



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Sociology and Community Development***Local identity, counter-conduct, and the cultural politics of labor recruitment in the asahan III hydropower project: A multi-actor ethnographic approach**Saruhum Rambe¹, R. Hamdani Harahap¹, Zulkifli Lubis¹ & Harmona Daulay¹¹Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*Correspondence: saruhum@usu.ac.id**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the power relations surrounding labor recruitment in the Asahan III Hydropower Project through the lens of local identity, counter-conduct, and the cultural politics of development. The recruitment of local workers became one of the main arenas of social contestation as multiple actors sought to obtain, control, and maintain access to the benefits generated by the project. Development actors attempted to regulate these dynamics through a series of institutional arrangements, techniques, and strategies aimed at directing community behavior and creating a conducive social order. Referring to Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, these efforts represent attempts to shape and govern subjects through regulatory mechanisms. However, the target community of regulation was not an empty social space that could be directed uniformly. Various actors mobilized local identity, social networks, and collective actions as forms of counter-conduct to negotiate access and challenge regulatory arrangements.

Using a multi-actor ethnographic approach, this study employed participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies involving development actors, village authorities, community organizations, and other stakeholders connected to the project. The findings show that labor recruitment was not merely an administrative process but a culturally and politically contested arena in which competing claims of belonging and legitimacy shaped access to project opportunities. Power relations between development actors and local groups continuously transformed recruitment mechanisms through negotiation, resistance, compromise, and adjustment. This study argues that infrastructure development operates not only as a technical or economic project but also as a cultural and political arena in which governance, local identity, and access are constantly contested and reconfigured.

KEYWORDS: counter-conduct, cultural politics, governmentality, labor recruitment, local identity, multi-actor ethnography

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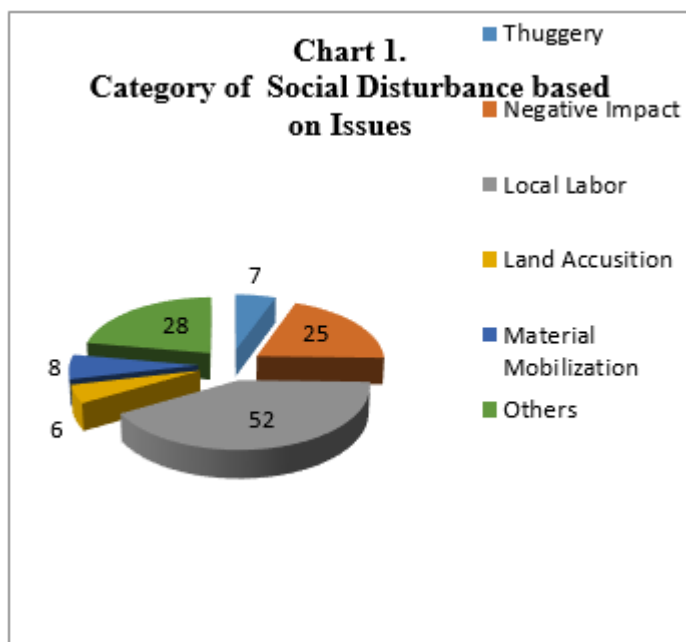
1. Introduction

Infrastructure development is one of the main focuses of the Jokowi administration through the National Strategic Project (PSN) program. In the energy sector, the government developed the 35,000 MW program to meet national electricity needs alongside economic growth targets. One of these projects is the Asahan III Hydropower Project (Asahan III), which is positioned as part of the government's priority agenda for the provision of electrical energy from clean and renewable resources in response to global environmental issues (Taufiqurrahman & Windarta, 2020). Construction work has been ongoing and was targeted to become operational in 2024.

The construction of PSN Asahan III required a large area of land for power plants, transmission networks, and other supporting facilities. The acquisition of large tracts of land often poses significant social risks, ranging from resistance to wider social conflict (McCarthy et al., 2013). Development projects themselves become arenas involving multiple actors who seek to participate in the procurement of goods and services, as well as opportunities for employment. Limited resources and opportunities have implications for struggles over access, which may lead to exclusion and resistance, referred to by Batubara (2017) as the core of social dynamics.

On the other hand, development activities require a conducive social situation to ensure the continuity of project operations and the achievement of development targets. During the New Order era, social control was generally carried out through repressive bureaucratic and military approaches. Following the Reformasi period, marked by changes in the political relationship between the state and society as well as the strengthening of social media in shaping public opinion and legal enforcement, repressive approaches gradually gave way to more persuasive forms of governance, which in the context of Asahan III are referred to as the management of social dynamics.

