



Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment and Its Role in Regional Development Transformation Evidence from Palm Oil Industrial Projects

Submitted: 12 February 2026

Last Revised: 22 May 2026

Accepted: 25 May 2026

Available Online: 22 October 2026

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Abstract

Resource-based regional development through oil palm plantation and crude palm oil (CPO) expansion drives economic growth in many Indonesian regions, generating employment and revenues while reshaping local social structures, production relations, and governance. Public participation is formally mandated in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA/AMDAL), yet its substantive role in legitimizing development decisions remains contested. This study examines public participation in EIA not as a procedural requirement but as an institutional arena where development legitimacy and local representation are negotiated. Using comparative qualitative analysis of three EIA documents and public consultation records from CPO projects in Sarolangun (Jambi), Dharmasraya (West Sumatra), and Sanggau (West Kalimantan), it analyzes variations in participation patterns, actor representation, and the quality of community responses. In Dharmasraya, customary communities dominated, with input focused narrowly on customary land rights. In Sarolangun, affected local communities were more prominent, but input was largely limited to employment and corporate social responsibility. Sanggau showed more inclusive participation, involving customary groups, affected farmers, and women, yielding more substantive input on environmental governance, water management, odor control, and distributive justice. These variations show that participation in EIA is shaped less by formal procedures than by local social configurations, power relations, and institutional design. The study contributes to regional development literature by conceptualizing EIA as a selective institutional mechanism mediating development legitimacy, not merely an environmental management tool. Bridging environmental governance and political economy, it highlights the need for inclusive, substantively meaningful participation for equitable and sustainable resource-based regional development.

Keywords: *Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA); Palm Oil; Public Participation; Resource-Based Regional Development*

1. Introduction

The palm oil sector plays a strategic role in the national economy due to its significant contribution to regional economic growth, job creation, increased foreign exchange earnings, and the strengthening of the downstream industry based on natural resources. In many rural areas, the expansion of palm oil plantations and processing industries has become the main driver of local economic transformation, replacing subsistence production patterns with a market-based economy and investment. However, this transformation process has not only had economic implications, but also brought about fundamental changes in social structures, resource control relations, and the livelihoods of rural communities (Napitupulu et al., 2023). For this reason, the sustainable development of the palm oil sector requires local communities

How to cite:

Akbar, M. F., Guntur, M., & Putra, R. H. (2026). Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment and Its Role in Regional Development Transformation: Evidence from Palm Oil Industrial Projects. *The Indonesian Journal of Planning and Development*, 11(2), 86-95. <https://doi.org/10.14710/ijpd.11.2.86-95>

to be prepared to adapt to the dynamics of ongoing development, while also demanding the presence of governance mechanisms capable of managing socioeconomic and ecological impacts fairly so that economic benefits are not generated at the expense of social cohesion and the sustainability of rural communities (Akbar et al., 2024). Although not all aspects of rural areas will directly receive positive impacts, the development of the palm oil sector in rural areas still provides benefits in several aspects of farmer households and rural communities (Krishna & Kubitz, 2021).

The development of regions based on natural resources through the expansion of plantations and the crude palm oil industry has become a major pillar of economic growth in various regions of Indonesia, making it a potential advantage in this sector (Purnomo et al., 2020). This investment not only encourages job creation and increased regional income, but also reshapes social structures, production relations, and development governance and agents of change at the local level (Banks et al., 2016). In the context of regions with diverse indigenous actors, independent farmers, and surrounding communities affected by investment-based development, there is a demand for governance mechanisms capable of managing economic interests while ensuring social inclusiveness. Currently, there is a growing awareness among civil society about the importance of issues such as social responsibility, environmental and social management, and sustainability (Pasaribu et al., 2020). Neglecting several social, economic, and environmental aspects of palm oil sector development efforts in rural areas will lead to conflicts, making it crucial to balance palm oil sector development efforts at the rural level with mitigation of the resulting social impacts (Abram et al., 2017).

