Political visibility in struggles for coastal land control in rural Langkat, Indonesia

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Abstract

State efforts to devolve resource control are often aimed at enabling more equitable and locally responsive forms of development. This thesis provides a relational analysis of how opportunities for more devolved land control are being seized and negotiated by different actors in two coastal villages of Langkat. It explores how and why residents, and a multitude of state and non-state institutions, participate in processes of devolving land control, and the material and relational consequences for coastal residents. The thesis relies on an exploratory, situational analysis approach, drawing on 126 interviews, observations and document analysis to explore these different actors' perspectives and practices.

Developing the concept of *political visibility* – to be seen favourably by institutions with public or political authority – this research makes three interrelated arguments. Firstly, it demonstrates how a desire for political visibility can play a critical role in determining the success of residents' land control practices and strategies. Secondly, by analysing how institutions consider the coast and its residents' appeals to power, the thesis establishes the relational and performative nature of political visibility, particularly with respect to the (re)production of authority. Finally, it demonstrates how practices of political visibility are not only appeals to power but also acts of power that are reliant on various structural, material and relational factors. Within these two villages, access to political visibility, as well as its material and relational consequences, is therefore uneven. Prioritising the perspectives of rural, coastal residents, the concept of political visibility enables a more nuanced understanding of how relations with the state and other powerful institutions, alongside intra-village dynamics, can influence processes of devolution, authority and land control.

Resumé

Statens indsats for at uddelegere ressourcekontrol sigter ofte mod at muliggøre mere retfærdige og lokalt lydhøre former for udvikling. Denne afhandling giver en relationel analyse af, hvordan muligheder for mere decentraliseret landkontrol bliver forhandlet af forskellige aktører i to kystlandsbyer i Langkat, Indonesien. Afhandlingen udforsker, hvordan og hvorfor beboere og en lang række statslige og ikke-statslige institutioner deltager i processer med decentralisering af jordkontrol og de materielle og relationelle konsekvenser for kystbeboere. Afhandlingen bygger på en undersøgende, situationsbestemt analysetilgang, der trækker på 126 interviews, observationer og dokumentanalyse for at udforske disse forskellige aktørers perspektiver og praksis.

Med udviklingen af begrebet politisk synlighed – at blive set positivt af institutioner med offentlig eller politisk autoritet – fremsætter denne forskning tre indbyrdes forbundne argumenter. For det første demonstrerer den, hvordan et ønske om politisk synlighed kan spille en afgørende rolle i at bestemme succesen af beboernes landkontrol i form af strategi og praksis. For det andet, fastslår afhandlingen den relationelle og performative karakter af politisk synlighed, især med hensyn til (re)produktion af autoritet, når det analyseres, hvordan institutioner betragter kysten og dens beboeres appeller til magt. Endelig demonstrerer afhandlingen, hvordan praksis for politisk synlighed ikke kun appellerer til magt, men også magthandlinger, der er afhængige af forskellige strukturelle, materielle og relationelle faktorer. I de to landsbyer er adgangen til politisk synlighed, såvel som dens materielle og relationelle konsekvenser, derfor ujævn. Begrebet politisk synlighed prioriterer landdistrikternes og kystbeboernes perspektiver og muliggør en mere nuanceret forståelse af, hvordan relationer til staten og andre magtfulde institutioner, sammen med dynamik inden for landsbyen, kan påvirke processer med decentralisering, autoritet og jordkontrol.

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Abbreviations

BAPPEDA	Regional Development Planning Agency, North Sumatra *(Badan Perencanaan dan Pembangunan Daerah, Provinsi Sumatera Utara)*
BLU	The Forestry Fund or the Centre for Forest Development Financing *(Badan Layanan Umum Pusat Pembiayaan Pembangunan Hutan)*
BPDAS	Watershed Management and Forest Protection Agency, North Sumatra *(Balai Pengelolaan Daerah Aliran Sungai dan Hutan Lindung Wampu Sei Ular)*
BPM	Batavian Oil Company *(Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij)*
BPSKL	Social Forestry and Environmental Partnership Agency, Sumatra *(Balai Perhutanan Sosial Dan Kemitraan Lingkungan Wilayah Sumatera)*
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
DisHut	Regional Forestry Service, North Sumatra *(Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara)*
DisLaut	Regional Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, North Sumatra *(Dinas Kelautan dan Perikanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara)*
Gerhan	National Movement of Forest and Land Rehabilitation *(Gerakan Nasional Rehabilitasi Hutan dan Lahan)*
KPH	Forest Management Unit, Stabat *(Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan, Wilayah I Stabat)*
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NTFP	Non-timber forest product
PS	Social forestry *(Perhutanan sosial)*
PT	Limited Company *(Perseroan Terbatas)*
TNI-AL	Indonesian Navy, Langkat *(Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) Angkatan Laut (AL) Kabupaten Langkat)*

Glossary

Abrasi	Abrasion
Adat	Indigenous
Areal penggunaan lain	Land for other purposes
Bakau	Mangrove, also used to refer to a specific genus of mangroves namely *Rhizophora*
Izin	Permit or licence
Bang	Elder brother, used when referring to a young man
Bubu	Traps, used to catch crabs or fish
Bupati	Regent, head of a regency or district such as Langkat
Dapur arang	Small-scale charcoal furnace
Dusun	Hamlet
Ekowisata	Ecotourism
Eksekusi	Executed, in this context removal of something previously occupying land
Hijau	Green
Ibu	Mother, used when referring to an older woman
Kepala desa	Village head
kangkung	Water spinach
Kak	Elder sister or brother, in this text used only when referring to a young woman, as is common practice in coastal Langkat
Kantor	Office
Kawasan hutan negara	State forest area
Kawasan lindung	Protected area
Kelompok	Group
Kebun Bibit Rakyat	Community Nursery Fund
Ketua	Leader
Lestari	Sustainable
Menduduki	Occupy
Mengakui	Recognise
Mengembalikan	Recover or restore
Menghijaukan	To green or reforest
Menguasai	Control

Orang penting	Important, powerful people
Pak	Father, used when referring to an older man
Palawija	Secondary crops, including root vegetables
Paluh	Stream
Pantai	Beach
Pasang perdani	Big tide caused by unusually high tides
Penghijauan	Reforestation
Pondok	Sheltered wooden structure
Preman	Violent gang member, colloquially referred to as mafia
Rapi	Tidy or well organised
Sawit	Palm, in this context referring to palm oil (*kelapa sawit*)
Surat Kepemilikan Tanah	Land Ownership Certificate
Tambak	Fish or crab pond
Warung	Small shop that sells food and drinks or vegetables and other groceries

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Overview and objectives

For decades, many states across the Global South have introduced decentralisation policies (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, RRI 2012, Ribot 2002, Hajjar et al. 2020). These policies are often aimed at improving governance by enabling more equitable and locally responsive forms of development (Crook 2003, Edmunds et al. 2003, Fisher et al. 2019). In Indonesia, efforts to devolve access to land have theoretically existed for decades (Lindayati 2002); however, in practice, land laws have routinely centred power in the hands of the state impeding true transfer of power to local actors (Colchester et al. 2006, Peluso 1992, McCarthy 2006, Banjade et al. 2017). Yet, in 2014, the Indonesian state (re)made land reforms a national priority, introducing new commitments and initiatives to increase devolved areas tenfold (Fisher et al. 2018). These initiatives focused on rural and forested areas, with transfer of authority to a range of state and non-state actors but particularly to residents of these areas (Fisher et al. 2019, Safitri 2022). In this research, I question the extent to which the possibilities offered by this new wave of devolution of rural land governance can challenge as well as reproduce relations of authority and access.

Empirically, this thesis considers how processes of devolution are unfolding in two coastal villages along the east coast of North Sumatra, in particular how and why coastal residents as well as many state and non-state institutions are engaging in processes of devolution of land control, and the material and relational consequences this presents for coastal residents. The overarching aim of this research is to shed light on the relationality of processes of devolution. By relationality, I refer to the relationships between social actors, how they think about, interact with and depend on each other, with attention to how their access to power influences these relations as well as the consequences this might have, particularly for local land control (Clarke et al. 2018, Ribot and Peluso 2003). Exploring different social actors' perspectives and practices, I argue that coastal residents' desire for,

and practices of, political visibility – to be seen favourably by institutions with public or political authority – can play a critical role in determining their access to land, among other material and relational consequences. Relatedly, for such institutions, or at times organisations, recognising practices of political visibility can provide opportunities for the (re)production of their authority. Taken together, the concept of political visibility as developed in this thesis enables a more nuanced understanding of how relations with the state and other powerful institutions and organisations, alongside intra-village dynamics, can influence processes of devolution, authority and land control.

This thesis therefore presents a relational analysis of how processes of devolving land control are engaged with by different social actors in coastal villages of Langkat, where opportunities for devolved land control have historically been rare. It does so by using an exploratory, situational analysis approach (Clarke 2005, Clarke et al. 2018) that draws on qualitative research methods including interviews, observations and document analysis to ask *How does engagement in processes of devolution of land control influence relations of authority and access in coastal villages of Langkat?*

I explore this research question through the following sub-questions:

a. Why and how are residents engaging with opportunities and processes of devolving land control in coastal villages of Langkat?

b. Why and how are institutions with public authority engaging with opportunities and processes of devolving land control in coastal villages of Langkat?

c. Within coastal villages of Langkat, who is able to access opportunities and processes of devolving land control and with what consequences?

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide a brief review of literature on decentralisation of resource governance in Indonesia and outline the concepts I draw on to guide my analysis, before detailing the overall structure of the thesis.

1.2. Decentralisation of resource governance in Indonesia

Decentralisation refers to the transfer of powers from a central government to lower, often more localised, levels within an administrative and territorial hierarchy (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Ribot 2002, Agrawal and Ostrom 2001, Larson and Ribot 2004). Decentralisation is often a response to the poor tackling of social, environmental and economic challenges by more centralised forms of governance. For example, a deterioration in financial or administrative performance of the delivery of social services, forest management, democratic processes, and the general decline of legitimacy of the public sector in the eyes of its citizens as well as other domestic and international institutions (Wunsch and Olowu 1990).

As early as the 1950s, many countries around the world pursued processes of decentralisation as a strategy for development and democratisation (Blair 2000). Decentralisation can take various forms. Devolution is often heralded as being a true form of decentralisation whereby meaningful authority over governance and finances is transferred to local actors allowing them to act outside the direct control of a central government (Eaton 2001, Edmunds et al. 2003). Devolution can involve transferring such authority beyond the formal structures of the state and to non-state organisations and resources users (Edmunds et al. 2003, Ribot 2004). It can include the transfer of decision-making powers, utilisation rights, tasks and resources (Ribot 2004) resulting in a more locally responsive form of governance (McCarthy 2004).

In Indonesia, colonial forestry and agrarian laws placed ownership of, and the capacity to classify and control, land firmly in the hands of the state (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001). After independence, these rights remained with the Indonesian state maintaining land control with government institutions (Bedner 2016, Peluso 1992). A major challenge to the wider centralised system of state governance came when the Indonesian government failed

to effectively address the 1997-8 economic and political crisis, which resulted in people across the country calling for a greater role in managing their local affairs and resources (Ahmad and Hofman 2000). In particular, areas rich in natural resources began demanding a greater say in, and share of, the resources being extracted from their regions, resulting in some provinces threatening to secede from Indonesia (World Bank 2003, Kantaprawira 2000, as cited in Resosudarmo 2004).

This threat to the Republic encouraged the government to consider decentralisation more seriously, and by 1999, laws on decentralisation were hastily being passed (Nordholt 2003). The passage of these decentralisation laws marked a fundamental political and administrative shift in Indonesia, however new legislation on forest governance – specifically Forestry Law 41/1999, which replaced the 1967 Basic Forest Law – continued to maintain decision-making authority at the centre (McCarthy 2006). Discrepancies in the new decentralisation laws and the revised Forestry Law produced tensions between the Ministry of Forestry and regional governments over the management of natural resources (Resosudarmo 2004).

At the same time, decentralised approaches as a means to improve forest governance and rural livelihoods were being popularised around the world, with most countries in Africa and Asia beginning to consider and adopt them (Schreckenberg and Luttrell 2009, White and Martin 2002). These approaches typically implied some degree of devolution of forest management to residents (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Crook and Manor 1998). In Indonesia, the extent of devolution in the early 2000s depended on the interpretation of broader decentralisation laws and were often limited to discussions of economic development, particularly the setting up of forest management funds and revenue sharing schemes. For example, in some instances, residents of forest areas were able to acquire permits for small-scale logging. However, while this increased forest access, permit-holders were rarely the

primary financial beneficiaries of these activities and were typically only able to operationalise them through partnerships with private companies and investors (Resosudarmo 2004).

The most recent push to devolve land and forest governance in Indonesia came with the election of the Widodo Jokowi government in 2014, when land reforms were (re)instituted as a national priority (Fisher et al. 2018, Safitri 2022). The newly elected government introduced commitments and initiatives to increase devolved areas tenfold and transfer authority to the village level through new laws and land/forest access rights for rural residents (Fisher et al. 2018, Sahide et al. 2016). For example, the national social forestry initiative includes multi-decade permits that grant forest access rights as well as natural resource governance and livelihood development responsibilities to local community groups (Safitri 2022). Between 2014-2019, social forestry in Indonesia expanded rapidly, increasing from 653,311 hectares to around 3,369,583 hectares (Sahide et al. 2020).

Research on these recent changes to the decentralisation of land and forest governance in Indonesia has focused on the rationale for decentralisation (Safitri 2022), the policy development process (Sahide et al. 2020) and the consequences of these policies on forest conservation (Suwarno et al. 2015, Putraditama et al. 2019), local social and economy development (Rakatama and Pandit 2020, Bong et al. 2019), and governance concerns including rights recognition (Fisher et al. 2018), accountability (Erbaugh 2019, Nikijuluw 2021), and reconfigurations of political power within central and local governments (Sahide et al. 2016). However, there remains limited empirical research on why and how different social actors pursue processes of devolution of land governance and how their relationships influence their engagement in these processes.

To understand these motivations and practices, I focus on two coastal villages in Langkat. Most research on devolving land control has largely focused on landscapes that have long

been considered state forest areas. Such state-sanctioned processes of devolved forest governance are relatively new in coastal areas. As described in Chapter 3, coasts being considered state forests is a comparatively recent phenomena in Indonesia. This change in legal land status resulted in many forest-related laws being applied to the coast including around forest decentralisation. I therefore ask, who does this new opportunity for devolved land control attract and why? How do these social actors engage with processes of devolution? And what consequences might this have for residents of coastal villages? And importantly, what would an investigation of these questions reveal about processes of political devolution, authority and access?

Furthermore, research on coastal forests in Africa and Asia focus on the social, economic and environmental benefits of these forests, particularly their capacity to contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation (Alongi 2012, Nurhidayah and McIlgorm 2019). Few studies consider coastal governance challenges, with even fewer examining how processes of devolution can influence resource control relations (Thompson et al. 2017, Banjade et al. 2017). As these areas become increasingly important to national climate change targets and related action and investment (Zeng et al. 2021, Macreadie et al. 2022), understanding why people choose to engage in processes of devolution in coastal areas can provide insights on what it is they are seeking through this engagement as well as what they expect from the state and other social actors. For example, is it an increase in downward accountability, the development of new income streams, a say in how land is used and by whom, the capacity to demand improved delivery of welfare services? How and why residents and institutions with public authority participate in devolution can also influence how they engage with these processes (see chapters 4 and 5). Furthermore, this engagement can have material and relational consequences for rural residents that do and do not engage in practices of land control (see Chapter 6). This thesis therefore aims to explore these motivations and

practices, while paying attention to the early consequences they have for residents of coastal villages.

Finally, I examine these processes in two neighbouring villages where residents were seeking greater control over their lands and engaged with state policies of decentralisation in different ways, sometimes relying on state-sanctioned programmes and at other times trying to anticipate what forms of devolved land use the state would likely support. By studying the motivations for, and practices and consequences of, devolution in these two seemingly similar settings, I am able to explore how different material and relational factors influenced processes of devolving land control.

1.3. Concepts

This thesis situates itself in the field of political ecology, a rapidly growing, diverse body of literature that explores how power manifests in discursive and material struggles over the environment (Forsyth 2003, Robbins 2012). As described by Robbins (2012), environmental problems and their solutions are shaped by processes of power. Political ecologists draw on a variety of theories including Marxist theory (Watts 1983), actor-oriented perspectives (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987), post-structural theory (Peet and Watts 2004) and science and technology studies (Goldman et al. 2011) in their analysis of the politics of resource governance, including relations of access and control (Peet and Watts 2004, Watts 2000, Robbins 2012, Ribot and Peluso 2003, Batterbury and Fernando 2006). In this section, I highlight and critically assess concepts often employed within a political ecological approach – specifically that of access and authority. Throughout this thesis, I draw on these concepts to explore processes of devolution of coastal land control. Moreover, the analysis enabled by these concepts provides a foundation for the development and examination of the concept of political visibility.

1.3.1. Access

Understanding access is a critical component of any political ecological analysis of resource use, crisis or conflict (Berry 1989, Ribot and Peluso 2003, Peluso and Ribot 2020). As stated by Berry (1989: 41), people's "ability to generate a livelihood or increase their assets depends on their access to productive resources and their ability to control and use resources effectively". This is certainly the case for access to land, a resource[1] that often supports human welfare and wellbeing (Elden 2010, Li 2014a). Furthermore, Li (2014a) distinguish land from other resources by highlighting the inevitability of exclusion from land. She builds on the work of Hall et al. (2011) which describes exclusion as the changing means by which different social actors are prevented from accessing land. Seeing exclusion as the inverse of access, Hall et al. (2011) draw on Ribot and Peluso's theory of access, which defines access as "the ability to benefit from things – including materials, objects, persons, institutions, and symbols" (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 153). Both Hall et al. (2011) and Ribot and Peluso (2003) provide useful frameworks for analysing land politics, with the former focusing on exclusion and the latter on access. They outline how and to what effect access to land is gained, maintained, prevented and controlled. In this section, I describe these frameworks, identifying elements that are useful for this research.

Ribot and Peluso (2003) bring together ideas spanning different disciplines, including political ecology, to theorise the notion of access. Building on the work of Berry (1988, 1989, 1993, 1994), Blaikie (1985), Li (1999, 2000), MacPherson (1978), Watts (1983, 1987) and others, they highlight the ways in which access goes beyond and differs from property

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[1] Debates over land use are centuries old, with land itself being central to economic, political and geographic theories. Yet, the concept of land remains under-examined (Christophers, 2016). Scholars have tended to view land as a resource or as a relation of property. The former considers the material quality of land and its role in human welfare, whereas the latter examines the political-economic aspects of land (Elden, 2010). These framings are not independent; many scholars present them together, often viewing land as a (scarce, finite) resource with important political and economic dimensions (Bridge 2009, Elden 2010).

conceptualising it as "*ability*, rather than *rights* as in property theory" (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 154, emphasis in original). Describing ability as being "akin to power", they draw attention to structural and relational dynamics of power that can constrain or enable people to benefit from things (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 155). To better understand how these power dynamics play out, they describe categories of what they call access mechanism, which can enable social actors to gain, control or maintain access. These include rights-based mechanisms (legal and otherwise) as well as structural and relational mechanisms such as technology, capital, markets, knowledge, authorities, social identities and relations. These mechanisms can be closely linked and function in tandem. This theory provides a clear framework for mapping and analysing access in ways that pay attention to the influences of power on dynamic processes and relationships that determine who can benefit from what resource, in what way and for how long.

The work of Hall et al. (2011) is rooted in Marx's (1995 [1867]) ideas on enclosures as a form of 'primitive accumulation' – a process of divorcing the producer from the means of production – which has more recently been conceptualised as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) whereby capital accumulation by some appears to depend on the dispossession or exclusion of others (Hall et al. 2011, Peluso and Lund 2011, Hall et al. 2015, West 2016). Hall et al. (2011: 7) describe three forms of exclusion: "i) the ways in which already existing access to land is maintained by the exclusion of other potential users; ii) the ways in which people who have access lose it; and iii) the ways that people who lack access are prevented from getting it." By emphasising the ways in which exclusion occurs, and the role of people (and their power) to exclude others, their framework highlights the processual and relational nature of exclusion. Hall et al. (2011) go on to discuss four "powers of exclusion" that can influence how access to land might be gained, maintained, prevented or controlled, namely, regulation, force/violence, markets and legitimation. Overall, this

framework is highly relevant for understanding and analysing relations of land control, particularly how access is prevented.

The focus of this thesis is the process of devolution of land control. Peluso and Lund (2011: 668) describe land control as "practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion for some time". These practices can be subtle or violent, and are typically "employed to acquire, secure, and exclude others from land in intense competitions over control" (Peluso and Lund 2011: 668). Land use can therefore also be a form of land control (Peluso 2005). Along the coast of North Sumatra, as with elsewhere in Indonesia, competition for control over land access is often high (Lucas and Warren 2013). Similar to Ribot and Peluso (2003) and Hall et al. (2011), Peluso and Lund (2011) emphasise the importance of a relational and processual analysis of power and the ways in which it configures land access, exclusion and control. This mode of analysis, and the frameworks outlined by Ribot and Peluso (2003) and Hall et al. (2011), are useful for examining how processes of decentralisation in coastal Langkat are engaged with by different social actors – in particular, for understanding how different mechanisms of access can shape motivations as well as practices of land control.

A concept that is missing from both Hall et al. (2011) and Ribot and Peluso (2003), but has since been recognised by other scholars as being important to analysing processes of resource access and exclusion, is materiality (e.g., Ginger et al. 2012, Ribot 2014, Myers 2015). I therefore provide an overview of the concept of materiality, highlighting its relevance to coastal research and its use in this thesis.

Central to the concept of materiality is the recognition that "things other than humans make a difference in the way social relations unfold" (Bakker and Bridge 2006: 17-18). To examine how "things" can influence social relations requires an understanding of the social meanings

of these things and the ways in which they affect the social (Robbins 2007). Materiality therefore involves both the natural and the social, but what is considered "natural" versus "social" as well as the relationship between them is approached differently by academics. For example, some emphasise the duality of nature and society (Doel 2006), while others argue that nature and society are the same thing (Braun 2006). However, while many perspectives call for the elimination of the distinction between nature and society, distinguishing between them can be useful. For example, Castree and MacMillan (2001) and Whatmore (2006) point out that there are differences in the agency of natural and social forces, which can be appreciated while still considering the importance of both forces. For many political ecologists, the concept of materiality considers both the material properties of an object, resource or landscape as well as its social significance, noting the effects it produces on social relations and processes (Tilley 2007, Robbins 2007). In other words, materiality encompasses more than a resource's physical or ecological properties, but pays attention to the meaningful ways in which it is entangled in and impacts people's lives. Such an approach puts emphasis on the relationship between the natural and social, suggesting that social relations must be analysed alongside biogeophysical properties of a resource or landscape. When using the term materiality, I therefore refer to the material (biogeophysical) properties of coastal areas as well as their social (relational) significance.

Studies in political ecology that explore resource governance and power relations increasingly include the materiality of natural resources and landscapes in their analyses (Li 2014b, Neumann 2002, Münster 2015, Peluso 2012). For example, Peluso (1996) demonstrates how the biogeophysical properties of fruit trees influence property relations in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Similarly, Cardozo (2013) provides an account of how aspects of the landscape, such as topography, can affect access to markets in the Peruvian Amazon.

However, while political ecology research includes analyses of coastal spaces and resources, studies that consider the materiality of coastal landscapes remain uncommon (Bennett 2019). Coastal areas are boundary spaces between land and sea; they are dynamic environments with fluid coastlines (Bird 1983, Alesheikh et al. 2007). An appreciation of the dynamism and materiality of the coast can impact how we understand, for example, how different actors engage with claims over coastal land (Walsh and Döring 2018). For instance, a mangrove seedling might have properties that enable it to hold on to soil, and as it grows, provide a nursery for fish. Moreover, it can be "implicated in social acts and events and the stories of people's lives" (Tilley 2007: 18), with the seedling representing a claim to the land on which it was planted as well as the nursery it then provides for fish impacting people's access to food. The capacity of mangroves to self-propagate, accredit land and even die might contribute to how they enable or hinder access to land (see chapters 5 and 6). Accounting for the materiality of the coast and mangroves can therefore help highlight their influence on processes of claim-making, land control and decentralisation (Bakker and Bridge 2006, Kärrholm 2007). This research accordingly pays attention to how coastal materiality influences relations of access and processes of decentralisation.

1.3.2. Authority

Devolution is a process involving, in theory, the transfer and sometimes negotiation of authority over a resource to a more localised governing institution or to the resource user (Edmunds et al. 2003, Ribot 2004). A relational analysis of this process can provide important insights on state-society dynamics, in particular on how authority is produced, negotiated and legitimised (Larson and Ribot 2004).

A growing body of literature on political and public authority challenges the Weberian conceptualisation of the nation state as a singular, rational actor that exercises authority over its citizenry within a clearly defined territory (Lund 2006a, Trouillot 2001). Rather, this

body of work considers "the state" to be a part of society, a system of powerful institutions and political practices well positioned to exercise their power (Abrams 1988, Mitchell 1999). As part of society, these institutions are informed by, and entangled with, dominant political and economic interests (Mitchell 1991), thereby often resulting in the introduction and implementation of policies, legislations and programmes that favour societal elites (Li 2007, Platteau 1996).

Furthermore, these scholars consider the state to be a social and political construct, that maintains the legitimacy of its authority by (re)producing the idea that it is a single, rational entity working in an imagined shared interest of society (Abrams 1988, Mitchell 1991, Lund 2006b). This construct is maintained through everyday practices such as "the language of legal practice, the architecture of public buildings, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking out and policing of frontiers" (Mitchell 1991: 81), as well as formal procedures and government techniques (Foucault 1991, Scott 1998). The state is therefore also "always in the making", with its authority being "(re)produced through its successful exercise" (Lund 2016: 1200).

Given its processual and dynamic nature, scholarship on state-society relations suggests that public authority ought to be posited as an empirical question, and rather than assuming that its exercise is the prerogative of state agencies it is more appropriate and productive to identify *actual authorities* (Raeymaekers et al. 2008, Benda-Beckmann 1981, Moore 1978). By institutions with political or public authority, I therefore refer to a range of state as well as quasi, non-state and private organisations, focusing on whose power is successfully legitimised through processes of decentralisation in coastal Langkat. This includes state agencies (at the national, regional and village-level), state-owned companies, private companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities, religious institutions, militia and others whose authority is widely recognised in North Sumatra. These institutions

or organisations might not all be perceived as being part of the state, yet their authority enables them to create a state-like effect (Trouillot 2001).

While different institutions might be able to create such an effect, authority needs to be perceived as being legitimate for it to be successfully exercised (Weber 1976 [1922], as cited in Sikor and Lund 2009). According to Alagappa (1995), legitimation of power is a dynamic process. It involves social actors attempting to produce, contest, negotiate and maintain their claim to power. Legitimacy of authority is therefore "continuously (re)established through conflict and negotiation" (Lund 2006a: 693). This processual understanding of legitimation of power also reveals its relational nature. Sikor and Lund (2009: 8) describe authority as "an instance of power that is associated with at least a minimum of voluntary compliance". Such compliance requires acknowledgment of an actor or institution's authority (Sikor and Lund 2009, Lund 2016, Lund 2020a). In other words, political or public authority is produced through relations of mutual recognition between two or more entities (Lund 2016). As people appeal to the authority of institutions, the recognition of their appeals simultaneously provide recognition to that institution's authority.

Central to these politics of recognition is for those appealing to authority and those exercising their authority to see each other – they require visibility and legibility (Honneth 2001, Taylor 1994, Fraser 2001, Scott 1998). The successful exercise of authority can therefore involve institutions with public authority making spaces and people more legible through practices that control territories and manage citizens (Ong 1999, Scott, 1998, Winichakul 1994). In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott argues that making nation-spaces more legible involves simplifying practices that help create standardised citizens and spaces. "State simplification" can include mapping and land surveys, the creation of identity documents and population registers, standardisation of language and legal practices and other ways of more effectively "seeing" citizens and spaces (Scott 1998).

These processes of making places and people more visible and legible, can be useful in (re)producing state authority. However, visibility can also be a useful resource for those seeking recognition. Taking the example of identity documents, Caplan and Torpey (2001: 5) argue that aspects of the process of identity documentation can be both "emancipatory and repressive". While this process can strengthen state authority and increase surveillance (e.g., Lyon 2001, Sriraman 2018), being in possession of an identity document can also serve as a representation of a right, enabling access to various entitlements (Lund 2020a, Jayal 2013). In other words, being invisible to institutions with public authority, might risk being denied the right to have rights (Arendt 1973 [1951]). This can make these processes worth pursuing, especially by more socially and politically marginalised people whose wellbeing might depend on them.

For more socially and politically marginalised populations, Rubis and Theriault (2019: 14) describe how visibility can be a dilemma, an "interplay of cooperation and concealment", wherein those seeking to be seen by the state or other institutions with public authority moderate what aspects of their identities to make visible and what to conceal. Visibility is therefore performative, involving practices that can make some people or some aspects of their identities more or less visible to others. Relatedly, which institution an individual or group chooses to try to appeal to by making themselves visible can also impact their claim to have a right recognised – in the way that they "shop" for institutions to recognise their claims, these institutions also shop for claims to grant (Benda-Beckmann 1981). This thesis therefore considers the ways in which authority – its production, negotiation and legitimation – can be a function of visibility and resource control.

These understandings of the state, authority and recognition guide my analysis of why and how coastal residents of two villages in Langkat, and various institutions with public authority, participate in processes of decentralisation and practices of land control. Taken

together, they enable me to pay attention to how authority is (re)produced within and across the boundaries of government and other non-government institutions (Ballvé 2012, Côte and Korf 2018, Lund 2006a, Roitman 2004), and especially through relations of mutual recognition (Lund 2016, 2020a).

1.3.3. Political visibility

This research relies on the above-described concepts of access, materiality, authority and recognition to explore why and how opportunities for land control are seized, negotiated and maintained by different social actors and institutions in two coastal villages of Langkat. These concepts enable and emphasis the value of a relational analysis of the process of decentralisation. In conducting such an analysis, this research develops the concept of political visibility, useful for explaining relations of access and authority in coastal Langkat.