Efforts to manage social dynamics are carried out through a series of ideas, techniques, and programs aimed at directing the behavior of subjects through particular norms and mechanisms. Referring to Michel Foucault, these efforts can be understood as forms of governmentality. However, efforts to direct behavior do not always proceed as expected because the target community of regulation is not an empty social space that can simply be shaped and directed (Li, 2012; Lubis, 2017). It involves multiple actors with different interests who seek to benefit from the project by carrying out various strategies to obtain, control, and maintain access. Among the most contested forms of access is the opportunity to become part of the project workforce, as reflected in the large number of actions and contestations related to local labor issues.



Source: GTF Asahan III

To manage social dynamics related to local labor issues, development actors formed an institution called the Asahan III Hydropower Project Cooperation Committee through a collaborative mechanism. However, the program did not operate according to the mechanisms that had been formally established. The power relations that emerged instead produced new recruitment arrangements shaped through negotiation, compromise, and contestation between development actors and multiple local stakeholders. This study therefore focuses on how

power relations between development actors who seek to regulate behavior and actors who practice access reshape the direction and practice of labor recruitment governance in the Asahan III Hydropower Project.

2. Literature Review

The desire to improve society through the language of development and prosperity has often produced outcomes that differ from what was originally planned. Li (2012), based on her study in the highlands of Central Sulawesi, revealed that development interventions frequently generated consequences contrary to their intended goals. Li highlighted the technicalization of problems, namely the tendency to simplify complex social and political conditions into technical matters. Referring to Ferguson (1994), such simplification is closely related to the neglect of political and structural dimensions when problems are reduced to technical questions. The arguments of Li (2012) and Ferguson (1994) are reinforced by other studies in the context of development, prosperity, and environmental protection programs (Astuti, 2013; Li & Semedi, 2022; Lubis, 2017).

Lubis' (2017) study on peatland fire control in Kapuas District, Central Kalimantan, found that efforts to discipline residents so that their behavior shifted from burning forests to protecting forests from fire did not fail merely because of technical limitations, nor solely because of open resistance associated with land grabbing and domination, as emphasized in some Marxian perspectives (Scott, 2000). According to Lubis (2017), the phenomenon of "frictional environmentality" refers to the encounter between global conservation programs and the pragmatic cultural practices of local residents. Referring to Foucault's concept of governmentality in the environmental realm and Anna Tsing's concept of friction, Lubis shows how global conservation ideas were implemented through foreign-funded programs aimed at preventing peatland fires. However, the relationship between global agendas and local communities was not always smooth because local residents were not empty social spaces ready to be filled with the logic of global conservation. Rather, they actively chose actions and strategies without necessarily expressing open rejection, including by taking advantage of the programs while simultaneously becoming part of them.

Apart from Li's (2012) work, Lubis' (2017) study became an important inspiration for this research because it provides a significant illustration of how power relations operate within global-local connections in the realm of governmentality. However, Lubis (2017) did not specifically examine power relations between development actors who practice governmentality in the formation of subjects and multiple actors who, at the same time, practice access in response to regulation. In his study, Lubis showed that the target communities of disciplinary programs were not passive subjects, but the context of their actions was not examined in relation to access practices as formulated by Ribot and Peluso (2003).

The relationship between development actors and target communities also illustrates that the "will to improve" is never free from interests, while communities surrounding development projects are not empty social spaces (Aeria, 2022; Cahyono, 2017; Li, 2012; Lubis, 2017). The notion of development as "not a space" can be related to Bourdieu's concept of the arena (Udasmoro, 2020), namely a social field in which actors compete to obtain material resources and symbolic power. Li (2012) argues that development programs are never value-free, just as the communities targeted for development are not passive entities that can simply be shaped according to external agendas. Likewise, actors involved in development, whether governments, religious organizations, or NGOs, are also shaped by their own interests and positions.

From this perspective, the power relations among actors become an important point of analysis. Li explains that the "will to improve" fundamentally operates within relations of power among actors with different interests. She highlights the existence of various development actors, referred to as "trustees," who carry their own interests, which are not always aligned with broader goals of prosperity (Li, 2012). These actors operate not only at one level, but across multiple levels ranging from local to global (Lubis, 2017; Tsing, 2011). Li further explains that the "will to improve" lies within what Michel Foucault calls the realm of governmentality. Governmentality itself refers to "governmental rationality" (Gordon, 1991), which Li (2012) defines as attempts to direct human behavior through calculated ways intended to ensure "the welfare of society, improvement of living conditions, increased prosperity, life expectancy, health, and so forth."