In regional development and governance, public participation is seen as an important instrument for ensuring the social legitimacy of development policies and projects that can be institutionalized and whose implementation can also be evaluated (Zakhour, 2020). However, the political economy of development approach emphasizes that participation is never value-free, but rather influenced by power relations, investment interests, and selective institutional design. In some cases, investors still view participation as a tool that can provide cognitive and political resources (Bobbio, 2019). In many cases, participation functions more as a mechanism for legitimizing development than as a space that allows the community to meaningfully influence the direction and substance of development decisions. On the other hand, participatory democracy emphasizes that political legitimacy does not only come from general elections, but also from the active involvement of citizens in public policy formulation, oversight of government implementation, and control over the use of state resources (Masrin & Noor, 2025).

In the context of natural resource-based development in Indonesia, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is one of the main institutional tools that formally requires community involvement. EIA is designed not only as an instrument for managing environmental impacts, but also as a space for public consultation in development decision-making. However, various studies show that the role of EIA in ensuring substantive participation is still debatable, especially when the process is confronted with large-scale investment interests and regional development acceleration targets, and the public participation process still appears to be a formality, dominated by the government, and lacking in transparency (Djawa et al., 2026).

Community participation is crucial and strategic as a tool for controlling environmental impacts (Rosana, 2018). However, in reality, community involvement in the EIA process often shows a pattern of selective representation, where certain groups are given more space to speak than others (Rahmat, 2019). Communities that hold strategic positions in the production structure or control resources tend to be more recognized as representatives of society, while other groups, including women and communities that do not own assets, are often marginalized. This condition not only affects procedural legitimacy, but also determines the depth, diversity, and quality of community responses to regional development.

The issue of gender participation is also an important aspect in the context of natural resource-based development because men and women experience and respond to the impacts of development in different ways, whether in economic, social, or environmental terms (Awoa et al., 2022). In many rural communities, women play a key role in household management, food security, and social reproduction, yet their access to decision-making spaces is often limited. Without gender participation analysis, public consultation processes risk reproducing existing inequalities by representing only the interests of dominant groups. Therefore, gender participation mapping is not merely intended to fulfill the principle of inclusiveness, but also serves as an analytical tool to assess the extent to which participation mechanisms are able to capture the experiences, needs, and interests of all social groups affected by development and sustainable resource management (Abubakari, 2025).

Although studies on EIA, agrarian conflicts, and the socioeconomic impacts of the palm oil sector have developed quite extensively, most research still places EIA within a normative and administrative framework, with an emphasis on procedural compliance or sectoral evaluation of environmental and social impacts (Spiegel, 2017; Kanu et al., 2018). This approach tends to ignore the political and institutional dimensions of EIA as a mechanism for legitimizing regional development, and does not adequately explain how the configuration of local social and economic structures shapes the capacity of communities to respond to and influence investment-based development processes (Kertaningrum & Widayati, 2021). On the other hand, studies that apply a cross-regional comparative approach to reveal variations in public participation patterns and the representation of local actors in the context of natural resource development are still relatively limited.

This study formulates a structured analytical model that explains participation in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process as the outcome of interacting structural and institutional forces. At the structural level, local political economic configurations which are characterized by asymmetries of power,

Case selection was guided by explicit analytical criteria to ensure comparability and meaningful variation. All cases involve formally approved EIA documents for crude palm oil industry development under the same regulatory framework, ensuring institutional consistency. They were then selected based on documented differences in socio-economic structure, indigenous presence, and land tenure arrangements, as well as the completeness of public consultation records. This design follows a replication logic, allowing structured cross-case comparison to identify how contextual variation shapes participatory institutionalization.

2.2 Data Sources and Types

The primary data for this study was sourced from AMDAL documents, particularly the section summarizing the results of public consultations and the responses and input from the community contained therein. These documents were analyzed to identify the actors involved, the issues raised, and the institutional response to public input. Secondary data includes laws and regulations related to AMDAL and regional development, regional policy documents, and academic literature relevant to public participation, development governance, and investment legitimacy.