Political visibility refers to being seen favourably by those with political or public authority. This research identifies it as a key motivating factor for engaging in relational processes of decentralisation. While existing literature on visibility highlights its importance in processes of recognition, this concept aims to illustrate the dynamics of power at play within these processes, with those that desire political visibility needing to adapt their practices, behaving in ways that powerful institutions recognise and deem appropriate (see Chapter 4).

Through a relational analysis, the thesis demonstrates that institutions with public authority are also motivated by a desire to increase their visibility to both coastal residents as well as higher authorities, both of which can impact their political authority (see Chapter 5). Since coastal residents' access to political visibility required appealing to these institutions, these institutions' ability to dictate and determine coastal land use was enhanced by the performance of political visibility. So, while these villages were able to attract more resources from these institutions by practicing political visibility, they also invited further control of coastal resources by these very institutions (Sahide et al. 2016). In other words, by appealing

to the authority of state and non-state institutions to secure resource access, residents inevitably contributed to strengthening the authority of these institutions in coastal North Sumatra (Lund 2016, Lund 2020a).

In Chapter 6, drawing on previously described frameworks of access and exclusion, I make political visibility the object of analysis. This allows for an examination of what mechanisms can enable access to political visibility and what consequences (including benefits) this access brought to coastal residents in North Sumatra. I show how political visibility can attract opportunities and resources that can have a material impact on the lives of coastal residents. However, not everyone has equal access to these opportunities and inequalities in opportunities are often shaped along lines of gender, race, ethnicity and geography (Fraser 2001, Ribot and Peluso 2003).

1.4. Thesis structure

The thesis is composed of seven chapters. This introductory chapter providing an overview of the thesis, including its research questions, scope and key concepts, is followed by a description of the research methods used alongside discussions of positionality, ethical considerations and limitations (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 provides an overview of the history of land control along the east coast of North Sumatra, highlighting changes in land use policies and practices and their impact on local land access and control in two coastal villages in Langkat that are at the centre of this thesis. This chapter draws on secondary literature, archival and empirical data to demonstrate how forestry and tourism are providing rare opportunities for coastal residents to gain control over their lands and livelihoods.

Chapters 4 to 6 focus on processes of devolving land control in two coastal villages in Langkat. In Chapter 4, I draw on documents, interviews and observations with village residents to demonstrate how a desire to be seen favourably by institutions with public authority – *political visibility* – informs collective land control practices. The chapter describes various

practices of political visibility demonstrating how they are about creating new forms of subjectivity and accountability that enable access to, and recognition of, land rights. In Chapter 5, I focus on interviews with state and non-state institutions and their role in participating in the devolution of land control in these villages. I argue that by providing and enabling opportunities for political visibility, these institutions are able to bring land into the purview of their control. In these villages, they are able to gain control over coastal resources not through mechanisms of dispossession or exclusion, but by providing recognition to claims made by coastal residents that in turn strengthen their authority.

Chapter 6 provides an access analysis of political visibility, focusing on the relational aspects of land control and political visibility and their uneven consequences for residents of the two coastal villages. Going beyond some residents' desire for political visibility and land control, this chapter highlights perspectives of those who have unsuccessfully engaged in practices of political visibility as well as those that preferred to stay invisible to institutions with public authority. The chapter demonstrates how new opportunities for land control bring with them new tensions, conflicts, losses and gains for residents, fuelled by the interests of those with public authority. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the main findings of this research and reflects on its broader contributions to discussions of processes of decentralisation, political authority and access. The thesis then concludes by highlighting possible areas for future research in the context of coastal land struggles in Indonesia and beyond.

Chapter 2. Methods

2.1. Introduction

Indonesia has the largest coastline in the Global South. During the first few months of my PhD, I was interested in understanding how a country with such a vast coastline was navigating global and national articulations of coastal areas as key sites for climate change mitigation. In particular, I was interested in understanding how the introduction of nature-based climate solutions (e.g., mangrove planting) was influencing rural land access and control. My research plans assumed that the impact of this new framing and imagining of coastal lands by climate mitigation academics, advocates and policymakers were being felt by coastal residents.[2] In early 2018, as I spent time with academics and practitioners in Jakarta and Bogor, I soon gathered that in practice, there were only two examples of mangrove planting projects that articulated their goal as being climate change mitigation. This information brought me to the east coast of North Sumatra.

On my arrival in Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra, I met with many land rights activists and environmental practitioners, some of whom were involved in coastal tree planting projects. My conversations with them were critical in informing both my research topic and methodological approach. Firstly, they seemed confused at the assumptions my research was making, particularly about climate mitigation as an important discursive framing for land control. Rather, they pointed to a number of environmental and developmental narratives that were influencing shifts in land control, with an emphasis on devolving control through national policies and initiatives such as social forestry. Secondly, coastal land control practices and strategies were being engaged with by a wide range of local, regional and national institutions, including state departments, private companies,

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[2] While this turned out to be untrue at the time, recent conversations with land activists in Indonesia indicate that coastal lands are now increasingly being enclosed as part of carbon offsetting programmes.

preman groups [violent gangs], state armed forces, land rights groups, environmental and conservation NGOs, religious institutions, unions, universities and others. For example, in one coastal village, over 20 institutions were involved in mangrove planting, development interventions and other practices involving land control. These projects were relatively new, having been initiated within the last 15 years with new actors, institutions and projects continuing to inform dynamics of land control. Many of these institutions had previously been involved in dispossessing coastal residents of coastal resources, particularly land. Why were they now interested in devolving coastal land control? What did this devolution look like in practice and what consequences did it have for these institutions with public authority and for coastal residents?

Informed by these conversations, this research adopts a research design that is both exploratory and descriptive, leaning on a variation of grounded theory – 'situational analysis' – to inform its methodology (Clarke 2005). I therefore relied on research methods that were appropriate for a situation analysis, including participant observations, interviews and document analysis. In this chapter, I describe my research approach and methods as well as reflect on my positionality and important ethical considerations.

2.2. Situational analysis

Situational analysis was developed by Clarke (2003, 2005) as a refinement of grounded theory as established by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Clarke (2003) considers situational analysis to be a logical extension of grounded theory that is more open to the inclusion of complexity, difference and heterogeneity. In addition to its roots in grounded theory, Clarke and colleagues (2018) further developed the approach by drawing on several theories that reflect more poststructural concerns, including Foucault's work on discourses, fields of practice and conditions of possibility, Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of rhizomes and assemblages and various theories within science and technology studies that emphasise the

importance of considering what they call the *nonhuman*, which can include natural and built environments, technologies, plants and animals, etc. based on what is empirically relevant. A situational analysis approach draws on these theories to make "the situation of inquiry [...] the ultimate unit of analysis, and understanding its elements and their relations its primary goal" (Clarke et al. 2018: xxv).

This methodology involves researchers constructing "the situation" empirically through the use of three relational maps: situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps. Unlike grounded theory, situational analysis is not interested in generating metanarratives or theories, but rather in producing *thick analyses* paralleling Geertz's (1973) concept of thick descriptions (Clarke 2005: 554). A thick analysis is made possible by identifying and analysing relations between "key elements, materialities, discourses, structures, and conditions that characterize the situation under inquiry" (Clark 2005: xxii). The aim is therefore to "generat[e] understandings of the *relationalities* among all the elements empirically found in the situation of interest through mapping them in various ways. These elements are understood as co-constitutive – they help to make each other up and together constitute the situation as a whole" (Clarke 2019: 15, emphasis in original). I describe these techniques and how I used them later in this chapter.

In the following sections, I describe how this methodology – and the data production and analysis methods used within it – enabled exploring the dynamics of devolution of coastal land control in North Sumatra.

2.3. Research locations

A situational analysis recommends the drawing of case boundaries based on a situation as it unfolds through the research process (Clarke 2005). When I returned to Medan in October 2018, I stayed with agrarian reform activists and researchers known to one of my supervisors. While they were not directly involved in land-based projects on the coast, they introduced

me to other individuals and organisations in Medan that were. These introductions played an important role in enabling my access to a network of government officials, academics, activists and NGO practitioners involved in mangrove planting projects along the east coast. Discussions with people involved in this network almost always included mentions of the village of Pasir Merah[3].

Pasir Merah was a village known for its mangroves. Institutions with public authority – from the Ministry of Forestry to local NGOs, universities and private companies – flocked to the village to engage with and support its residents' practices of land control. It was while moving between Pasir Merah and Medan that I began reflecting on how coastal residents and these institutions engaged with each other and processes of devolution and began to develop the concept of political visibility. However, on spending a couple of months in Pasir Merah, I encountered residents of the neighbouring village of Ujung Tanah. This village shared many things with Pasir Merah, from its border to social relationships, similar livelihood practices and land uses and experiences of land grabbing, floods and land loss. And yet, its residents' experiences with attracting political visibility differed from their neighbours in Pasir Merah. What prompted me to divide the remaining five months of my time in North Sumatra between these two villages was the interest their residents shared in pursuing political visibility.

2.4. Data production

The use of multiple methods to collect or produce data enhances validity and is typical of a situational analysis (Clarke 2005, Creswell 2013). This research therefore used a combination of qualitative research methods that enabled the study of relationships between, and perspectives of, different actors as well as their land control practices and strategies, while

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[3] Some residents of the two villages that are at the centre of this research wanted to remain anonymous. For this reason, I do not use the names of the villages or any of the research participants, instead opting for pseudonyms.

recognising the role of the researcher in producing the data (Clarke 2005, Bilgen et al. 2021). In this section, I describe the methods of data production used, namely, interviews, participant observation and document analysis, which were complemented by iterative data analysis (Clarke 2005: xxxi).

From October 2018 to March 2019, I lived between Medan, Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, with short visits to other coastal villages where residents were involved in developing local and regional strategies for acquiring coastal land control. I would spend around two weeks in Pasir Merah or Ujung Tanah and return to Medan for a week before going back to either village.

While in the villages, an interpreter[4] and I would stay at the home of a member of a community group involved in a coastal land claim[5]. Overall, we lived with seven families, each in a different hamlet of the two villages. This was useful in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the history of different lands and how claims over them were made and maintained. While this meant we were able to explore different groups' perspectives, it is likely that people might not have been as forthcoming with their opinions in cases of competing land claims. However, it might also have meant that our presence did not provide legitimacy to any particular claim or community group, many of whom were making competing claims. Living in different parts of the village was also a practical decision since we had no mode of transport. We found walking around the village was a good way to increase our visibility and created opportunities to interview residents from different ethnic

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[4] I worked with four interpreters in the villages, all of whom lived in Medan and travelled to the village with me. They were all students or activists, but none of them had previously visited or worked in Pasir Merah or Ujung Tanah or on coastal land issues. I was fortunate to work with friends who were not only confident and competent interpreters, but who were also kind, patient and friendly, which made it much easier to build rapport and ensure everyone (including I) remained involved and included in conversations and interviews despite my beginner-level Bahasa Indonesia. Fortunately, towards the latter half of my time in the villages, my Bahasa Indonesian comprehension skills improved, and very little interpretation was needed. On occasion, I conducted interviews on my own in Bahasa Indonesia.
[5] In Pasir Merah, there were six such community groups and in Ujung Tanah there were four.

and socio-economic backgrounds who both did and did not benefit from the collective land claims in different ways.

2.4.1. Interviews

As we learned about the various collective land claims and projects in the villages, we began interviewing residents involved in these claims and projects in order to identify and explore important events, themes and storylines. I would then map out other actors and institutions involved (see section on data analysis), and we would interview them to understand their perspective of, and role in, the claim or project. Within the village, we also interviewed residents who were disinterested in or unable to access these coastal land control practices, paying particular attention to how gender influences land access (see Chapter 6).

In Medan, Stabat[6] and the two villages, I used in-depth and semi-structured interview guides (see Appendix A), but in most instances, interviews were informal with open-ended questions that encouraged descriptions (i.e., "Could you tell me about…"). The interviews enabled me to enquire about land control practices as well as explore how interviewees perceived, participated in and responded to them. I also kept blank sheets of paper on hand in case interviewees wanted to communicate using other forms of expression such as illustrations, figures or maps. In the villages, many of the men I interviewed drew maps of the village and diagrams of the mangrove planting techniques and different species. Interviews were audio recorded when consented to and accompanied by notes and postscripts. Most interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of work, home, a neighbourhood coffee shop or on the coastal land in question in order to increase data richness, since these are spaces where land claim-making and control practices were often

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[6] a town in Langkat where some of the district government offices were located.

discussed. In Medan and Stabat, I conducted interviews in English on my own or in Bahasa Indonesia with the help of one of three interpreters[7].

Overall, a total of 126 interviews were conducted with 112 people,[8] 81 of whom were residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. In Pasir Merah, a total of 49 interviews were conducted with 35 men and 14 women. Similarly, in the village of Ujung Tanah, I led 32 interviews with 24 men and 8 women. These interviews were complemented by many more informal conversations, mostly in the villages, sometimes with individuals and at other times in groups.[9]

The remaining 31 interviews were conducted with individuals from 24 state and non-state institutions in North Sumatra, such as district and regional state institutions as well as national technical units based in North Sumatra (e.g., departments under the Ministries of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Environment and Forestry, Tourism, Planning, the navy and police). I also interviewed individuals at NGOs that work on land reform, environmental protection or restoration, women's rights, fishers' rights, rural development; universities with research groups studying coastal forest management and livelihood development; private companies funding coastal forestry and tourism projects; and political groups that participate in mangrove planting projects. All of these institutions were involved in coastal projects along with village-based institutions such as community groups resident to the villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.[10]

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[7] two of whom had also worked with me in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah

[8] Post-interview, if I had either clarification or further questions to ask, I would return to speak to research participants, sometimes more than once (Creswell and Miller 2000). These follow-up conversations sometimes took the form of interviews and at other times were more informal conversations.

[9] Many women in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah preferred to speak to me informally, and oftentimes in groups. This is reflected in the low number of interviews with women as compared to men.

[10] For a full list of institutions, see Appendix B. This list does not include the village government offices of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. Since the village heads and others who worked in these offices were part of the social fabric of the villages with some of them members of community groups involved in land claims. My conversations with them therefore included discussions from their perspective as both residents of the villages as well as village-level government employees.

Within these institutions, I interviewed individuals directly involved in mangrove planting efforts and land claim processes specific to Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah, as well as institutional representatives that oversaw these processes. Interviews were aimed at understanding decision-making, such as why and how the institution became involved in projects devolving land control along the coast, how project sites were selected, how project collaborations were established with individuals and institutions based in and outside of the villages, and what their aspirations were for the coast and their projects. These institutional interviews form the basis of Chapter 5.

2.4.2. Participant observation

In addition to interviews, participant observation in the villages helped facilitate a deeper understanding of how residents relate to each other and their everyday land control practices. This involved paying attention to how people articulate what it means to live by the sea and partake (or not) in practices of land control. We would therefore walk on the land together, travel together (by boat or bike), visit the (fish) market, work together (collecting food like shellfish from the shore, cooking), relax together in the afternoons and late evenings (play cards, chat, sing, watch TV, have a cup of tea, coffee or an ice-cold drink), and listen together to the sea, the fish, the mangroves, the music, the dramas on TV, etc. Living in the villages allowed for more time to have informal and everyday conversations as well as for people to show me the land-based and extraterritorial practices that enabled them to gain and maintain control over the land (e.g., trees, signposts, roads, fences, walls, shelters, websites, documents). I maintained a daily journal to record my observations and reflections. These journal entries or field notes assisted in continual iterative analysis, which were used to refine my research methods and tools, such as interview guides.

While living in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, I did not have the opportunity to participate in any organised collective land-based activities that enabled land claims, such as mangrove

planting or clearing. While it would have possibly added to my understanding of how decisions were made (for example, where to plant what species of mangrove and to what end), what people think about the land claim as well as personally experience the labour involved, I think it would have put me in a difficult situation. In both villages, the mixing of your labour with the land through mangrove planting or clearing, setting up of boundaries and signs, etc. is considered a practice of political visibility and land control. Given the number of conflicting and overlapping land claims within both villages, it would have been inappropriate for me to participate in the activities of any of the community groups as it might have been perceived as legitimising one group's claim over another.

However, throughout my research, I was present at many events that helped me understand how different actors and institutions engaged with each other and legitimise their control over land. For example, I sat in on community group meetings with their partner institutions where they discussed land governance challenges. I was also present at a beach clean-up drive organised by a community group in collaboration with a regional branch of the Indonesian navy and a local school, where the community group leader, head of the village government and representatives of the navy and school spoke about the importance of devolved tourism interventions. In Medan, I observed a corporate social responsibility seminar which enabled me to meet senior employees of private companies involved in mangrove planting and tourism projects in coastal Langkat. Additionally, during my final two weeks in North Sumatra, I attended organising and lobbying events led by climate, land and women's rights activists in the region, some of which were also attended by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.

2.4.3. Document analysis

While conducting interviews in Medan and living in the two villages, people provided me with a variety of documents related to their activities on coastal land in Pasir Merah and

Ujung Tanah. These included projects documents (e.g., proposals, evaluations, reports), registrations of community groups and local NGOs, permits, agreements, maps, photographs, videos, books, calendars. I was also directed to relevant websites, laws, policies and news articles. Similarly, when speaking to individuals at institutions with public authority, I was pointed to reports, videos and presentations they had produced.

In March 2019, I spent a couple of weeks at the National Archives of Indonesia in Jakarta and the Government Forestry library in Bogor where I researched relevant books, project reports, maps and photographs. These documents helped me understand aspects of the history of land use along this coast, how colonial and postcolonial perspectives of coastal areas have evolved, and the emergence of mangrove planting projects and their discursive framing. Some of these documents also played key roles in making visible and legitimising land claims in both villages.

2.5. Data analysis

2.5.1. Situational and access mapping

In line with a situational analysis, whenever I returned to Medan, I undertook readings of all available textual data (transcripts, postscripts, field notes and documents), listened to audio recordings and made notes in order to inform further data collection (Clarke 2005). While in the villages, maintaining a journal enabled me to reflect on observations and experiences on a daily basis. I would also have daily debriefing sessions with the interpreter accompanying me where we would share our reflections. In addition to note-making, I produced diagrams following the three mapping exercises outlined by Clarke (2005). The first is situational maps, which are used to identify the major elements (human, non-human, discursive, material) and their relations as they appear relevant to the situation. I therefore created two primary situational maps that evolved over the period of data collection. The first mapped out the various actors and institutions involved in coastal land control projects along the coast. Focusing on the relations between these actors, I made notes of various social, political and

financial aspects of their relationships. The second mapped the many practices and strategies adopted by these actors and institutions. With this map I paid attention to the combinations in which these practices and strategies were performed, drawing on frameworks of exclusion (Hall et al. 2011) and territorialisation (Rasmussen and Lund 2018, Peluso and Lund 2011) to understand how land was being controlled (see Chapter 5).

The second set of maps produced were positional maps. These are often used to identify the varied positions actors take in relation to a situation and its controversies. However, it is also useful to develop maps wherein 'positions' are abstracted from actors in order to enable an analysis in which a single actor need not be reduced to a single perspective (Clarke 2005: 130). I therefore used this technique to map the different motivations for participating in (and avoiding) processes of devolving land control. I developed separate maps for coastal residents and institutions with public authority. This exercise enabled me to get a better sense of which motivations were widely shared and identity what data I was missing to better understand the perspectives of research participants.

The third is the social world/arenas mapping exercise that is used to identify 'collectives' (people acting together/participating in the same discourse), and explore their negotiations, controversies and organisational activities. I used this mapping technique to illustrate how actors and institutions within the same 'collective' pursued a variety of agendas. Despite not finding this technique to be the most intuitive and at times too simplistic, when producing these maps alongside the situational and positional maps, I found it to be useful in better understanding relational dynamics between research participants, in particular to understand why some alliances between institutions with public authority and coastal residents emerged and others fell through. The process of illustrating these relations involved simplifying them, but also provided some clarity in my own thinking and was

therefore useful to get a sense of what I did and did not yet know. This too helped inform further data collection.

These mapping exercises were complemented by a fourth mapping technique. Ribot and Peluso (2003: 160) describe access analysis as "the process of identifying and mapping the mechanisms by which access is gained, maintained, and controlled". This involves identifying and mapping benefit flows, access mechanisms that enable the gaining, maintaining and controlling of these benefits and their distribution, and the underlying power dynamics of the identified mechanisms. I used access mapping, along with qualitative data analysis, to 1) explore how the consequences (including benefits) of political visibility and land control varied for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and 2) identify the mechanisms that enabled the gaining and maintaining of access to political visibility. Access mapping is less explicit on how to examine the power dynamics that underpin access mechanisms (Myers and Hansen 2020). However, when used in combination with situational analysis mapping techniques, I found this method useful in exploring the various relations between social actors, and how their practices and perspectives influenced rural, coastal land access in Langkat.

2.5.2. Qualitative data analysis

A total of 54 interviews were audio recorded, all of which were transcribed by myself and others while in Medan and on my return to Norwich and Copenhagen. These recordings were either transcribed by a translator[11], me, or the both of us together. The transcripts included notes of any significant emotions or intonations, as well as observations of potentially leading questions. Key interviews were transcribed in full by the translator. However, since most interviews in Bahasa Indonesia were interpreted in first person and close to verbatim,

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[11] The translator was one of the interpreters I worked with who was familiar with the context, and had agreed (as did all the interpreters I worked with) to maintain anonymity and confidentiality for all interviewees and research participants.

when I transcribed them on my own, I often only transcribed the conversation in English since I am not fluent in Bahasa Indonesia.[12] If I was unsure of the language used by the interviewee or the interpretation, I requested a second interpretation from someone else in the team of interpreters I worked with. I also listened to each recording twice and made notes on themes covered in the interview and my reflections.

For all textual data (transcripts, postscripts, field notes and a range of documents), I conducted a thematic content analysis, by which texts were organised based on themes, and then coded and categorised using the computer-based qualitative data analysis software Nvivo (QSR IPL 2018). Coding was conducted in two stages, descriptive followed by analytical coding. The analytical coding was strongly informed by the literature and concepts presented in Chapter 1. An intertextual analysis was also conducted to identify associative or conflicting relationships between texts (Ruiz 2009). I kept in mind the situations in which these data were produced (individual/collective, my relationship with the person, the location, context, etc.) and their potential influence on the data. In addition to textual data, I also coded other material such as photographs, drawings, maps and videos. This coding was based on their visuals, audio, script and when they were produced.

2.5.3. Writing as analysis

Writing has been an important method of iterative analysis for this research (Richardson and St Pierre 2008). Writing is second nature when doing a PhD. As described above, from research design and data production to writing the thesis, I routinely revisited the research data to analyse it, gather my thoughts and plan my next steps (Clarke 2005). However, in addition to producing situational and access maps and conducting thematic content analysis, I found writing to be a useful analytical technique. For example, after completing my data production, my supervisors suggested I produce a short document summarising

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[12] While I understand most of what is said in the interview, I do not feel confident translating these recordings myself.

my thoughts as first impressions. I found this document to be helpful throughout writing

this thesis. It served as both a means to reflect on how my thinking had evolved and, similar

to observations noted in a journal during data production, reminded me of how I thought

and felt at the time. Additionally, articulating my arguments by writing multiple versions of

chapter abstracts (as recommended in Lund 2014) pushed me to further reflect on what my

data was showing me, what I wanted to say and for whom. These considerations were

closely linked to other ethical questions, which I discuss in the next section.

2.6. Positionality, reflexivity and ethical considerations

Prior to travelling to Indonesia in 2018 and beginning data production, I received ethical

approval for this research from the International Development Research Ethics Committee

of the University of East Anglia. As qualitative researchers, particularly feminist scholars,

have long argued, all knowledge is *situated* in some way (Haraway 1988, Rose 1997,

McDowell 1999). A researcher's own perceptions, as well as other people's perceptions of a

researcher, influence the data they are able to produce. It is therefore important to be self-

reflexive throughout the research process: to actively reflect on my actions and relationships

(and other people's perceptions of these), but also the various worldviews and opinions I

bring to the research. In this section, I provide reflections on my positionality and research

ethics having completed this research.

I have volunteered and worked in environmental NGOs and research institutes from a young

age, however over the last eight years, my role in these organisations has been as a social

scientist concerned with rural land reform. I have previously conducted research on land

grabbing and the many subtle ways in which rural people's access to resources is configured

and restricted in the name of national development as well as environmental conservation

and restoration. I therefore began this project conscious of the politics of development and

forest restoration and how related projects can influence people's access to resources. When

conducting this research, I was motivated by the desire to challenge dominant development and restoration interventions, particularly as they often exclude rural residents' desires and needs. And while some of my findings were in line with my research assumptions, I also found myself questioning these assumptions as they were challenged by research participants, particularly those residing in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.

On arriving in Europe to begin my PhD, I was (and still am) regularly questioned about my research choices, particularly my choice of research locations, mostly by others within Anglo-Euro-American academia. These same questions were rarely directed at my PhD colleagues who were racialised as black or brown and study phenomena within the boundaries of the country they lived in or identified with, nor my white colleagues irrespective of where they conducted their research. However, others like myself (a Malaysian colleague leading research in Indonesia, a Bolivian colleague doing fieldwork in Vietnam, a Sudanese friend conducting research in Uganda) also had their choice of case study repeatedly challenged. It is as if our role within Anglo-Euro-American academia was to perform as informants producing case studies, rather than as scholars making theoretical contributions (see West and Aini 2018)[13]. And while this did require me to constantly defend my research choices, it also pushed me to question my role as a researcher in perpetuating colonial legacies and challenged me to unpack other research decisions and how they align with my own politics (Pailey 2019). It encouraged me to reflect further on who this research was for, and who I wanted to hold myself accountable to in writing this thesis.

In North Sumatra, as well as elsewhere in Indonesia, most people I met in cities and villages assumed I was Indonesian on first instance. As a young, middle-class, brown woman who grew up in a neighbouring Asian country, I was often considered with a sense of familiarity

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[13] As famously articulated in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage, My Freedom* (2005 [1855]: 361), Collins says "give us the facts…we will take care of the philosophy".

and therefore privy to comments and jokes about topics such as bureaucracy and risk/safety. Additionally, my status as a PhD researcher at a European university enabled me to access networks of environmental NGOs and government officials with relative ease. As a foreign researcher, government officials were sometimes cautious about sharing information with me, but most met with me without requiring me to acquire formal permissions that my Indonesian colleagues who worked on land rights were subjected to. Knowing I had worked at environmental NGOs and supported social movements in an Asian developing country context (which was also my home), NGO practitioners and activists were often more candid.

During my first few days in Pasir Merah, my presence mostly went unnoticed. The village is large with many comings and goings from nearby towns and cities since the opening of mangrove tourism projects. To begin with, I visited the village head office a few times and while people in the office knew I was a PhD student from India, based at a European university and studying mangrove planting and other coastal land projects, word of this took a couple of weeks to travel. During this first week, I also travelled across the village on motorbike as most residents do. While it was convenient to have the bike, I found walking to be a better way of making myself more visible to residents with more opportunities to stop for chats and meet people. When people would see me on the street, it was still assumed I was from Medan and visiting friends until we began speaking and I had the opportunity to introduce myself and why I was there. Throughout my time in North Sumatra, I was consistently referred to as a student from India[14], who was studying in Europe. In Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, this peaked residents' interest in different ways.

Firstly, it was common for parents of young people and young people themselves to want to talk to me about my experiences in higher education, including details about my PhD

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[14]Throughout my time in North Sumatra, Jakarta and Bogor, I was identified as being *dari India* [from India] or *orang India* [Indian], and never *orang asing* [foreigner] or *bule* (typically used for a person racialised as white)

programme and the scholarship I received. However, within coastal villages, not everyone approved of my decision to pursue higher education. Education beyond high school was inaccessible to most rural residents along the east coast.[15] School and university fees were high in the region and the few that attended university had to take on jobs or loans (often acquired by their family selling their farmland or boats). Moreover, many university graduates were unable to find work and returned to the village and what remained of their paddy fields or fishing boats. Most people who found low-wage work in nearby towns, cities or countries were able to do so without having to take on the expenses of a university education. For some older residents, my pursuit of education was therefore considered a waste of time since it was unclear what job my PhD would lead to.

Secondly, for community group leaders and village governments, my connection to a European university raised questions around whether I could help them access funds for development projects. This was particularly important to leaders of community groups with social forestry permits which required them to develop livelihood projects on forest land under their control. There were other projects in the villages, run by Indonesian (national and regional) NGOs, but funded by European donors who would visit on occasion. People did not presume that I had money to share, but rather that my relationships with people in Europe might enable their access to funding opportunities. This perception regarding who I was and what resources I might have access to extended to many other spheres of interaction.

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[15] In 2019, residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah could count the number of people that had been to university, estimating that it was under 2 per cent of village households that included a university graduate.

For the most part, people saw me as a South Asian woman who had the privilege to grow up speaking English[16] in a city with more affordable access to education, to study in Europe, to travel to Indonesia and to spend time doing something that may or may not directly contribute to her future career or family life. I was also from a postcolonial country and grew up with many similar social and cultural practices. I was therefore considered a familiar guest. For example, while many of the people I lived with did harvest and cook local delicacies to share with me, they expressed that they did not feel the need to go out of their way to accommodate me.[17] For instance, people would comment on how we are used to eating rice every day, eating with our hands and lying indoors on the cool floor to escape the afternoon heat. Many people were also familiar with and interested in discussing the colonial histories (and freedom struggles) of India and Indonesia, as well as comparing their contemporary politics, economic development and social policies.

However, while most people I met saw themselves and me as being racially similar, many people in North Sumatra racialize people from India differently.[18] I was often told I was *hitam tapi manis*[19] [black but sweet], and it was common for darker-skinned children in the villages

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[16] Many assumed that most Indians spoke English because they were colonised by the English. I therefore had to articulate the privileges I have as an English-speaking Indian, which led to interesting discussions about the histories that enabled this and continue to gatekeep many Indian citizens' access to welfare services and economic opportunities. These conversations also created space to discuss what being under Dutch rule was like as well as what it means to live in the afterlife of colonialism in both countries.

[17] it is also important to note that the households that volunteered to have me stay with them were not the poorest (or the richest) – so if I slept on the floor at night, it was on a mattress and people looked out for my comfort to some degree. However, when people learned that I am married to a white man, they expressed that they were glad I didn't bring him along with me since they would not have felt as comfortable if he stayed in the village, adding comments like "but would he be comfortable?" or "you are like us, we know how to make do".

