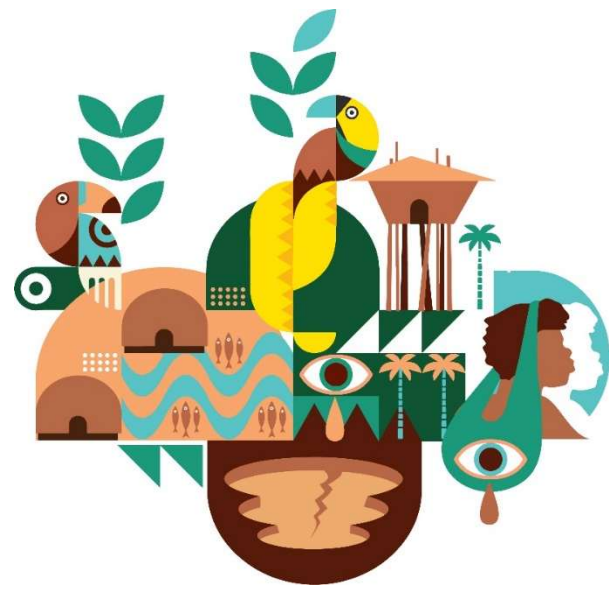


Voices from Papua



Papua Is Rich — But Who Really Benefits?

Agus Sumule, Universitas Papua

The PAPEDA Summit 2026, held in Sorong from September 2–4, was unable to run to completion.

The demonstrations around the venue sent an important message: any discussion about development, investment, conservation, carbon, and the green economy in Papua cannot be separated from one fundamental question:

Where do Indigenous Papuans stand in all of this?

It is a question we need to hear.

Papua is extraordinarily rich. It has minerals, gas, forests, oceans, rivers, biodiversity, carbon, and immense cultural wealth. But a region's wealth does not automatically translate into prosperity for its people.

As long as Papuan children still struggle to access quality education, mothers struggle to receive proper healthcare, villages remain without clean water, electricity, and internet access, and Indigenous communities fail to benefit fairly from their own lands and natural resources, we cannot say that Papua's wealth has truly become the well-being of the Papuan people.

That is why our debate should not be reduced to simple choices: exploitation or conservation; investment or no investment; mining or forests.

There are more important questions:

If natural resources are developed, how much of the benefit goes to the Indigenous communities who own the land?

And if Papua's forests, seas, and biodiversity must be protected for the benefit of Indonesia and the world, how much of the economic value of that conservation flows back to the communities who protect those forests and seas?

Indigenous communities should not receive only a one-off compensation payment when their land is used.

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If companies benefit from customary lands for decades, Indigenous communities should also have the opportunity to receive long-term benefits through fair land leases, profit sharing, and — where legally and economically possible — share ownership.

But the money received today should not all be spent today.

Part of the income from land leases, profit sharing, dividends, and other economic benefits should be placed in Indigenous Community Endowment Funds.

The principal should be protected, while the returns should be used to support children's education, healthcare, culture, the protection of customary territories, and community economic development.

That way, when a mine eventually closes or a particular natural resource runs out, future generations of the communities who own the land can continue to benefit.

The same principle should apply to conservation.

If the world needs Papua's forests to store carbon, protect biodiversity, and help tackle climate change, Indigenous Papuans should not simply be praised as "guardians of the forest."

Conservation must deliver a prosperity dividend.

It should mean better education, healthcare, clean water, energy, connectivity, jobs, and income for the communities who own and protect those lands.

In other words, a forest that remains standing should also generate prosperity for the people who keep it standing.

This is where government, businesses, conservation organizations, NGOs, universities, churches and other faith-based institutions, and development partners need to rethink their approach together.

We should not only ask how many hectares have been mined, how much investment has entered Papua, how much carbon has been stored, or how many hectares of forest have been protected.

We should also ask:

How many Papuan children are receiving a better education?

How many Indigenous families have seen their incomes rise?

How many villages now have access to healthcare, clean water, electricity, and the internet?

How many Indigenous communities have become genuine economic beneficiaries of their own lands and natural resources?

Papua's Special Autonomy framework and the RIPPP — the Master Plan for the Acceleration of Papua's Development — already provide room for this transformation through Smart Papua, Healthy Papua, and Productive Papua.

We already have ideas and innovations that can help make this happen.

The Full-Day School (SSH) program, for example, can help children in villages gain access to better education.

Village-based healthcare, supported by internet connectivity and land, sea, and air referral systems, can bring medical services closer to people living in remote areas.

Encouraging local food consumption through the One Day No Rice (ODNR) program can create stronger markets for Papuan farmers.

And payments for environmental services, combined with Endowment Funds, can turn today's natural wealth into wealth that lasts across generations.

Perhaps, then, the most important lesson from what happened in Sorong is not about deciding who won and who lost.

The demonstrations are a reminder that development loses its legitimacy when the people who own the land feel they do not share its benefits and have no meaningful say in shaping their own future.

At the same time, we need safe spaces for dialogue — places where disagreements can be discussed without intimidation and without violence.

Papua should not have to choose between healthy forests and prosperous people.

Papua needs both.

One day, the mines will run out. The gas will run out. Even the forests could disappear if we fail to protect them.

But before that happens, Papua's wealth must be transformed into something far harder to exhaust: healthy and educated Papuan children; economically strong Indigenous communities; professional Indigenous institutions; thriving villages; a sustainably protected environment; and a new generation of Papuans with the capacity and confidence to shape the future of their own land.

In the end, perhaps there is only one question we need to keep asking:

If Papua provides Indonesia and the world with minerals, gas, forests, carbon, biodiversity, and immensely valuable living spaces, how much of that value is truly being turned into a better future for the Papuan people?

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