In addition to governmentality, two other processes influence the operation of power in the formation of subjects: (1) the formation of subjects through external disciplinary mechanisms (disciplining subjects), and (2) the formation of subjects through self-disciplining processes or "technologies of the self" (Carpenter, 2020). In his study, Lubis (2017) focused more on the first process, namely discipline imposed through external entities,

whereas this study focuses primarily on governmentality.

For Foucault, subjects are free individuals who possess agency but are never fully autonomous because their spaces of action are shaped by existing power relations. Thus, the process of subject formation through regulation occurs within relations of power between actors who seek to regulate behavior and those who become the targets of regulation. Human freedom, therefore, always operates within the limits and possibilities created by power relations.

Within these power relations, cooperation and resistance continuously emerge. Foucault (1991) in Inda (2005) argues that where there is power, there is always resistance. However, resistance is not positioned outside power, but rather exists within it as a force that can reshape and redirect the operation of power itself. Foucault refers to this form of resistance as “counter-conduct,” namely efforts to adopt or establish alternative rules, practices, habits, and goals.

The recognition of these power relations becomes an entry point for examining the access practices carried out by residents through access theory. Ribot and Peluso (2003) define access as the ability of individuals or groups to benefit from resources in various ways. This perspective emphasizes the importance of social relations that enable or restrict access to resources beyond formal ownership alone, in contrast to property theories that focus mainly on rights (Bromley, 1991). Access theory therefore emphasizes the “bundle of powers” rather than merely the “bundle of rights.” These powers are formed through material, cultural, and political-economic relations that are interconnected within broader networks shaping access to resources.

3. Method

This study uses an ethnographic approach as part of qualitative research. This approach was chosen because the study seeks to analyze regulatory practices and access in the management of social dynamics surrounding the recruitment of local workers in the Asahan III National Strategic Project (PSN). Referring to McKee (2013) and Li (2012), ethnographic approaches are important in governmentality studies because they enable researchers to understand and explain program interventions and social practices in everyday contexts. Such an approach combines an analysis of regulatory interventions—including their origins, diagnoses, prescriptions, and the formation of arenas shaped by elements excluded from planning—with an analysis of what occurs when those interventions intersect with the social processes they seek to organize and improve. These encounters often produce complex processes, practices, and struggles that extend beyond the scope of the original plans.

To address these concerns, data were collected on the ideas, programs, and practices developed to manage social dynamics within the project area. The data were obtained through documents and news sources, interviews with informants, and observations of events related to labor recruitment and social contestation surrounding the project.

In examining multi-actor power relations related to obtaining, controlling, and maintaining access, this study specifically applies a multi-actor ethnographic approach. According to Little (2007), multi-actor ethnography is relevant because it considers the plurality of socio-environmental interactions experienced by social groups while also giving equal attention to the actors involved and the trans-level relations that connect them.

This study focuses on a specific case, namely the management of social dynamics in the recruitment of local workers in the Asahan III Hydropower Project. The project is viewed as an arena of power that brings together the interests of multiple actors within the surrounding communities as well as broader institutional interests. Regulatory efforts are examined through the ways development actors and their support systems seek to direct the behavior of subjects, and how these efforts intersect with power relations involving actors who simultaneously practice access. In this context, data collection was conducted through observation, participation, and in-depth interviews with development actors involved in regulatory efforts as well as actors engaged in access practices.

The main research locations were Tangga and Meranti Utara villages, which constitute the primary locations of the construction project, without limiting observation to other areas connected to the movement and activities of relevant actors. This approach is consistent with Li's (2012) view that ethnographic studies are always selective but should not treat a region as an isolated and self-contained world. Key informants in this study included committee members, project leaders and staff involved in the management of social dynamics, contractors, village heads and village officials, as well as organizational figures actively contesting access within