[18] While people from the Indian subcontinent travelled to what is today Indonesia even before the arrival of the Dutch, the current Indian-Indonesian population in North Sumatra are mainly descendants of plantation labourers brought to the island by the Dutch from South India in the mid-nineteenth century. It is primarily this group that reside in the Indian-majority neighbourhood in Medan locally called *Kampung Keling* and are often subjected to colourism.

[19] this phrase comes from the popular song Afifah by Yopie Latul, where the Indonesian singer describes himself as being sweet despite being "black" or dark-skinned when trying to gain the attention of a woman, Afifah.

to be teased as being my younger siblings, much to their embarrassment.[20] On a couple of occasions, individuals went as far as to utter racist or colourist tropes (e.g., telling me to take a shower to "wash that black off"). I was therefore often having to navigate a mix of being seen as a privileged South Asian woman with access to opportunities in England, an ally who lived most of her life in a postcolonial state with similar political histories and socio-cultural practices, and a welcomed(?) guest despite sometimes being poked fun at as a person from India.

I present this section in this manner to demonstrate some of the complex and relational ways in which our identities influence our research, including the data we produce and how we interpret and analyse them. Butler and Davies (2008) raise concerns as to whether it is possible for researchers to ever outline their true identities and positionalities as these are fluid and everchanging. Relatedly, drawing on Stuart Hall's (1996: 141) conceptualisation of identity as an "articulated positioning", one's positionality is influenced by situated political engagements and power relations.

Research can be a highly extractive process. Prior to, and after, arriving in North Sumatra, I reflected on ways to make the research more useful for residents of this coast while continuing to explore my own academic interest in understanding land access relations. However, while my research topic was informed by discussions with land activists in North Sumatra, many of my research participants were excluded from these conversations. As I stayed in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, I routinely asked residents how I could make the research more useful to them and if there were other ways in which I could express my gratefulness for them sharing their time, knowledge and homes with me. However, with the exception of the village government staff in Pasir Merah, my research skills were not in high

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[20] Across Asia, and many other parts of the world, colourism as a form of discrimination is rampant.

demand.[21] To most of my research participants, the research I was doing appeared more like an academic exercise – something they were happy to participate in and help me with, but not something they had many expectations of. I therefore tried to practice an ethics of reciprocity (Millora et al. 2020) by making myself available in ways that were asked of me. For example, in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah I was asked if I knew anyone in Medan that could help someone's child settle in to university or a new job, if I could help with applying for a fishers ID so someone could access some of their rights, or if I knew activists that could help with a challenging land struggle, or if I could help prepare a wedding feast, or share a meal together or visit with someone that was ill or watch the children or play a game or just sit a while longer and chat. Similarly, in Medan, I was asked to help with drafting and editing research grant proposals, reports, and university and job applications.

This lack of interest in what my research could mean for residents of the coast pushed me to think more critically about what my expectations of a PhD thesis were, who I was writing for, and to whom I want to be accountable in my writing. Reflecting on these questions heavily influenced the framing of this research. Academically, I have therefore tried to be intentional with the concepts I use, the literature I cite and the conversations I participate in. Relatedly, I have tried to present these academic engagements in ways that are accessible for land rights activists in Indonesia, India and elsewhere by sharing my work through presentations, short written summaries and candid conversations. These conversations have also included a handful of residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah who continue to struggle for their access to land. In the following chapters, I shift attention to the perspectives and practices of these individuals as well as many others who participated in this research.

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[21] A few village government staff wanted me to explore how best to increase their control of the land and prevent others from occupying it – something I explained was beyond the scope of my research, which they acknowledged before I began living in the village.

Chapter 3. Context

3.1. Introduction

It was 2018 and we[22] were visiting Pak Achmad, a resident of a village known for its mangrove restoration efforts. As we entered the village, mangroves were what you saw on signs directing you to tourist sites, they were on maps and posters in the village office, on t-shirts worn by residents, a sticker on a child's schoolbag. Walking through the village, we soon arrived at Pak Achmad's community group's *tambak* [fishpond], where we sat together to learn about his experiences planting mangroves and claiming land as leader of a mangrove-planting community group. Pak Achmad generously took us through the history of the land we were sitting on – how it was privatised for charcoal production and later enclosed by palm oil companies, how the loss of mangroves had impacted residents, how he and others from across the regency of Langkat had fought to evict the palm oil companies, and how mangroves were a key part of their land control strategy as well as their vision for the land. He added casually, "*when we were struggling for the land, the rest of the village was asleep*". Noting my confusion, he explained, "*you must have heard how everyone here is involved with mangroves. This was not always the case, most residents signed papers handing over the land to palm oil companies. And when we were resisting, many of them were afraid and did not support us…but it is true now…mangroves bring opportunities.*"

This chapter presents a brief history of land relations along the east coast of North Sumatra,

focusing on the region of Langkat and in particular the villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung

Tanah that are at the centre of this thesis. The aim of the chapter is to provide context to the

contemporary interest in devolved land control among coastal residents and the relations

and practices they cultivate with institutions with public authority. From the perspective of

coastal residents and powerful institutions that participated in this study, this chapter

highlights two main opportunities that enabled them to take part in processes of devolution

of land control. It demonstrates that opportunities for devolved land governance have been

a rarity in coastal Langkat and their recent emergence has resulted in a flurry of land claiming

practices and related consequences, which are further detailed in subsequent chapters.

3.2. Contextual overview

Over the last century, the east coast of North Sumatra has undergone numerous changes.

In this section, I describe the political economy and ecology of coastal Langkat, in particular

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[22] Myself and an interpreter

broader political, ecological and economic structures and processes that are useful in understanding current land uses and claims. I focus on the edge of the coast, the strip of land along which the villages at the centre of this thesis are located. Most academic literature on the history of coastal governance in North Sumatra[23] has focused slightly more inland, on plantations (e.g., Stoler 1995, Rice 2012) with more recent attention being paid to the history of the very edges of the coastline (e.g., Ilman et al. 2016, Talib et al. 2022) – where mangrove forests have long been cut down for timber, oil and gas exploration, charcoal production, ports and other coastal development projects. I therefore draw on a mix of archival information, primary data produced during this research, and broader academic work on coastal change across North Sumatra and Indonesia to piece the history of coastal Langkat together. I describe how coastal land use has evolved over time, what drove these changes and what this has meant for various social actors involved in coastal land claims today.

3.2.1. The coast of Langkat

It was late 2018, and we were at the house of Pak Dedi, one of the oldest residents of the village of Ujung Tanah. He was not involved in any collective land control practices, but living close to the edge of the coast, he had planted mangroves, bought soil to fill in parts of the land surrounding his house and raised his house off the ground in attempts to stay afloat. Pak Dedi was Banjarese and had moved to Ujung Tanah as a child, a few years before Indonesian independence.

> "At the time, there were train tracks that ran along what is the main village road today. My parents moved here from Kalimantan. Many Banjarese came to this coast to work as labour in paddy fields…it was something we were known for. Some moved here as early as the 1890s, but many like my family came here between the 1920s and 1940s. That's why there are so many Banjarese in this village" (Pak Dedi, UT28)

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[23] Due to my own limited language abilities, I have only considered literature available in English when providing this overview.

A few months later, while in the national archives in Jakarta, I pulled out maps and photographs of the coast from Pak Dedi's childhood. I had read and heard about the long history of trade, resource extraction and infrastructural development along the coast of Langkat, but seeing these maps and photographs of oil and gas infrastructure and large plantations reemphasised how difficult it has been for residents to carve out land for themselves – for their homes and fields as well as their schools and mosques – and how important recent opportunities for land control were for them. It also highlighted how heavily involved colonial and postcolonial state and private institutions have been in governing coastal Langkat.

The east coast of North Sumatra has long been a site of trade and resource extraction. For centuries, the sheltered Straits of Malacca provided refuge for small and large boats on journeys between continents and kingdoms. The coast was therefore often visited by tradesmen and others looking to expand potential markets, including British colonial officials from nearby Penang in the early 1820s (Pelzer 1978). However, in 1824, with the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, Sumatra was considered territory of the Dutch who focused on drawing economic activity towards its west coast in order to avoid inadvertently benefitting British trade across the Straits (Pelzer 1961). It was only in the 1850s that the Dutch signed a treaty that brought large swathes of the east coast under their control, and a decade later they were growing and exporting tobacco, betel nut, pepper and nutmeg (Pelzer 1978). In 1883, the Dutch located their first oil reserve in Indonesia at Telaga Said in Langkat (Lindblad 1989), and by the 1920s, coastal mangrove forests were cut down for both oil and gas exploration as well as timber exploitation (Goor et al. 1982).

Figure 1| Archival photographs of land being cleared for oil and gas infrastructure development in Langkat on the east coast of North Sumatra (Source: Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections)
Clockwise from top left: 1. Paraffin factory of the Batavian Petroleum Company (BPM) in Pangkalanbrandan (1916); 2. Mangrove deforestation to place a derrick at Pangkalanbrandan (1928); 3. Abandoned drilling on the BPM yard in Pangkalansoesoe (between 1927 and 1932); 4. Development of new locations for the Dutch East Indies Oil Company by the BPM, presumably at Pangkalansoesoe (between 1927 and 1932).

The potential profits to be made from extraction of natural resources, especially spices, oil and gas, drove Dutch colonisation in many parts of Indonesia. According to Pelzer (1978) and Reid (2014), a strategy used across the Dutch East Indies that had its roots in the east coast of Sumatra was the initiation of limited liability companies, which involved privatising the land for economic exploitation and importing indentured labourers from nearby islands and as far as China. Other practices used to enable the extraction of large amounts of natural resources included the transferring of communal land ownership to village councils and elites to whom rent was paid to in exchange for the ability to extract resources (Talib et al. 2022).

Across Indonesia, Talib et al. (2022) describe the formalisation of coastal governance as beginning in 1905, when fisheries management fell under the remit of the Department of Land and Agriculture. This was followed by a 1939 colonial law that detailed control over

coastal and marine areas through the enforcement of property rights. Overall, marine governance during Dutch colonial rule focused on resource extraction and exploitation for profit and involved dispossession of coastal residents and traditional fishers "whose rights and access to the sea were restricted by an additional and more codified layer of domination and oppression" (Talib et al. 2022: 4).

The coast also experienced ecological changes as the Dutch experimented with more intensive industrial plantation practices. For example, in the 1880s and 1890s, large areas of Langkat were set aside for tobacco and had to lie fallow for a minimum of 8-10 years before being replanted (Pelzer 1978: 42, 45). Rural residents that possessed agrarian rights (often Malay or Batak men) were permitted to use the land during fallow periods. However, the company or tobacco planter retained control over the land defining rules of use, including how, when and what could and could not be planted (Pelzer 1978: 45). The control that individual companies – and others with access to financial and political power – had over land and labour continues to be reflected in experiences shared by coastal residents today. For example, it is not uncommon for mangrove forests to be cleared overnight for palm oil plantations and aquaculture (Basyuni and Sulistiyono 2018). For coastal residents this can mean a loss of access to food and timber, an increase in flooding of their homes and fields, loss of land through abrasion, and a drop in fish catch due to the introduction of pesticides and loss of mangroves.

Post-independence, the Government of Indonesia introduced regulations that drastically changed the leasing mechanism for mangrove forest concessions, from local authorities to more centralised ones. This change in governance was aimed at facilitating and stimulating foreign investment in mangrove timber (Burbridge and Koesoebiono 1982). By the 1980s, industrial agriculture was heavily promoted, including in the fisheries sector. The Blue Revolution involved a strong push for shrimp aquaculture, resulting in mangroves being cut

down further for the expansion of fish and shrimp ponds to meet export demands (Ilman et al. 2016, Quarto 1998). It was only in the 1990s that coastal areas and mangrove forests in Indonesia were explicitly, legally classified as protected forests (Presidential Decree 32/1990, Forestry Law 41/1999), specifically, protected areas or *kawasan lindung*. Prior to this, regulations to protect mangroves were largely linked to public health concerns (e.g., the spread of malaria), support for the fishing industry or the management of timber concessions (Ilman et al. 2016). The revised Forestry Law (41/1999) is the first regulation that explicitly lists mangrove forests as state forest land (this can include areas that are considered conducive to the growth of mangroves, and so the presence of mangroves on the land is not a prerequisite for the land classification). This was soon followed by coastal mapping and other practices of enclosure that reduced residents' access to coastal land and other coastal resources, impacting their livelihoods.[24]

As with other forest areas in the country, coastal lands developed a complex system of institutional arrangements involved in their management (Banjade et al. 2017, McCarthy 2006, Peluso 1992). Furthermore, authority over coastal areas is often unclear with conflicting land and sea laws that have varying environmental, economic and social priorities. For example, in the mid-2000s, the government passed numerous laws aimed specifically at regulating and governing coastal and marine areas. These laws developed new sets of principles, zones and systems of administration that placed the development of plans for coastal and marine areas within local government jurisdictions, and later transferred authority to govern and manage the first 12 miles of the coast (measured inland from the shore) to regional governments under the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (Coastal

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[24] For example, accompanying the change in legal status of coastal forests, in 1996 the regional government of North Sumatra banned the use of small, communally-owned charcoal kilns. These kilns were present in multiple villages along the east coast and were an important income source for many households. Now deemed illegal, around 350 small-scale kilns continue to operate in Langkat, producing approximately 6000 tonnes of charcoal annually (KPH01).

and Small Islands Management Law 27/2007, later amended as 1/2014). However, according to forestry regulations, the area of state forest land along the coastline is governed by national forest laws and is to be calculated by multiplying the tide differential with 130 (e.g., if the difference between the highest and lowest tidal points is 2 metres, the protected forest area would be 260 metres wide from the point of the lowest tide point inland) (Presidential Decree 32/1990, Forestry Law 41/1999).

Such delineations of territorial administration are further complicated by confounding definitions of forests among various government departments, interpretations of these national policies (McCarthy 2006) and conflicting mapping and border demarcating in forests across Indonesia (Li 2007). In coastal areas this overlapping of authority is made even messier by changes to the coast caused by erosion and accreditation of land that result in coastlines and tidal points shifting over time. Overall, at least four Ministries are responsible for mangrove forest management,[25] along with two Bureaus of Mangrove Forest Management, and National and Local Mangrove Working Groups. A National Strategy on Mangrove Ecosystem Management is intended to guide coordination across these institutions (Presidential Decree 73/2012). The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami also brought multiple changes to the coastal policy landscape, including the consideration of mangrove planting and protection as a key tool for disaster risk reduction as well as climate change adaptation (Yuniati and Brown 2008). The Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry and the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries both accordingly invested in mangrove planting programmes to increase coastal and watershed protection (Banjade et al. 2017). However, despite these attempts to *menghijaukan* [green or reforest] the coast, mangrove deforestation continued, often with the endorsement or protection of state institutions (Pak

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[25] Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Land Agency

Wahyu, PM01; Pak Iksan, PM03; NGO02a). Today, along the east coast of North Sumatra, mangrove forests continue to be cleared for palm oil plantations, aquaculture ponds, development of ports and power plants, charcoal production and sand mining (Basyuni and Sulistiyono 2018).

Figure 2 | Examples of extractive activities common along the coast today (Source: Pinto 2018). A farmer looks back at a palm oil plantation that lies between himself and the Straits of Malacca (left) and a coal-fired power plant pumps out fumes that scatters ash in nearby fishponds and fields (right).

3.2.2. The villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah

Along the east coast of Langkat lie the neighbouring villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. These villages are connected to the cities of Stabat and Medan by road. As you enter either village by road, the village head office and mosque are the first to welcome residents and visitors, with signs pointing you to the various hamlets, mangrove forests/plantations and beach tourism sites. Pasir Merah consists of 1000 households with five hamlets. The signs indicate the presence of four mangrove planting and protection areas however one of the signs with its faded map has been crossed out. The neighbouring village of Ujung Tanah is home to 500 households spread across four hamlets. This village too has a few signs, some directing you to mangrove planting areas and others to beaches. In this section, I introduce the residents of these two villages, describe key changes of land use in their villages over the last century and highlight consequences these changes have had for their lives and livelihoods.

3.2.2.1. The people and their livelihoods

Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, like most villages along the east coast of North Sumatra, are farming-fishing villages. Rural households practice multiple livelihood activities to make ends meet, with villagers often engaging in both farming and fishing as their primary livelihoods. As described by a resident of Pasir Merah when we first met and I asked if he was a farmer or fisher, he smiled and said "*sama, kita semua amfibi* [The same, we are all amphibians]" (Pak Ipoh, PM07).

Figure 3 | Livelihoods in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah typically include a mix of farming and fishing activities (Source: Pinto 2018). Small traps for fish and crabs are often placed in mangrove streams (top left). Fishers use small boats for nearshore fishing in the sea and larger mangrove streams (top right). A field of rice is a common sight in both villages, with some households also planting other vegetables around their homes for subsistence (bottom right). Bivalves can be found at low tide along the shore and are harvested, mostly by women and children, for subsistence (bottom left).

Fishing is mostly limited to small-scale, near-shore and mangrove stream fishing in small boats of 1-4 men, while women, children and some men harvest crustaceans on foot from

mangrove streams and the shore at low tide. A handful of wealthier households have larger boats that can accommodate 10-15 persons, and hire men and women from other households at a daily wage rate to work on these boats. Fishermen often go out in smaller boats overnight, with the larger boats spending up to a week out at sea. Fish and crustaceans are caught and collected for local markets as well as household consumption.

The soil along the coast is too saline to grow anything. However, in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, a series of water gates are used to keep sea water out of paddy fields. Not everyone in these villages has access to farmland with most who engage in farming doing so on other people's land in exchange for a share of the crop. Farming is typically limited to wet paddy fields, and harvests are often only enough to meet household needs. Some residents use the land and ponds surrounding their homes for small vegetable gardens or to grow *kangkung* [water spinach][26]. Such farming is practiced by both men and women; however, men more commonly partake in paddy farming. Few households further supplement these livelihood activities with other work opportunities (e.g., in the village government, school, small retail store or at the power plant), and many young men and women migrate to nearby Indonesian or Malaysian cities in search of work.

Both the villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah are home to people from a number of ethnic groups including Melayu, Javanese and Banjarese people. Some Melayu families have lived in these villages for generations, with others more recently moving in from other coastal villages. Many Banjarese families migrated to the east coast of North Sumatra in the early 1900s in search of work, mostly as agricultural labour (Pak Dedi, UT28). The Javanese population in these villages had mostly been forcibly moved by the Dutch colonial government from Java to elsewhere in Sumatra in the 1950s as part of the transmigration programme. Facing threats of physical violence and persecution from *Tentara Islam*

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[26] *Ipomoea aquatica*

Indonesia [Islamic Armed Forces of Indonesia], some of these transmigrants travelled to Langkat in search of safety and have since considered Pasir Merah (and to a lesser extent Ujung Tanah) their home (Pak Iksan, PM03; Pak Jamaluddin, PM18). A couple of the hamlets in Pasir Merah were majority Javanese, while in Ujung Tanah they were mostly home to Banjarese families. In these hamlets, large extended families tended to live in close proximity to each other.

Residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah are economically better off than many other villages along the coast of North Sumatra that lack access to paved roads. The road from Medan and Stabat to these villages enables easier access to markets, various infrastructure and other opportunities. Most houses in the village have cement walls, gas stoves and indoor toilets. However, houses away from village main roads and those situated closer to mangrove streams and the coast are often made of wood and not all have access to the same amenities. These houses are also built on less firm soil and residents often employ various practices such as mangrove planting and periodic reconstruction to keep them afloat. A few households in both villages are considered wealthy. These households typically have at least one member who owns land or earns a regular income (e.g., working at the village head office or as a midwife). The houses of such residents tend to be larger with more furniture, with residents owning other devices such as smartphones, refrigerators and motorbikes. In chapters 4 and 6, I describe more specifically how these socio-economic differences influenced residents' access to land as well as their political visibility and the benefits and risks it attracted.

3.2.2.2. Changes in land use
The ecology of the village of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah are integral to understanding how land use has changed in these villages. Pasir Merah includes part of an estuary, which has historically sustained close to a thousand hectares of mangrove forest in the village, as well as provided fishing grounds and prevented floods for many villages across the coast (FUN01,

UNI02). Changes in land use in the village can therefore impact the wider ecosystem as well as the lives and livelihoods of people living beyond the village.

Oil and gas
In the early 1900s, much of the mangrove forests in both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah were cleared by the Dutch for oil and gas extraction, the resources of which are now controlled by Pertamina, the national oil company.[27] This includes oil and gas wells, pipelines, roads as well as other infrastructure such as housing for employees. Although largely inoperable, most of this infrastructure has shaped the layout of the village, its roads and hamlets. For example, in the village of Ujung Tanah, there used to be a rail track that cut right through the village and connected refineries and storage facilities to a port (Pak Dedi, UT28). Today, Pertamina continues to own this infrastructure with the rail track being replaced by a road and parallel pipeline that goes out to sea. This road remains the main village road. Such infrastructure also means that road access has been a longstanding feature of the landscape, which has attracted other industries to the village, particularly as the oil and gas wells began to dry up decades later.

Aquaculture, palm oil and timber companies
In the 1980s, private investors from nearby cities in North Sumatra – referred to as businessmen by residents – negotiated with the village head and other village elites to occupy the entire coastal stretch of Ujung Tanah, on which they established aquaculture ponds, many of which were converted to palm oil plantations in the 2000s by the same businessmen (Pak Yusof, UT01). This land was previously a mix of mangrove forest and small patches of farmland. Many residents – particularly women and those from poorer

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[27] The Batavian Oil Company (*Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij* - BPM) was a subsidiary of the Royal Dutch Shell oil company established in 1907 (Braake 1944). It was Shell's main oil producing entity in the Dutch East Indies and its first and main oil well of BPM was on the east coast of North Sumatra (US Department of Commerce 1929: 21). The main oil well of BPM, considered as the origin of the Royal Dutch Shell, was in Langkat. After Indonesian independence, this infrastructure became the main asset of the newly-established national oil company, now called Pertamina.

households who did not have access to land or boats – used to harvest fish and crustaceans from these forests. As part of their agreement with the village government, the businessmen offered cash payments to farmers and some other residents that were using the land and forests in exchange for signed statements that they had been compensated and would not stake claim to the land or pursue any further action (Pak Arif, UT29; Pak Yusof, UT01).

These businessmen built high walls around their newly acquired land and employed staff who were not from the village to patrol and guard the land with the assistance of dogs. Embankments – heights ranging from 2 to 4 metres, with widths of about 4 to 6 metres – were also constructed to protect the plantations and ponds from the sea. Together, the old oil and gas infrastructure and the reconstruction of the coastal front introduced routine floods to Ujung Tanah, redirecting seawater into people's homes and fields (Pak Elang, UT24; Ibu Indah, UT06). Adding to this, over the last 50 years, the village has experienced extensive erosion of its coastline, with some village leaders estimating a total loss of 200 metres (Pak Pramana, UT14; Pak Azmi, UT08).

In a similar manner, in Pasir Merah in the mid-1990s, private and domestic aquaculture and mangrove-based charcoal companies moved in, occupying most of what remained of recently classified state forest land (Pak Wahyu, PM01). Many households in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah were engaged in charcoal-making at the time with a communal *dapur arang* [small-scale charcoal furnace] in the area (Ibu Fatimah, PM20). However, changes in forest laws in the region resulted in the banning of harvesting of mangrove timber without a permit for charcoal production (KPH01). Yet, the production of charcoal from the area did not seize as, in 1999, a domestic charcoal company acquired a permit to harvest mangroves in Pasir Merah (FUN01). It is unclear why, but the Ministry of Forestry shut down the company in

2006, which is when the charcoal company "sold" its concession to a palm oil plantation company (UNI02, FUN01). [28]

The establishment of intensive aquaculture ponds along the coastline was in line with the Indonesian government's strong push for the expansion of fish and shrimp aquaculture to meet export demands (Ilman et al. 2016, Quarto 1998). The presence of these aquaculture ponds in Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah also encouraged wealthier residents to hire equipment to dig out smaller ponds for fish and shrimp. While initially lucrative, the spread of diseases in the region began wiping out farmed shrimp (Ilman et al. 2016) and many residents abandoned their fish and shrimp ponds (Pak Jalil, PM14). By the early 2000s, most of these smaller ponds lay empty, however the larger aquaculture ponds continued to produce fish (Pak Yusof, UT01). In the early 2000s is also when three domestic private companies began occupying coastal land in Pasir Merah for the purpose of setting up palm oil plantations. Similar to the process of land occupation in Ujung Tanah, the owners of these companies began negotiating agreements with the village government. According to residents, the companies' owners were familiar with senior regional and national government officials as well as *preman* groups [violent gangs] who enabled their occupation of the land (Pak Iksan, PM03; NGO02b).

Many residents shared that they received cash as a form of compensation (up to 3 million Indonesian rupiah per family) for their loss of access to coastal land and forests. Few households were using parts of the area as fields and fish and shrimp ponds. These households received up to 6 million Indonesian rupiah from the companies, but only after staging a protest in one of their offices in a nearby city (Pak Wisnu, PM33). To receive these payments, residents were required to sign papers which they later heard were used by the

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[28] I was unable to find details of the concession, but confirmed with multiple residents of Pasir Merah that the site on which the palm oil plantation and mangrove charcoal concession lay were the same.

companies and village government to produce *Surat Kepemilikan Tanah* [Land Ownership

Certificates] that stated the land was being passed from residents to the company owners

(Ibu Ratna, PM21; Pak Wisnu, PM33). While legally the land remained state forest land, this

process provided some legitimacy to the companies' presence in the eyes of Pasir Merah

residents (Pak Amat, PM26; Ibu Ratna, PM21). More importantly, the connections the

owners of the companies had within government strengthened their claim to the land and

left residents of Pasir Merah feeling unable to challenge them (Pak Rohkoon, PM12; Pak Jalil,

PM14).

Struggle over coastal land in Pasir Merah
Similar to coastal land occupation in Ujung Tanah, the establishment of palm oil plantations

and aquaculture ponds in Pasir Merah required the building of embankments to keep the

sea out. However, unlike in Ujung Tanah, the waterways that ran through Pasir Merah were

key to managing floods in the district as well as providing sources of food and income to

many neighbouring villages (Ibu Fitri, PM42; Pak Edi, PM36). The construction of the

embankments to keep water out of the plantations therefore resulted in the redirection of

seawater from the estuary to people's homes and fields in Pasir Merah as well as other

coastal villages (Pak Amat, PM26; Ibu Nurul, PM10; Pak Inong, UT05). These floods prompted

a few residents of Pasir Merah to consider if and how they could challenge the presence of

the plantations in the village. In 2007, four of them contacted their local fishers' union

representative to explore their options (Pak Iksan, PM03).

However, it was not until 2009, when an extreme weather event provided momentum for

coastal residents to resist the occupation of their coast by private entities. Referred to as

pasang perdani [big tide] by coastal residents, this event resulted in a major flood that

impacted hamlets in Pasir Merah as well as five other nearby villages and one town (NGO02b,

FUN01). Residents from Pasir Merah and many surrounding villages, together with the union,

a national environmental NGO and legal aid agency, began organising and planning possible

ways of gaining access to the plantations and ponds and kicking the companies off the land. They collectively decided to express their dissent by adopting practices aimed at causing economic disruption and *mengembalikan*[29] [recovering or restoring] the land (Pak Iksan, PM03; NGO02b).

The ensuing struggle over the land lasted eight years and involved legal battles,[30] visits to Jakarta for parliamentary audiences and connecting with similar struggles in other parts of Indonesia, all of which was facilitated by the union, NGO and legal aid agency. Most residents of Pasir Merah did not participate in this struggle, nor did they openly support it. The few residents (men) who did were subjected to threats of physical violence against themselves, their families and their homes (Pak Iksan, PM03. These threats were delivered by *preman* [violent gang members] who were known to the owners of the palm oil plantations. The conflict escalated when one of the residents lost his life during a physical fight with the *preman* (FUN01).

On a couple of occasions, these resident men were arrested and imprisoned for trespassing on the plantations and destruction of property. They had entered the plantations and broken the embankments allowing the sea to flood the area and slowly kill the palm trees (see Chapter 5 for the perspective of the NGO and fishers' union regarding these events). This action, alongside the legal and political actions being pursued by the NGO, union and legal aid agency, resulted in the owners of the plantation companies abandoning the land. However, the few residents involved in the struggle were nervous about the land being left unoccupied, afraid that another company might move in and attempt to occupy it. Together

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[29] By recovery or restoration, residents referred to both the condition of the land as needing to recover from extractive activities, as well as their own *recovering* of control over the land (Pak Jamaluddin, PM18; Pak Amat, PM26)

[30] The NGO, legal aid agency and village government were successful in their case which confirmed that one of the palm oil plantation companies was illegally occupying the land. Possibly out of fear of being taken to court, soon after, the other two plantation company owners as well as the owners of the aquaculture ponds in Pasir Merah abandoned their holdings in the village (NGO02b).

with fishermen from nearby villages and the NGO and union, they began to reflect on how they could collectively prevent future floods, restore fishing grounds and ensure the land stayed under the control of the village government and residents.

Collective mangrove planting and tourism
To protect their lives, lands and livelihoods, residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah would plant mangroves – around their homes, along embankments, streams and the shore. This was cheaper and often less labour-intensive than other household-level practices of preventing land loss and floods such as buying soil to fill in the land or renovating homes to raise the floor (Pak Dedi, UT28; Ibu Janah, UT22). However, such planting was taken up by individual households, with collective mangrove planting first occurring in Pasir Merah in 2005.

At the end of 2003, before this land conflict between coastal residents and the palm oil plantations in Pasir Merah, the Indonesian government introduced the *Gerhan* programme [*Gerakan Nasional Rehabilitasi Hutan dan Lahan*, National Movement of Forest and Land Rehabilitation]. The intention of this programme was to restore depleted forest areas by planting trees on three million hectares over 5 years (Nawir et al. 2007). In 2005, under the *Gerhan* programme, the village government of Pasir Merah learned of the fund and identified 25 hectares of land on which mangroves could be planted. Under the programme, funds and seedlings would be supplied to community groups[31] in exchange for their labour. This opportunity prompted the first mangrove-planting community group to be established in Pasir Merah. However, soon after the planting, the group became inactive. No new mangrove-planting community groups would form in Pasir Merah until the early 2010s.

