

Climate Disinformation in Malaysia: Appropriating Indigenous Peoples' Entitlements



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Asia Centre

2026

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PREFACE

Asia Centre is pleased to present the report ***Climate Disinformation in Malaysia: Appropriating Indigenous People's Entitlements***, produced in partnership with International Media Support (IMS). This publication is part of a broader series assessing the impact of climate disinformation on Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The series comprises one baseline study for each country and a regional report.

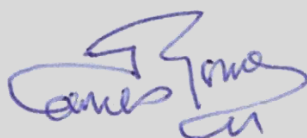
It unpacks the information disorder to identify the specific forms of climate disinformation and their corresponding impact on IPs' agency, identities and rights to protect their natural environment. The report provides targeted recommendations for a range of stakeholders, including the international community, INGOs, governments, local civil society organisations, IPs, the media and technology companies.

Climate disinformation is an increasingly pressing issue in the Asia-Pacific, emerging alongside the broader rise of disinformation that is taking place both online and offline. In the case of climate disinformation, both digital and offline channels spread false environmental narratives whose intent is to deceive the public, distort climate discourse, and weaken inclusive and effective responses to climate change and deforestation. Disinformation, deforestation, and IPs' rights have each been individually studied at national and international levels; however, the impact of climate disinformation on IPs' ability to respond to climate change remains under-researched. This forms the rationale for this project.

The dissemination of climate disinformation is particularly concerning for IPs, who often reside in forested areas most affected by these crises and are therefore disproportionately exposed to the environmental, social and political threats they pose. This is where this series makes a meaningful contribution. It examines how climate disinformation circulates – both online through mass and social media and offline – through community-level interactions. It assesses both the direct consequences, such as exclusion from climate discourse, forced evictions, criminalisation, intimidation, physical violence and the broader contextual factors that enable such outcomes. In doing so, the series enhances understanding of how climate disinformation undermines Indigenous communities' ability to respond to climate change.

Asia Centre hopes that this report – and the others in the series – will, through the lens of climate disinformation, offer the international community, national governments, and local stakeholders a range of ideas on how to protect the environment and, in doing so, help secure the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

Sincerely,



Dr James Gomez
Regional Director
Asia Centre

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Malaysia, the concept of *Bumiputera*, established following the declaration of the Malaysian state, grants a “special position” to both Malay-Muslims and the long-marginalised Indigenous *Orang Asals* as natives of the land. Comprising approximately 11% of the population (3.56 million) ([International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2025](#)), *Orang Asals* meet the internationally recognised human rights concept of “Indigenous Peoples (IPs)” due to their distinct cultural and forest-based systems, while Malay-Muslims do not due to their political dominance.

Nevertheless, over the years following independence, Malay-Muslims have been positioned as the primary “Indigenous” group and, thereby, the state’s rightful owners. Two factors underpin this exclusionary framework: (1) elevating the Malay-Muslim identity as the national norm, and (2) using capitalist modernisation models that conflict with *Orang Asal* cultures. A product of such ideology, government efforts like the New Economic Policy – ostensibly benefitting all “Indigenous” groups – in practice deny the substantive rights of the *Orang Asal*. Ultimately, such appropriation of IPs’ inherent entitlements has legitimised Malay-Muslims’ legal privileges and control over *Orang Asal* lands, and limited IPs’ access to rightful protections.

Climate disinformation, spread by state-aligned media, entrenches this power imbalance by obscuring the true environmental and social impacts of development and falsely promoting “green” efforts. This report analyses how such narratives sustain exploitation, resulting in the exacerbation of the appropriation of *Orang Asals*’ protections and rights.

The research makes three key contributions. First, it identifies four distinct forms of climate disinformation. The first three constitute types of “climate delayism”, while the fourth is a manifestation of “climate denialism”.

- Greenwashing reframes corporate-led projects as “sustainable” or “carbon-neutral”, thereby diverting attention away from the negative ecological and social costs of these initiatives on IPs.
- False climate solutions, such as REDD+ carbon offsets and hydropower dams, are promoted as genuine climate mitigation attempts, despite causing continued deforestation and displacement of IPs.
- Appeals to well-being justify extractive projects as essential for economic growth, improving livelihoods and poverty alleviation. This narrative obscures how these projects exacerbate ecological harms and the dispossession of IPs.
- Denial of deforestation narratives, spread by state-aligned media, deliberately inflate stable forest covers and “sustainable logging” data. This severs the correlation of state encroachment with forest loss, eroding accountability to legitimise the conversion of ancestral lands for commercial gain.

