestically and internationally, members of the Besipae indigenous community expelled from the forest area are thrown into the opaque and predatory market of neoliberalism.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the Besipae indigenous community has experienced dynamic socio-economic problems since its exclusion. Several key points can be summarized here. First, amid intimidation and violence by the government and security forces, the Besipae community chose to return to the forest area to live and manage forest products. Second, they have lived in uncertainty for years due to the unclear status of the forest between state ownership and indigenous rights. This uncertainty and terror have caused trauma not only for women but also for children. Third, amidst the vulnerable economic conditions, women have emerged as workers, not only working in the domestic sector but also assisting men working in the forest. Women have successfully moved beyond the private domain to generate additional economic income from the forest, without completely abandoning domestic work.

Faced with structural pressures imposed by the government and even socio-cultural pressures to fulfill socio-economic responsibilities, some local community members, unable to survive the uncertainties surrounding forest status and economic development, have chosen to leave the Besipae forest area and become migrant workers. They have been thrown into the neoliberal market as wage laborers after being expelled by the government and security forces.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that, by using a political ecology and social exclusion approach, this paper does not stop solely at ecological destruction, but also examines the struggles of indigenous communities as victims of local government policies. Specifically, this article asserts that systematic government destruction has pushed most indigenous communities to continue struggling to survive in forest areas, while others have become highly vulnerable migrant workers.

By examining these socio-economic dynamics, the Besipae community's hopes for rights to the Besipae land and forest must be met by the government. Intense and constructive dialogue between the government and indigenous communities, examination of historically valid government certificate documents, and enforcement of indigenous people's rights to the Besipae forest area are prerequisites.

This research left unexplored a snapshot of the condition of Besipae children after the expulsion. Therefore, future researchers are expected to examine the fate of these children in their relationship with school and their social and psychological development, often accused of being rebellious by the dominant community. This would undoubtedly be very beneficial for the personal growth and development of these child victims.

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