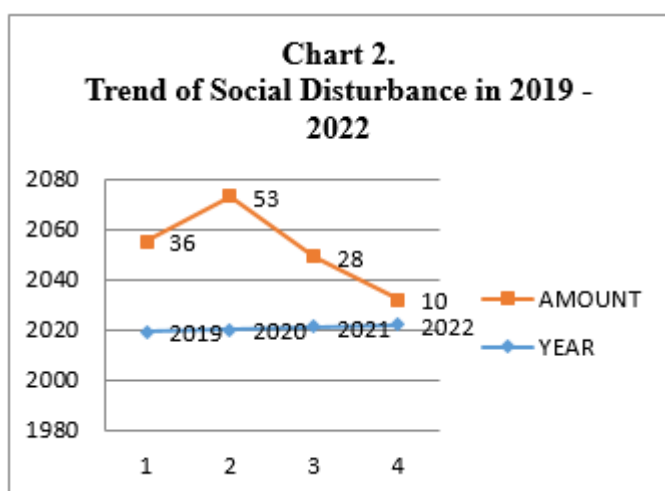
the Asahan III Hydropower Project.

Data collection techniques followed ethnographic methods, namely participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. In the process of data collection, the researcher developed closeness with informants through involvement in committee mentoring activities related to labor recruitment. Data analysis was carried out qualitatively by grouping data according to themes and conducting triangulation and interpretation of the findings.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Result

The recruitment of local workers became the largest contributor to the social dynamics surrounding the project. The high enthusiasm of residents to work in the project had significant implications for disruptions to project operations. Based on the identification of these problems and the importance of creating arrangements for the fair recruitment of local workers, PT PLN (Persero), as the leading actor in the project, initiated the establishment of an ad hoc institution called the Asahan III Hydropower Project Cooperation Committee. This committee was formed collaboratively through meetings at the PLN Asahan III Office involving village governments from the two villages located in the main project area, district government officials, TNI/Polri representatives from two sub-districts, as well as representatives of contractors and consultants. The committee was mandated to regulate the recruitment of local workers through a series of rules and mechanisms. To operate this institution, four people were appointed, consisting of two representatives from the project and two representatives from Tangga Village and Meranti Utara Village.



Source: GTF Asahan III

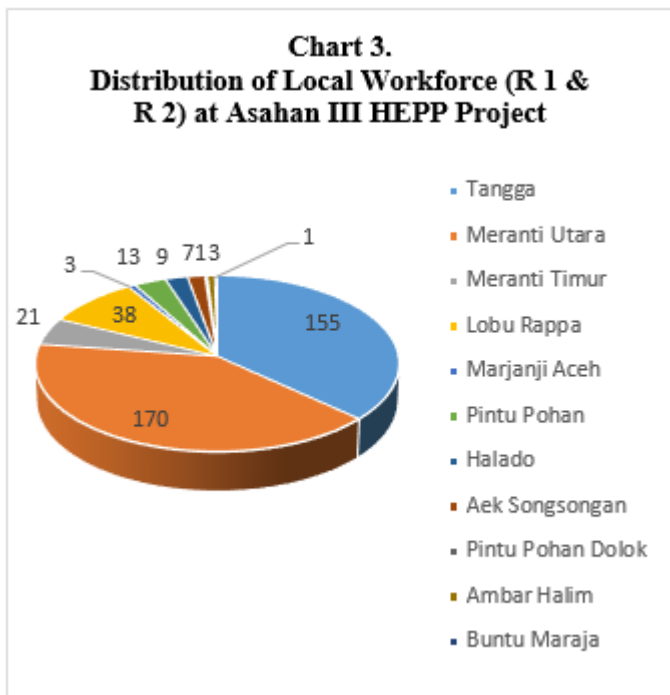
As part of directing the behavior of subjects, the formation of the committee was accompanied by ideas concerning fairness and priority for residents affected by the project. Representatives from village governments were appointed based on the assumption that they knew their residents better and could ensure labor distribution according to agreed priority scales. The committee functioned as a partner for contractors and subcontractors in fulfilling labor needs while prioritizing residents according to administrative areas, family relations, and project impacts.

The committee was equipped with rules and mechanisms for implementation. The project area was divided into four categories called “Rings”: Ring 1 consisted of Tangga and Meranti Utara villages; Ring 2 included Aek Songsongan District and Pintu Pohan Meranti District; Ring 3 covered Asahan Regency and Toba Regency; while Ring 4 included the wider North Sumatra Province and other provinces in Indonesia. Labor recruitment was prioritized for residents from Ring 1, followed by Ring 2 and subsequent categories according to labor needs and expertise. Applications from Ring 1 residents were submitted through village representatives in the committee, while applications from Ring 2 were submitted directly to companies with recommendations from sub-district authorities.