Second, it demonstrates how such forms of climate disinformation impact IPs in four ways, each legitimising the Malay-Muslim-led state institutions in appropriating IPs’ entitlements:

1. Excluding IPs from decision-making for development projects and climate mitigation efforts, by rejecting significant input from IPs on the use of their land.

2. Displacing IPs from ancestral lands and reinforcing the state's authority over IPs' land, resulting in land rights violations and forced evictions.
3. Exacerbating structural inequalities of IPs, with pro-development narratives omitting their worsening well-being and forced reliance on low-wage jobs for survival, further entrenching their socio-economic marginalisation.
4. The suppression of IPs' resistance in Malaysia through criminalisation, intimidation and violence, with climate disinformation framing their calls for accountability as illegal or obstacles to official enforcement efforts.

Third, the report outlines a set of recommendations for key stakeholders to start addressing climate disinformation and its impacts on IPs in Malaysia.

- UN bodies should integrate the issue of climate disinformation into human rights monitoring and climate action mechanisms, while ensuring Malaysia complies with its international commitments.
- The Malaysian government must strengthen protections and ensure genuine participation for IPs in policymaking, alongside a transparent and accountable environmental governance, which includes safeguards against climate disinformation.
- International NGOs should collaborate with Indigenous groups to map climate disinformation, develop joint responses, offer sustained capacity-building and financial aid and support advocacy/strategic litigation to defend IPs' rights.
- Civil society organisations should monitor anti-Indigenous disinformation, co-develop counter-narratives and educational resources with IP groups for broader awareness and increase legal aid access for those affected.
- The media sector should prioritise in-depth, solutions-oriented reporting on climate, environment and IPs' issues. This includes increasing coverage in IPs' languages and formats, collaborating with IP organisations for fact-checking/disinformation monitoring and amplifying IPs' voices globally.
- Tech companies must improve content moderation for climate disinformation and fund digital literacy/connectivity for rural and Indigenous communities.
- Indigenous communities should establish local disinformation monitoring, partner with independent/Indigenous media, build capacity and use digital tools to amplify voices and safeguard traditional knowledge.

These recommendations seek to support more inclusive and evidence-informed climate governance. They call for multi-stakeholder engagement to respond to the urgent need to reimagine climate governance grounded in justice, diversity and full recognition of IP self-determination. Addressing climate disinformation and its impacts in Malaysia is inseparable from confronting the broader appropriation of IPs' entitlements. A more balanced approach should restore IP rights for all, recognise their stewardship of natural resources and prioritise genuine participation in governance. Ensuring equitable governance will be key to rebuilding trust, reducing structural inequalities and promoting inclusive sustainable development for all communities.

ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DWNP	Department of Wildlife and National Parks
EUDR	European Union Deforestation Regulation
FDPM	The Department of Forestry
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FPIC	Free, Prior and Informed Consent
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
IP	Indigenous Peoples
JAKOA	Department of Orang Asli Development
KII	Key Informant Interview
MPOC	Malaysia Palm Oil Council
MSPO	Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Scheme
MTCC	Malaysian Timber Certification Council
MTCS	Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme
NEP	New Economic Policy
ORACO	Pahang Orang Asli Corporation
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation In Developing Countries
RPS	Rancangan Pembangunan Masyarakat
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the widespread distribution of climate disinformation is actively reinforcing existing hierarchies amongst the *Bumiputera*. This occurs because the political dominance and the “Indigeneity” of Malay-Muslims are strategically conflated with the human rights framework of “Indigenous Peoples (IPs)”, a designation intended for non-dominant groups. This conflation effectively legitimises the privileges of the Malay-Muslims over IPs, cemented by Malay nationalist ideas. As a result, the interests of Malay-Muslims are protected, while the rightful entitlements accorded to IPs as marginalised populations are appropriated by the dominant Malay-Muslims, hindering the provision of genuine rights and needed protections for IPs. To comprehensively assess the impacts, this report analyses the role of climate disinformation in perpetuating this appropriation to identify solutions. This chapter begins by providing context on the situation of IPs, the threats posed by climate change and deforestation, the digitalisation of the media and the rise of disinformation in Malaysia.