2.3 Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through systematic document review. Each AMDAL document was examined to extract information regarding the composition of public consultation participants, forms of community representation, types of input provided, and follow-up actions reflected in the final document. This approach enabled researchers to assess participation practices as formally institutionalized in the development decision-making process.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis combined with cross-case comparative analysis in the EIA preparation process (Walker et al., 2025). The analysis process began with thematic coding of the EIA documents to identify main categories, such as the types of actors involved, forms of representation (indigenous peoples, affected communities, gender representation), and the nature of inputs (social, environmental, and governance). Next, the coding results are compared between cases to reveal patterns of representational selectivity and variations in participation practices in different regional development contexts.

To minimize interpretive bias, the analysis relied on documented statements within the EIA reports rather than subjective inference beyond textual evidence. Cross-case comparison was used to reduce over-interpretation of single-case findings, and analytical categories were derived both inductively from the data and deductively from the conceptual framework. Reflexive evaluation was conducted throughout the analysis to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in documented consultation records.

The coding process was conducted in two stages. Open coding was first applied to identify recurring themes related to actor composition, representation patterns, and issue articulation. These categories were then refined through axial coding and aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Themes were iteratively reviewed across cases to ensure consistency and analytical coherence, and all coding decisions were systematically documented to maintain transparency and traceability.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Participation Patterns and Selectivity of Representation in Regional Development

The patterns of public participation in the three EIA documents of the selected case studies show significant variations in terms of both the actors involved and the substance of the input provided. These differences not only reflect the social context of the region, but also show how the design of public consultation shapes who has a voice and what issues are considered relevant. Thus, participation cannot be understood as a homogeneous process, but rather as a highly contextual and selective practice (Sisma et al., 2025).

In the Dharmasraya Regency case study, the involvement of indigenous peoples was very strong and even more dominant than that of the directly affected communities. Public consultations were dominated by indigenous actors who had authority over the control and management of customary lands. There was no gender representation in this process, so women's voices were not formally accommodated. The input that emerged focused almost entirely on the issue of recognition and protection of customary land, while other technical and social environmental issues received relatively little attention.

The dominance of indigenous peoples in public consultations in Dharmasraya shows that procedural justice is shaped by local social structures, not by uniform principles of inclusivity. Although customary land issues are strategic and crucial, the limited number of actors involved means that the spectrum of development impacts is not discussed comprehensively. This indicates that strong customary participation is not necessarily synonymous with socially inclusive participation.

Unlike Dharmasraya, public consultations in Sarolangun Regency were dominated by affected communities, particularly those living near the planned project site. The involvement of indigenous peoples was relatively weak, and there was no gender representation in the consultation forum. The input provided tended to be limited to social issues, particularly employment and corporate social responsibility (CSR), without meaningful discussion of the bio-physical environment or resource management aspects.

The pattern of participation in Sarolangun shows how public consultation can be reduced to a space for articulating short-term pragmatic interests. The focus on employment and CSR issues shows that the community views the project more as an economic opportunity than as a process of spatial and environmental transformation. The absence of indigenous peoples and gender perspectives further narrows the framework of discussion, so that the potential long-term impacts on the social and ecological structures of the region are less articulated.

Meanwhile, the case study of Sanggau Regency shows a relatively more inclusive pattern of participation compared to the other two regions. The involvement of indigenous peoples and affected communities, including independent farmers, was strong and balanced, and accompanied by gender representation. The input provided was not only social in nature, but also substantive, covering issues of waste management, surface water quality, odor, and fairness in the proportion of CSR and labor absorption. This pattern shows that a more inclusive participation design contributes directly to improving the quality and depth of the substance of the discourse in the EIA.