However, in practice, these arrangements did not proceed as expected. Residents and village governments from Ring 2 protested against committee rules that positioned their communities only after Ring 1 labor had been accommodated. They framed this arrangement as unfair and contrary to the committee’s stated goal of equitable distribution. In response to these pressures, new provisions were introduced requiring the composition

of unskilled local workers to consist of 60% from Ring 1 and the remainder from Ring 2. For positions requiring specialized skills, however, no such arrangement was implemented.

At the same time, many residents who were not originally categorized as Ring 1 residents sought domicile permits and changed their identity cards to become registered residents of Tangga Village or Meranti Utara Village in order to gain quicker access to employment opportunities within the project. This process was closely connected to local political interests, particularly those of village heads seeking electoral support for re-election. Political interest itself refers to an individual’s curiosity, attention, and motivation to engage with political affairs, public policies, and governmental processes (Amin et al., 2022; Humaizi et al., 2019). Through representatives appointed to the committee, village heads often fought to prioritize those who had political loyalties or kinship relations connected to village political contestation. Meanwhile, some residents who had previously migrated returned to seek work in the project area. As a result, the number of applications from Ring 1 residents continued to increase, producing long waiting lists that effectively narrowed opportunities for residents from outside Ring 1.



Source: GTF Asahan III (2022)

In situations where labor demand was not proportional to community expectations for employment, village representatives within the committee tended to prioritize family members and relatives for recruitment into the project. These practices gradually delegitimized the committee’s role as an institution intended to ensure equitable labor distribution. At the same time, not all contractors and subcontractors were willing to recruit workers through committee mechanisms. Some contractors preferred to recruit labor directly at their work sites. Consequently, the committee’s efforts to regulate labor distribution could not function effectively.

The growing delegitimization of the committee eventually caused the institution to become ineffective and, paradoxically, transformed it into a new source of social disruption. Disturbances to project operations related to labor issues increased from 36 cases in 2019 to 53 cases in 2020. This situation contradicted the committee’s original purpose of creating a conducive security situation through the regulation of labor recruitment. As a result, in early 2021 the committee was frozen, and labor recruitment was returned to individual companies, which then communicated directly with village heads and other local stakeholders through locally recruited public relations actors.

This delegitimization developed alongside struggles for access that generated exclusion and resistance. Various actors adopted strategies to obtain, control, and maintain access, including organizing collective actions aimed at forcing the project to accommodate their demands. Labor issues became the primary entry point through which broader economic interests connected to procurement and project resources were pursued.

Initially, three groups actively contested labor-related access and competed with one another to obtain work opportunities connected to the project: Formadestama (Community Forum of Tangga Village and Meranti Utara), PARNAS (Parhitean and surrounding areas), and IPK (Youth Work Association of Pintu Pohan Sub-

District). These groups mobilized local identities and claims of being negatively affected by project operations as the basis for obtaining and controlling access.

The contestation between Formadestama and PARNAS appeared through competing identity narratives and differing ways of positioning themselves toward the project. Formadestama identified itself as representing “local people living in the village,” distinguishing itself from PARNAS, whose members were described as local people living outside the village area. Formadestama figures further delegitimized PARNAS as greedy local elites who had already achieved economic success elsewhere but continued to seek access within the village.

Conversely, PARNAS figures delegitimized Formadestama as a “village thug organization,” particularly by criticizing methods associated with intimidation, threats, the stopping of project fleet mobilization, and anarchic demonstrations. PARNAS contrasted these actions with what they described as more respectable strategies, such as hearings, formal letters, and banner campaigns used to articulate demands and secure access to project opportunities.

The contestation between Formadestama and IPK emerged through struggles over access to the procurement of internal security workers. At the beginning of the project, PT SAJO, as the main contractor for civil works, required 45 security personnel through an outsourcing procurement process. Formadestama believed that the company it supported would win the tender. However, the contract was ultimately awarded to a company proposed by the youth organization IPK. In response, Formadestama organized demonstrations and mass mobilization at the contractor’s office. Although these actions did not alter the tender decision, they significantly influenced subsequent power relations between development actors and actors practicing access.

Following these events, Formadestama strengthened its position within the project by obtaining greater privileges in labor recruitment and procurement activities. Several Formadestama figures were appointed as public relations actors within the project, while its chairman, Risjon Simatupang, was appointed as a public relations coordinator at PT SAJO. This position became an alternative channel for local labor recruitment after the Cooperation Committee lost legitimacy and was eventually suspended.