The second ever mangrove-planting community group to be established in Pasir Merah was led by the few residents involved in the struggle with palm oil plantation owners over coastal

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[31] By community groups, I refer to farmer groups, fisher groups and farmer-fisher groups.

land (Pak Wahyu, PM01). The group was initially formed in order to receive funds and seedlings from various organisations looking to fund tree planting projects (Pak Iksan, PM03). The organisations from which they received funding were varied, and included religious groups, national environmental NGOs and national private companies. At the time, some organisations, such as a regional conservation NGO, did not want to associate with the land struggle as the legal status of the land was ambiguous and would not be acceptable to international donors (NGO01a). However, many local and national groups were glad to be involved in these efforts, especially as the community group consistently featured positively in local and national news stories (e.g., Jakarta Post 2018, Tempo 2018).

Around the same time, the first community group that had grown inactive began to be approached by NGOs and private companies. Since the tenure of the land was clear – it was a mix of state protected and production forest – it appealed to organisations that were explicitly seeking 'clean-and-clear' land (see Chapter 5). The first to seek interest in the land was a regional NGO in search of a site on which to establish a mangrove conservation project. The NGO attempted to gather residents to register a new community group with whom they could work. This prompted the existing group to make their first claim to the land. The promise of the project, particularly the potential opportunities for payment for labour, resulted in the group's membership increasing from a mere 2 to 40 members over a few days (Pak Jamaluddin, PM18).

As more and more environmental NGOs, private companies and religious groups began working with these community groups to plant mangroves, and other organisations such as political parties, government departments, religious groups, the police, navy, *preman* groups [violent gangs] and others learned about the mangrove planting activities in Pasir Merah, new funding opportunities became available to the groups for planting mangroves as well as developing other commercial activities on the land (e.g., tourism, fishponds). Pasir Merah

was particularly attractive to different organisations since after the palm oil plantations had been cleared, the village had land available for new coastal projects. Furthermore, with the Indonesian government setting new social forestry targets in 2014, community groups would be able to apply for social forestry permits enabling them to acquire control over the coast and attract further investment from different organisations (Safitri 2022). This inflow of interest in the village and potential to gain tenure over coastal land encouraged other residents to form community groups, and by 2018, the village had a total of nine community groups[32] involved in mangrove planting.

There was a lot of variability in these community groups. In some instances, community groups were formed by village elites; however, in others the setting up of the group depended on who representatives of institutions visiting the village came across first or struck up a friendship with. However, none of the founders of these community groups were from poor households. They tended to have varied occupations, including farming, fishing and working in village government. The founders of the community groups were often elected as the leaders of the community groups, however, in some cases, group members nominated and elected others. Membership to a community group was typically restricted to residents of the hamlet in which the mangrove-planting site was located, however some of these plantation sites spread across two or three hamlets, and some hamlets had more than one plantation site. In such cases residents who wanted to join a mangrove-planting community group had the choice of multiple groups. Lastly, these community groups ranged in size, some with 10 members and others with just over 100 members. Most groups had between 10 to 40 members, majority of whom were older men.

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[32] Eight of these groups were either farmer groups, fisher groups or farmer-fisher groups. One of the community groups was a women's group.

Men and women participated in mangrove planting efforts, with women often also maintaining mangrove seedling nurseries. These men and women were paid a wage in exchange for their labour,[33] and not all who raised seedlings or planted mangroves were members of community groups (in particular, women were rarely offered membership – see Chapter 6). Decisions over how and where to plant mangroves were mostly made by state and non-state institutions that were funding the efforts, with occasional input from community group leaders (Pak Sopian, PM09). By the mid-2010s, various mangrove-planting community groups in Pasir Merah began to compete over donors, project partners and land (see Chapter 6 for more on how this competition affected intra-village relations).

In the early 2010s in Ujung Tanah, similar attempts were being made to introduce mangrove planting projects. However, unlike in Pasir Merah, the coastal land of Ujung Tanah was still primarily occupied by plantations and ponds. Two mangrove-planting community groups formed in 2012, one by a relatively wealthy resident who was friendly with a member of staff at the Regional Forestry Service (Pak Inong, UT05) and another by the same conservation NGO that was approaching village governments across the east coast of North Sumatra to set up a new European-funded carbon credit project (NGO01c).

As land for mangrove planting in the village was limited, the two groups sought land on the very edge of the coastline, where around 2 kilometres of land is exposed at low tide. The community group initiated by the conservation NGO developed a nursery for the mangrove seedlings and made three attempts over two years to plant seedlings using a range of techniques as instructed by the NGO. However, the seedlings struggled to take root along the coast. The other mangrove-planting community group however was initially much more successful. The group leader's contact at the Regional Forestry Service informed him of the availability of funds for mangrove nursery development and planting through the *Kebun Bibit*

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[33] Rates of pay varied and were decided by the organisations funding the planting.

Rakyat [Community Nursery Fund]. The group raised and planted seedlings that survived for close to six years before they were cleared by another community group looking for a site on which to create a beach for tourists (further description of this process and its consequences can be found in chapters 4 and 6).

A final key change in land use in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah was the introduction of tourism projects by community groups. The first of these was set up in 2016 by one of the mangrove-planting community groups in Pasir Merah. Community groups were encouraged by state institutions as well as funding and partner organisations to adopt tourism as a source of income as well as a means of maintaining their social forestry rights (see the following section for a description of the legal conditions for maintaining social forestry permits). In Ujung Tanah in 2018, two new community groups were formed that had no prior involvement in planting mangroves. These groups were created with the intention of setting up beach tourism sites at two ends of the village. These groups and sites in Ujung Tanah are still in their infancy, however the presence of tourism in both villages has contributed to an increase in intra-village conflicts as community groups compete over land, infrastructure and tourists (see Chapter 6).

In chapters 4 and 5, I present how this struggle over coastal land was engaged with by residents of Pasir Merah and a number of institutions with public authority. This struggle, and the opportunities it highlighted for devolved land control in coastal villages of North Sumatra, greatly influenced many rural residents' perspectives and strategies of political visibility and land control. In the following section, I highlight two of these opportunities – forestry and tourism – that were pursued by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. I do so in order to emphasise the contemporariness and rarity of these opportunities, both of which encouraged coastal residents as well as an array of state and non-state institutions to partake in processes of devolving land control.

3.3. Opportunities for devolution

3.3.1. Forestry

Laws and policies aimed at managing coastal forests strongly reinforce state control (Banjade et al. 2017). This is reflective of wider forest management in Indonesia, with most land laws remaining largely unchanged since colonial times and centring power in the hands of the state (Peluso 1992, McCarthy 2006). While decentralisation of forest management has theoretically been present in Indonesian policy for decades (Lindayati 2002, Safitri 2022), the continued upholding of laws that disproportionately favour the interests of corporations, the state and international interests over those of forest residents impeded any devolution in forest areas (Colchester et al. 2006, Tsing 2005, McCarthy 2001). This in turn prevented vulnerable populations residing in and near forests from accessing resources on which they depend (McCarthy 2006, Peluso 1992).

However, since 2014, land reforms have become a national priority with commitments to increase community or social forestry targets tenfold from 1.1 million hectares to 12.7 million hectares (Fisher et al. 2018). The initiative grants forest access rights to groups of rural residents that live close to state forest land with five options for forest management arrangements: village forests, community forests, community forest plantations, forestry partnerships and customary forests, the last of which is exclusively reserved for those recognised as *adat* [indigenous] communities by the Indonesian state. With the exception of customary forests, state forest institutions retain control of the land and provide rural community groups with 35-year (extendable) access rights. These rights are limited, and rightsholders must comply with other state forest laws. Any group with a social forestry permit is also required to produce management plans that include forest-based livelihood activities since the initiative aims to support forest conservation while empowering the rural poor through livelihood development (Fisher et al. 2018, Safitri 2022).

These changes to forestry regulations created an opportunity for coastal residents and many others to increase their control over the coast. For example, in Pasir Merah, nine community groups – registration of a community group is a prerequisite to applying for a social forestry permit, among many other state programmes and funds (see Chapter 4 for more details) – and over 20 institutions were involved in claims over forest land in different capacities. In 2017, three community groups in Pasir Merah received social forestry permits, gaining legal access rights to parcels of coastal land. By the end of 2018, 15 other community groups across the east coast of North Sumatra had successfully had their claims to land registered as rights (KPH01).

However, most residents of Pasir Merah, including members of these community groups, had no experience in collective forest management or the development of forest-based livelihoods as required for the maintenance of a social forestry permit (Pak Arhap, PM05; Pak Sopian, PM09). The three community groups were routinely encouraged by institutions with public authority to pursue tourism as a forest-based livelihood activity (see Chapter 4). As devolved forest management and tourism both enabled political visibility for these community groups, other coastal residents, such as in Ujung Tanah, began to imitate and experiment with related practices in the hopes of gaining land access and appealing to powerful institutions (this is explored in detail in chapters 4 and 6).

3.3.2. Tourism

Tourism is an important contributor to the Indonesian economy. For example, between 2008 and 2017, tourism consistently contributed over 4 per cent of Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (OECD 2022). Since 2012 and up until the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia has also seen a spike in the number of domestic tourists (Badan Pusat Statistik 2019). In 2017, the sector provided 12.7 million jobs, representing 10.5 per cent of total employment (OECD 2020). In 2016, the Ministry of Tourism announced the Ten New Bali Project. This Project

selected ten places across the country – one of which is in North Sumatra – highlighting them as new key tourism destinations with the aim of attracting international and domestic investment (MFA 2018).

Compared to the forestry sector, policies and legal regulations promoting and recognising locally-governed tourism projects are still in their infancy. However, notions of tourism being a positive and favourable form of local development were routinely emphasised by state and non-state institutions that interacted with residents of Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah. For example, in 2017, staff from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry visited Pasir Merah and recommended community groups develop tourism projects (Pak Intan, PM38). Community group leaders shared that government officials and NGO staff sometimes invited them to trainings and exchange visits, many of which took place in Bali and other locations where tourism was promoted as contributing to local and national development (Pak Sopian, PM05; Pak Iksan, PM03). In chapters 4 and 6, I further describe how and why coastal residents considered this to be an opportune moment to pursue tourism as a means of gaining local land control as well as political visibility.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter provides a brief overview of coastal land control in Langkat, and specifically in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, describing how the coast has long been imagined as a resource frontier with the last 15 years bringing opportunities for its residents to successfully gain access to these lands. As described in this chapter, changes to national policies and regulations have encouraged the devolution of resource governance. These changes brought with them new opportunities for coastal residents as well as many other social actors to claim control over the coast. These new opportunities can be short-lived, encouraging interested parties to try to anticipate them (Campbell 2015) and hold on to for as long as possible.

In the following three empirical chapters, I present the perspectives and practices of coastal residents and multiple institutions – including different levels of government, private companies, NGOs, unions, militia and many others – who engage in processes of coastal land devolution.

Chapter 4. Pursuing political visibility

4.1. Introduction

> We were sat together in a shady spot for lunch, Pak Iksan, his son, an interpreter and me. Pak Iksan had just shown us a 3D model of a possible tourism project as designed by architecture students from a nearby university. He was unsure about tourism, so we were discussing other mangrove-based livelihoods they could pursue to maintain their social forestry permit. It wasn't the first or last time they would discuss this with us, the district Forest Management Unit or any of their supporting institutions. Pak Iksan was no stranger to the demands of the social forestry scheme or the modalities of state power. I asked him why social forestry. He said it was the best option he had. He was going to continue physically protecting the mangroves no matter what, but the permit provided additional assurance that the state was on their side. I asked him if he trusted the state. He smiled, "they are like *preman* [violent gang members]. Did I tell you, the same *preman* who were hired by the palm oil company and killed people here returned once we got the permit and offered to protect the mangroves, but they wanted some of the land for themselves. The state is the same…the police and army protected the company, the old village government signed the papers giving them the land…and now they support us. But what else can we do? How else can we keep these companies out?…what about my grandchildren? If I didn't go to Jakarta, didn't fight, then what would happen to them?" He briefly pauses before adding, "if they [state institutions] don't see us, how will they know our struggles?"

This was an inescapable framing for many conversations in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.

When we arrived at someone's home, bumped into them in the street, sat together at a

warung [shop] (for a coffee or to buy sweets or vegetables), by the road during sunset with

parents and others watching the children run around or on someone's field, fishpond,

mangrove planting site – there it was, the state and its relationship with its citizenry. Similar

to Pak Iksan, some people were especially upset that the state wasn't aware of their lack of

care, that it could not *see them* and only if it did see that they were *good citizens and good*

communities (that collectively obeyed the law, practiced the appropriate religion, worked

hard, contributed to the state economy), it would remedy this deficit.

Most others, in full awareness of how their own village government and others in positions

of power (e.g., *preman*, police, navy) had previously sided with the wealthy owners of

plantation companies that caused their most recent disenfranchisement, were not as

trusting of those with public authority, but acknowledging their power, believed falling in

line with their vision of a 'good rural community' would enable them to transcend being what Li (2000: 7) calls "ordinary villagers", or persons who "belong to a homogenized or simplified category of people whose ethnic identity, distinctive forms of social organization, and localized commitments are officially unrecognized and often seen as contrary to national laws, policies and objectives". If recognised as good citizens working together in the interest of the country, then maybe they could gain some control over their village's resources and attract support for other public goods such as schools, employment opportunities and hospitals. In other words, acquiring such recognition – that they were legitimate members of a political community or group – would provide them with the very right to have rights, which would itself function as a mechanism of access (Arendt 1973 [1951], Somers 2008, Ribot and Peluso 2003) (see Chapter 6). And while not everyone wanted to be seen – and those that did, only wanted to be partially seen, some of the time, in particular ways, and for specific reasons – what informed these choices, I argue, was a desire to be seen favourably by those with public authority. I refer to this as a desire for political visibility.

How does the desire for political visibility influence rural residents' engagement with opportunities for and processes of devolving land control? Did it inform collective land control practices in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah? As outlined in Chapter 3, opportunities to acquire control over land for coastal residents are few and far between. This chapter demonstrates how people's land control practices are directed by these opportunities and driven by a desire to be seen favourably by institutions with public authority. This includes institutions that are definitively arms of the state, but also other 'non-state' institutions that have the capacity to lobby for and deliver goods and services sought after by many coastal residents – schools, hospitals, jobs, housing, roads, etc. For example, in Indonesia and elsewhere, private companies sometimes provide such services through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes (e.g., Rajak 2011, Gilberthorpe and Banks 2012, Anthias 2018). The boundaries between state and other institutions with public authority are fuzzy

(Mitchell 1999), however two aspects of their authority are of interest in this chapter: 1) their ability to determine the terms under which a claim or right is recognised (Lund 2016) and 2) the influence this ability has on the land control practices of those invoking their authority.

The chapter shows how rural residents try to anticipate opportunities that would make them politically visible. By an opportunity for political visibility, I mean moments when particular practices and forms of organisation enable people to be seen favourably by institutions with public authority. This visibility is required for individuals or groups to be acknowledged and accordingly have their claims recognised by powerful institutions (Lund 2016, Lund 2020a, Lund 2020b). However, such opportunities for political visibility can be short-lived and can therefore be challenging to anticipate and navigate (Campbell 2015). The chapter uses examples of collective mangrove planting as well as collective mangrove clearing, both of which were elected by different groups on different occasions via different institutions to acquire political visibility and land control.

This chapter also demonstrates that a desire to be seen by powerful political institutions can inform and influence land control practices. I present this as a desire to be seen rather than a desire to be recognised, as Pak Iksan described – that you need to first be seen to be recognised (for example, through the formal allocation of rights), and sustain that visibility in order to maintain recognition (which would be essential for the right to continue to operate) (Honneth 2001, Lund 2020a). In the case of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, this visibility was acquired through a suite of practices that involved making claims to land. The choice of practices was influenced by a desire to gain control over the land as well as appeal to different institutions that could help them maintain that control and hopefully enable access to other goods and services. The chapter therefore argues that maintaining political visibility can be an important aspect of maintaining land control for rural residents. At the same time, claiming and maintaining control over land can be a means for gaining and

maintaining political visibility. It is therefore not only necessary to be seen in order to make a claim, but equally so to maintain the claim (or, in some cases, right) in order to stay seen.

The chapter first presents residents' motivations for planting mangroves, illustrating how they intersect with an opportunity fuelled by a desire for land control and political visibility. It starts with collective mangrove planting in Pasir Merah since residents' concerns about being excluded from coastal land by palm oil and aquaculture companies were deeply entangled with the loss of mangroves and the consequences this had for their livelihoods. The floods of 2009 were a key moment in the political mobilisation of resident farmers and fishers, and mangroves became a symbol for restoring and regaining control of the coast. Once the first group of residents, with support from a number of civil society organisations, successfully claimed access rights under the social forestry scheme, other residents began imitating this strategy of land control up and down the coast.

However, when this strategy of mangrove planting failed in Ujung Tanah, residents adapted their land control practices, which at times included the cutting down of mangroves, enabling them too to become politically visible. The chapter then describes practices of political visibility used in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah before discussing the concept of political visibility further, including how it sits within broader conversations of the politics of recognition, and arguing that it is about creating new forms of subjectivity and accountability that enable access to, maintenance of, and recognition of, rights.

4.2. Mangroves and the desire for political visibility

Residents of Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah have planted and harvested mangroves for a long time – to protect the land from subsidence and floods, to protect their livelihoods and to make firewood, timber and charcoal. However, as described in Chapter 3, it was only in the early 2000s that the practice of collective planting of hundreds of saplings was introduced through state-funded programmes. While for many in these villages, their motivations for

participating in collective mangrove planting remained similar to when they planted mangrove saplings independently, they were now mingled with new motives and aspirations, inspired by the power and opportunities of collective action. For example, post-tsunami coastal recovery projects included a daily wage rate for planting mangrove saplings and most residents chose to sign up to earn some additional income from a one-off activity.

> "When we first heard about the *Gerhan* [*Gerakan Nasional Rehabilitasi Hutan dan Lahan*, National Movement of Forest and Land Rehabilitation] programme back in 2005, we registered as a community group so we could get paid to plant mangroves the next year. For us, it was additional money for our family." (Pak Jamaluddin, PM18)

However, after the 2009 flood in Langkat, collective planting also became a key strategy to gain control over coastal land. Civil society organisations, trade unions and farmers and fishers from villages across the regency came together to discuss possibilities for evicting the palm oil company in Pasir Merah.[34] At one of their meetings, fishers from a neighbouring village suggested breaking embankments and planting mangroves once the company had abandoned the land. This strategy would serve two key outcomes – firstly to protect and slowly "recover" people's lands and livelihoods from future flooding and land subsidence and, secondly, to disrupt extractive economic activities and serve as a deterrent for the company and others from (re)occupying and controlling the land (Pak Iksan, PM03). While this was key for the first collective planting in Pasir Merah, motivations (and therefore related practices employed) evolved as institutions with public authority began paying attention to the village and its planting activities.

This section presents different motivations for organising and participating in collective mangrove planting and clearing activities, highlighting how they are informed by a desire for

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[34] As described in Chapter 3, the mangroves in Pasir Merah are considered to be key to regulating flooding in the region. However, since the construction of embankments to keep water out of the palm oil plantations and aquaculture ponds, the sea found other ways to enter the land, resulting in floods across many villages across the regency.

political visibility linked to timely opportunities presented by favourable public discourses and state concessions.

4.2.1. Protecting livelihoods and lands

For many in the farming-fishing villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, mangroves (and estuaries) provide secondary sources of income and food (e.g., fish, shrimp, crabs, honey, timber). So, while these villages are better off than many others along this coast,[35] the loss of mangroves was felt most by poorer households that did not have access to a regular source of income, land or fishing equipment. When the village government of Pasir Merah assisted palm oil companies with the development of plantations on coastal forestlands, the companies offered households cash payments as a form of compensation for their loss of access to coastal forests as well as to ensure their complicity in what was effectively an illegal land grab. As a woman from a poorer household described the situation to us,

> "My husband died years ago, and my son now has a wife and child. It is not an easy life for me. When they offered us 3 million rupiah, they asked me to sign some papers. I didn't know what I was signing, but 3 million rupiah is a lot of money for me…now it [the money] is all gone, but how could I have said no? And would it have made any difference? They would have taken the land anyway, they had the support of the village government" (Ibu Ratna, PM21).

For Ibu Ratna, and many others in the village, the clearing of mangroves and privatisation of the land cut off access to small streams in which to catch crabs and snails. Some households depended on trapping and selling crabs as their primary source of income, but they also considered the payment from the palm oil company to be an opportunity they did not want to miss out on. These changes in land use also disturbed groups of monkeys[36] that entered the village, breaking into people's homes, destroying household items and consuming food. The houses most affected were those located closer to the estuary and coast. While

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[35] Both villages have road access, enabling access to markets and nearby urban spaces with more facilities and (although often inaccessible) opportunities for education, jobs and healthcare. With a few exceptions, most households also include features considered unattainable by less connected and poorer coastal and inland villages (such as cement walls, toilets, gas stoves).
[36] Crab-eating or long-tailed macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*)

proximity to the estuary and coast are not a definite indicator of socio-economic status, many of these houses are more prone to land subsidence and flooding with changes in land use and often unable to afford to fill in the land to keep their house afloat. As another resident of Pasir Merah expressed,

> "In the past, we would get a flood once a year, when the tide was at its highest, water would enter our house….it used to be up to our ankles. After the mangroves were cut down, it became difficult to predict when it would flood…and it was much worse when it did." (Pak Amat, PM26)

There is now widespread agreement in the village that these changes in flooding patterns were caused by the construction of embankments to keep the sea out of the palm oil plantations and aquaculture ponds. The building of embankments interrupted the flow of tidal waters into the mangroves and redirected seawater into people's homes and fields. In 2009, a major flood impacted Pasir Merah as well as five other nearby villages and a town. This flood played a key role in enabling civil society organisations and trade unions mobilise residents of the regency to organise and resist the occupation of coastal land by palm oil and aquaculture companies.[37] However, as noted in Chapter 3, despite this major flood, most residents of Pasir Merah did not initially get involved in the resistance. Some residents explained their decision to stay clear of the land struggle and opposing the plantation companies out of fear of violence.

> "The *sawit* [palm oil] companies have *preman* [violent gang members]. They also get support from the police and government. It is not easy to fight them" (Pak Rohkoon, PM12)

Instead, they chose to get involved once state forest agencies, religious groups, private companies and civil society organisations provided support through funding for daily wage

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[37] The role these civil society organisations played in challenging large coastal land occupations in Pasir Merah was crucial to residents' ability to assert control over the land. In Ujung Tanah, where residents were similarly faced with violent threats and did not receive the same support, the coast remained occupied by palm oil and aquaculture. When private companies and NGOs provided funding for mangrove planting for coastal restoration and climate change mitigation, there was nowhere to plant other than the intertidal zone, where it is not easy for mangrove seedlings to grow. Despite multiple attempts to protect the seedings, the village lost over 90 per cent of mangroves planted under these projects (see chapters 6 and 7).

payments for the management of seedling nurseries and planting of mangroves. For many

of the residents we spoke to, their participation in these mangrove planting activities were

motivated by the payment they received for their labour.

> "I heard from a friend that we would be paid if we helped with planting the seedlings. It is difficult to find paid work here, so many of us joined in, including my mother, my wife and my brother." (Pak Wawan, PM04)

Another important consequence of the establishment of palm oil plantations was a drop in

fish catch. The near-shore fishermen we spoke to were grateful both for the removal of the

plantations as well as the return of the mangroves. They considered the mangroves to not

only provide supplementary fishing opportunities, but also to serve as nurseries for near-

shore species of fish, shrimp and crabs. More importantly, the palm oil plantations had

negatively impacted their fish catch. As one fisherman described,

> "The *sawit* plantations polluted the sea. It turned the water yellow and red in places and killed all the fish. I don't know what chemicals they used, but it was very difficult to find fish while the *sawit* was there" (Pak Jalil, PM14)

However, while most fishers we spoke to considered this a significant impact to their

livelihood, many did not participate in the collective planting activities. Some said they were

busy struggling to cope with this loss of food and income, while others were suspicious of

people's motives for planting, particular those organising the activities. Other residents of

Pasir Merah were also looking beyond the village to financially care for themselves and their

families. For example, when asked about their decision to not participate in community

groups that were applying for social forestry permits, Ibu Fatimah, a resident of Pasir Merah,

explained

> "When we lost the mangroves, many of us looked elsewhere for work. It is not the first time we had to do this. I used to make charcoal from mangrove wood. Many of us did this, we had a *dapur arang* [small-scale charcoal furnace] just behind that house which we would all use. When they [the regional forestry service] started fining us, I went to Malaysia, to Penang. I have gone many times...the police in Malaysia put us in jail or send us back...they beat us, and some women get raped...but I still go. My daughter is there now...It is good that the mangroves are back, the fishermen can get fish again and don't have to go out for work. But we are

used to this life, and my children all want to go out of the village to work." (Ibu Fatimah, PM20)

A final key motivation shared with us for participating in the planting in Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah was the erosion of land. Residents reported a loss of between 20-200 metres of coastal land to the sea, attributing this to the clearing of mangroves. Facing the Malacca Strait, the coast routinely faced *abrasi* [abrasion] caused by the waves. The coast was mostly occupied by aquaculture and palm oil, but people that lived slightly inland showed us where the earth beneath their homes had eroded causing the houses to sink or move closer to the shore. Some were able to add cement to widen the base of the house, others lifted their houses off the ground using stilts, but most planted different species of mangroves to help hold the land together and in place. While this form of mangrove planting pre-dates collective efforts, having witnessed this abrasion led some residents to partake in large-scale planting.

I highlight these motivations for collective mangrove planting as they were important to most of the coastal residents I spoke to. They also highlight the significance of these lands and forests to residents and the various ways they contribute to the protection of people's lives. Gaining and maintaining control over the lands to protect them from existential threats (loss of mangroves, the biodiversity that depend on them and the soil itself that holds their homes and fields together) was therefore an important motivation for many residents involved in collective planting activities.

4.2.2. Enabling land control and political visibility

As previously described, accessing and maintaining control over coastal land in order to prevent future negative social impacts from extractive enclosures was a key motivation for those leading the collective mangrove planting.

> "We wanted to keep all those companies out. They were why the farmers and fishers in this village suffered." (Pak Misno, PM06)

For some of those who participated in collective planting, once it became apparent that coastal land could be claimed under the social forestry scheme, they began to participate in other practices of land control that also enabled them to be seen favourably by institutions like the Regional Forestry Service.

> "Planting mangroves helps us in many ways…but we need to protect the trees, so we built the roads and little walkways to patrol the land, we also put-up signs saying not to cut them, that it is now a protected forest area" (Pak Hanafi, PM08)

This strategy for land control quickly gained traction in other coastal villages, including the neighbouring Ujung Tanah. Pak Inong did not live in Ujung Tanah, but had been born there and was still registered as a resident of the village. In 2012, a friend of his in the district Regional Forestry Service informed him of a scheme[38] that provided funds for developing a nursery. While it did not enable claiming the land on which seedlings were planted, Pak Inong and his friend discussed the potential of establishing a community group who could then plant the mangroves, map the land and put-up signs with the name of the group and citing forestry laws[39] that identified the land as a state forest area [*kawasan hutan negara*] and claimed any damage to the seedlings or attempts to occupy [*menduduki*], work on [*mengerjakan*] or control the land without a permit [*menguasai tanpa izin*] would be punishable by law. While this was likely a strategy for the Regional Forestry Service to regain control over coastal land previously lost to aquaculture companies (and abandoned at the time of mangrove planting, so unlikely to incite counter-claims from these companies), Pak Inong also saw this as an opportunity to gain favour with, and be seen favourably by, them.

> "My friend worked at DisHut [*Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi*, Regional Forestry Service]. He helped us get the seeds…it is easier if you know someone who works there…and it was good for him too since they need to implement projects to get more funds" (Pak Inong, UT05)

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[38] *Kebun Bibit Rakyat* [Community Nursery Fund]
[39] For example, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry Law 41/1999 on Forestry or Law 18/2013 on Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction

While Pak Inong did not discuss opportunities to privatise the land with us, other village residents did share their belief that it is possible to do so through engagement with various institutions. For example, the aquaculture companies had acquired coastal land with the support of the village government, a coal-fired plant that was polluting the sea and fishponds and providing a handful of residents with low-wage jobs sat on the edge of the coast, and a previous governor of North Sumatra and *bupati* [regent] of Langkat occupied a stretch of coastal Ujung Tanah on which he planted mangroves when his attempts at aquaculture failed.

These motivations for land control and political visibility also resonated with members of community groups collectively cutting down mangroves in Ujung Tanah. Similar to collective mangrove planting, this collective action was aimed at gaining control over the land and as one resident described "so Ujung Tanah is not forgotten" (Pak Basirun, UT12). In 2018, two groups at different ends of the village were clearing coastal land to develop their own beach tourism projects. These land occupations were accompanied by different strategies for maintaining land control that were material (e.g., setting up immovable infrastructure) and relational (e.g., endorsements from institutions with public authority such as the navy, regional tourism department, village government). For one of the groups, the clearing of the land took place overnight.[40] With limited land available for a beach, it was Pak Inong group's land that was being cleared of its threatening signboards and mangroves. While Pak Inong expressed being upset about this,[41] other group members saw it differently.

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[40] It took them six weeks to set up huts, a stage, signboards, hammocks, etc. It was important they move quickly with establishing the tourism site as well since it is on state forest land and they believed it would be less likely to get shut down once opened. The tourism group registered the beach with the village government, however on the advice of a state tourism official, they were waiting for the enterprise to become better established before trying to have their claim formally recognised.