The variations in public participation patterns in the three case studies also reflect the dynamics of urban–rural linkages in the regional development process. In Sarolangun, the focus on employment and CSR indicates that industrial development is perceived as a means of integrating the local economy into the regional production system and broader markets. In Dharmasraya, the dominance of customary land issues underscores resistance to changes in spatial control structures resulting from externally oriented economic expansion. Meanwhile, more inclusive and substantive patterns of participation in Sanggau demonstrate community awareness of the interrelationship between industrial activities, environmental quality, and the sustainability of livelihoods in rural areas that are increasingly connected to the regional economic system. Thus, public consultations on environmental impact assessments (AMDAL) are not only a forum for discussing environmental impacts, but also a space for negotiating the direction of regional transformation in the context of increasingly intensive village-city relations and refer to structural changes in the economy, society, and rural environment that lead to economic growth and development (Rustiadi et al., 2023). The comparative patterns of public participation across the three case studies can be summarized based on key variables, including the involvement of indigenous peoples, affected communities, types of participation, and the main issues raised. These variations highlight differences in actor dominance, inclusivity, and the substantive focus of the consultation process, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Participation Patterns and Representational Selectivity in EIA

Variable	Dharmasraya Regency	Sarolangun Regency	Sanggau Regency
Indigenous Peoples	Very strong and dominant	Weak / minimal	Strong and balanced
Involvement Affected Communities	Limited involvement	Strong and dominant	Strong and balanced
Type of Participation	Selective, dominated by customary authorities	Pragmatic, community-driven	Inclusive and multi-actor
Main Issues Raised	Recognition and protection of customary land	Employment opportunities and CSR	Environmental issues

Source: Authors' analysis of AMDAL documents, 2026



Figure 2. EIA Public Participation in Sarolangun

Source: Authors' documentation (photographs from the AMDAL documents), 2026

3.2 Variations in Community Capacity to Respond to Palm Oil Industry Development

Variations in the community's ability to respond to palm oil industry development are clearly evident from the differences in the quality, scope, and depth of input that emerged during the EIA public consultation process in the three study areas. Community responses are influenced not only by the degree of geographical proximity to the project, but also by historical experiences, local social structures, and the bargaining positions of the groups involved. Thus, public participation cannot be understood as a single variable, but rather as a social process that produces diverse forms of response to the regional development agenda.

In Dharmasraya Regency, the community's ability to respond to palm oil industry development is reflected in a very strong focus on customary land issues. The dominance of indigenous peoples in public consultations shapes a response framework oriented towards control and legitimacy of space. Other issues, such as environmental management or long-term social impacts, are relatively underdeveloped in the discourse. This shows that the ability to respond to development in this region is structured by customary authority and a history of land conflicts, so that industrial development is perceived primarily as a threat to collective land rights. This condition is in line with the characteristics of the Minangkabau indigenous community, which considers customary land rights to be an important value (Hafidh & Krisdyatmiko, 2020).

Meanwhile, in Sarolangun Regency, the community's response to palm oil industry development tends to be pragmatic and economically oriented. The dominance of directly affected communities, without significant involvement of indigenous peoples or gender representation, has resulted in limited input on labor and CSR issues. This pattern indicates that the community's ability to respond to development is shaped by short-term economic needs and expectations of direct benefit distribution, rather than by critical reflection on the structural impacts of regional development.

Unlike the two previous regions, Sanggau Regency demonstrated a relatively more comprehensive community response to palm oil industry development. Strong involvement of indigenous peoples and affected communities, including independent farmers, as well as gender representation, broadened the spectrum of issues discussed in public consultations. In the context of natural resource utilization, the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) views forests and land not only as economic assets, but also as living spaces that have spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions (Usop & Rajiani, 2021). DAD serves as a coordination forum between Dayak sub-ethnic groups and as a strategic partner of local governments in resolving customary disputes, recognizing customary territories, and protecting local wisdom values (Andreastuti, 2025, who studied Dayak communities in Gunung Mas Regency, Central Kalimantan). In addition, input not only covers social and economic aspects, but also technical environmental issues such as waste management, surface water quality, and odor. This shows that the diversity of actors involved contributes directly to improving the quality of community response.