At the same time, the strengthening of cooperation between Formadestama and the project contributed to the emergence of new competing groups that challenged Formadestama’s growing influence and intensified resistance toward subsequent regulatory efforts concerning local labor recruitment. In the end, the recruitment of local workers became increasingly pragmatic, operating through compromises between project actors and local pressure groups, particularly those positioned simultaneously as project intermediaries and actors seeking to obtain and distribute access among their networks and members.

4.2 Discussion

In Foucault’s (1991) view, regulation operates within an arena of power that he refers to as governmentality. Power itself is understood as diffuse and distributed across social relations rather than possessed exclusively by a single actor. Thus, interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions are always shaped by power relations.

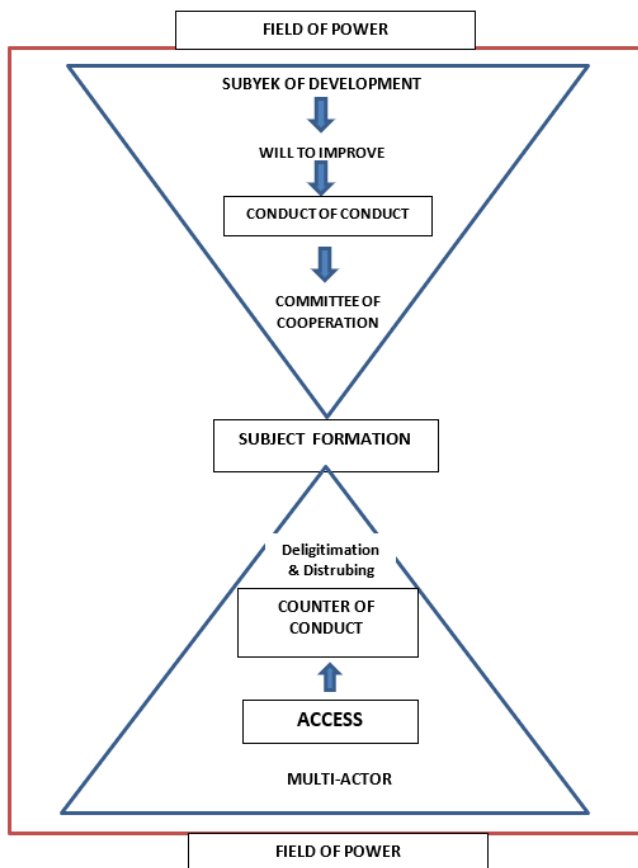
For development actors seeking to manage social dynamics and create a conducive security situation, governmentality operates through particular techniques, strategies, and forms of knowledge directed toward shaping behavior. In the context of labor recruitment, the management of social dynamics was institutionalized through the establishment of the Cooperation Committee. This process began with the identification of problems, which Li (2012) refers to as problematization. It was followed by meetings involving development actors and representatives from the two target villages, resulting in agreements concerning institutional mechanisms and labor recruitment arrangements. However, in practice, the committee encountered many obstacles. After operating for approximately one and a half years, the Cooperation Committee was frozen, and a new mechanism for labor recruitment emerged, shifting authority from a centralized committee system to individual contractors. The failure of the Cooperation Committee can be understood through two dimensions: the practical dimension and the spatial dimension. The practical dimension relates to the arrangements developed to direct the behavior of subjects. In this context, Li (2012) argues that failure is often connected to the neglect of political elements in development planning and implementation, a process she describes as depoliticization. Complex social relations are simplified into technical problems that are assumed to be manageable through administrative arrangements alone.

Meanwhile, from the spatial dimension, the target community of development programs is not an empty social

space. Regulatory efforts are not value-free, and community guardians, or community representatives, are also shaped by their own interests and social positions. A similar phenomenon was identified by Lubis (2017) in his study of peatland fire control in South Kalimantan. In that context, disciplinary efforts rooted in global environmental ideas encountered pragmatic local practices and interests.