[41] Fairly powerful men in the village have opened the beach (including men with connections to gangs and state tourism institutions). While Pak Inong was upset they did not ask him before cutting down the mangroves, he claimed would have given them permission to do so since it provides a

"I used to catch crabs to sell in the mangroves…I did lose that and we do need the mangroves to protect the village from abrasion…but the beach is good too. The beach brings tourists and will hopefully also bring more jobs. There aren't many jobs here. And who knows what else…you were there when the navy visited today for the beach clean-up. They said the beach is helping Indonesian development. Maybe we could be the next Bali [laughs]…it'll be good for us" (Pak Solihin, UT09)

This sentiment of being the "next Bali" and improving the village's economic state and residents' household incomes was consistently expressed to us by many in Pasir Merah and even more so in Ujung Tanah. This was unsurprising for a few reasons. As described in Chapter 3, tourism is an important economic sector in Indonesia, routinely contributing over 4 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (OECD 2022) and providing millions of jobs, often representing over 10 per cent of total employment (OECD 2020). In particular, tourism in Bali is routinely touted by the media, politicians, private companies, investors, state and non-state institutions as successfully contributing to the development of the country, region and local economy.[42]

Seeking to replicate these economic effects across the country, in 2016, the Ministry of Tourism announced the Ten New Bali Project which includes a site for tourism development in North Sumatra (MFA 2018). However, the detrimental social impacts that often accompany such large-scale development (e.g., forced evictions and razing of farmlands, see Mongabay 2021) are not widely known, and was not something research participants in Ujung Tanah or Pasir Merah were aware of. Instead, to them, tourism was considered a means to claim land and have that claim recognised. Institutions familiar to coastal residents, such as NGOs, regional and national government departments including forestry, tourism and fisheries and private companies emphasised the potential development tourism could bring to these villages. In some instances, leaders of community groups in Pasir Merah were

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source of income for other village residents (Pak Inong, UT05). The district Forest Management Unit is aware of the tourism venture but has not tried to evict them either.

[42] The negative impacts of tourism on residents of Balinese villages are well documented (e.g., Scarpello 2015) and similar impacts are already being felt at sites like Lake Toba in North Sumatra, one of the appointed "Ten New Balis" (Mongabay 2021).

flown to Bali to learn from and replicate their mangrove tourism projects. The messaging was clear and constantly reinforced – emulate this version of Bali and you will be seen favourably.[43]

As with collective mangrove planting efforts in Pasir Merah, Ujung Tanah's residents' aspirations around tourism were wrapped up with other desires for better village infrastructure, primarily education, healthcare and employment opportunities. The preparing of the land for a beach was therefore not only about gaining control over a profitable resource that was otherwise mostly controlled by politicians and businessmen from nearby towns, but also about performing the role of a good citizen with the hope that it would help maintain land control as well as enable the inflow of welfare services. If they were recognised as *good* citizens, they would be able to act as citizens and thereby claim rights due to them.

In the following section, I look at the *how* of becoming favourably visible to institutions with public authority, or what I refer to as the practices of political visibility. These practices are informed by a number of considerations, including how do we want to be seen? As individuals, collectives, at what scale? What do we make visible and how? When is it safe to be seen? What opportunities for devolved land control exist now and what might be on the horizon? What would be the consequences of political visibility? What expectations does it place on those who possess it? And how can they maintain its possession?

4.3. Practices of political visibility

I identified seven main practices of political visibility adopted by coastal residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah that were relevant to their relationships with various authorities.

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[43] For those with social forestry permits, this was further complicated by the requirement to conduct "livelihood activities" on the land or risk losing the permit (Fisher et al. 2018). While some groups welcomed the suggestion of tourism, others felt at a loss for what else they could do on the land that would contribute financially to the group as well as meet the social forestry requirements.

Some of these practices, such as signposting, time-stamping, identifiable collectives and land and labour, enable them to make their claim to coastal land visible. Other practices such as enforcement, development infrastructure and legitimate livelihoods assist with the maintenance of these claims while also demonstrating their capacity to align with and contribute to the ideals of the institutions to whom they were trying to appeal.

4.3.1. Signposting

We were riding down a dirt road, filled in with soil, to enable access to one of the mangrove planting sites in Pasir Merah. Pak Misran was showing us around, pointing out signboards as we approached the site. Most of the signs were set up by organisations funding the nurseries, saplings and planting labour. There were four main types of signs, at this site as well as others across Pasir Merah. The first was a sign acknowledging funding of the planting, adorned with logos of the various institutions involved. The second included a map of the site – the trees, streams and importantly, the borders – along with a geolocatable address and, if present, the details of the permit to manage the land and the name of the group that holds the permit. The third typically had stereotypical environmental messages. For example, "*jaga hutan untuk masa depan anak cucu* [protect the forest for the future of our children and grandchildren]".[44] And the fourth referred to rules for what was allowable on the land and what would be punishable, sometimes by law. However, as is often the case for maintaining land control, physical violence rather than the legal system was used to enforce these rules (Hall et al. 2011, Rasmussen and Lund 2018).

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[44] Signboard of a regional bank's CSR project planting mangroves in Pasir Merah

The media and its portrayal of mangrove planting and clearing activities was another common means of signposting. How these activities were framed by residents, village governments and affiliated institutions, and in turn situated by the media within wider public discourse, influenced residents' capacity to become and stay politically visible. For example, in the case of Pasir Merah, local and national media presented the collective planting action as a "people's movement", how "the community fought back" and highlighting that "farmers prefer mangroves to palm oil", while downplaying the violence faced by residents who challenged the palm oil and aquaculture companies (e.g., Tempo 2018, Jakarta Post 2018). These framings appealed to various institutions looking to support locally-led environment and development projects, most of whom refused to contribute to resolving the land conflict. Appealing to these institutions was important as they provided seedlings, construction material, mapping technologies and funding, all of which were key to acquiring land control and political visibility.

Figure 4 |Examples of signboards around mangrove planting areas in Pasir Merah (Source: Pinto 2018). The sign on the left is the third type of sign and reads "The forest is a deposit for our children and grandchildren, let's protect it together". The sign on the right is the fourth type of sign which states it has been erected by the North Sumatra Regional Forestry Service, that this location is state forest area and it is banned to occupy and/or work and/or control without permission, citing the Minister of Environment and Forestry Laws 41/1999 and 18/2013.

4.3.2. Identifiable collectives

Pak Misran is a member of a mangrove-planting *kelompok* [group]. A community group with most of its members residing in the *dusun* [hamlet] closest the site. Establishing and registering a group is key to making yourself visible to institutions with public authority. To these institutions, it provides a recognisable entity to which they can channel funds, provide permissions, celebrate achievements and work together with – a formalised, recognisable group with its own structures and procedures. As detailed in Chapter 3, the first community group in Pasir Merah that formed to plant mangroves was in 2005. The group was created in order to receive government funds and seedlings under the *Gerhan* programme [*Gerakan Nasional Rehabilitasi Hutan dan Lahan*, National Movement of Forest and Land Rehabilitation]. After the 2009 *pasang perdani* [big flood] and subsequent rush of state and non-state institutions to the village to support local mangrove planting efforts, eight more community groups were soon established and engaging in other practices of political visibility.

The naming of the mangrove-planting group is also important. For example, in Pasir Merah, names that included words like *lestari* [sustainable], *hijau* [green], *penghijauan* [reforestation], *bakau* [mangrove], were adopted to signal intent to environmental NGOs, state forestry and fisheries departments and private companies with CSR programmes with environmental goals. Other institutions seeking to appeal to public interest in environmental protection and livelihood support for the rural poor are also happy to partner with such groups. Along this coast, this has included well-known *preman* groups, the police, navy, religious groups and political parties.

The registering of the community group with the village government, providing a name, a list of members of its steering committee, an outline of its procedures and plans, and an address, is not only useful for members to receive funds and stake their claim to the land, but also

often a required step in applying for government funds and programmes, including a social

forestry permit (Maryudi et al. 2012, Banjade et al. 2017). Groups that registered themselves

early were therefore in a better position to have their claims recognised as rights at the

opportune moment. For example, in Pasir Merah, when two or more community groups

applied for geographically-overlapping social forestry permits, the group that had registered

first was given priority. In addition to land, these groups also competed over other resources

that mangrove-related projects stood to attract, such as funding. This competition influenced

practices of political visibility, with groups presenting themselves differently to potential

donors and partners. For example, when seeking mangrove seedlings, one of the group

leaders shared how they had to highlight their interest in the diverse agendas of a political

party promoting pluralism, a religious group wanting to support Muslim communities, an

NGO interested in climate change mitigation and the regional police who were looking for a

large parcel of land to break a tree planting record as part of a promotional event.

Groups and affiliated institutions also partook in spreading gossip and other tactics to

sabotage the image of other groups (e.g., that another group was secretly harvesting

mangroves for fuelwood, which would be against state forest laws and therefore in violation

of their social forestry permit, particularly in the eyes of the state. Moreover, one group

leader described the relationship between the district-level Forest Management Unit and

the groups as a teacher-student one, wherein the teacher will favour the student who

performs best; it was therefore important to him that his group consistently received

approval from the Forest Management Unit (Pak Effendi, PM11). This also encouraged many

group leaders to argue over who was the first to plant mangroves, gain a social forestry

permit, introduce tourism to the village or more successfully manage the land.[45]

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[45] For example, in terms of planted seedling survival rates, amount of income generated for group
members, how aesthetically-pleasing the mangroves (e.g., how 'neatly' planted) and scenic the
location of the land is (e.g., does it have a view of the river or sea)

In Ujung Tanah, residents organised themselves into 4 groups with varying coastal projects. However, despite the opportunities provided by social forestry, only two adopted the language of mangrove protection, and none attempted to apply for a permit under the scheme. Groups elsewhere that had successfully acquired a permit attributed their success to the support they received from other institutions familiar with the application process and in possession of required resources such as GPS devices to map the land. In Pasir Merah, there are nine groups involved in mangrove planting, of which three had successfully acquired a social forestry permit at the time of my stay in the village. Pak Misran was a member of one of the groups with a permit.

4.3.3. Enforcement

As we hopped off the bikes, the first thing we saw was a watchtower at the end of the road, overlooking the mangrove plantation. Members of the group would take turns watching the land at night. Charcoal production, while illegal without a permit from the Regional Forestry Service, remains a common practice in neighbouring villages and the group has sometimes found and "had to beat up" (Pak Ahadi, PM16) trespassers on the land, especially if they carried equipment to harvest the mangroves.[46] The use of physical force to maintain land control was not unusual in either village, and was often entangled with the desire to stay politically visible. Ibu Luciana, a member of a mangrove non-timber forest product group, considered the use of force to be necessary, adding that

> "If we lose the land, we will lose all of this [the products her group produces]…even if we can still work as a group, the project will end. [Name of a private company] will not support us after that." (Ibu Luciana, PM23)

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[46] I left North Sumatra in March 2019. A year later with the COVID-19 pandemic, groups found it challenging to maintain control over the trees. As coastal residents struggled to make ends meet, and group members were unable to routinely patrol their lands, some groups have lost over 50 per cent of planted mangroves (Pak Iksan, PM03).

As we looked around Pak Misran's group's land, we also noticed that the borders of the land were clearly demarcated with signs and embankments (that doubled up as footpaths for patrolling the land).

4.3.4. Development infrastructure

At better-funded social forestry sites, there were also other non-movable infrastructure like gates and other barriers to entrances, parking lots, toilets, *warung-warung* [shops], etc. that remained on the land indicating its occupation and use by a particular group. Some of this infrastructure (such as the toilets, the shops and related features such as entry fees for visitors) also doubled up to symbolise that the land was more than a mangrove plantation and a site that was positively contributing to the village, the region and country. Within both villages, residents spoke about how these projects provided jobs and infrastructure as well

Figure 5 | Examples of tourism infrastructure in Pasir Merah (left) and Ujung Tanah (right) (Source: Pinto 2018)

as brought favourable attention from various institutions with political authority. Senior government officials (e.g., from the regional forestry and tourism departments, the Ministry of Forestry, the navy) commended leaders of these groups for their contributions to developing the region and country by providing leisure spaces for the wider public, jobs for the rural poor and for helping make the land "*clean-and-clear*"[47,48]

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[47] This expression is commonly used to describe clarity regarding tenure. See Chapter 5 for institutional perspectives of clean-and-clear.

[48] Other important factors for institutional endorsement of these land claims and projects are presented in Chapter 5.

4.3.5. Land and labour

All across Pak Misran's group's land, the saplings were planted equidistant from each other. This method of planting was introduced in the village by NGOs who, according to residents, possessed the scientific expertise of mangrove planting.[49] This method of planting involved collecting seeds or propagules, sometimes raising them in nurseries, and then using ropes to measure out a grid to plant them in. While this method often proved effective in maintaining a high survival rate, it also ensures the planted mangroves looked *planted*, deliberate, in neat rows.

Figure 6 | On the left is an aerial photograph of a mangrove plantation in coastal Langkat (Source: INFIS / Mongabay.id) and on the right is an example of planted mangrove seedlings at high tide in Pasir Merah (Source: Pinto 2018)

The act of planting of mangrove seedlings is also at the heart of these land claims and can be used to demonstrate the validity of a claim. Furthermore, the older a planted mangrove, the stronger the planter's claim to the land. As we learned from another group leader, Pak Sopian,

> When KPH [*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*, Forest Management Unit] came to check the boundaries for *PS* [*perhutanan sosial*, social forestry], we showed them the mangroves our group planted in 2005. Another group from another *dusun* [hamlet] also wanted to get the *izin* [permit] on the same land, but their mangroves were still young, ours were older. We showed KPH which mangroves were ours and they decided the boundaries around these mangroves…it is right that we got the *izin* since we planted [mangroves] first. (Pak Sopian, PM09)

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[49] The method of planting described here is distinct from how residents would plant mangroves around their homes and along the coast, where they would not typically plant only a single mangrove species and would not clear co-dependent species that would naturally grow around planted propagules or seedlings.

Additionally, as Pak Misran and others pointed out to us, they also routinely weed the land of any non-planted seedlings that try to take root. When asked why this was done, we were often told that it was to keep the land *rapi* [tidy, well organised]. This was important as Pak Misran elaborated: "*jika kita tidak menjaganya tetap rapi, untuk tunjukkan bahwa kita menanamnya* [If we don't keep it tidy or well-organised, how will we show or prove that we planted it]?". He continued to explain, "if someone visits and see that it is not organised, they will think we are not serious with our work." (Pak Misran, PM22).

4.3.6. Legitimate livelihoods

It was important to every group involved in attempts of land control that they appeared serious and productive, that they were providing value to the village and, to some institutions, the country. Many highlighted how they hoped the mangroves would help them attract welfare services. For example,

> "Now we are planting mangroves, we are helping all of Langkat by preventing floods…I hope that these mangroves bring us something too, like more money to the *kantor kepala desa* [village head office] for jobs and maybe a high school." (Ibu Pinah, PM19)

For those groups with social forestry permits, it was a requirement to produce management plans that included forest-based livelihood activities since the programme aims to support forest protection while empowering communities through livelihood development (Maryudi et al. 2012, Fisher et al. 2018). This was challenging for many groups, especially as none had previously participated in collective mangrove management. With maintenance of the social forestry permits being important to remaining politically visible, funding and direction from various institutions with public authority often informed livelihood choices. For example, one

of the mangrove-planting groups received funding from a university that was experimenting with silvofishery which became their primary social forestry activity.

However, as previously described, most popular with many of the institutions was tourism.

Figure 7 I Examples of livelihood activities in Pasir Merah on areas with social forestry permits. On the left is a community group member harvesting crabs in a silvofishery pond and on the right is a community group member collecting entrance fees from tourists visiting the mangrove area (Source: Pinto 2018)

This encouraged the perception that the establishment and maintenance of a tourism project would enable residents to be seen as good citizens despite the legal ambiguity of their claim. For example, a group with a social forestry permit was constructing a road and huts directly on the coast. This involved clearing some of the mangroves, which infringed on the rules of the permit. The group leader argued that this was needed to develop a livelihood activity on the land and met with no pushback from the Regional Forestry Service.

Similarly, in Ujung Tanah, while discussing the legality of the tourism projects, the head of the village government pointed out that since the village had experienced significant land loss all along its coastline, the state forest area [*kawasan hutan negara*] had been lost to the sea (Pak Yusof, UT01). According to him, this makes both tourism project sites on non-forest land or 'land for other purposes' [*areal penggunaan lain*] that could be privatised by the tourism-related community groups. For groups such as these that were unsure of what rights they could claim, the choice of livelihood activity was integral to their claim being considered legitimate in the eyes of powerful institutions. Additionally, for many of the community

group leaders, it was important to comply with livelihood recommendations in order to be treated favourably in case of future conflict between the groups and their respective land claims. Moreover, because of their experiences of powerful institutions siding with, and enforcing the claims of, those they consider their allies, constantly performing and remaining politically visible became essential to maintaining recognition.

4.3.7. Time-stamping

Organising or attending events that left paper and digital trails was another common practice

Figure 8 | Examples of time-stamping. On the left is a t-shirt from a tree planting event that took place across the east coast of North Sumatra, organised by the Regional Police Department. On the right is a 'beach clean-up' event in Ujung Tanah attended by a regional branch of the Indonesian navy and children from a local school – some of the mangroves that were 'ill-placed' were removed and burned along with litter found on the land controlled by the community group (Source: Pinto 2019).

of sustaining political visibility. For example, two of the groups from Pasir Merah attended events hosted by the regional and national government at which they received awards for their planting efforts. The village has also received recognition from the Ministry of Forestry for its social forestry activities, with groups inviting the President of Indonesia, Minister of Forestry and other officials from Jakarta to visit the village. Similarly in Ujung Tanah, community groups would invite politicians, state institutions (such as the navy) and non-state institutions (private companies, NGOs) to inaugurate, contribute to the project (e.g., by participating in clean-up drives) and partake in activities on offer for visitors (e.g., karaoke). These moments were documented as photographs and videos on group members' phones as well as articles by journalists. Such commemorative events often provided further legitimacy to the group's activities. For example, naval officers commended one of the

groups on the success of their tourism project and the important role it stood to play in "developing the village and Indonesia" (TNI-AL01).

Working in tandem, the above-described practices were also supported by other activities across the villages included the production of documentaries, books, calendars, t-shirts and other promotional material; village maps which name the sites after the community group or livelihood project; digital presence, including geolocations of the sites on GoogleMaps, websites, social media profiles, YouTube videos; inviting researchers and journalists to conduct studies and publish articles, etc. All of these practices were simultaneously aimed at helping to maintain local land control, while also allowing the groups and villages to remain politically visible.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter explores why rural residents of coastal North Sumatra partake in collective land control practices and the considerations that inform these practices. It demonstrates that what is important to residents are opportunities that make them favourably visible to institutions with public authority, and it is these moments of opportunity that they try to anticipate and seize (Campbell 2015, Lund 2016). Such visibility was important to coastal residents that otherwise felt abandoned by the state, who hoped that being seen as good citizens by institutions with public authority, their control over the land would be maintained and they would gain access to other provisions such as jobs, education, healthcare and related infrastructure.

Literature on the politics of recognition highlights the importance of visibility to being acknowledged or recognised, emphasising its relational nature (Honneth 2001, Taylor 1994, Fraser 2001). Lund (2016, 2020a) describes recognition as requiring mutual visibility between those seeking to be acknowledged by an institution with public authority and the recognising institution. While I discuss the relevance of mutual visibility to land claims in Pasir Merah and

Ujung Tanah in Chapter 5, here, I use the concept of political visibility to more succinctly illustrate the dynamics of power at play. In other words, while institutions with public authority and those seeking to be recognised are co-participants in a negotiation conversation, those with public authority get to set the tone. Therefore, coastal residents that desire political visibility find they need to adapt their land use practices, behaving in ways the state and other powerful institutions deem appropriate for a coastal, rural citizenry. The chapter therefore shows how as coastal space is re-categorised as sites of leisure and forests, coastal residents try to re-categorise themselves by complying with forms of organisation and employing land use practices that makes them favourably visible to the state.

Political visibility also speaks to relations of accountability. Policies and programmes that decentralise natural resource governance, such as social forestry, "rely on a new logic of making local citizens and decision makers responsible both for their own well-being and for resource sustainability" (Mustalahti and Agrawal 2020: 5). This process of responsibilisation involves transferring duties that previously fell to the state – and accountability for them – to local authorities, including community groups (Erbaugh 2019). In the case of coastal Langkat however, residents hoped that these new responsibilities would help them demand further accountability *from* the state in order to improve their well-being (through the upholding of their rights over coastal land and the provision of various other social services) (Fox 2018). This expectation is driven by an understanding that accountability between residents that perform the role of *good citizens and good communities* and institutions that provide them with the desired recognition of their rights is co-constitutive – that is, one upholds the other (Lund 2020b). Using examples of mangrove planting and clearing, the chapter also argues that the desire for, and practices of, political visibility and land control are co-dependent, informing and maintaining each other. In both villages, the choice of practices described were influenced by a desire to gain control over the land as well as appeal

to different institutions that could help them maintain that control and hopefully enable access to other goods and services. It is therefore not only necessary to be seen in order to make a claim, but equally so to maintain the claim (or, in some cases, right) in order to stay seen. For residents of both villages, practices of land control were an important part of strategies to gain political visibility.

As this chapter demonstrates, political visibility is powerful, attracting opportunities and resources that can have a material impact on the lives of coastal residents. However, not everyone has equal access to these opportunities and inequalities in opportunities are often shaped along lines of gender, race, ethnicity and geography (Fraser 2001, Ribot and Peluso 2003). This chapter focuses on the many residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah involved in collective land control who considered political visibility to be desirable, worth pursuing. The perspectives of residents that were more apprehensive of political visibility and did not participate in practices of collective land control, as well as the local consequences of struggles over political visibility, are explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5. Authority and political visibility

5.1. Introduction

> One morning while living in Pasir Merah, we made an appointment to visit the *kades* [*kepala desa*, village head] in the neighbouring village of Ujung Tanah. An NGO in Medan had mentioned planting mangroves in Ujung Tanah, yet no other institution involved in mangrove planting in Pasir Merah had mentioned any similar projects in Ujung Tanah. Given the villages shared a border, were similarly littered with palm oil plantations and aquaculture ponds, were facing increased floods and loss of land, and many of their residents knew each other well, we were surprised that they were not of similar interest to most institutions supporting local land control in Pasir Merah. What were these institutions looking for that Ujung Tanah was missing?
>
> We met the *kades* of Ujung Tanah on his paddy field and sat together in a *pondok* [sheltered wooden structure] he had constructed on the land. We introduced ourselves, mentioning my research on mangroves and their role in coastal land control. He looked at us confused and said, "*There are no mangroves here, they are all in Pasir Merah. That is the mangrove village*". I mentioned hearing about some mangrove planting in Ujung Tanah to which he responded, "*We tried that, but it did not work here. In this village, we have beaches*". It was my turn to look confused, but as we left his field and spoke to other residents it soon became clear. It wasn't that people weren't planting mangroves here, but rather, their attempts to adopt similar practices of political visibility as in Pasir Merah were not being seen as favourably by institutions with public authority. They were therefore testing a different strategy, one of mangrove clearing for tourism. Would this bring them the visibility they sought?

Why were Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah, and their residents' practices of political visibility seen differently by institutions with public authority? And why were so many institutions, particularly those that did not have a mandate to work on coastal forestry or tourism, shift their attention to the coast? Why now? What were they looking for? In this chapter, I consider the other side of political visibility – the perspectives and practices of institutions whose authority coastal residents were trying to appeal to through their practices of land control.

As described in Chapter 4, political visibility, when successfully practiced, enables its practitioners to become favourably visible to institutions with public authority. The practices of political visibility are relational and require mutual visibility (Lund 2020a, 2020b) and engagement from both those trying to appeal to powerful institutions and the institutions that acknowledge and recognise these appeals. Studying political visibility therefore

necessitates a relational analysis where perspectives and practices of those wanting to be seen and those doing the looking are considered together, with attention to how they influence and depend on each other. The institutions discussed in this chapter had a variety of motives for their involvement in supporting devolved land control in coastal Langkat. This chapter aims to demonstrate that these institutions decisions of *when* and *how* to get involved were informed by

1. coastal residents' practices of political visibility, which they saw as opportunities to gain control over coastal resources. This control would not be gained through mechanisms of dispossession (Harvey 2003) or exclusion (Hall et al. 2011), but by providing recognition to residents' practices of political visibility (Lund 2016, Lund 2020a) and

2. their own institutional desire for political visibility from other, often more powerful, institutions[50] that could also help strengthen their authority in coastal North Sumatra by providing recognition to their successful involvement in devolving land control and promoting local development.

To make this argument, I draw on data from 31 interviews and multiple reports, presentations, news articles, videos and photographs from 24 institutions[51] to explore why some coastal villages are gaining their attention – whether it be for coastal restoration, land reform or the development and support of livelihood projects; whether it be through state approved legal mechanisms such as the national social forestry initiative or in opposition to current state-sanctioned land uses like the conversion of mangroves to tourism sites. This chapter presents the perspectives of key individuals at these institutions,[52] focusing on how

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[50] By "other, often more powerful institutions", I refer to both institutions with authority in other domains (for example, a regional fisheries department seeking favourable visibility from a regional forestry department that has access to a different set of resources) and higher authorities (for example, the central government or international donors).
[51] For a full list of institutions, see Appendix B
[52] see Chapter 2 for details on how I identified research participants to interview.

they see the coast and its people and paying attention to discrepancies between their perceptions of the two villages. These distinctions are notable since residents of Pasir Merah routinely expressed feeling *more favourably seen* than people living in Ujung Tanah. I attribute this to two things: 1) material (biogeophysical) factors and 2) the strategies and practices of political visibility adopted in Pasir Merah which more effectively anticipated what powerful institutions were looking for at the time.

This chapter presents three main ways in which these institutions saw the coast, and specifically Pasir Merah, as a site of struggle, a frontier and a territory. These categories are useful for understanding the opportunities different institutions sought to strengthen their authority in coastal areas as well as the material and discursive practices they chose to employ. I then compare how institutions with public authority perceived practices of political visibility in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, reflecting briefly on how the success of land claims is contingent on the relationality of political visibility.

5.2. Seeing Pasir Merah

5.2.1. As a site of struggle

Struggles over land are not new or uncommon in Indonesia (Lucas and Warren 2013, McCarthy and Robinson 2016), and the east coast of Langkat is no exception. Residents of Pasir Merah, Ujung Tanah and other neighbouring coastal villages shared with us their experiences of trying to claim control over coastal land – how terrifying it was to make yourself a known enemy of wealthy businessmen who had the support of village, district and regional governments, the police, navy, *preman* groups [violent gangs]; how challenging it was to organise collective action with limited access to resources and in the face of potential violence; how difficult it was to know whom to trust and what tactics to use to acquire and maintain control over the land.

Figure 9 | An example of a coastal palm oil plantation, photographed facing the Malacca Strait. Prior to this plantation, the land was covered in a variety of mangroves species and small brackish streams. This was previously an intertidal area that was later filled in with soil so that the palms could grow. While this is another village in Langkat, it is reminiscent of Pasir Merah in 2010. The land photographed is also similarly a site of struggle for a resident community group who are being advised by leaders of a community group in Pasir Merah and the institutions that support both their land claims (Source: Pinto 2018)

A handful of residents of Pasir Merah considered raising their concerns regarding their loss of land and livelihoods with various NGOs, but were hesitant to do so as they believed that any institution they approached was likely to try to take advantage of their request for help (Pak Iksan, PM03; Pak Misno, PM06). As described in Chapter 3, they eventually approached a representative of the fishers' union for advice. The representative informed them that the palm oil plantation was possibly illegal. The union representative also said he would try to support them and would confer with the regional team of a national environmental NGO (Pak Iksan, PM03).

Meanwhile, as shared by Pak Bimo (PM02) and Pak Iksan (PM03) the residents of Pasir Merah decided to report the plantation to the district police. When this proved ineffective, they gathered a group of around 30 men and entered the plantation. They broke embankments,

damaged palm oil trees and lit them on fire. Promptly, on the request of the owner of the

plantation company, the police arrived and arrested them. The environmental NGO, fishers'

union and a legal aid agency succeeded in bailing them out the following day, but this initial

demonstration that they were angry and willing to act was a positive sign in the eyes of the

NGO and union.

> "The police arrested more than 30 people, so [the union member] called us and
> asked us to help at the police station in Kota Brandan. So, we and [a legal aid
> agency] came and helped the people to get out of the police station the next day.
> We then discussed with them how to reclaim the land, to try and develop a strategy.
> We worked together, the people fought the *sawit* [palm oil] company on the
> ground and we did the campaigning. We started to make a report to Ministry of
> Environment and Forestry, to the regional police…we made it high profile every
> day, persistently" (NGO02b)

For institutions involved in this land struggle, Pasir Merah had the potential to become a

model for other coastal land struggles. As described to us by a member of the fishers' union,

firstly, the village's biogeophysical aspects meant that if they were successful, farmers and

fishers across the region would benefit through better flood regulation and coastal

protection – it would therefore be easier to mobilise many coastal residents to partake in

reclaiming the land from the plantation (FUN01). Secondly, while many regional and village

institutions had enabled the plantation, the environmental NGO and legal aid agency

suspected the national government, particularly the Ministry of Environment and Forestry,

would see things differently and be eager for the land to be more obviously and decipherably

under the purview of the state (NGO02b). However, to gain the attention of the national

government, these institutions would have to assist with making the village favourably visible

to them. Thirdly, if residents were able to acquire and *maintain* access to the land, the

struggle could provide a blueprint for other coastal residents to make similar claims.

> "The priority for us is to make this a possibility for all villages. The struggle is still
> ongoing. There are other groups that are trying to do the same…Tourism is our end
> goal, that will be the final step once the land is recovered, an activity that brings
> positive impacts to the people. We are trying to create a sustainable model"
> (FUN01)

These institutions therefore focused on their "capacity to empower communities" by "facilitat[ing] the interaction (and exchanges of favours) between communities and powerholders" – what Berenschot et al. (2022: 508) refer to as political brokers. They invested their time and energy towards making this land claim a success story, one that would enable them to attract interest from other rural residents that were looking to acquire local land access and control. They mobilised residents of coastal villages, filed a case against the companies for illegally occupying state forest land, sought an audience with the House of Representatives and together with fishers developed a strategy for residents to occupy the land (NGO02a). Mangroves were to be at the heart of their strategy – as an antidote and preventative measure to the land ever being claimed by plantation and aquaculture companies again in the future while simultaneously "recovering" [*mengembalikan*] people's lives and livelihoods (NGO02b). They produced posters, books and media articles sharing details of the struggle and assisted community groups with registering themselves as well as identifying institutions that would provide them with two things vital to the success of their struggle: mangrove seedlings and recognition of their land claim (FUN01).

