The Indonesian government’s Social Forestry program offers an opportunity to put large areas of mainly intact forests under the sustainable management of Indigenous peoples, and significantly reduce outside pressures.

Indigenous Organizations in Indonesia estimate that approximately 400,000 km² should be recognized as Indigenous collective titles, with 130,000 km² already mapped and claimed by local communities.

Investments are needed to support a rapid expansion of the Indigenous forestry approach within the government’s Social Forestry Program.

Indonesian government policies and programs, fire control and management by Indigenous peoples and other local communities have successfully reduced deforestation in recent years. However, there is now a clear risk that the deforestation pressures from rising palm oil prices and continued demand for timber will bring greater threats to Indonesia’s eastern provinces, which contain most of Indonesia’s remaining intact rainforests. Yet, opportunities still exist to prevent the destruction of these forests.

A potential “game changer” is the emerging cooperation between local governments and communities, in and around the rainforest, to recognize Indigenous forests as opposed to supporting the expansion of palm oil and logging concessions. This paves a way to secure local livelihoods, manage the forest sustainably, and prevent large-scale, unsustainable exploitation.

Indonesia has an official target of allocating 127,000 km² for social forestry projects, making it the largest government-sponsored social forestry programme in the world. The program is, however, suffering from underinvestment, making progress on recognition slow. It includes a special category for Indigenous forests that recognises communities’ permanent legal management of their forests through an Indigenous collective title. The actual areas recognised and managed under this category remain low, but the potential for this government-community partnership to become a major solution for rainforest protection in Indonesia is high.

To date, just over 130,000 km² across Indonesia have been mapped and claimed by local communities as part of their Indigenous lands, making them ready for government recognition. AMAN, the Indigenous coalition in Indonesia, estimates that approximately 400,000 km² should be recognized as Indigenous. Most of these fall within the government’s designated forest zones and are intact forests. The investments in mapping and planning, which are already made by the communities in these areas, make community-based forest protection through social forestry program the largest scalable solution to combating deforestation across Indonesia.

Many local governments in Eastern Indonesia are in favour of establishing Indigenous collective titles under the Social Forestry Program. This bioregion, which includes the provinces of Papua, West Papua, Maluku, and North Maluku, is known for its “megadiversity” both biologically and cultural. It is also, like Borneo and Sumatra before it, suffering from frequent illegal destruction of intact rainforests. Most of these rainforests fall within Indigenous lands.

The West Papua Regency of Sorong has passed legislation on the “Recognition and Protection of Indigenous Peoples of Moi Tribe”. The regulation requires local government to “materialize Indigenous areas in a sustainable manner based on customary law.” The province of West Papua has created a special task force for the implementation of social forestry with an initial target of 2,500 km² to be managed officially by local Indigenous communities.
Opportunities and Funding needs

Recognition of forested Indigenous lands as Indigenous collective titles under the social forestry scheme will support communities to sustainably manage their forests, and resist outside threats from logging and palm oil concessions. It should also enable the communities to access climate and biodiversity funding from both international and domestic sources. Parts of the REDD+ results-based payments from the Green Climate Fund to Indonesia are currently being negotiated to support the government’s Environment Fund and social forestry program. Yet, this funding is currently neither sufficient nor easily accessible to meet the direct needs of communities, so additional investments are needed.

Additional resources are particularly needed in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago where Asia’s most extensive, intact rainforests are found. The Eastern Indonesia Forest Facility, a recent civil society initiative to support conservation and local livelihoods, is working to fill this gap by supporting government efforts to address illegal forest conversion to plantation agriculture, as well as facilitating numerous communities to be supported to protect their forests. Substantial additional funding is needed for this facility to expand impact on the ground through small and medium sized grants to local communities and for additional mapping of their territories, policy analysis and advocacy and livelihood support.

Key enabling actors

Several civil society organisations offer invaluable support to local governments and communities to enable progress under the social forestry program.

The Papua-based NGO Perkumpulan Silva Papua Lestari (SPL) is facilitating local Korowai, Kombai and Asmat communities to gain official control and management rights over 6,000 km² of their rainforests. This initiative focuses on recognising Indigenous rights and developing community-based forest management of lowland rainforest. SPL, in collaboration with the local government, has also broken new ground in being the first NGO in Indonesia to help local communities negotiate with the government to ensure that their rights and management of these forests are legally incorporated into the official provincial spatial plan for land use.

In the West Papua regency of Fakfak, the local NGO, Gemapala, has facilitated an Indigenous community to gain control over 300 km² of their area by applying for and being granted a social forestry designation as a “Village Forest” (Hutan Desa).

The Indonesian NGO, EcoNusa (https://econusa.id/en/about-us/), is coordinating the Eastern Indonesia Forest Facility.

Government of Indonesia’s indicative map for social forestry areas in Eastern Indonesia. It does not include all areas that could potentially be covered by Indigenous collective titles.