1.1. Methodology

The research for this report consisted of three phases: desk research, field research and review. First, desk research was conducted between August to October 2025 to examine the state of IPs, climate change, media landscape and climate disinformation in Malaysia. The research was instrumental in defining terms and themes, framing the study’s scope and identifying knowledge gaps. It drew on a range of primary and secondary sources in Malay and English, including international and national legal frameworks, national development and climate strategies and reports by international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and media outlets.

Second, during the field research phase, the Asia Centre team conducted 10 online key informant interviews (KIIs) between October to November 2025 to address knowledge gaps identified in the first phase. Respondents¹ were Malay, Chinese and/or English speakers and included representatives from Indigenous communities and Indigenous CSOs as well as professionals from the media and academic sectors (see Annexe I for respondent profiles).

Third, following desk research and interviews, a first draft was sent by the Asia Centre team to IMS for an initial review on 20 October 2025. Following the feedback received on 31 October 2025, Asia Centre conducted an FGD on 22 October 2025. Following the national convening on 7 January 2026, to present and validate the key findings, Asia Centre incorporated feedback from the convening for the finalisation of the report.

Key Terms

False information can be understood through three interrelated concepts: **Misinformation**, **Disinformation** and **Malinformation**. The key difference between them lies in **falsity** and the **intent** to deceive.

Misinformation, in contrast, involves the sharing of false or misleading content without the intent to deceive; those sharing it may genuinely believe the information to be true (*Ibid.*)

Disinformation refers to false information that is intentionally created and spread to mislead or manipulate audiences (*UNDP, 2022*).

¹ The identities of the respondents has been anonymised due to safety and security reasons.

Malinformation, while based on real information, is shared with harmful intent, often by distorting context, exposing private data, or weaponising facts to undermine individuals or groups (*Ibid.*).

Climate disinformation is deliberately false content spread to mislead people about climate change and deforestation for political, financial, or ideological gain by those with vested interests in denying its reality or impacts (*UNDP, 2025*).

1.2. Background

This section examines two key elements that shape the impact of climate disinformation on IPs in Malaysia. First, it provides an overview of IP communities, including their demographic distribution, geographical concentration, livelihoods and their legal entitlements that have been appropriated. Second, it highlights how climate change and deforestation threaten IPs' livelihoods since they inhabit the country's most forested and ecologically vulnerable regions.

1.2.1. Indigenous Peoples in Malaysia

In 2024, Malaysia's total population reached 34.2 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). According to the most recent census conducted in 2020, IPs – collectively referred to as Orang Asals ("Original People") – make up approximately 11% (3.56 million) of the population (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 2025).

Due to Malaysia's geographic diversity, it is important to distinguish between IPs in Peninsular Malaysia and those in East Malaysia (the states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo island). IPs in East Malaysia are often called *Dayak* or *Orang Ulu* ("Natives") and make up over 90% of the IP population in the country. Sabah has the largest IP population collectively known as *Anak Negeri* ("Children of the Land"), including major communities such as *Kadazan-Dusun*, *Murut*, *Paitan* and *Bajau* (*Minority Rights, 2023*). IPs in Sarawak include groups such as the *Iban*, *Bidayuh* and *Orang Ulu* subgroups like *Kenyah*, *Kelabit* and *Penan* (*Ibid.*). IPs in Peninsular Malaysia (known as *Orang Asli* ("First Peoples")) account for a much smaller proportion of the Peninsular Malaysia population compared to East Malaysia. The majority of them live in the states of Pahang, Perak, Selangor and Kelantan (Indigenous Navigator, 2020). The *Senoi* is the largest sub-group (IWGIA, 2025), followed by Proto-Malay and Negrito (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019; Asli, 2021).

Region	State	Number of IP Groups	Population		
			Total	Share of State Population	Share of Country Population
Peninsular	-	18 (<i>IWGIA, 2025</i>)	20,677 (<i>IWGIA, 2023</i>)	0.8%	0.6%
East Malaysia	Sabah	39 (<i>IWGIA, 2025</i>)	2.1 million (<i>IWGIA, 2025</i>)	62%	5.9%
	Sarawak	26 (<i>Minority Rights, 2023</i>)	1.2 million (<i>IWGIA, 2025</i>)	40%	3.4%

There is a broad diversity in the religious beliefs of IPs in the country. In Peninsular Malaysia, the majority (70%) adhere to animism, with smaller percentages practising Islam (15-20%) and Christianity (10%) (Minority Rights Group, 2018). East Malaysia presents different religious landscapes. In Sarawak, Christian *Dayaks* form a significant portion of the IP community, with Christianity being the most common religion (50.1%), followed by Islam (34.2%) (Sintang, 2024). Conversely, Sabah's IP population is predominantly Muslim (69.59%), with Christianity practised by 24.7% of the population (Ibid.).