By 2018, the NGO and union were working on similar projects in other villages across coastal Langkat, and an informal network of men who resided in these villages (and each of their community groups) were sharing experiences and developing collaborative strategies for acquiring land control that relied on mangroves, maps and legal provisions, such as the acquiring of access rights through the social forestry initiative. While these institutions had otherwise lobbied for land reforms that demanded the transfer of ownership rights to citizens, they considered social forestry as providing a temporary, legal, spatial fix – a short-term opportunity for rural residents to have their (access) rights to land recognised while continuing to demand further devolution of resource control (Lee 2018).

> "At the local level, we haven't yet found any regulation to stop these concessions
> for companies. When people apply for *PS* [*perhutanan sosial*, social forestry], they

would get a licence, then only is it no longer allowed to plant *sawit* [palm oil] at the location" (NGO03)

What happened beyond the acquiring of access rights was therefore important to these institutions and influenced their engagement with coastal residents, particularly community groups, and their strategies for land control (NGO02a, NGO03, FUN01).

5.2.2. As a frontier

Rasmussen and Lund (2018: 391) describe a frontier as a moment where the conditions of possibility are reconfigured. Actively created by political struggles, they are ''sites where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations, and property regimes" (Peluso & Lund, 2011: 668, as cited in Rasmussen and Lund 2018). In this chapter, I distinguish the site of struggle from the frontier since some authorities viewed the coast *as a site of struggle*, one where the success of the struggle strengthened their legitimacy across the coast, and other institutions saw it *as a forest frontier* or a landscape ripe for exploration and preparation as state forest land.

While residents of coastal Langkat focused their energies on pushing out palm oil plantations and aquaculture companies that were threatening their lives and livelihoods, multiple public institutions were making note of the new opportunities this provided them. The struggle over this land coincided with a series of national and regional shifts in forest governance (see Chapter 3). For example, decision-making around forest management began to shift from the district to the regional level, and new technical units, such as Forest Management Units, were established. Other state institutions that focused specifically on mangrove governance, such as the Mangrove Forest Management Centres that was set up across Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, were shut down. In North Sumatra, many of the officials that worked at the regional Mangrove Forest Management Centre were then employed by the Social Forestry and Environmental Partnership Agency, bringing their knowledge and familiarity of

the coast with them (BPDAS02). Moreover, as noted in Chapter 3, as land reform became a national priority, area-based targets for social forestry increased tenfold from 1.1 million hectares to 12.7 million hectares (Fisher et al. 2018). This push for the rapid expansion of social forestry encouraged state institutions – as well as many non-state institutions interested in participating in the devolution of land control through social forestry – to look for two key features on which new opportunities relied.

First, the land, or the "object" of social forestry (BPSKL01), needed to be 'clean-and-clear', as was becoming the case in Pasir Merah thanks to the labour of residents and supporting NGOs and fishers' union. This phrase is common among those working on land-based projects across Indonesia, for example in sectors such as mining (Saprika et al. 2018) and forestry (Safitri 2015). It refers to land that is broadly considered conflict-free and has clear boundaries – land for which a recognisable entity can receive the "licence to operate" (Saprika et al. 2018).

> "Without the location being clean and clear, physical boundaries, signs demarcating the territory at least every 50-100 metres, and a map, funds and programmes cannot be accessed. The community members need to know where the boundaries are. We do the verification of this…there is a technical expert in Jakarta who decides what level of mapping is needed" (BLU01)

Figure 10 | A forest cleared to make room for palm oil plantations. The village photographed was experiencing the clearing of large swathes of coastal land to accommodate new palm oil plantations. While different from what took place in Pasir Merah, this photo reminded some residents of Pasir Merah of what parts of the palm oil plantation looked like after the palms had been removed (Source: Pinto 2018)

This focus on clean-and-clear land allowed institutions to refrain from intervening in what was a violent process of land claiming, and is typical of frontier dynamics (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, Rasmussen and Lund 2018). Representatives of some of the state institutions we interviewed spoke of a lack of resources and authority to assist with resolving what they considered a dispute. They therefore did not assist with the struggle, but once the companies ceded the land, the Regional Forestry Service of North Sumatra, district-level Forest Management Unit and the navy organised further clearing of the plantations and ponds. They spoke of this as "land preparation" (DisHut01, BPSKL02) – readying the land for what was to come next. This refusal to assist with the struggle over state land – one in which coastal residents put their lives at risk facing physical violence that resulted in death for some – was described by many state forest officials as a lack of authority on the part of regional and district governments to enforce laws against companies that receive support from politicians, the police and *preman* groups.

"Sometimes companies have support from higher ups in the government, including in the police, army and navy. So, if the local people and NGOs try to fight, it is better. We cannot do much. We can write a letter to the police that the company is doing something illegal, but this needs to be done together with the support of the community, then only can it be good. If we tried to remove the companies on our own, it would not be possible, and we might get attacked from the companies. We do not have enough power or budget." (KPH01)

According to these forest officials, regaining control over forest land would enable district and regional state forest institutions to strengthen their authority locally as well as in the eyes of national level state institutions. They hoped that such recognition of their authority would result in them being allocated further funding and discretionary powers (KPH01, DisHut01 and BPDAS01).

The land being prepared for projects in Pasir Merah fell mostly within the coastal greenbelt, a strip of land that runs across all of Indonesia that was classified and mapped as state forest land in the late 1990s. As described in Chapter 3, prior to the clearing of tenure in Pasir Merah, the coast of Langkat was largely outside the control of state forest institutions[53] with many industrial activities including oil and gas extraction, power plants, ports as well as palm oil and coconut plantations and aquaculture ponds littering the coast. The readying of the land in Pasir Merah, a process in which state and non-state institutions participated, was therefore key to reconfiguring the coast as a forest frontier.

The second feature that was essential to determining the possibilities of this frontier moment was what an employee of the regional Social Forestry and Environmental Partnership Agency referred to as the "subject", that is the new claimant of the land (BPSKL01). What would supporting and recognising their claim mean for these institutions? As detailed in Chapter 4, residents of Pasir Merah were seeking to become politically visible to institutions with public authority while gaining access over coastal lands in order to support their livelihoods. Through discussion with institutions involved in their struggle for

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[53] The exception being forest conservation areas and mangrove forestry concessions.

land control, mangrove planting was selected as a suitable practice for achieving these aims.

As community groups interested in planting mangroves began to register themselves and submit proposals and letters of request for seedlings, NGOs, private companies, religious groups, *preman* groups, political parties, the police, navy, and other state institutions rushed in to provide seedlings as well as inform where, how and to what end they could be planted.

For some of these institutions, their involvement in planting was motivated by a desire to increase their appeal among coastal populations. Mangroves are often framed as providing essential services to coastal residents; they protect the coastline from erosion, storms, flooding and tsunamis; they function as nurseries for a number of species including crabs, shrimp, molluscs and fish; they absorb and store carbon; and they support and can create new income generating opportunities for residents (Alongi 2012, Griffin et al. 2013, Wibisono and Suryadiputra, 2006). This makes mangrove planting appealing for one-off promotional events as well as longer-term investments. In both instances, institutions were able to claim more than the planting – support for a "local community" involved in a land struggle and enabling legal forest access – they become part of a positive story that recognises their contribution and commitment to the environment and development (POLDA01, NGO02, DisHut01). Irrespective of where in the village they plant, with whom, and what their planting activities mean for residents of the village, the history of the village and legal status of the land enables them to present their activities in the village as contributing to a "people's movement" (PT01, NGO01, NGO02).

Figure 11|Some institutions and community groups rushed to stake their claims and begin planting mangroves before all the dying palms could be cleared by state forest institutions, the navy and environmental NGOs – representational photo (Source: Reforest'Action 2017)

The following section considers the institutions that chose to invest in sustaining the growth of these seedlings, those that saw the coast as a particular resource frontier worth commodifying and controlling through development projects (e.g., tourism, the production of carbon credits, the sale of non-timber forest products). For these institutions, such reordering of "objects" and "subjects" of control involved reconfiguring the coast into a regulatable territory.

5.2.3. As a territory

In their work on frontiers and territorialisation as cyclical processes, Rasmussen and Lund (2018) argue that when resources are (re)discovered or (re)valued, so does interest in the (re)territorialisation of space. Drawing on Sack (1986: 19) who describes territoriality as ''the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area", Rasmussen and Lund (2018: 393) outline key elements of how territorialisation projects are operationalised: 1) through the establishment of a territorial administration (as an exercise of authority), 2)

institution of a legal system (with laws and bureaucracies), 3) establishment of boundaries, and 4) the capacity to enforce these elements of territorialisation. These territorial strategies are made legible through the deployment of various instruments of control, such as laws, maps, bureaucratic procedures, spatial planning, taxation and force (Scott 1998, Rasmussen and Lund 2018, Hall et al. 2011), all of which were observable practices employed by institutions involved in mangrove projects in Pasir Merah. For example, various state institutions, NGOs and private companies supported community groups by mapping their planting areas and assisting with their applications for social forestry permits to acquire forest access rights, which included photocopying and storing copies of their identity cards and the development of forest management plans (including the enforcement of new rules, e.g., through policing the land).

Such territorialisation enabled the regulation and control of resources, which influenced institutions' interest in the coast. For example, in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, institutions were able to extract value from mangrove through the signing of agreements over the rights of carbon sequestered by mangroves planted by them (NGO01b) or generate revenue through their investment in, or taxation of, mangrove-based tourism, the sale of non-timber forest products and the harvesting of timber for charcoal (KPH02, DisHut01). For example, the Partnership scheme under the social forestry initiative divides responsibility for managing the forest between the district-level Forest Management Unit and a community group while also requiring both institutions to sign a profit-sharing agreement whereby between 20-30 per cent of the profits from livelihood activities on the land go to the state (KPH01). Rules developed by these institutions therefore dictated how and for what mangroves, the land on which they grew and the organisms they supported could and could not be used. The potential to profit from the control of these resources also inspired the establishment of new NGOs that mimicked these land control practices by seeking clean-and-clear land and community groups to plant mangroves with along the coast (NGO04).

The establishment and endurance of territorial claims is also dependent on whether their justification is widely accepted as legitimate (Sikor and Lund 2009, Peluso and Lund 2011). Institutions involved in coastal mangrove projects employed various tactics while claiming the legitimacy of their authority to govern. Firstly, for some, their interest in *coastal* forest-making was influenced by their perception of coastal residents as being more amenable and willing to recognise of their authority (BPDAS02, KPH01). For example, state forest institutions considered coastal residents to be "easier to work with" (BPSKL01) and by the end of 2018, had issued 85 per cent of social forestry permits in Langkat along the coast. As the head of the Forest Management Unit shared,

> "On the coast, the people already welcome social forestry, but in the highlands we need to make sure the people *mengakui* [recognise] the forest areas…they consider it to be their land not the [state] forest land…the coastal people have already welcomed us, it is easy to manage them. But we must also start to manage people in the upland areas." (KPH01)

Secondly, as described in the previous section, mangrove restoration is commonly promoted as a practice that produces positive impacts for local as well as global populations. Representatives of state and non-state institutions shared their interest in contributing to these positive impacts when I interviewed them as well as in promotional material they produced highlighting their role in Pasir Merah (DisLaut01, NGO03, POLDA01). The employment of these discourses were not limited to institutions otherwise involved in forestry or coastal development, but also included private companies such as banks and oil and gas companies looking to acquire a "social licence to operate" (PT01, PT02).

Finally, as more institutions flocked to Pasir Merah, a few collaborative relationships between institutions emerged, but by-and-large competition between them to be recognised as possessing authority with greater legitimacy grew. For example, it was common for institutions that were implementing mangrove projects to collaborate with universities that could provide research support that strengthened the case for their project

(e.g., tourism, silvofishery). However, most institutions competed for land, seedlings and the affections of community groups. As the *kades* of Pasir Merah shared with us, when we asked why so many institutions flocked to Pasir Merah to assist with the planting and governance of mangroves, and what consequences this had for the village,

> "They each have their own reasons, depending on their projects and who is funding them…it is good for the village that they come here, groups can choose who they want to work with…but sometimes they [the institutions] fight, they claim each other's work…they want to be recognised as being the first or the best at something [laughs]." (Pak Wahyu, PM01)

During interviews with various state and non-state institutions they each claimed to have been the "first to" have introduced practices such as planting mangroves, establishing community groups and initiating projects considered successful by the media, village government and residents. For example, multiple institutions were involved in establishing, funding and managing a mangrove tourism project that was received positively by state forest institutions, the media and many coastal residents. During interviews, the idea of being the *first* institution to introduce a tourism project in a mangrove area was claimed by a conservation NGO, a private company and state forest institutions.[54] These institutions have each produced documents including academic papers, news articles and reports, as well as videos, to help cement these claims. They reiterated this, alongside many other claims of being the "first to", during interviews. For example,

> "In Pasir Merah, social forestry was introduced by us…we sent members of our community group to Java and other places where there were established mangrove tourism sites. We built the initiative first. And after the government heard about it, they used this information to help others promote it easily. Without our tourism project, I think it would have been quite difficult for the other [community] groups to promote and get social forestry permits. It's easier for the others because of us." (NGO01a)

In some instances, this competition over the legitimacy of their authority to govern resulted in more overt conflict between different institutions. These conflicts were typically over

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[54] Alongside the leader of a community group, who migrated to the village a few years prior and was keen to highlight his contributions to the village (Pak Sopian, PM09)

territories or areas of control, such as disputes over boundaries. On one occasion, two NGOs

that were debating over their "project areas" had a heated argument on a public road in

Pasir Merah, and one of the organisations went to the press and published a defamatory

article claiming that the other was trying to claim rights over the land.

> "An NGO was jealous of us because we have international funding, so they claimed
> that it is their planting. This has happened to us in many places...we argued with
> them and asked for proof that they introduced tourism, but they cannot answer.
> This NGO published in the papers that we did something wrong and when we
> confronted them, they have nothing to say...but we don't have any enemy, now it
> is okay." (NGO01c)

After this incident, the *kades* called a meeting so the NGOs could talk and apologise to each

other in order to deescalate the situation (Pak Wahyu, PM01). However, soon after, the

NGOs and many other institutions, began engaging in and encouraging gossip between

community groups. Employees at these institutions as well as members of community groups

would often ask me which group I preferred, which of the group leaders I thought was better

and which institution had done the most for "their group" (BPDAS02, NGO02a, NGO01c).

These conversations were often aimed at convincing me that one group or institution, and

their claims, were more legitimate, valid and lawful. For example, conversations included

rumours about other groups or institutions' practices that were considered undesirable or

illegal such as mangrove logging or data theft. As a staff member at an NGO expressed,

> "You know, KPH [*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*, Forest Management Unit] has many
> targets that they cannot fulfil, like with social forestry. So, with the tourism venture,
> KPH claims they initiated it. In the tourism site, did you see any of our signboards?
> Only in the information hut. There are no other signs; we had put up signs, but they
> have all gone. We are the pioneers of mangrove tourism, but sometimes we are not
> invited to meetings in Pasir Merah. In the past, we used to share our data, but other
> organisations have claimed the data pretending it is their work, it even happened
> with the DisHut [*Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi*, Regional Forestry Service] – they used
> our data for their report to Jakarta. That's not fair. We built tourism in Pasir Merah,
> why doesn't the government try to do this in another village step-by-step? They
> just use our work to reach their impossible social forestry targets." (NGO01b)

These practices were used to undermine competing institutions' legitimacy which challenged

their authority to govern coastal territories. A challenge to an institution's authority stood to

have impacts on their ability to maintain control over an area as well as access new territories. For example, instances where an institution failed to successfully territorialise a mangrove plantation (such as with an NGO who worked with two community groups on neighbouring plots of land and did not establish clear boundaries), community groups and other institutions turned away opportunities to work with them (including new funding and other resources) out of concern that it might impact the legitimacy of their claim over an area. Relatedly, rules and management plans the NGO had devised were abandoned in favour of other rules and plans developed by state forest institutions whose authority to govern the coast was considered valid by the community groups. Such practices were therefore not only useful in marginalising competing authorities, but equally in helping strengthen one's own.

5.3. Seeing Pasir Merah, but not Ujung Tanah

The previous section focuses on how authority is produced and strengthened by institutions participating in processes of devolving land control that they frame as land struggles, frontier dynamics and territorial strategies. While many of the institutions featured in this chapter are engaged in these processes in villages across coastal Langkat, this chapter relies heavily on examples from Pasir Merah with few mentions of Ujung Tanah. This section describes why institutions that so heavily engaged in coastal land control practices in Pasir Merah, mostly ignored residents in Ujung Tanah.[55]

As described in Chapter 4 and previous sections of this chapter, the previous decade saw a major flood, Pasir Merah residents' practices of political visibility and the political expansion of social forestry all converge in a storm of recognition. For example, it was only in 2011, after residents of Pasir Merah occupied former palm oil plantations and aquaculture ponds,

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[55] State and non-state institutions did eventually show interest in Ujung Tanah, supporting community group's efforts to claim coastal land. However, this interest would be conjured at a different moment and not through the lens of the law.

that multiple institutions turned their attention to the coast and began providing coastal residents with information about opportunities for devolved land development and control. Local mangrove restoration NGOs were established overnight to assist with channelling these newly available funds, and residents of Pasir Merah were quick to form community groups and partner with institutions that provided them with seedlings, sign boards, mapping technologies, research to demonstrate the ecological and economic value of their projects, and other infrastructure that assisted with establishing and demarcating territories (see Chapter 4).

Additionally, the framing of the village in the media, particularly news articles, social media, brochures, videos and reports, presented residents of Pasir Merah as mangrove enthusiasts (e.g., Tempo 2018, Jakarta Post 2018). This encouraged many institutions to flock to the village over other coastal areas that were similarly facing issues of erosion, flooding and land grabbing. "They love mangroves there" was a common response to why institutions had selected the village to plant mangroves in Pasir Merah (e.g., PP01, PT02). Moreover, this framing portrayed residents of Pasir Merah as having "good intentions"[56] as expressed by a state forest official,

> "In other areas people want to participate just to be able to control the land, not to green it. They just want to control it, to try to own it, while [the residents of Pasir Merah] have good intentions, they do not want to own it, but to reforest it." (DisHut01)

In Pasir Merah, residents' practices of political visibility also made them appear as more suitable rights subjects to these institutions. Their willingness to work with a range of institutions who could assist them with becoming politically visible and recognise their claims resulted in the village attracting more institutions that were looking for claims to recognise. And as more institutions arrived in the village, more community groups began to form and

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[56] The village of Pasir Merah was also home to many more Javanese transmigrants compared to Ujung Tanah, which could have potentially influenced opinions about their subjectivity (see Chapter 3).

demarcate new territories. These new territories were possible because of the availability of clean-and-clear land, which as previously described was important to institutions looking for land to govern (NGO01a, KPH02, DisHut02).

In Ujung Tanah, as in Pasir Merah, a few residents we spoke to were eager to reclaim their coast from aquaculture ponds and palm oil plantations. However, the companies that lined this stretch of coast each owned smaller plots of land. Additionally, Ujung Tanah has a smaller resident population and the impacts from changes to coastal lands here (such as flooding caused by the construction of embankments) do not extend beyond the village. These factors would have made it more challenging for land reform activists, unions, NGOs and legal aid agencies to repeat what they achieved in Pasir Merah (FUN01). While individuals from these institutions do campaign on issues such as health, fishers and women's rights, opportunities for local land control were rarely discussed (NGO03, NGO01a).

Similar to residents of Pasir Merah, residents of Ujung Tanah were also organised in identifiable collectives – community groups – some of whom participated in mangrove planting in collaboration with an NGO and state forest institution. However, because of a lack of clean-and-clear land, the two mangrove-planting community groups were advised to plant seedlings directly on the coast, which faces open waters and powerful waves. One of the groups was advised to plant a single species of mangrove – known for its carbon sequestering potential – in line with a carbon credit project (NGO01b; Pak Pramana, PM14). This group attempted planting seedlings thrice only to lose them all to the sea every time. The other group was more successful in growing the mangrove seedlings, however, as described in Chapter 4, they would later be cut down by another community group in search of land for a tourism project. When we asked the leader of the mangrove community group if they had considered applying for a social forestry permit, they looked puzzled. The tourism

group that cut down the mangroves had a similar response. No institution had mentioned this possibility to either of them (Pak Inong, UT05; Pak Bayu, UT02).

State and non-state institutions I spoke to had not heard of these community groups in Ujung Tanah, and most did not seem interested in discussing why they hadn't heard of them. They did not seem interested in making themselves visible to residents of Ujung Tanah. Rather, they wanted to talk more about what they had done in Pasir Merah and what more they sought to do (PT02, NGO04, PP01). It is unclear why they were uninterested in Ujung Tanah and these groups; however, it is evident that these groups' strategies and practices of political visibility – impeded by biogeophysical factors – were less successful. I suggest that planting mangroves in Pasir Merah was more appealing to these institutions than planting in a village like Ujung Tanah because of what it enabled them to claim. The history of land struggle, extensive mangrove planting by residents of the village, and the presence of state-approved forest access through social forestry permits provides institutions with the opportunity to be part of a positive story. Irrespective of where in the village they plant, with whom, and what their planting activities mean for residents of the village, the history of the village and legal status of the land enables them to present their activities as positively contributing to a "people's movement" (PT02, NGO04, BPDAS02, BPSKL01).

5.4. Conclusion

As has been observed elsewhere in Indonesia, the involvement of numerous institutions with public authority in land claims has significantly contributed to increasing land access and political visibility for rural, coastal residents (see Fisher et al. 2019). From their support mobilising farmers and fishers to assist with the land struggle, campaigning, advocacy, the provision of seedlings, mapping technologies, infrastructure for demarcating and policing the land, publicising the planting activities, assisting with access to government schemes to establish mangrove nurseries to acquire multi-decade land access through social forestry.

However, as demonstrated in this chapter, these moments of claim-making also produced multiple opportunities for these institutions, including increasing their control over coastal land and strengthening the legitimacy of their authority through the recognition of land claims.

This chapter considers the perspectives of institutions with public authority that participate in processes of devolution of land control. It demonstrates that these institutions are motivated to engage with these processes in order to increase their visibility to both coastal residents as well as higher authorities, both of which can impact their political authority. Lund (2020a, 2020b) describes mutual visibility between social actors seeking to be acknowledged by an institution with public authority and the recognising institution as a requirement for recognition. In order for coastal residents to develop strategies of political visibility, they need to be able to explore what institutions with public authority are looking for and what form of acknowledgement or recognition they can provide. In other words, knowing what will appeal to different institutions influences practices of political visibility. This requires mutual visibility. Furthermore, acknowledging and enabling political visibility for these rural residents, allowed state and non-state institutions to bring coastal land into the purview of their control. These institutions were hopeful that this increase in their control over coastal areas would make them politically visible to higher authorities. This in turn, they hoped, would allow them to access further funding, discretionary powers as well as demonstrate their value to these authorities.

Finally, this chapter raises questions about the means by which political visibility can be accessed. It describes how social relationships and biogeophysical differences between Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah impede and improve on their access to political visibility, but does not provide a thorough analysis of what informs access to political visibility and the

consequences that can accompany such visibility. In the following chapter, I present an

access analysis of political visibility from the perspective of coastal residents.

Chapter 6. Accessing political visibility

6.1. Introduction

> Ibu Nurul invited us into her house for a chat. She had lived along a mangrove stream for over 50 years, building makeshift extensions to her house as her family grew. As we sat down together, she shared with us her experiences living in Pasir Merah and how her access to state provisions (e.g., food rations) had changed over time. It was a while before we turned to the topic of mangrove planting, with Ibu Nurul initially telling us she had never been involved with any of it. She would later go on to explain that she, along with others in her family, had participated in the collective planting but did not think to share this as she had not been involved with the land claim that followed. We asked why not, she said "I didn't think about it, it's not my land". We asked if she ever visits the land she planted mangroves on, to which she replied, "I used to, but not anymore. It is now for tourism." (PM10)

Ibu Nurul was one of the first persons we spoke to in Pasir Merah that was not a member of a community group. Like many women who raised the mangrove seedlings in nurseries and later planted them, she had not been invited, nor did she ask, to join the group as they partook in other practices of political visibility and devolving land control. Were Ibu Nurul and others like her choosing not to participate in other practices of political visibility, or were they unable to? What made practices of political visibility accessible to some residents and not to others? And what material and relational consequences did political visibility have for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah?

The previous empirical chapters consider how and why coastal residents and a range of state and non-state institutions are participating in opportunities for more devolved coastal land control in rural Langkat. In Chapter 4, the desire for political visibility is explored as a key motivation for coastal residents of Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah who are actively seeking and engaging with processes of devolving land control. However, as this chapter describes, access to political visibility and the consequences it had for residents of the two villages were not evenly distributed. In this chapter, I highlight the perspectives of residents that did not engage with practices of political visibility, their inability to access it, their disinterest in it, and their concerns about the risks of becoming politically visible (Rubis and Theriault 2019).

I also present the material and relational consequences access to, and exclusion from, political visibility had for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.

"Access", as defined by Ribot and Peluso (2003), refers to the "ability to benefit from things" (153), including political visibility. They describe "ability" as being "akin to power" referring to the capacity of people to influence the practices and ideas of others (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 155). The practices of political visibility performed by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah are an exercise of their collective power. In both these villages, residents were able to benefit in numerous ways from acting collectively, including gaining access to land and other resources to support existing livelihoods and develop new ones.

Furthermore, political visibility *enhances* access in that it is also an appeal to power. Becoming politically visible, and maintaining this visibility, involves attracting and holding the attention of institutions with public authority that possess the power to enable benefits. It is an attempt at acquiring and maintaining "privileged access" (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 170). Therefore, for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, accessing political visibility itself was critical to accessing other sought-after benefits such as welfare services. Ribot and Peluso (2003) describe a number of mechanisms that can enable access, such as identity, social relations, authority and rights. In this chapter, I describe political visibility as a relational access mechanism, however access to political visibility was itself contingent on other access mechanisms. I therefore also present mechanisms that influenced access of political visibility for coastal residents, as well as some of the varied consequences political visibility had for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and more broadly along the coast of North Sumatra. For some, these consequences took the form of "benefits" (Ribot and Peluso 2003), such as increased control over lands and livelihoods, whereas for others, it resulted in being excluded from these very things (Hall et al. 2011).

In this chapter, I begin by discussing why some residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah were disinclined to participate in collective practices of political visibility. I then present the various mechanisms that enabled residents of both villages to successfully access political visibility, before finally examining the consequences of acquiring political visibility for residents of Pasir Merah, Ujung Tanah and other rural parts of the coast of North Sumatra.

6.2. Eluding political visibility

In Chapter 4, residents' motivations for participating in practices of political visibility are described in detail. Among other motivating factors such as land control and protecting lands and livelihoods, political visibility was an important consideration for residents partaking in organised collective activities such as mangrove planting and tourism development. While most residents expressed that they did not trust the state or other powerful non-state institutions, political visibility was viewed as a practice that would enable greater access to other resources and services that could impact their quality of life. For some residents, political visibility was also a means to be better positioned to demand accountability from these institutions. Furthermore, residents hoped that these new relations of accountability would result in the provision of various welfare services such as schools and hospitals.

> "The *ekowisata* [ecotourism site] is good because it brings many people here…we hope we can get money from the government to repair the road and build toilets, and then maybe as the village develops, we can get a secondary school" (Pak Samsul, PM32)

So, what about those that resided in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and were not inclined to participate in collective practices of political visibility? Were they not seeking political visibility? Or were other considerations informing their decision to avoid these collective activities?

6.2.1. A lack of desire for political visibility

A minority of the residents we spoke to in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah were not interested in becoming politically visible. It wasn't that they didn't want to be seen favourably by

institutions with public authority, but rather that they didn't consider it to be important, that it wouldn't make a difference to their lives. As Ibu Indah shared during a discussion with other residents of Ujung Tanah,

> "Why would the *pantai* [beach] change anything? The government knows we are here." (Ibu Indah, UT06)

This sentiment was often shared by men and women in their 40s and older that did not participate in practices of political visibility. They had learned to cope without support from powerful institutions for decades, and did not expect these newfound ways of engaging with them to impact their lives (Pak Agung, PM24; Ibu Dewi, PM28). As described in Chapter 3, many villages along this coast have long been sites of extraction with resources exploited by state and non-state institutions many of whom continue to exert control over coastal lands including through support for mangrove planting and tourism projects. However, for some older and disabled residents in Pasir Merah, the recognition the village received for planting mangroves provided hope.

> "My mother broke her leg years ago and we are looking after her…it is not easy for us. We are hoping all these efforts in our village will help us get her the care she needs." (Ibu Fitri, PM42)

We met fewer young people (in their 20s and 30s) who were not supportive of practices of political visibility. While they did not all participate in these collective activities, most suggested they thought they were worth pursuing. They often spoke not of political visibility, but of being favourably viewed by their peers (e.g., young people from nearby villages and Medan that engaged with the tourism projects in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah on social media and as tourists), which could potentially lead to other future opportunities.

> "It is nice to have people visit and talk about your village. We like hanging out with friends at the *pantai* [beach tourism site]…there is music and food to eat, and we sometimes get to meet new people" (Kak Annisa, UT17)

> "I like to follow and share their [a community group] posts on Facebook. It makes me feel proud and hopeful that in the future I could work there or maybe somewhere else, like in Bali! [laughs]" (Bang Udin, PM37)

However, some others were less certain about what political visibility might bring. Pak Edi was a fisherman who said he felt reassured that the mangroves were back, his family depended on them (PM36). He was relieved that the palm oil and aquaculture companies had moved out and that the land was providing some community groups with new sources of income. But he was wary of how the introduction of tourism to Pasir Merah might result in a loss of access to the waterways and mangroves for fishers.