According to Lubis (2017), the meeting between these two currents of power produces friction that contributes to the failure of disciplinary programs. Local communities are not passive subjects who can simply be shaped according to program objectives. Rather, they are actors capable of choosing strategies and negotiating opportunities without necessarily engaging in open resistance. In many cases, they participate in programs while simultaneously redirecting them toward their own interests. The process of subject formation within these power relations is illustrated in the following chart:

Chart 4. *The process of forming subjects in power relations*



In the context of the Cooperation Committee as a regulatory mechanism in the Asahan III Project, residents initially did not reject its existence. On the contrary, the committee was widely understood as a form of goodwill from development actors seeking to create a fair distribution of labor opportunities. At the same time, however, the committee was not free from particular interests because its broader objective was also to create social order and ensure project stability and operational continuity.

Nevertheless, the target community of regulation in Asahan III cannot be understood as a passive social space. The mechanisms established through the committee disrupted existing networks of interest among multiple actors seeking to obtain and control access to project resources. Community and youth organizations viewed the committee as a competing institution and responded through various forms of counter-conduct aimed at pressuring the project to accept labor proposals outside official committee procedures.

At the same time, resistance toward the committee gained legitimacy because committee members who functioned as community guardians, in Li's (2012) terms, were themselves unable to appear free from personal and group interests. Family members and social networks connected to committee representatives benefited more easily from employment access within the project. Other actors who felt excluded responded through disruptive actions, including stopping project fleet mobilization and blocking operational access. Such actions forced the project to negotiate because delays in project operations generated substantial economic losses. Law enforcement institutions also tended to avoid direct intervention unless actions escalated into overt violence or

anarchy.

Over time, repeated acts of disruption became normalized and developed into recognizable patterns of action accompanied by their own rationalizations. Demonstrations, the stopping of material mobilization, and the closure of access roads increasingly came to be understood as effective ways of obtaining and controlling access because they produced results with relatively low risk. What initially emerged as collective strategies by organized groups later became practices adopted more individually by residents and local actors.

From the discussion above, it appears that the idea of collaborative institutional formation was generally recognized as ideal by the parties involved. However, in practice, a gap emerged between institutional expectations and social realities. This gap was shaped not only by weaknesses among committee members themselves but also by the project's limited efforts to strengthen the committee institutionally and politically. Consequently, when the committee experienced growing delegitimization, the response was not institutional strengthening but institutional withdrawal through its suspension and the transfer of recruitment authority to contractors and subcontractors. This process weakened broader regulatory efforts in relation to local actors practicing access.

From this perspective, the failure of labor recruitment regulation through the Cooperation Committee emerged from the encounter between actors seeking to direct behavior and actors simultaneously seeking to redirect regulatory arrangements toward their own interests. Following Ferguson (1998) and Li (2012), development actors tended to approach labor conflict primarily as a technical problem, thereby failing to fully recognize the political and cultural dimensions of access practices within local society. As a result, labor recruitment became an arena of power relations between development actors attempting to shape conduct and multiple actors engaging in counter-conduct in order to obtain and maintain access to project resources.

5. Conclusion

Governmentality through the establishment of the Cooperation Committee in the Asahan III National Strategic Project (PSN) began with the idea of protecting community interests through the equitable distribution of labor opportunities. However, after operating for approximately one and a half years (July 2019–December 2020), the committee was declared unsuccessful during an evaluation process and was subsequently frozen. In its place, a new mechanism emerged through compromises with groups that had actively carried out pressure and contestation around access to project resources.

The failure of this institutional mechanism began with the technicalization of problems in the management of social dynamics surrounding labor recruitment. In line with Ferguson (1998) and reinforced by Li (2012), development actors in the Asahan III Project tended to approach social and political tensions as technical problems requiring administrative solutions, while overlooking the political and cultural dimensions embedded in local struggles over access.

At the same time, this study also strengthens Lubis's (2017) findings concerning the frictional relationship between development actors seeking to shape subjects through disciplinary arrangements and local communities that pragmatically negotiate, adapt, and strategize within those arrangements. The target communities of regulation are not passive recipients of programs, but social actors capable of redirecting regulatory mechanisms toward their own interests and networks.

What distinguishes this study is its focus on the encounter between two flows of power: development actors attempting to regulate conduct and multiple actors simultaneously practicing access through various forms of counter-conduct. Development actors operate through ideas, rationalizations, strategies, and regulatory techniques, while local actors respond by constructing their own rationalizations and strategies for obtaining and maintaining access to project opportunities. The resulting power relations produced adjustments in governance practices through compromises between project actors and groups practicing access. Consequently, the Cooperation Committee was suspended and replaced by a more pragmatic mechanism that accommodated local pressure groups by transforming former opponents into project intermediaries and partners.

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