IPs in Malaysia essentially rely on forests, serving as crucial resources for both sustenance and the maintenance of cultural practices across various communities (Dhir, 2015). In Peninsular Malaysia, forests are vital for agriculture, hunting and the collection of non-timber forest products, which contribute about a quarter of the average household income of IP communities (Saifulla et al., 2021; Saifullah et al., 2018). Similar patterns of dependence are observed in East Malaysia, where groups like the *Dayak* integrate shifting cultivation and rice farming with forest gathering (Sada et al., 2019). Communities such as the *Penan*, historically nomadic hunter-gatherers, continue to rely on the forest environment for food, tools and medicine (BBC, 2014).

Malaysia ratified key international treaties supporting the rights of IPs, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) in 1995 and signed on to the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007) in 2007.

However, the country has yet to ratify key human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1965) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965).² Furthermore, there are ongoing concerns regarding Malaysia's compliance with its international obligations in protecting IPs. Recommendations in Universal Periodic Reviews of Malaysia have consistently urged the country to ratify International Labour Organisation Convention No. 169 (UN, 2013; 2024) to ensure IPs' involvement in policy-making, particularly concerning customary lands, and to implement national frameworks respecting UNDRIP and IP rights (UN, 2013; 2019; 2024). The Special Rapporteur on health emphasised IPs' access to health information and decision-making (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015). The Special Rapporteur on cultural rights highlighted upholding IPs' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for customary land and preserving Indigenous knowledge (UN, 2019).

These international-level concerns reflect the challenges faced by IPs in Malaysia. Centrally, these stem from the misuse of Indigenous definitions to preserve Malay-Muslim privileges, which translates to the appropriation of Indigenous entitlements from IPs.

This process of appropriation is rooted in the historical construction of the *Bumiputera* concept. During decolonisation and the formation of the Malaysian state in 1963, *Bumiputera* (lit. "Sons of the Soil") was introduced as a decolonial concept and category encompassing Malays and Indigenous natives, intended to consolidate the position of local inhabitants (as the rightful owners of the land) as compared to British authority and migrant populations (Sekharan, 2024).

However, while Malaysia formally recognises "Indigenous" groups through the category of *Bumiputera*, this construct diverges significantly from international understandings of "Indigenous Peoples" as a human rights concept (UN General Assembly, 2025). Under the UN's working definition, Indigenous Peoples are "non-dominant sectors of society" who maintain distinct cultural, legal and territorial systems across generations (IWGIA, 2025). As the politically, economically, and socially dominant group in Malaysia, Malay-Muslims do not meet this definition, but nevertheless are grouped as the

² The proposed ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2018 faced heavy opposition due to concerns it would undermine Malay-Muslim privileges (Jalli et al., 2022), which many considered a "sensitive" political issue in the country.

country's Indigenous population. Furthermore, the term also initially excluded *Orang Aslis* in the peninsula altogether,³ and they were only officially recognised as *Bumiputera* in the 1991 census (Sekharan, 2024).⁴

This conflation of definitions operates alongside – and is reinforced by – the ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). National political discourse consistently frames Malays as the “original” and “rightful owners” of the land, effectively equating Malay identity with the state itself (Ibrahim, 2021). These exclusions persist despite Article 8(1) of the Constitution guaranteeing equality before the law, resulting in a hierarchy within the *Bumiputera* category that privileges Malay-Muslims over other Indigenous groups (Ibrahim, 2021). A Focus Group Discussion took note of this blurring of basic rights and privileges (FGD02):

“When a country is flooded with multiple races, the majority group gets a national urge to protect their rights. The issue is where the line ends. We must distinguish between basic rights and privilege. The privileges Malay Muslims receive due to Bumiputeraism takes away the basic rights of other races...the system did not evolve with the population; it stayed where they had to protect the majority from other races [during decolonisation] (FGD02)”

Over the years, this divergence has enabled successive Malay-Muslim-led governments to appropriate the language of Indigeneity, as well as legal and policy frameworks originally intended to protect IP communities. Malay-Muslim privileges are reframed as Indigenous entitlements, while genuine IPs are relegated to peripheral or conditional beneficiaries. This creates a structural loophole in which Indigenous recognition exists without meaningful rights protection and uplifting.