> "It is good now, but it is difficult to say what they [the community group] will do with the land…I don't think they will cut down the mangroves, but if they want to keep it for tourists only, then we will have to find other ways to go out to sea." (Pak Edi, PM36)

While such opinions were shared by few residents that we spoke to, it reflected a wider lack of trust in state and non-state institutions and doubts about whether political visibility and the recognition it could bring would benefit all residents or only a handful of elites. As Pak Hasan shared,

> "I am glad that there are mangroves, but you know [one of the community group leaders]? He lives here, but he is not from here. He has support from many NGOs. I don't know what he plans to do, it could be good for all of us or maybe only good for him [laughs]. You understand what I mean?" (Pak Hasan, PM31)

Some of the community group leaders we interviewed shared that they themselves do not easily trust external institutions, but worked with them because of the political visibility they brought to the group and village (Pak Arhap, PM05; Pak Sopian, PM09). However, associating with these institutions resulted in some residents becoming more wary of community group leaders and the kind of political visibility they sought (Pak Wisnu, PM33; Pak Hendra, PM46)
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6.2.2. Not desiring the same kind of political visibility

Political visibility in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah was practiced at varying scales. For community group leaders and a select few members and employees of the village government, political visibility was accessible as individuals as well as for their families. Other community group members acquired this visibility as a formalised, legally recognised entity.

And finally, in the case of Pasir Merah, the village itself was made politically visible through the practices employed by the community groups and their leaders. Examples of this visibility include the recognition and support received by group leaders to inform decision-making around the development of new village infrastructure, community groups to earn additional income for their households and the village government to pursue new avenues of public and private funding. However, this support was mostly provided in instances where the request for support was associated with mangroves and tourism development. When discussing the mangrove planting with poorer households in the villages, they would point to their need for food rations, healthcare and jobs. While the provision of jobs was often associated with tourism, these projects were not intended to, nor did they extend to, meet the basic material needs of poorer residents.

> "The mangroves are good, I can go collect snails from the *paluh-paluh* [streams] but it depends on the tide…for me, it would help if the community groups could help my family with other things like food rations." (Ibu Siti, PM25)

Similarly, when fee-paying community group members sought loans from group leaders and councils to provide for similar needs or to access educational programmes, they were deemed unrelated to the wider goals of the community group and therefore not issued (Bang Ajai, PM27).[57] The choice of practice of political visibility was therefore considered differently by residents dependent on the scale of visibility and the influence they were able to have over how the acquired visibility was translatable to other forms of support and accountability (Ibu Siti, PM25; Pak Hasan, PM31).

Some residents also took issue with the institutions they were becoming politically visible to. This concern centred around the increased land control these institutions acquired through social and legal contracts with community groups. For example, a handful of residents in Pasir Merah relied on mangrove timber for fuelwood and housing materials. With increased

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[57] However, exceptions to these rules did exist for group leaders, their friends and family members (see section on intra-village conflict under the consequences of political visibility in this chapter).

involvement of the district Forest Management Unit and the Regional Forestry Service and issuance of social forestry permits, they expressed concerns about losing access to timber and were planting mangroves around their houses to protect themselves from this potential loss of access (Pak Wahyu, PM43; Ibu Nadia, PM30). Community groups had also accepted seedlings and funding from other institutions that some residents said they did not trust. For example, while one of the community groups refused to work with a *preman* group [violent gang] that had had been hired by the owner of a palm oil plantation company to violently defend his land from residents, another community group accepted seedlings from them. Pak Iwan described how he thought this might influence how the land would be used and controlled.

> "They did not only plant the mangroves, but a journalist was there…there must have been a report somewhere. What if they come back and say those mangroves are theirs? Then what? Will the group have to give them money from the *ekowisata* [ecotourism site]? (Pak Iwan, PM13)

Residents were even more sceptical of NGOs. In both villages, NGOs are widely perceived to only participate in projects that financially benefitted them. Many residents considered them to be glorified middlemen who siphoned off most of the funds they received to line their own pockets. For example, as Pak Sopian shared,

> "There was a student that was interning with them [a conservation NGO], so he came here to learn about our group's activities. We became friends and it was just as I suspected, it really is true, they keep most of the money for themselves. NGOs are not to be trusted. We work with them because we need the funds, but we have to be careful...they ask for our ideas, but since they are the experts and have the funds, we have to listen to them." (Pak Sopian, PM09)

While this concern about how public institutions might dictate future land access was expressed by both community group members and non-members, members – particularly those in decision-making positions – were often more willing to assume this risk than non-members. As discussed further on in this chapter, this was likely because the benefits for leaders and other members were greater than the potential gains for non-members that resided in both villages.

Another consideration for residents that chose not to participate in political visibility practices was how they would be perceived by their neighbours and others in the village. For example, despite the public discourse around collective mangrove planting for the wellbeing of the village, coast and country, some residents believed that community group members and leaders were chasing power and control. For example, when asked why he doesn't partake in collective mangrove planting despite individually planting mangroves in the village to prevent erosion, Pak Ahmad responded,

> "I don't want to join them, they do not care about mangroves, they only want the land. Tell me, why do they not plant by themselves, around their houses?" (Pak Ahmad, PM34)

Others also believed that community group members were primarily motivated by new income opportunities. While community members highlighted these new opportunities as being an important motivating factor, how it was perceived by different residents influenced their opinion of the groups more generally and their willingness to participate in or support group activities.

> "They [community groups] only think about themselves and their own stomachs [laughs]. I don't think tourism is good for the village, it gives jobs only to a few people." (Pak Salim, PM29)

These feelings of disapproval and distrust in community groups were also mingled with other factors such as personal experiences residents had with community leaders and members regulating their access to lands and livelihoods. I expand on this later in this chapter when discussing the consequences of political visibility.

6.3. Accessing political visibility

In this section, I discuss important mechanisms, processes, and social relations that have influenced access to political visibility, and accordingly, access to coastal land and other related benefits sought by residents, such as welfare services.

6.3.1. Social relations, and related capital, technology, knowledge and authority

As described in chapters 4 and 5, relationships with individuals at institutions with public authority played a crucial role in enabling collective land claims for coastal residents. These social relations provided information on what land use practices would be considered favourably by powerful institutions, expertise on how to frame and conduct these practices as well as capital and technology to support practices of political visibility, land claim processes and livelihood activities. These social relations also provided privileged access to how these institutions might see the coast, assisting coastal residents with anticipating opportunities for political visibility and land control. As outlined in Chapter 3, opportunities for large-scale collective land control – legal or otherwise – were uncommon on the coast so being able to anticipate them was considered to be advantageous by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah.

> "Without [the fishers' union] we would not have known we could apply for social forestry. We did not know this land was state forest land or even how to apply." (Pak Iksan, PM03)

> "We know someone in the district tourism department. He told us we can get a permit for the beach. We are waiting to see what he suggests we do next." (Pak Bayu, UT02)

In addition, information on what practices to employ and how to frame these practices privileged community groups whose leaders had access to individuals familiar with institutions with public authority. For example, in both villages, land claims made by some community groups were dismissed. In Ujung Tanah, the one community group that successfully[58] planted mangroves seedlings lost their land access to a community group with a tourism project. In addition to both groups knowing individuals at powerful state institutions, the tourism group's access to more senior government officials as well as the village government, their strategy to clear the mangroves overnight and rapidly build *pondok-pondok* [sheltered wooden structures] each named after a mangrove species,

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[58] By successfully, I refer to a high survival rate.

develop an agreement with an aquaculture company to enable access to the land for tourists, mark the beach on GoogleMaps, invite local schools and a branch of the navy to "clean up" the beach (Pak Soleh, UT11), and present the beach as the "next Bali" (Pak Solihin, UT09; Pak Banyu, UT07) were all integral to them gaining and maintaining access to political visibility as well as control over the land (Pak Bayu, UT02).

Similarly, in Pasir Merah, leaders of a community group supported by NGOs, unions and a legal aid agency used their privileged access to authority to secure an audience with the Legislative Council and a meeting with the Minister of Environment and Forestry (Pak Iksan, PM03). The treasurer of this group was later elected as the head of the village government. This proximity and access to authority meant that when another community group with an overlapping land claim wanted to apply for a social forestry permit, they struggled to secure support from various state and non-state institutions. This was despite the group initially working with the same set of institutions as well as a research group at a public university who assisted them with mapping the land and constructing a tourism site which included walkways, toilets, prayer rooms and dining areas.

> "The KLHK dirjen [a Director General at the Ministry of Environment and Forestry] visited this village and told us the more community groups there are that care about mangroves the better. But when we tried to apply for the social forestry permit, the *kades* [*kepala desa*, village head] did not give us the papers we needed. Soon after that, the university and others stopped working with us. Without the permit, we can't do anything." (Pak Intan, PM38)

Applying for a social forestry permit requires access to knowledge and capital. The application process is highly bureaucratic, involving the appropriate completion of technical forms, production of management plans and budgets, mapping of the land using GPS devices, production and collation of group members' identity documents (typically family cards), and, among other requirements, ensuring the application references appropriate land laws (for example, the number of group members needs to be in line with laws that limit

land access rights at the individual level (Lucas and Warren 2013)). Group leaders shared that without the support of institutions that have this expertise, applying for a permit would not have been feasible (Pak Iksan, PM03; Pak Arhap, PM05)

Access to expertise was also central to collective mangrove planting activities in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. A high survival rate of planted seedlings was a requirement for social forestry land claims. Community groups therefore preferred to rely on scientific forestry experts, and others with similar claims to authority such as those in possession of higher education qualifications, to inform the choice of seedlings, their maintenance in village-based nurseries, the planting method used and post-planting care for the seedlings and the land (Pak Misran, PM22). In addition to expertise, access to seedlings themselves became essential. Seedlings were often acquired by both community groups and the institutions they worked with through references to scientific literature on the significance of mangroves to protecting coasts and coastal residents (Pak Iksan, PM03; NGO01b).

Finally, access to capital shaped relations between community groups and institutions with public authority. Community group leaders considered this access to capital to be of great consequence to their political visibility and land access (Pak Sopian, PM09; Pak Iksan, PM03). In Pasir Merah, under social forestry rules, community groups needed to develop livelihood activities on the land (Fisher et al. 2018), for which they often needed to secure funding (Pak Arhap, PM05). Community group leaders were therefore often accepting of the livelihood activities proposed by institutions on whom they relied for writing grant applications or providing direct funding. For example, Pak Iksan, the leader of a community group, told us that he did not think a tourism project would be sustainable and was hesitant to introduce such a project given the presence of other mangrove-based tourism in the village. However, when discussing this with one of the group's supporting institutions, he did not raise these concerns, later saying to me that "we are not experts, we do not have experience in these

things…they know better" (Pak Iksan, PM03). This was reinforced when, during an official visit, Ministry of Environment and Forestry staff suggested the group introduce a mangrove tourism project on the land. This access to 'expertise', and the social and financial capital that comes along with it, is important for maintaining political visibility.

6.3.2. Identity, labour and rights

Access mechanisms also influenced the kind of political visibility that rural coastal residents could access and benefit from. They can affect how benefits are distributed. An example of this is how membership of a community group can enable access to land that a non-member might have to pay a fee for, as in the case of the beach in Ujung Tanah or mangrove tourism site in Pasir Merah. Another example, featured in Chapter 5, is being perceived as being "easier to work with" (BPSKL01) or "easy to manage" (KPH01) by identifying as belonging to a settled, coastal community (see Scott 2009).

In both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, men and women had participated in mangrove planting in exchange for a daily wage. Additionally, in instances where mangrove nurseries needed to be developed, care for the seedlings was mostly provided by women in exchange for a daily wage. However, across both villages, few women were members of community groups and the few that were, were family members of men that led the groups. Only one of the community groups was led by a woman. While this was a mangrove-based group, it was different from the rest. The women's group was the only one to focus on collecting and bringing to market non-timber forest products (NTFP). As described in Ribot and Peluso (2003), identity-based access mechanisms often interact with market, labour and rights-based access mechanisms. Often, when we spoke to women about mangrove planting in the villages, they would initially say they had nothing to do with it (Ibu Nurul, PM10; Ibu Yanti, PM35). However, later in our conversations they would share that they had helped in the nurseries or planted seedlings but did not think to mention it because they were not

members of any community group. As described in Chapter 4, mixing one's labour with the land was a practice of political visibility, one that was important to demonstrate the validity of a claim to land. However, women's labour was often erased from this process. When we asked community group leaders about this, they would point us to the handful of women that were group members or to the NTFP group that they suggested were benefitting from the mangroves in a different way (Pak Arhap, PM05).

Women in the NTFP group as well as others who had raised and planted mangroves shared different explanations for not joining the community groups. Some said they did not have the time (Ibu Bulan, PM39; Ibu Kirana, PM44), others that they participated in the mangrove planting for the additional income but were not interested in managing the land (Ibu Yanti, PM35; Ibu Melati, PM40), with many sharing that they were not invited to join the group (Ibu Luciana, PM23, Ibu Melati, PM40; Ibu Murni, PM47). However, many of the women also did not believe they had the right to make a claim to the land, preventing them from attempting to make a claim (Ibu Nurul, PM10; Ibu Luciana, PM23). They did not have access to the same privileged information[59] that men leading the groups did, nor were they involved in decision-making around land access or management practices.

In Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, labour is gendered in a number of ways that reflect this division of labour around mangrove planting, land control and income-generating activities. As described in chapters 3 and 4, in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, women (particularly women from poorer households) were more likely to visit mangrove streams and the coast to harvest molluscs and other shellfish. While some women did work in rice paddy fields and on medium-sized (8-20 person) fishing boats, the land and boats were owned or rented and

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[59] Including that land laws limit land access rights at the family unit or household-level (Lucas and Warren 2013). While the inclusion of women and men from the same household would not have reduced land access for the group, it is possible that men wanted the right to be registered to their name alone.

managed by men. Rights to farmland, fish and crab ponds, small and medium-sized fishing boats and houses were most often registered in the name of the oldest man in the household. Men were also more likely to engage in livelihood activities that generated greater sums of cash on a dependable basis (e.g., producing rice, catching fish and crabs that fetch a higher market price) with women collecting shellfish and working as daily wage labourers to supplement the household income. So, while both men and women expressed a desire for political visibility (e.g., Ibu Fitri, PM42; Pak Basirun, UT12), women's engagement with practices of political visibility, and the expectations of the benefits they could access by acquiring such visibility, were likely coloured by what they believed they had the right to claim.

In Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, residents were also able to acquire political visibility through rights-based access mechanisms that were both legal and illegal. In both villages, similar land control practices were deployed (see Chapter 4), some of which relied on state laws and others sought legitimacy through alternative means, including moral framings and the use of force. For example, the tourism group in Ujung Tanah described their initiative as bringing development to the village.

> "We are doing this to help the village. So much of the coast belongs to businessmen from Medan and Stabat. It is better if we can decide our own future…we can build up the village, make it like Bali" (Pak Banyu, UT07)

Likewise, in Pasir Merah, there was an area of the "executed" palm oil plantation that was remade as an area for *palawija* [secondary crops, including root vegetables]. This land was sub-divided among landless residents of Pasir Merah to help meet their households' food needs. While this area falls under state forest land on maps belonging to the district Forest Management Unit, the head of the Unit decided against displacing otherwise landless farmers to reforest the land.

> "The people there are poor. They struggled to get the land back from the palm oil company. It is better we let them farm there now." (KPH01)

The political visibility of the village as a reforestation success story, praised in government and Corporate Social Responsibility reports, helps maintain access to this land for residents. However, some users of the communal *palawija* land were concerned that their access to the land might be impacted if they lost the endorsement of community group leaders or if the head of the Forest Management Unit was reassigned.

> "It is difficult to say what will happen. We can farm here now, but if we make enemies, especially with *orang penting* [important, powerful people], then who knows [laughs]" (Pak Fadhlan, PM02)

While legal access does not guarantee long-term maintenance of land access, community group leaders in Pasir Merah were generally more interested in employing state laws as part of their land control strategies. They considered this to be a more reliable route to securing control over the land, one that brought with it legal protections (including enforcement) along with moral pretences that underpinned these protections.

> "The *izin* [permit] helps us protect the mangroves and the land. If we need help, we can now call KPH [*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*, Forest Management Unit] …and no company can easily take the land from us." (Pak Iksan, PM03)

As with identity and labour access mechanisms, rights-based mechanisms primarily benefitted men and members and leaders of community groups, however, other residents were also able to access political visibility and land through recognition of community groups' land rights. In the next section, I look beyond the scope of what Ribot and Peluso (2003) would consider access mechanisms, which are contingent on human agency, to present another important influence on coastal residents' ability to benefit from political visibility.

6.3.3. Coastal materiality

Coasts can be unstable areas, and as described in Chapter 5, can have a strong influence on residents' practices and strategies of political visibility. Residents in both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah expressed having to adapt their practices of political visibility to environmental factors that impacted how they could portray themselves to institutions with public

authority. For example, in Ujung Tanah, community groups repeatedly tried to plant mangrove along the coast yet the seedlings constantly experienced high rates of mortality.

> "Three times we planted mangroves there! But they always died. Why? It was something different each time. Sometimes it was the barnacles and other crustaceans, we tried pesticides but it did not help. Other times it was the force of the waves that destroyed the seedlings. So, we tried different planting techniques to protect them, we even planted at different times of the year and created trial plots, but still most of them died" (Pak Pramana, UT14)

While this practice of political visibility had been successful in Pasir Merah, biogeophysical factors such as the abundance and appetite of crustaceans and the roughness of the sea prevented it from taking root in Ujung Tanah.

Elsewhere along the coast of Ujung Tanah, another community group was clearing mangroves in the hopes of creating a beach. Their initial plan was to collect sand from a nearby mine to place along the shore, holding the land in with bags of more sand. However, once the mangroves were cleared, group members were surprised to see white sand being deposited on the shore by the sea. White sand was unheard of in Ujung Tanah and nearby villages, yet the appearance of this sand was critical to creating the kind of tourism the group was trying to emulate – the "next Bali" that would appeal to powerful institutions that would recognise their efforts to bring development to the village and wider region (Pak Banyu, UT07).

> "It was like a sign from God. We were so surprised when the white sand started to arrive. I have never seen sand like this anywhere in North Sumatra" (Pak Bayu, UT02)

These examples from Ujung Tanah present a glimpse into how the materiality of coasts – their biogeophysical factors and the effects they produce on social relations and processes – are highly dynamic and can impede and improve on community groups' ability to practice

and benefit from political visibility.[60] The consequences of this access for different residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah as well as the rest of the east coast of North Sumatra are described in the following section.

6.4. Consequences of political visibility

In *A Theory of Access*, the term benefit is described as being similar to value, where "value is present wherever benefits from "things" are pursued" (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 155). As described in Chapter 4, gaining and maintaining access to political visibility is entangled with gaining and maintaining access to land. By "benefits" from accessing political visibility, I therefore refer to access to land as well as other potential benefits that residents may receive due to their favourable visibility in the eyes of institutions with public authority.[61]

In this section, I look beyond benefits, describing costs and risks associated with political visibility and the varied material and relational consequences political visibility has had for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah – as elite individuals involved in practices of political visibility, members of community groups, and residents of the villages. However, this political visibility of these two villages has also affected other rural coastal residents. I therefore first provide some examples of how practices of political visibility have impacted land access along the east coast of North Sumatra and the villages of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah as a whole. I then focus on the land access and other relational consequences of political visibility within these two villages, mainly along the lines of community group membership.

Practices of political visibility and land access in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah had ripple effects across the east coast of North Sumatra. In particular, practices employed in Pasir

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[60] While I focus on the materiality of the coast, other materials influenced access to political visibility within Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, such as identity documents, tools for constructing shelters and cutting down trees, etc.
[61] For similar reasons, political visibility could be considered a benefit derived through the gaining, maintaining and controlling of access to land.

Merah informed wider land access strategies all along the coast. Pasir Merah was well-known by coastal residents for its mangrove planting efforts and the favourable attention the village was able to gain from institutions with public authority. Men who were resident to other coastal villages sought meetings with community group leaders from Pasir Merah, particularly those who had secured social forestry permits.[62] As more community groups were established, their leaders networked and worked together to develop strategies to acquire and maintain land access rights. On occasion, this involved coordinating applications for funding and other resources and setting up shared mangrove nurseries.

While community groups in Ujung Tanah were not as much on the forefront of beach tourism that brought political visibility, they too established relationships with similar community groups with sea-facing tourism projects on the coast. However, these efforts were not as definitively coordinated as it was still unclear how effective this strategy was for securing land access. Yet, when we interviewed individuals at institutions with public authority it was clear that the mangroves and tourism projects in both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah had impacted how they saw as well as imagined the coast. For example, as described by staff at the Regional Development Planning Agency of North Sumatra [*Badan Perencanaan dan Pembangunan Daerah (Bappeda) Provinsi Sumatera Utara*] and the Regional Forestry Service, North Sumatra [*Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara*],

> "...this mangrove will protect the environment and it can also be a good place for tourism, so we are planning on mangrove tourism sites in *kabupaten* [regency] Batu Bara and Serdang Bedagai, but it is not well developed yet, it is still in process. We got this idea from other areas in Langkat where there is mangrove tourism, but we think it can be developed further and North Sumatra has good potential for this. On the east coast it is easy to grow mangroves…so far, tourism and climate change mitigation are the only plans we have that include mangrove planting. We don't

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[62] While visiting other villages in North Sumatra where residents were coming together to plant mangroves and form community groups, I would sit down with leaders of the groups to understand how and why these activities began. They would routinely talk about Pasir Merah and the community groups there. On one occasion, I bumped into a number of community group leaders from different villages who were meeting to share practices and strategies. These efforts were coordinated by group leaders themselves, often with assistance from various state and non-state institutions.

know any other uses for mangroves, you can share with us if you do [laughs]" (BAPPEDA01)

"The mangroves in [Pasir Merah] stand out! We are still in the learning stage, so we are still evaluating the potential of different areas in North Sumatra for social forestry. By this I mean in the coastal areas people may want different types of tourism, like water sports, waterfall, beach, etc…we now map the potential of these areas based on KPH's [*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*, Forest Management Unit] technical evaluation." (DisHut01)

Overall, the social contracts developed between residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and institutions with public authority were influencing both how other coastal residents practiced political visibility as well as how institutions saw and acknowledged them.

6.4.1. Land and livelihoods

Specifically, in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, political visibility had a similar impact in that the more politically visible the villages became, the more political visibility they attracted. As residents became better at anticipating what institutions were looking for, they adapted and refined their practices which increased their visibility to these institutions. For example, by speaking of their tourism projects as the "next Bali" (Pak Banyu, UT07) or by requesting particular species of mangrove seedlings that were preferred by some institutions for their carbon sequestering potential (Pak Arhap, PM05). Similarly, as institutions with public authority became more familiar with a village, its landscape and residents, the more likely they were to direct project spending and other resources to the village. This is evident in Pasir Merah where many institutions had multiple projects, sometimes with more than one community group.

Within these villages, community groups that practiced political visibility were able to gain access to land. For example, one community group received a permit that covered over 410 hectares. Through continued practices of land control, they were also able to develop new income sources for themselves and few other residents through tourism development and NTFP collection. Additionally, many residents preferred the land to be under the control of

community groups over palm oil and aquaculture companies that completely cut off their access to the land and negatively impacted their livelihoods.

> "I go out to sea a few times a week. Before, it was not possible for me to go this way, through the *paluh-paluh* [streams that run through the mangroves], the palm oil company had blocked the way….they also used chemicals that turned the water red and yellow, so I had to go further out to sea to fish. It is much better now" (Pak Zaenuddin, PM48)

In Pasir Merah, some residents also considered the planting of mangroves to help with future flood control or regulation. They attributed the *pasang perdani* [big tide] and associated flooding in 2009 to the loss of mangroves accompanied by the construction of coastal embankments to protect the aquaculture ponds and palm oil plantations (Pak Jalil, PM14; Pak Eko, UT20). Reforesting the coast and bringing the land under the control of resident community groups was therefore thought to help prevent the inundating of homes and fields by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah (Pak Rohkoon, PM12; Pak Tarigan, UT13).

In addition to improvements to the conditions for fishing and farming, acquiring social forestry permits required community groups to develop livelihood activities on the land (Maryudi et al. 2012). For some residents looking to move away from farming and fishing or introduce additional income generating activities alongside farming or fishing, these new livelihood activities were promising.

> "I go to the *ekowisata* [ecotourism site] on Saturdays and Sundays. [The community group] lets me sell food there. They have a shop for snacks, but no other food, so I sell hot food…I have four children, so it is good to earn more money" (Ibu Budiwati, PM45)

Many therefore expressed a preference for the land being under the control of community groups. However, for other residents, particularly those that did not belong to community groups, there were concerns over their access to these lands and livelihoods changing as they became increasingly commodified through tourism. Specifically, they expressed fears that despite providing new income streams, such livelihood projects could also make their unfair distribution of costs and benefits seem more acceptable. For example, in Ujung Tanah, Pak

Elang shared his observation of how, as the land was set aside for tourism, his household lost out on their access to harvest molluscs to supplement their diet (UT24). Poorer households in both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah often depended on harvesting shellfish from the coast and mangrove streams. So, while the planting of mangroves in Pasir Merah was accompanied by new sightings of shellfish to collect and no new restrictions in access to fishing (Ibu Siti, PM25), poorer residents shared concerns about losing access to this food source as tourism took root (Pak Edi, PM36). The long-term maintenance of land access for various residents was therefore in the hands of community group leaders, and importantly, in concert with supporting state and non-state institutions.

6.4.2. Authority and control

While devolution of land control brought an overall increase in access to coastal land and livelihood opportunities for residents, decision-making regarding who could access what particular livelihood activities and land remained with community group leaders and the state and non-state institutions that supported their access to the land. For example, as described by a community group member,

> "They decided to try, what is it called...silvofishery, yes. But the fish keep dying. They are trying shrimp, crab, everything. It is difficult, they want to make it *lestari* [sustainable, long-lasting]...they never asked my opinion. The *ketua kelompok* [group leader] decides. He discusses with [a university and NGO], they decide." (Pak Ahadi, PM16)

Additionally, livelihood activities practiced by poorer households such as the land set aside for farming *palawija* [secondary crops] was possible at the discretion of the district-level Forest Management Unit, with residents concerned about losing access to the land with time.

As previously described, developing and maintaining relations with powerful institutions was integral to gaining and maintaining access to coastal land. It was therefore common for community group leaders pursuing political visibility to manage the land in line with the

project goals of their respective partner institutions that ultimately controlled their access to the land. Increased political visibility therefore did not only concentrate decision-making powers in the hands of village elites who led community groups – strengthening their local authority – but more consequentially they further centred them with external institutions who were critical in enabling and maintaining local land access.

Across both villages, membership to community groups included the regular payment of fees and provision of identity documents (e.g., family card), which kept poorer residents out (Pak Salim, PM29). Furthermore, attempts to introduce accountability within community groups, particularly from group leaders and partner institutions, were rare. Community group members had the right to vote on some matters – such as the election of community leaders – but most decisions remained with group leaders and institutions that helped them maintain their claim to the land. For example, how the land and mangroves were managed, what new partnerships and projects were developed, how members would be rewarded and disciplined, who could access group funds including in the form of loans and, crucially, how access to the land was to be maintained (Bang Susilo, PM15; Pak Iksan, PM03; Pak Soleh, UT11). Additionally, most groups did not have established rules as to when or how changes in leadership would take place. The one group that developed more democratic rules did so while applying for their permit, before developing financial ties with any particular institution.

> "Did you hear what happened? The old *ketua* [group leader] organised us to work on the abandoned fishpond after [the aquaculture company] was *eksekusi* [executed or removed from the land]. We would spend nights guarding the fish, and when it came time to sell, he kept all the money for himself…so we all left the group and started a new one. Now we have rules about electing a *ketua*, like every two years, we will have an election" (Pak Arhap, PM05)

Yet, despite group members limited say regarding the future of the group, group leaders expected them to express their loyalty to the group. This loyalty is further emphasised by state and non-state institutions who provide members with merchandise such as clothing

items that publicly display their affiliations and encourage gossip and competition between community groups. Maintaining such relations is important for these institutions for without the cooperation of community groups, they would lose control over these lands. In the following section I describe the ways in which the increase of power in the hands of community leaders compounded conflicts amongst village residents (community group members and others) that had material and relational impacts.

6.4.3. Intra-village conflict

In November 2018, we spent a week with one of the groups, meeting members that would visit the land throughout the week to attend to maintenance tasks in preparation for tourists visiting on the weekend. Bang Susilo sat down with us for a longer chat, which he said he was comfortable to do in the presence of the group leader. We offered to go to his house or the nearby *warung* [coffee shop], but he insisted we sit together with the leader. After briefly sharing his motivations for joining the group and perspective on how the group was managed and decisions made, the group leader began interjecting and it became clear that Bang Susilo felt uncomfortable and watching what he shared with us. To ease the situation, we began discussing more mundane, technical things like the species of mangroves in the nursery for another ten minutes before suggesting it was getting late. As we said goodbye, Bang Susilo asked us to meet him at the *warung* the next morning and the group leader was visibly upset at him. He blurted angrily,

> "Bang Susilo is not a thinker; he is a worker. He just does what he is told. And his friend that he mentioned told him about our group? He cannot decide which group he belongs to. He used to be in my group, but I confronted him and now he left to join another one." (Pak Sopian, PM09)

Bang Susilo sat down with us in the morning as we apologised for what had happened the previous night. He shared that the group leader had insisted he speak to us in his presence. That he did enjoy the work and had devoted a lot of time and effort to the group even before earning an income through tourism, but that being a group member had caused a number

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of conflicts amongst his friends and also within his own family. For instance, when he was unemployed, he had requested a small loan[63] from the group to travel to Medan in search of a job, but the group leaders refused. He later heard that a much larger loan was given instead to the group treasurer's brother to purchase a motorbike. As a fee-paying member who considered the group important to pursuing his professional aspirations, he said he was hurt and had stopped speaking to members of his family who participated in the group leadership (Bang Susilo, PM15).

Similarly, he had lost contact with some of his friends in the village. Bang Dumadi had told Bang Susilo about the mangrove group and the opportunity it provided to earn a daily wage through mangrove planting. Bang Dumadi had previously taken up such work with another mangrove community group that was also seeking daily wage labourers. He considered mangrove planting to be a positive contribution to the village and as a young person with no land or fishing equipment, was grateful for the opportunity to earn some money (Bang Dumadi, PM41). Wanting to remain in the know about similar potential future opportunities, Bang Dumadi was a registered, fee-paying member of both mangrove community groups. However, as these groups began to have their land claims registered as rights, he was faced with a dilemma. Land reform laws limit the amount of land a household can access through state-sponsored programmes, even if the right to the land is communal (Lucas and Warren 2013). This includes social forestry, which stipulates that a household or family[64] can only be registered with one community group that has land access rights. A number of regional and national bodies under the Ministry of Environment and Forestry are tasked with verifying group members' family identity documents provided as part of the application process. These regulations have knock-on effects on access to other resources, including state funds.

