

Ironic Survival

Alex Mahuze is a Malind tribesman and a sago farmer in Merauke. His clan has for generations lived in harmony with nature. The arrival of the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) program has forced him to earn money through other means, which ironically harms the environment. He lost his lands and his culture is threatened, but Alex fights on. The word 'mahuze' in the Malind language means 'sago tree', and the starch which is washed out of its fibre makes up their staple diet. Alex has a traditional duty to protect the sago, but his land has been taken without negotiation or compensation and all the sago trees have been cut down. Now Alex is forced to mine sand from the beach, which is causing erosion and environmental damage. The workers on the MIFEE project are brought in and Alex is now worried about going hungry and his future survival after losing his main food source.

One of the aims of MIFEE is to increase Indonesia's food security, but it is actually making the traditional Malind people more hungry. Alex describes himself as one of the 'little' people who are powerless against the thirty six companies that have been given permission to destroy over one million hectares of forest to grow plantations. There are many people like him who are suffering at the hands of Indonesian government policy. There is nothing they can do but, ironically, add to the destruction of their environment by mining sand.

Issues: palm oil, land rights, environment, rainforest destruction, industrial agriculture

Talking points

- 1 Do you think that the benefits that Indonesia will receive from large scale economic development like MIFEE outweigh the harm that is being inflicted on people like Alex?
- 2 Do you think that the MIFEE companies should be forced to hire local workers like Alex so he gains some benefit from the project, or should companies be able to hire who they like?
- 3 Do you think that saving rainforests and traditional cultures is more important than alleviating the grinding poverty of Indonesia's poorest people? How might both be achieved?