This appropriation is institutionalised most clearly through legal and institutional frameworks. The Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954), governing the *Orang Asli*, grants only rights of occupation or use – explicitly excluding ownership – and allows for state revocation. The National Land Code (1965) does not recognise customary land rights, while land legislation in Sabah (1930) and Sarawak (1958) similarly fails to guarantee self-determination or Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for the IPs. By contrast, Malay reservations enjoy statutory protection through registered titles and deeds. This asymmetry has enabled widespread land dispossession. *Tanah Adat* (customary land) is frequently treated as unoccupied or unregistered, rendering it vulnerable to expropriation (Sekharan, 2024). Non-gazetted customary lands are routinely reclassified for logging, agriculture or development without FPIC, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia (Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2021). This legal grey area facilitates illegal encroachment and commercial exploitation, including oil palm and rubber plantations, often justified through “national development” and *Bumiputera*-uplifting imperatives (Friends of the Earth International, 2020; Ruiqi, 2022).

The consequences of appropriation are also evident in political representation. While Indigenous political parties exist in East Malaysia, national politics remain dominated by Malay-led and Malay-focused parties (Sekharan, 2024). In Peninsular Malaysia, the *Orang Asli* lacked parliamentary

³ The original definition of *Bumiputera* had only included the Malay-Muslims and “the natives of Sabah and Sarawak”. The concession to include the latter was only made due to the size of the Indigenous population in these two states, compared to the *Orang Aslis* in the peninsular region, which was not included in the original definitions.

⁴ Though even today, national registration systems often categorise them as *lain-lain* (“others”), rather than explicitly recognising their identity (Keng, 2011).

representation until 2019, when Ramli Mohd Nor became the first Orang Asli Member of Parliament (*Ibid.*). This disparity illustrates how formal inclusion under *Bumiputera* has not translated into meaningful political power for all Indigenous groups.

The New Cultural Policy and the New Economic Policy introduced in the 1970s further entrench this imbalance. The New Cultural Policy established *Malay-ness* and Islam as the principal norms and practices of national discourse (*Ibrahim, 2021*). As a result, the *Orang Asal* are marginalised as “non-state peoples” for not aligning with the Malay race and/or the Islamic faith (*Bulan, 1998; Ibrahim, 2021*). New Economic Policy, while framed as a poverty-eradication strategy across ethnic groups, similarly entrenched a Malay-Muslim-centric *Bumiputeraism* as a core pillar of development (*Ibid.*). Over time, this identity shaped economic, social and educational policies that distribute privileges based on state-defined Indigeneity for the Malay-Muslims, rather than seeking to address vulnerability and historical dispossession of the IPs (*Mason & Omar, 2003*).

Challenges to this structure are routinely framed as “politically sensitive” and as threats to Malay-Muslim protections, reinforcing the perception that questioning *Bumiputeraism* undermines the foundations of the state itself. As highlighted in an FGD (01):

“Based on what we experience as Malay-Muslims, the line between privilege and right is very thin. It's human nature: if someone gives you something, you appreciate it, even if you are taking others' benefits. Most people who are not thinking about human rights are not thinking about privilege. If I receive benefits from the government, I would not complain or question why only Bumiputeras have this privilege. Now, with ... people starting to question the privilege, most Malays [get] defensive because they see the new government as trying to protect others besides them.

We have normalised and become comfortable with [receiving privileges]. That's why if attempts to provoke that word [Bumiputera] are made, we become more aggressive and defensive (FGD01).”

Recent reforms signal limited progress. Amendments to the Aboriginal Peoples Act tabled under the 13th Malaysia Plan in 2025 mark its first major revision in 71 years and aim to strengthen *Orang Asli* rights in land, education and infrastructure (*Malaysia Madani, 2025; Hisham, 2025*). However, activists caution that vague provisions may continue to exclude broader customary lands used for hunting and foraging (*Lin, 2025*).

In sum, the appropriation of Indigeneity within Malaysia's *Bumiputera* framework systematically transfers Indigenous entitlements to the Malay-Muslim majority, while leaving IPs politically marginalised, legally insecure and culturally eroded. These structural vulnerabilities are further intensified by climate change and deforestation, given IPs' deep reliance on natural ecosystems for livelihood, medicine and identity, as explored in the following section.