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[63] The loan request was for 100,000 Indonesian Rupiah, which is approximately 6-7 United States Dollars
[64] Across most laws in Indonesia, the family (a heteronormative conjugal partnership) is the unit through which people can access rights and become "ideal citizens" (Elmhirst 2011).

For example, as described by an employee of The Forestry Fund or the Centre for Forest Development Financing [*Badan Layanan Umum Pusat Pembiayaan Pembangunan Hutan*],

> "We verify that the [social forestry] permit area is clean-and-clear, that there are clear boundaries. Then we map the area into individual plots for each *kelompok* [group] member. Why is this done at the individual level? Because the law only allows maximum two hectares per family, so it is important to demonstrate that this law isn't being breached. So, the permit area depends on the number of members and other things. There is a technical expert in Jakarta who decides what level of mapping is needed for verification." (BLU01)

Bang Dumadi therefore had to choose between the two groups, with his uncertainty about which group to join upsetting one of the community group leaders (Pak Sopian, PM09; Bang Dumadi, PM41). These competitive dynamics between community groups were common, resulting in similar material and relational impacts at a wider scale. For example, land and livelihood access was often conditional. For group members, this meant access to streams to fish in, land to grow fruit trees on, waterways to travel by, new sources of income made possible through tourism and, at times, the potential to participate in decision-making.

For non-members resident to both villages, access to these benefits was often based on other factors such as which hamlet they resided in and who they knew or how they were known in the village. For instance, to access parts of the coast in Ujung Tanah and mangrove forest and waterways in Pasir Merah, entrance fees charged to residents were at the discretion of community group leaders and members who guarded the entrance and issued tickets. Access to these sites affected the livelihoods of residents. For example, Pak Arif who had no land to farm or boat to fish with, depended on mangrove access where he'd set up traps for mud crabs that he would then sell. Losing access to the mangroves had a devastating impact on his household income.

> "I used to go to those mangroves to catch crabs with *bubu* [traps]. It used to be enough for my family. But now I cannot go there…my son helps us with money" (Pak Arif, UT29)

Relatedly, competition between community groups over access to resources put a strain on relations within the villages. For example, as described in chapters 4 and 5, group leaders and members began engaging in gossip about the motives and activities of other groups. The longer we stayed in the villages, the more residents opened up to us about their concerns over land control being in the hands of a few, whom some trusted and others did not. For example, when speaking about one of the community groups, Pak Rimba commented,

"They are all snakes, especially the group leader." (Pak Rimba, PM49)

This was even more evident in hamlets where residents felt they had lost out on opportunities because a competing community group in a nearby hamlet had secured a social forestry permit.

"We also had a project planting mangroves with [an NGO], but KPH [*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*, Forest Management Unit] gave the land to [another community group]. We argued with their group leader, and now they don't allow anyone from our *dusun* [hamlet] to visit the *ekowisata* [ecotourism site]. Even if we want to pay, they do not allow us" (Pak Budi, PM17)

Overall, the consequences of political visibility varied for residents of the coast and were greatly influenced by a number of access mechanisms. While many residents benefitted from increased access to land, political visibility also brought with it increased conflict with more struggles over land and a desire to be seen favourably by institutions with public authority. Furthermore, pursuing land control through practices of political visibility that appeal to powerful institutions resulted in increased involvement of these institutions in decision-making over land use, increasing possibilities for their control over coastal land.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I draw on *A Theory of Access* to further analyse political visibility, what enables access to it and what costs, benefits and risks might be associated with it in coastal North Sumatra. Moreover, by making political visibility the object of an access analysis, this chapter demonstrates how practices of political visibility are both an appeal to power as well

as an act of power. In the following chapter, I explore what this means for broader understandings of power in processes of devolution of land control, legitimation, recognition and access.

This chapter presents the varied experiences of political visibility as described by residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah. For the minority of research participants, such visibility was not sought after. Rather, the practices of political visibility adopted by fellow residents raised suspicions, resulting in heightened distrust within the villages. Since many residents were hesitant to trust state and non-state institutions, their involvement in coordinated land control and management efforts with community groups was met with disapproval from some residents we interviewed, particularly those in their 40s and older. Another concern raised by residents was about the kind of political visibility practiced and what this could mean for the future of their village, primarily the type of development it might bring and the possible uneven consequences for more marginalised residents.

Access to political visibility can inform access to land and livelihoods, as well as other potential benefits like welfare services. In Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, various mechanisms impacted residents' access to political visibility including their materiality, social relations, identity, labour and rights. Most notably, women were often denied benefits that men acquired through practices of political visibility. In Pasir Merah, this included land access rights and related opportunities to participate in decision-making and access other resources. Residents who were not members of community groups – because they could not afford to be members, did not have the required documents, did not have the time to contribute to the group or did not have good relations with group leaders, among other reasons – were also less likely to benefit from their village's political visibility, with some being excluded from access to coastal lands and livelihoods.

The political visibility of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah produced consequences for residents of the two villages as well as other rural areas of coastal North Sumatra, whose lands were being reimagined by village elites, land rights and environmental activists, and multiple state and non-state institutions with varying agendas. In Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah specifically, the consequences of political visibility were wide-ranging. For many, access to coastal lands and livelihoods increased. However, residents' experiences of whose rights were recognised, how benefits were distributed and who was able to participate in decision-making varied greatly. They shared how their social status, group membership, where they resided in the village and their gender influenced their ability to benefit from political visibility. Moreover, poorer residents were particularly concerned about how the villages' access to political visibility might increase existing inequities in the long-term (O'Neill 2016).

These concerns about the long-term impacts of political visibility were associated with the concentration of decision-making over coastal land control in the hands of a few village elites and the powerful institutions they sought visibility from. Since accessing political visibility required appealing to these institutions, their ability to dictate and determine coastal land use was enhanced by the performance of political visibility. Furthermore, to maintain political visibility and land access, residents needed to continue appealing to powerful institutions on whom their access to resources depended. So, while these villages were able to attract more resources from these institutions by practicing political visibility, they also invited further control of resources by these very institutions (Sahide et al. 2016). In other words, by appealing to the authority of state and non-state institutions to secure resource access, residents inevitably contributed to strengthening the authority of these institutions in coastal North Sumatra (Lund 2016, Lund 2020a).

A final significant impact of political visibility was the increased competition over land and other related resource access. As coastal land control through organised collectives became

a possibility, more community groups emerged. And with the emergence of more groups, competition over land increased, in turn creating more conflict between community groups and the hamlets they resided in. As described in this chapter, these conflicts had tangible material and relational consequences for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and demonstrate some of the unexpected and uneven effects of efforts to decentralise natural resource governance (Erbaugh 2019, Hajjar et al. 2020, Sikor and Nguyen 2007).

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

This thesis provides an analysis of how opportunities and processes of devolving land control are seized and negotiated by different social actors in coastal North Sumatra. As a coast that has long been perceived as a resource frontier, its residents have struggled to find opportunities for land control. This research considered how coastal residents navigate what opportunities are worth pursuing by trying to anticipate what practices would provide them with political visibility that could enable recognition of their land claims. For many residents, acquiring and maintaining political visibility has the potential to enable access to other resources and services that could enhance their quality of life (see Chapter 4). For institutions with public authority, recognising residents' practices of political visibility can enhance their own political visibility as well as their authority over coastal landscapes (see Chapter 5). However, access to political visibility in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah remains uneven and dependent on a variety of access mechanisms including social relations, gender and rights (see Chapter 6). Through a relational analysis of the process of decentralisation in two villages of coastal Langkat, this research provides a number of insights on the themes of decentralisation, authority and access. In this concluding chapter, I present a summary of the main findings as well as highlight key contributions. I conclude by outlining limitations of the study and possible areas for future research.

7.2. Summary of findings

As outlined in Chapter 1, this thesis set out to explore how engagement in processes of devolution of land control influenced relations of authority and access in coastal villages of Langkat. The research did this by examining decentralisation in coastal Langkat as a relational process and asking why and how different social actors (in particular rural residents and institutions with public authority) engaged with opportunities and processes of devolving

land control. Moreover, it considered who within two neighbouring coastal villages is able to access these opportunities and processes and with what consequences.

A key finding of the research was that for coastal residents, alongside a want for local control of resources, the desire to be seen favourably by institutions with public authority was an important motivating factor when engaging with processes of decentralisation of resource governance. In Chapter 4, using examples of mangrove planting and tourism, the research demonstrated how these desires for, and practices of, political visibility and land control were co-dependent, informing and maintaining each other. For residents of both Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, practices of land control were an important part of strategies to gain political visibility and vice-versa. I therefore argued that visibility was not only necessary to make a claim (to land access), but equally so the maintenance of the claim (or right) was important to staying visible to institutions with public authority. Maintaining political visibility could enable coastal residents to then make other claims to various social services such as schools and hospitals.

The research also shed light on why and how institutions with public authority identified people and places for decentralising resource control. In Chapter 5, I described motivations of state and non-state institutions – state departments, NGOs, private companies and others – for participating in processes of devolution. These included opportunities to access resources from other, often more powerful institutions alongside strengthening their own authority and control. In order to successfully access these opportunities, these institutions sought populations that engaged with practices of political visibility (among other factors), seeing these populations as being willing to be governed by their rules and subject to their authority. What institutions with public authority saw as favourable subjecthood therefore had the ability to impact practices of political visibility and accordingly the consequences of devolution. Practices and strategies of political visibility could therefore inform how people

and places for devolving land control are identified and subsequently recognised. For example, in Ujung Tanah, community groups' practices and strategies of political visibility were influenced by what they – through their access to knowledge, social relations and technology (see Chapter 6) – believed institutions with public authority were looking for in land claims they would recognise and lend their support to. This guided the types of land control and related land-based livelihood activities they practiced. In Pasir Merah, a similar process nudged community groups to pursue social forestry.

In Chapter 6, I discuss how these differences in their choice of practices were also influenced by the materiality of the coast in both villages. Ribot and Peluso (2003) describe access mechanisms, processes and relations as being limited to the realm of human agency, however, this research highlighted the importance of considering other non-agentic influences on access. In particular, the differences in the materiality of the coast in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah showcased how biogeophysical factors such as seedling mortality, tidal movements and the proliferation of crustaceans impacted people's practices of political visibility and accordingly what benefits they could access via its acquisition and maintenance. Another important finding of this research is therefore the significant influence coastal materiality can have on access to political visibility and processes of decentralisation.

The research also described how the practices of political visibility can have unexpected, long-lasting and even unwanted consequences for how people live. For example, as outlined in chapters 4 and 6, acquiring access rights through social forestry permits resulted in new responsibilities for community groups, including the development of forest-based livelihoods. When applying for these permits, community groups were seeking two main things: 1) to fix their control over the land to protect other livelihood activities such as farming and fishing and prevent land abrasion and floods and 2) to appeal to different institutions that could help them maintain that control and hopefully enable access to other

goods and services. However, these new responsibilities required them to secure funding and develop alternative livelihood activities such as tourism.

In the case of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, political visibility had tangible material and relational consequences that demonstrated some of the unexpected and uneven effects of decentralisation (see Chapter 6). These included costs and risks for coastal residents such as further strengthening the authority of powerful institutions in coastal areas, a rise in conflict and competition over the coast, and for some residents, being excluded from coastal land, livelihoods and decision-making (see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of the consequences of political visibility).

Yet, political visibility also enabled those practicing it to have a say in how their local resources were governed, improving access to land and livelihoods while strengthening their local authority. In Chapter 6, I described political visibility as being both an *appeal to power* and an *act of power*. Through the exercise of their collective power, residents of Ujung Tanah and Pasir Merah identified, seized and negotiated opportunities for land control. While some groups of residents were more successful than others, by appealing to institutions with public authority, community group leaders were able to engage with these institutions and acquire support towards enabling benefits for themselves as well as other coastal residents. For example, in Pasir Merah and across other rural, coastal parts of North Sumatra, they improved access to land by drawing attention to coastal land struggles and sharing practices and strategies of local land control. Given the history of land control along this coast (see Chapter 3), this feat was routinely described as significant by residents of these two villages as well as elsewhere in North Sumatra, bringing with it the possibilities and promises for rural residents to have their rights recognised and their life chances improved.

7.3. Key contributions

This research makes a number of empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of political ecology, in particular scholarship on resource governance and state-society relations in Indonesia.

This research examines why and how different social actors are pursuing processes of decentralisation in a landscape in which opportunities to devolve authority over natural resources are rare. It does so by paying attention to the motivations, relations and practices of these different actors. In doing so, the research finds that motivations – such as the desire for political visibility – greatly influence when, how and with whom different actors engage in decentralisation. This research stresses the role these motivations and subsequent practices can play in determining the sites and subjects of decentralisation, in particular, by comparing the experiences of residents of two coastal villages in Langkat, for whom the consequences of pursuing political visibility differed. As described in Chapter 1, most research on decentralisation tends to focus on other aspects such as its rationale (Safitri 2022), policy development process (Sahide et al. 2020) and its consequences on forest conservation (Suwarno et al. 2015, Putraditama et al. 2019), local social and economic development (Rakatama and Pandit 2020, Bong et al. 2019), governance dimensions including rights recognition (Fisher et al. 2018), accountability (Erbaugh 2019, Nikijuluw 2021), and reconfigurations of political power within central and local government institutions (Sahide et al. 2016). This research highlights the importance of considering the motivations of different social actors when examining processes of decentralisation and their consequences.

Further, what distinguishes this research from other empirical studies on decentralisation is that it considers the materiality of the coast in analysing relations of access. While other scholars have noted the relevance of objects and resources on how people benefit from

things (e.g., Ginger et al. 2012, Ribot 2014, Myers 2015), few studies consider the materiality of landscapes, especially often rapidly changing ones such as coastlines. This study provides examples of how coasts – their biogeophysical properties and the effects they produce on social relations and processes – are highly dynamic and can influence access relations, producing varied consequences for coastal residents as well as institutions with public authority that are engaging in processes of decentralisation.

Moreover, this thesis' findings contribute to a theoretical reflection on the role visibility, and the pursuit of it, can play in processes of recognition and legitimation of authority. Within scholarship on the politics of recognition, visibility is considered integral to acquiring and maintaining recognition (Honneth 2001, Taylor 1994, Fraser 2001), with a lack of visibility potentially resulting in misrecognition that institutionalises social hierarchies (Fraser 2005). Furthermore, Lund (2016, 2020a) describes recognition as requiring mutual visibility between those seeking to be acknowledged by an institution with public authority and the recognising institution. However, while mutual visibility is important to enabling recognition, the concept of political visibility serves to clarify the role of power. So, while institutions with public authority and those seeking to be recognised depend on each other, those with public authority have a greater say in how the dynamic processes of recognition and legitimation play out.

Finally, the thesis demonstrates two main methodological contributions to access analyses. Firstly, this research uses situational analysis – as described in Chapter 2, this is a methodology that involves researchers constructing "a situation" empirically through the use of three relational maps: situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps. To these mapping techniques, I added access mapping, described by Ribot and Peluso (2003: 160) as "the process of identifying and mapping the mechanisms by which access is gained, maintained, and controlled". This involved identifying and mapping benefit flows, access

mechanisms that enabled the gaining, maintaining and controlling of these benefits and their distribution, and the underlying power dynamics of the identified mechanisms. I used access mapping, along with qualitative data analysis, to 1) explore the varied consequences of political visibility and land control for residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah and 2) identify the mechanisms that enabled the gaining and maintaining of access to political visibility. However, access mapping is less explicit on how to examine the power dynamics underpinning access mechanisms (Myers and Hansen 2020). Yet, when used in combination with situational analysis that outlines mapping techniques aimed at examining "key elements, materialities, discourses, structures, and conditions" (Clark 2005: xxii) in order to generate understandings of the relationalities among them (Clarke 2019), access mapping was useful in capturing how power mediates relations between different social actors, and in turn, their access to rural, coastal land in Langkat.

Secondly, this research drew on the theory of access developed by Ribot and Peluso (2003) – alongside understandings of exclusion (Hall et al. 2011), frontier-making and territorialisation (Peluso and Lund 2011, Rasmussen and Lund 2018) – to first analyse land access and then political visibility. By analysing access to both political visibility and land, the research also examined how access to one can inform access to the other, enabling successful claims to resources and recognition. For example, for coastal residents of Pasir Merah, acquiring political visibility increased their access to rights-based mechanisms in the form of social forestry permits. This in turn enabled them to maintain their control over coastal land. Moreover, as described in chapters 4 and 6, the entangled nature of processes of political visibility and land (or potentially other resource) control mean that the pursuing of one can result in the acquiring of the other. Political visibility could therefore be a benefit of land control and vice-versa. By considering two objects of analysis, this research demonstrates the flexibility and broad scope of the theory of access (Ribot and Peluso 2003),

in particular its capacity to be used to examine access relations between two or more objects of inquiry.

7.4. Future research

In this concluding section, I present a few final reflections, highlighting areas neglected by this thesis as well as possible future areas of research based on the context of coastal land struggles in Langkat and elsewhere today.

I conducted this research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted residents of Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah in many ways. When the pandemic first began, and lockdowns were instituted, many of the farmer-fishers that depended on their fish catch to sustain themselves and their families were no longer able to go out to sea. Those who were members of community groups were also no longer able to guard the land they had collectively struggled to control. For example, one of the community groups with a social forestry permit lost over 50% of the mangroves they planted to residents of nearby villages who themselves were trying to make a living amidst pandemic-related restrictions (NGO02c). Community groups with tourism projects also lost out on what had previously been an important source of income (Pak Bayu, UT02). These changes might likely affect coastal residents' strategies and practices for maintaining political visibility, highlighting how temperamental opportunities for land control can be. Relatedly, how the risks and consequences of political visibility are distributed amongst rural coastal populations might have also been impacted by the pandemic, which in many other contexts further marginalised the rural poor (Mehta et al. 2022, Simula et al. 2021).

For many in Pasir Merah and Ujung Tanah, their practices of political visibility were dependent on the interests of institutions with public authority and on state power. However, practices of visibility might look very different in different contexts and timeframes. For example, populations often considered less favourably by institutions with

public authority might seek different kinds of (in)visibility (Scott 2009, Rubis and Theriault 2019). The same research questions on devolving land control might therefore reveal different dynamics in upland areas of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, this research could have benefitted from focusing on other questions related to the motivations of rural coastal residents. For example, it could have paid more attention to interest in, and access to, political visibility and land control across generational lines, in particular how the aspirations of young people living in rural areas might have influenced their (dis)engagement in processes of devolution (White 2015, Hall et al. 2015).

Moreover, since I completed data collection for this research, the Indonesian government has introduced several regulations that are shifting away from devolution and pulling authoritative power back to the centre. For example, the Jobs Creation Law (11/2020) has moved permit-granting for economic activities and planning of the use of coastal areas and the sea from district and regional to national government agencies (Talib et al. 2022). It is unclear how these new laws will impact land control along the coast, especially considering increasing interest in land-based climate change mitigation activities such as blue carbon forestry (Zeng et al. 2021, Macreadie et al. 2022). This raises further questions worthy of research, such as whether struggles for recognition that rely on processes of state-led decentralisation can enable long-lasting liberation.

In this thesis, I argue that exploring motivations for engagement in processes of devolving resource governance is important to understanding how different actors negotiate relations of authority and access. The findings and analysis presented in this thesis shine light on how a desire for political visibility can drive engagement with (more and less equitable) processes of resource access that involve negotiations of authority between different social actors. By providing a relational analysis in which the perspectives of rural, coastal residents are prioritised, the thesis therefore demonstrates how the concept of political visibility can

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enable a more nuanced understanding of how relations with the state and other powerful

institutions, alongside intra-village dynamics, can influence processes of devolution,

authority and land control.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guides

The following two interview guides were used to provide myself with prompts during interviews with coastal residents and institutions with public authority. Research participants were not necessarily asked all questions nor asked questions in the sequence below. After introducing the research and requesting consent to participate, I would begin by asking a more open-ended question such as "Could you tell me about this land?" referring to the parcel of land under discussion. Follow-up questions would depend on their response and the prompts outlined below. If a research participant approached me for an interview, I would begin by introducing the research and then asking them what it is they would like to discuss and why, using the below prompts as needed.

Interview guide for coastal residents

Time, Date, Place, Name (code)

Introduction	1. Introduce self: independent, PhD student - thesis, not working at any NGO
	2. Introduce research: "*we are trying to understand mangrove planting and other coastal land projects you might know of or be involved with and how they is affecting how land is used and controlled in Langkat*"
	3. Please think of this as a two-way conversation – we are here to learn
	4. Consent to participate – approx. 1 hour, we can break anytime or speak for longer if you would like
	5. Consent to record? – ensure confidentiality and anonymity
	6. Interview data to be used in a PhD thesis and potentially other academic writing
Brief profile (post-interview)	Age | Gender | Family size | Primary occupation | How long have you lived here? | Land access/use within + outside the village | Mangrove restoration or other coastal land project involvement

Note: avoid asking 'do you think' / 'do you remember' questions; avoid verbally and non-verbally reinforcing responses; the key is to listen - ask for further details + examples/stories

Pay attention to
History: land use, access and control (institutions, practices, policies, KEY EVENTS)
WHAT, HOW, WHEN, WHERE: **Land control practices + strategies** (discursive + material)
(*custom, established practice, law, needs*)
WHO, WHY (benefit distribution): **Networks/Alliances**
HOW: Claim-making and legitimation

QUESTIONS

The site

Could you please tell us about the mangrove planting or clearing here?
How did it begin? Why now, why here? Previous land use? Land tenure? Did you previously use the land - how?
Who initiated the planting/clearing? Who are involved (genders, ages, abilities)? Funding?

Involvement

How did you hear about the project and related land claim? How did you participate? Why - motivations, aspirations, expectations? What was your experience like with others involved?
Who made decisions about the activities on the land (e.g., planting? How to plant, which species, where, why? Who did the planting?) What was your role? Could you tell us about your experience undertaking the activities? What <u>do you think</u> about the activities?

Consequences

Current land uses? What <u>do you think</u> about these uses? Could you tell us how these changes came about?
Has your access to and use of the land changed since the planting/clearing – How? Has your access to and use of the surrounding landscape changed since the planting/clearing – How?
Could you tell us about any changes you might have experienced on the land? Ecological/others? Expected changes?

Other comments

Are there any other coastal land projects in the village?
Has there been land lost / gained anywhere in the village?

<u>Debriefing</u>: Thank you for taking the time to share with us. We ensure everything will remain confidential. Again, thank you for this opportunity. If you have any further questions/comments, please contact me (<u>CONTACT DETAILS)</u>

Interview guide for representatives of institutions

Time, Date, Place, Name (code)

Introduction	1. Introduce self: independent, PhD student - thesis, not working at any NGO
	2. Introduce research: "*we are trying to understand mangrove planting and other coastal land projects you might know of or be involved with and how they is affecting how land is used and controlled in Langkat*"
	3. Remind why you are approaching them for an interview
	4. Please think of this as a two-way conversation – we are here to learn
	5. Consent to participate – approx. 1 hour, we can break anytime or speak for longer if you would like

	6. Consent to record? – ensure confidentiality and anonymity
	7. Interview data to be used in a PhD thesis and potentially other academic writing
Brief profile	Age | Gender | Primary occupation | Mangrove / other coastal land project involvement

Note: avoid asking 'do you think' / 'do you remember' questions; avoid verbally and non-verbally reinforcing responses; the key is to listen - ask for further details + examples/stories

Pay attention to
History: land use, access and control (institutions, practices, policies, KEY EVENTS)
WHAT, HOW, WHEN, WHERE: **Land control practices + strategies** (discursive + material)
(*custom, established practice, law, needs*)
WHO, WHY (benefit distribution): **Networks/Alliances**
HOW: Claim-making and legitimation

QUESTIONS

The site

Could you please tell us about the mangrove planting or clearing here?
How did it begin? Why now, why here? Previous land use? Land tenure? Did your institution previously use or control the land - how?
Who initiated the planting/clearing? Who are involved (genders, ages, abilities)? Funding?

Involvement

How did you hear about this project and related land claim? How and when did your institution participate? Why - motivations, aspirations, expectations? What was your experience like with community groups and other institutions involved?
Who made decisions about the activities on the land (e.g., planting? How to plant, which species, where, why? Who did the planting?) What was your role? Could you tell us about your experience undertaking the activities? What do you think about the activities?

Consequences

Current land uses? What do you think about these uses?
Access/Control: Could you tell us how this land use changed? How was the land claimed?
Has your involvement in this site changed how you approach your other work along the coast – How?
Could you tell us about any changes you might have observed since your involvement with this site? Expected?

Other comments

Are there any other coastal land projects that you're involved in in Langkat?

Debriefing: Thank you for taking the time to share with us. We ensure everything will remain confidential. Again, thank you for this opportunity. If you have any further questions/comments, please contact me (CONTACT DETAILS)

Appendix B: List of institutions interviewed

Institution	Interview reference code
Forest Management Unit, Stabat / *Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan Wilayah I Stabat*	KPH01, KPH02
Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Langkat / *Dinas Kelautan dan Perikanan Kabupaten Langkat*	DKP01
Advice and Germination Section, Regional Forestry Service, North Sumatra / *Seksi Penyuluhan dan Perbenihan, Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara*	DisHut01
Law Enforcement Section, Regional Forestry Service, North Sumatra / *Seksi Penegakan Hukum, Dinas Kehutanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara*	DisHut02
Regional Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, North Sumatra / *Dinas Kelautan dan Perikanan Provinsi Sumatera Utara*	DisLaut01
Regional Department of Culture and Tourism, North Sumatra / *Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Provinsi Sumatera Utara*	DisPariwisata01
Social Forestry and Environmental Partnership Agency, Sumatra / *Balai Perhutanan Sosial Dan Kemitraan Lingkungan Wilayah Sumatera*	BPSKL01, BPSKL02
Watershed Management and Forest Protection Agency, North Sumatra / *Balai Pengelolaan Daerah Aliran Sungai dan Hutan Lindung Wampu Sei Ular*	BPDAS01, BPDAS02
Conservation of Natural Resources Agency, North Sumatra / *Balai Besar Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam Sumatera Utara* (None of the land in Pasir Merah or Ujung Tanah is classified as Conservation Forest, which is the category of state forest that falls under the jurisdiction of this institution)	BBKSDA01
The Forestry Fund or the Center for Forest Development Financing / *Badan Layanan Umum Pusat Pembiayaan Pembangunan Hutan*	BLU01
Regional Development Planning Agency, North Sumatra / Badan Perencanaan dan Pembangunan Daerah (Bappeda) Provinsi Sumatera Utara	BAPPEDA01
Regional Police Department, North Sumatra / Kepolisian Daerah Sumatra Utara	POLDA01
Indonesian Navy, Langkat / Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) Angkatan Laut (AL) Kabupaten Langkat	TNI-AL01
State-owned company (oil and gas)	PT01
Private company (bank)	PT02

NGO (mangrove conservation/restoration)	NGO01a, NGO01b, NGO01c
NGO (environment/land reform)	NGO02a, NGO02b, NGO02c
NGO (women's rights/health)	NGO03
NGO (mangrove restoration)	NGO04
Fishers' union	FUN01
Public university (based in North Sumatra)	UNI01
Public university (Java-based)	UNI02
Political party	PP01
Ex-politician who occupies coastal land in Ujung Tanah	PP02

Appendix C: Categories of institutions not interviewed

This appendix serves as an explanation for why some categories of institutions with public authority were not included in this research despite being identified by research participants and featuring in situational analysis maps.

1. One-off funding providers: Some institutions donated money, recorded mangrove planting or other activities as a one-off event and did not develop any further relations in the village or with other institutions involved in similar activities. Other than photo evidence of these events, it was often difficult to identify individuals to interview at these institutions. This list includes an array of institutions including the police, religious groups and others. Wherever possible, I identified and interviewed representatives at these institutions. However, since these were single planting events and these institutions were not involved in decisions regarding planting or land claim practices, some of them proved difficult to identify nor did I consider it necessary to seek them out.

2. *Preman* groups [violent gangs] and land grabbers: I chose not to conduct interviews with *preman* groups or with private businessmen from nearby cities that grabbed village land to develop palm oil plantations and aquaculture ponds. Residents of the two villages had struggled for close to a decade to gain some control over the coast, with some risking their lives in the process. While it is possible that these private businessmen and *preman* groups would have agreed to talk to me, I did not think it was appropriate to interview them. However, in addition to interviews with residents and various institutions involved in coastal land struggles, I also drew on relevant news articles (including some that discussed a *preman* group that initiated mangrove planting in Pasir Merah).

3. Institutions outside North Sumatra: Given my research scope, institutions that conducted similar coastal projects outside North Sumatra as well as those involved in national policymaking were not included in my analysis. Across the thesis, I focused on dynamics between individuals/institutions involved in coastal land control in the two villages and/or within the region. All interviews were therefore conducted with institutions working within North Sumatra, including one Java-based university involved in research aimed at assisting with developing mangrove-based livelihoods and social forestry applications across Indonesia including in Pasir Merah.

4. Donors: I did not interview any international funding institutions, but only conducted repeated interviews with implementing partners, all of which were Indonesian NGOs based in North Sumatra. This is partly because NGOs were hesitant for me to speak to their international donors. Many of these are NGOs with relatively few members of staff, most of whom had precarious jobs that were heavily donor-dependent. They therefore requested I anonymise them and not interview their donors in case it affected their funding/income. My agreement to do so enabled us to have more open and candid discussions about the projects they implemented.

5. Other institutions: I was also unable to interview anyone at 2 NGOs, 1 Java-based university as well as the regional office of the *Kementerian Agraria dan Tata Ruang*

(ATR/BPN). There was no to limited interaction between individuals from these institutions with residents of the villages, making it difficult to identify appropriate interviewees. Additionally, all these institutions worked along with other external institutions whose representatives I did interview.