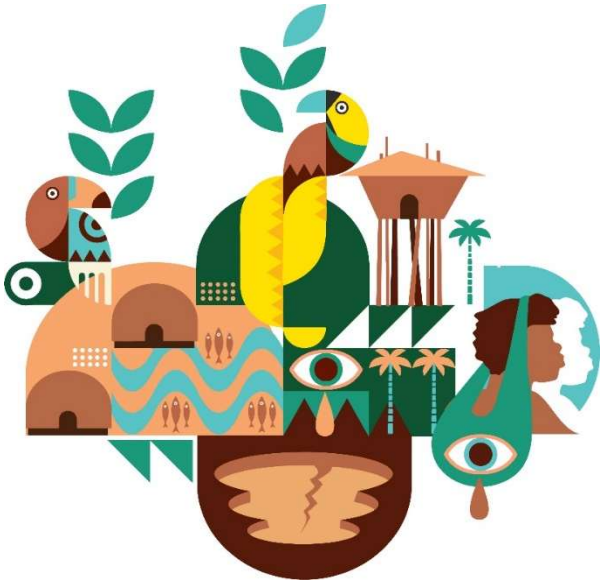
Voices from Papua



THE SCRAMBLE FOR MAKIMI'S GOLD: WHAT'S IN IT FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES?

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On October 22, 2026, the Indonesian government, through its Forest Area Enforcement Task Force (Satgas PKH), shut down the gold mining operations of PT Kristalin Ekalestari in Makimi District, Nabire Regency, Central Papua Province. The company's mining permit, covering approximately 3,500 hectares, had been revoked. The government stated that the company had committed several violations of mining and forestry regulations.

The government now plans to hand over management of the mining area to the state-owned mining company PT Aneka Tambang (Antam). This development raises an important question: who will actually benefit from Makimi's gold? More fundamentally, what will the Indigenous communities, whose ancestral lands hold these valuable mineral resources, receive in return?

According to information published by the company, the gold resources within its mining area are estimated at 32.7 tonnes, of which approximately 13.7 tonnes are reportedly ready for extraction. There have also been estimates of potential production reaching 300–500 kilograms of gold per month at peak capacity. These figures, however, remain company claims and projections that require independent verification.

To illustrate the potential economic value, assuming a gold price of Rp2.2 million per gram, monthly production of 300–500 kilograms could generate gross annual revenue of approximately Rp7.9–13.2 trillion. Again, these figures do not represent net profits, nor do they establish the company's actual production. They simply illustrate the enormous economic value at stake.

Given the scale of this potential wealth, it is only reasonable to ask: how much of it has actually reached the local Indigenous communities? How much has gone to local governments? And how much has genuinely been invested in improving education, healthcare, housing, and the well-being of people living around the mine?

The government certainly has the authority to take action against companies that violate the law. If a company is found to have conducted mining operations without the required authorization to use forest areas, exceeded its permitted mining boundaries, or neglected its environmental

rehabilitation obligations, it must be held accountable. The enforcement of the law must never be compromised.

However, law enforcement must also be transparent, fair, and open to scrutiny. Revoking a mining permit should not automatically be equated with taking over ownership of a company's shares. Legal certainty must be upheld, including when the government intends to transfer mining operations to a state-owned enterprise.

Yet there is an issue far more fundamental than the dispute between the government and a private mining company. The land beneath which this gold lies is not land without a history, without customary rights holders, or without people. Long before any company obtained a mining permit, and long before the government issued its various administrative decisions, Indigenous communities had maintained ancestral relationships with their lands, forests, rivers, and the territories that sustain their lives.

For Indigenous peoples, land is not merely a collection of hectares that can be included in a mining concession. Land is the foundation of life, identity, history, and a heritage entrusted to generations yet to be born.

For this reason, replacing PT Kristalin Ekalestari with Antam as the mine operator does not resolve the question of justice. There is no guarantee that transferring control over gold resources from one set of hands to another will bring greater benefits to local Indigenous communities unless they are genuinely consulted and meaningfully involved in the decisions being made.

State control over mineral resources, as provided under Article 33 of Indonesia's 1945 Constitution, must be understood as a mandate to secure the greatest possible prosperity for the people. It must not be reduced to simply increasing government revenues or the profits of state-owned companies.

Moreover, Papua has a Special Autonomy framework that explicitly mandates the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights. That mandate must mean something in practice, rather than remain merely a promise written into law.

If Antam eventually takes over the Makimi gold mine, the government must first engage in meaningful dialogue with the Indigenous communities holding customary land rights.

The legitimate rights holders must be properly identified, rather than unilaterally designated by government officials or mining companies. Indigenous communities have the right to know how much gold is expected to be extracted, how long mining operations will continue, what environmental impacts they may face, how the economic benefits will be shared, and what will happen to their lands once mining comes to an end.

They must also be involved in environmental monitoring, have access to decent employment and business opportunities, and benefit from clear, transparent, and accountable arrangements for sharing mining revenues. Indeed, the possibility of Indigenous communities holding an ownership stake through legally recognized representative institutions deserves serious consideration.

We must not repeat the familiar pattern of development across Papua: vast quantities of natural resources are extracted, while the Indigenous peoples whose lands produce that wealth continue to live in poverty, with limited access to basic public services.

Nor should we assume that because a mine is operated by a state-owned enterprise, the interests of Indigenous communities are automatically represented. A state-owned company belongs to the state, but the state and Indigenous communities cannot simply be treated as two entities whose economic interests are always identical.

Indigenous peoples have their own rights, needs, histories, and aspirations. These must be heard and respected. This is the real test facing the government in its handling of the Makimi gold mine.

Will the government merely replace one mining operator with another? Or will it seize this opportunity to fundamentally improve the relationship between the state, mining companies, and Indigenous communities?

The success of the transfer of mining operations should not be measured solely by increased gold production, tax revenues, royalties, or profits earned by a state-owned enterprise. It must also be measured by tangible improvements in the lives of Indigenous communities living around the mining area.

Will their children receive a better education? Will their families have access to adequate healthcare? Will their lands and rivers remain protected? Will they receive a fair share of the economic benefits? Will they have a meaningful voice in determining the future of their own territories?

We must not allow Makimi's gold to pass from private hands into state hands while Indigenous communities remain mere spectators on the very lands inherited from their ancestors.

The government has an opportunity to demonstrate that natural resource management in Papua can follow a different path: one that respects Indigenous rights, safeguards the environment, delivers real economic benefits, and upholds the law fairly.

But everything must begin with one step that is both simple and fundamental: sitting down with Indigenous communities, listening to them, respecting their rights, and involving them in deciding how Makimi's gold will be managed and how its benefits will be shared.

Because, in the end, the most important question is not who wins the struggle for Makimi's gold. The most important question is this: when the last ounce of gold has been extracted, what will be left for the Indigenous peoples of Makimi and for their children and grandchildren?

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