

From Maps to Recognition: How Participatory Data Supports the Resolution of Spatial Conflicts in Indonesia

Written by: JKPP (The Network for Participatory Mapping)

In the hills of Lebak District, the Kasepuhan Karang community has long lived in harmony with their land – managing forests, farms, and settlements through generations of customary law. But for years, their way of life was invisible on official maps.

That changed when the community, with support from JKPP and RMI, began a participatory mapping process. Together, they charted their territory: sacred forests (*leuweung kolot*), rice fields, and village lands. More than just lines on paper, the map became a powerful tool of recognition.

In 2016, their efforts paid off.

The government formally recognized 486 hectares of their forest as *hutan adat* (customary forest), making Kasepuhan Karang one of the first communities in Indonesia to gain legal acknowledgment under the landmark Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/2012. Their success set a national precedent and inspired Indigenous communities across the archipelago to follow suit.

At a validation workshop in West Kalimantan, a customary leader shared what this process meant:

"This is the first time our territory is officially recognized on a map. We feel seen. This gives us the courage to speak in front of the government."

Stories like Kasepuhan Karang's show that participatory mapping does more than mark territory – it makes communities visible, strengthens their voices, and helps reshape how land and rights.

(Counter-)Mapping as a Tool of Empowerment

In Indonesia, land and territorial conflict have long driven the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities from their places of living.

Since 2011, ILC members JKPP – the Network for Participatory Mapping or *Jaringan Kerja Pemetaan Partisipatif*, in Bahasa – has promoted the idea that conflict resolution should not rely on negotiation or legal proceedings alone. Instead, the network believed that solutions must be grounded in principles of strengthening community rights to their land and territory using participatory maps as a foundation for resolving conflicts.

Participatory mapping is not merely a technical tool by which maps are produced – such efforts can also be considered as “counter-mapping” or as cartography of resistance, challenging policies that erase community rights to their lands and territories. It is also an integral part of organizing community members around their rights to land and natural resources. It also paves the way for people to achieve sovereignty over their own space, including legal certainty in terms of control, governance and access to land, territory and natural resources.

As a form of counter-mapping, participatory maps serve multiple purposes:

1. **Advocacy tools** to challenge state or corporate claims
2. **Instruments of legal recognition** for Indigenous and local territorial rights
3. **Evidence** in cases of community criminalization
4. **Mechanisms for resolving** land and spatial use conflicts

More than just geographic visuals, these maps offer counter-narratives to conventional mapping that often erases Indigenous and local presence. They reclaim both narrative and spatial representation, strengthening communities' claims over their territories.

Participatory Maps as a Catalyst for Change

Since the early 1990s, participatory mapping in Indonesia has evolved from a tool of community resistance into a powerful force for transforming landscape governance. Spearheaded by JKPP and its network of Participatory Mapping Service Hubs (SLPP), this movement has facilitated the mapping of **26.92 million hectares of Indigenous and local territories across the country**. This includes:

- 20.97 million ha of customary territory maps (1,111 Indigenous communities)
- 5.57 million ha of village boundary maps (866 villages)
- 260,000 ha of proposed social forestry areas (2,611 sites)
- 115,000 ha of proposed TORA lands (139 sites)

The approach of JKPP is rooted in community ownership: communities lead the mapping process – defining purpose, content, and use – while NGOs serve as technical facilitators. Participatory mapping empowers communities, helping them understand and document their territories, assert their rights, and reinforce cultural identity. It also reveals social dynamics, enriching the spatial narrative with local knowledge.

Using maps to drive change, JKPP follows a three-pillar strategy:

1. **Advocacy** – promoting recognition of participatory maps in policy through dialogue with government
2. **Information** – building community-based data systems
3. **Empowerment** – enabling communities to take ownership of spatial planning

A notable success is in North Luwu Regency, where the government adopted participatory mapping for defining village boundaries, reflecting a growing appreciation of local knowledge in official processes.

Today, JKPP comprises 198 members – NGOs, grassroots groups, and individuals – and operates 30 SLPPs across 28 provinces. Together with the JKPP National Secretariat, these hubs advocate for integrating participatory maps into land and spatial policies. They also support communities through the Sustainable Land Use Planning (SLUP) method—an approach that blends local wisdom, ecological balance, and improved welfare into landscape governance

Participatory Maps as Counter Mapping

As a form of counter mapping, participatory maps are used in several ways:

1. As tools of struggle/advocacy for communities to challenge claims made by policymakers (the state) or corporations
2. As instruments of legal legitimacy in the recognition processes of Indigenous and local communities' territorial rights and management
3. As legal arguments and/or evidence in cases of community criminalization
4. As part of the resolution of overlapping land and spatial use conflicts

Participatory mapping is not just a geographic visualization but serves as a counter-narrative to conventional maps that erase the presence and rights of Indigenous and local communities over their living spaces. It reclaims both narrative and visual representations of space from the community's perspective as a means to strengthen their spatial claims.

Critical Collaborations with Policy Makers

JKPP engages in critical collaboration with policymakers at all levels; from village, district, provincial, to national ministries and institutions, to advocate for the use of participatory data in spatial planning, recognition of community-managed territories, and conflict resolution. Some major collaborations and victories with policy makers are listed below:

- Supported **recognition of customary forests** – *hutan adat* – through participatory maps following a decision by the Constitutional Court in 2013. By 2024, over 150 Indigenous communities across Indonesia had received formal decrees from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, recognizing **more than 150,000 hectares** of customary forest.
- Influenced national regulations (e.g., Permendagri 52/2014, PerMenLHK P.21/2019) that created **legal pathways for recognition**, including mechanisms for the recognition of Indigenous territories. These policies were heavily influenced by evidence and maps generated through participatory processes.
- As part of the National Geospatial Information Network (JIGN), JKPP actively contributes maps to the One Map Policy via partnerships with BIG and the One Map Acceleration Team, ensuring that Indigenous and community maps are integrated into national geospatial databases, promoting more inclusive governance.
- Collaboration with various ministries Helps resolve land overlaps and ensures Indigenous representation.

Looking Ahead

Over the next five years, JKPP and the SLPPs aim to further strengthen participatory mapping efforts in communities by embedding principles of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), emphasizing that participatory maps are not merely geographic visuals but tools to support community struggle. The organization will continue critical collaborations with government actors, especially in the context of the One Map Policy that provides an opening for participatory maps to be compiled, integrated and synchronized, contributing to the resolution of spatial and land conflicts. With a view of further strengthening its data and information on community-managed territories, JKPP will also expand its work beyond

terrestrial areas to Indigenous and fishing communities' coastal, marine and small island territories.

Through the platform built by the ILC (International Land Coalition), we hope these stories will inspire dialogue and solidarity among communities and movements at the global level.



1. Discussion with Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries



2. Community taking Coordinates with GPS Handheld