The causal link between representation and response quality lies in the diversity of knowledge and deliberative power within consultation forums. When participation is dominated by a single group, the issues raised tend to reflect its specific interests, narrowing impact identification. In contrast, more inclusive representation broadens perspectives, expands the range of concerns articulated, and strengthens the substantive quality of EIA responses by shaping not only who speaks, but what knowledge informs decision-making.

The differences in the community's ability to respond to palm oil industry development in the three regions show that EIA public consultations serve as a mirror of local social capacity. In regions with more closed social structures or narrow representation, community responses tend to be fragmented and focused on one dominant issue. Conversely, in regions with more inclusive representation, community responses become more substantive and multidimensional. In other words, the quality of community responses is determined not only by formal EIA mechanisms, but also by the surrounding social configuration.

The implications of variations in community capacity to respond to palm oil industry development are crucial to understanding natural resource-based regional development. Environmental governance must strive to maximize benefits and minimize impacts (Delabre & Okereke, 2020). A narrow and partial response could potentially result in impact management policies that are not comprehensive and leave social and environmental risks for the future (Obidzinski et al., 2012). However, a more mature and substantive response opens up space for the integration of economic growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability objectives. These findings emphasize that strengthening the quality of public participation is important so that it does not merely become a procedural requirement and prerequisite for sustainable and regionally equitable palm oil industry development. The variations in community responses to palm oil industry development across the three case studies can be systematically compared based on key dimensions, including response orientation, dominant actors shaping the response, scope of issues, and perceptions of development, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Community Capacity to Respond to Projects

Variable	Dharmasraya Regency	Sarolangun Regency	Sanggau Regency
Response Orientation	Focused on customary land control and legitimacy	Economically oriented and pragmatic	Comprehensive: economic, social, and environmental
Dominant Actors Shaping Response	Indigenous peoples (customary authorities)	Affected local communities	Balanced: indigenous peoples, affected communities, independent farmers, and gender groups
Scope of Issues	Narrow (customary land issues)	Limited (employment and CSR)	Broad (environmental, social, and economic issues)
Perception of Palm Oil Development	Threat to collective land rights	Economic opportunity	Opportunity with environmental and social risks

Source: Authors' analysis of AMDAL documents, 2026



Figure 3. EIA Public Participation in Dharmasraya

Source: Authors' documentation (photographs from the AMDAL documents), 2026

3.3 Gender Dimension in Regional Development

The gender dimension in regional development is often positioned as a complementary issue, rather than a substantive element in the development decision-making process. In the context of EIA public consultations, the absence or presence of gender representation is not merely a matter of formal representation, but has a direct impact on the types of issues that arise and how development is interpreted by the community, including the management of existing resources (De Vos & Delabre, 2018). The development of natural resource-based industries, such as the crude palm oil industry, has direct implications for the division of labor, access to resources, and the quality of daily life, dimensions that in practice intersect significantly with gender experiences, particularly those of women (Rowland et al., 2022).

In the case studies of Dharmasraya and Sarolangun regencies, the absence of gender representation in public consultations resulted in a limited spectrum of issues being articulated. In Dharmasraya, the dominance of indigenous communities, which are generally represented by male elites in their social structure, resulted in a singular focus on customary land issues. Meanwhile, in Sarolangun, the dominance of affected communities without a gender perspective shaped a pragmatic and economic discourse, limited to issues of employment and CSR. In both cases, issues related to environmental health, domestic workloads, access to clean water, and the long-term impact on the quality of settlements were virtually absent from the consultation forums.

The conditions in these two areas show that regional development is understood primarily from the perspective of production and ownership, rather than from the perspective of social reproduction and the sustainability of daily life. In fact, women are often the most affected by changes in environmental quality, such as water pollution, waste odors, and changes in access to natural resources. When this perspective is not represented, the public consultation process has the potential to ignore the indirect, cumulative, and long-term dimensions of impact, which are crucial in the context of sustainable regional development.

In contrast, the case study of Sanggau Regency shows that gender representation contributes to more substantive and comprehensive input. The presence of women in the public consultation process coincides with increased attention to technical environmental issues, such as waste management, surface water quality, and odor, as well as issues of equity in the distribution of development benefits. This shows that a gender perspective not only enriches social discourse, but also increases sensitivity to environmental risks and the sustainability of community livelihoods, particularly for independent farmers and rural households.

These findings confirm that gender is an important component of equitable and inclusive regional development, especially in the context of natural resource-based rural industrialization. The involvement of women in public consultations cannot be understood merely as fulfilling the principle of equality, but as a prerequisite for producing impact management policies that are more responsive to social and environmental complexities. Thus, strengthening the gender perspective in the EIA process has the potential to encourage regional development transformation that is not only oriented towards economic growth, but also towards social sustainability and the broader quality of life of the community.

Gender positioning functions as a structuring factor that shapes both procedural justice and the substantive quality of community responses in the EIA process. In Dharmasraya and Sarolangun, the absence of women's representation narrowed deliberation to dominant concerns such as land control and short-term economic benefits, limiting recognition of cumulative environmental and social impacts. In contrast, Sanggau demonstrates that gender inclusion expands impact identification to encompass environmental risk, distributive fairness, and livelihood sustainability. These findings indicate that gender representation is not merely symbolic, but directly conditions deliberative breadth and the analytical depth of participatory outcomes. The role of gender in shaping participation can be comparatively observed across the three case studies, particularly in terms of representation and the dominant perspectives that emerge in public consultations, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender Representation and Dominant Perspectives in EIA Public Consultations

Variable	Dharmasraya Regency	Sarolangun Regency	Sanggau Regency
Gender Representation	Absent	Absent	Present
Dominant Perspective	Customary authority (male elite)	Pragmatic-economic (community-based)	Inclusive (multi-actor, including women)

Source: Authors' analysis of AMDAL documents, 2026



Figure 4. EIA Public Participation in Sanggau
Source: Authors' documentation (photographs from the AMDAL documents), 2026

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) within resource-based regional development operates primarily as a selective institutional mechanism rather than a purely procedural or technical requirement. Comparative evidence from crude palm oil projects in Sarolangun, Dharmasraya, and Sanggau shows that participation patterns, actor representation, and the quality of community responses are shaped by local social structures, power relations, and institutional design. Where participation was narrowly defined, community responses were fragmented and focused on limited interests, whereas more inclusive participation, particularly involving affected groups and gender representation, enabled more substantive engagement with environmental governance, distributive justice, and livelihood sustainability. These findings position EIA as an intermediate institution that mediates growth, equity, and legitimacy, and indicate that the quality of participation determines whether palm oil development integrates economic growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability or leaves risks of conflict and long-term degradation.

Accordingly, EIA reform should move beyond procedural compliance toward stronger representation standards, deliberative quality indicators, and accountability mechanisms embedded in regulatory guidelines. One concrete measure is a minimum mandatory gender representation quota in public consultation forums, accompanied by clear stakeholder selection criteria and independent facilitation to prevent symbolic inclusion and elite capture. Consultation processes should also ensure balanced representation of customary communities, affected local groups, and gender perspectives, while building community capacity to articulate concerns beyond short-term economic interests. Without such reforms, participation risks remaining a formal legitimization device rather than a mechanism for equitable and sustainable resource-based development.

5. Acknowledgments

The authors wish to sincerely thank Universitas Jambi for its backing and for fostering the academic setting in which this research could be carried out. Every author contributed to the study's conceptualization and design, data collection and analysis, and the drafting of the manuscript. We deeply appreciate these contributions, which were indispensable to the completion of this scholarly work. In the course of preparing this manuscript, the authors employed AI tools to enhance the language and readability of the text. Afterward, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the content as necessary and accept full responsibility for the published work.

6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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