1.2.2. Climate Change and Deforestation in Malaysia

Malaysia is increasingly experiencing the effects of climate change. From 1969 to 2023, average temperatures rose by 0.24°C per decade in Peninsular Malaysia, 0.14°C in Sabah and 0.13°C in Sarawak ([Malaysian Meteorological Department, 2025](#)). The country is also facing more frequent and intense extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods ([Sahani et al., 2022](#)).

As an equatorial nation with extensive low-lying coastal areas, Malaysia is also highly vulnerable to sea level rise. Between 2002 and 2024, sea levels rose by 11 centimetres ([Pandya-Wood et al., 2024](#)), and if current trends continue, up to 25% of the population (over 8 million) could be displaced ([Kasinathan, 2023](#)). A one-metre rise would lead to the loss of 180,000 hectares of agricultural land and submerge many coastal Indigenous communities ([Ehsan et al., 2018](#); [Pandya-Wood et al., 2024](#)).

Furthermore, the impacts of climate change are not experienced equally. IPs, whose lives are deeply tied to lands and natural resources, are among the most vulnerable. Their limited access to infrastructure compounds the effects of environmental shocks ([ILO, 2017](#); [Hyolo, 2024](#)). Climate change has already led to declining soil fertility and increased crop susceptibility to disease, undermining traditional subsistence farming. IPs living in remote or upland areas are also more exposed to floods and landslides ([Gevelt et al., 2019](#)). The decreasing availability of non-timber forest resources has also negatively impacted incomes while exacerbating IPs' food and water insecurity ([Daud et al., 2020](#); [Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2018](#)). This scarcity has also heightened health vulnerabilities, particularly concerning their dependence on medicinal plants ([Wiki Impact, 2022](#)).

Additionally, IP communities in Malaysia are highly vulnerable to health and livelihood risks from rising sea levels and changing rainfall patterns ([Solar, 2011](#)). Saltwater intrusion contaminates freshwater sources used for drinking and agriculture ([Ibid.](#)). Floods and droughts are intensified due to altered rainfall patterns, ranging from major fluctuations in Peninsular Malaysia to smaller variations in Sabah and Sarawak ([Ibid.](#)). This increases the incidence of vector-, water-, and food-borne diseases in rural areas. Water and sanitation service gaps persist in Kelantan, Terengganu, Sabah and Sarawak, leaving many IP communities exposed ([Ibid.](#)).

Moreover, Malaysia has experienced significant levels of deforestation, contributing to global forest loss trends. As Table 2 shows, the country ranked ninth globally in tree cover loss between 2002 and 2023 ([Global Forest Watch, 2023](#)). While illegal logging exists, these trends are largely a result of legal deforestation, with 80% of forest loss linked to the expansion of plantations for export commodities like palm oil and rubber ([Rahman et al., 2023](#); [RimbaWatch, 2024](#)).

Table 2: Tree Cover Loss in Malaysia Between 2002 and 2024⁵

Year	Primary Forest Extent Remaining	Tree Cover Loss in Kha (% of total tree cover)	Tree Cover Loss in Kha Due to Deforestation
2002	99.6%	61.8 (1.1%)	313
2005	97.8%	115 (1.3%)	375
2010	92.9%	140 (1.5%)	431
2015	87.3%	154 (1.5%)	454
2020	83.0%	73 (0.9%)	269

⁵ Data for all three indices is available from 2002, the earliest common year, to 2024, the most recent year. During the desk research, data on Tree Cover Loss Due to Deforestation was available up to May 2025, but has not been accessible since the dataset was last updated.

2023	81.6%	79.3 (1.0%)	309
2024	81.1%	68.9 (0.96%)	N/A

Source: [Global Forest Watch; 2025](#)

As shown in Table 2, the most significant forest losses in Malaysia occurred between 2002 and 2015, coinciding with the peak of agricultural expansion ([Ministry of Environment, n.d.](#)). Industry remains the primary driver of forest loss in the country ([The Borneo Project, 2023](#)). Between 2017 and 2021, the logging sector accounted for 41.6% of deforestation, while the palm oil industry contributed 15.5% during the same period ([Ibid.](#)). The situation is further compounded due to international anti-deforestation regulations, like those of the European Union, failing to classify Sarawak state as high-risk ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)).

Deforestation further degrades ecosystems by disrupting watersheds and causing soil erosion, which worsens water quality and raises flood risks ([Pimid et al., 2022](#)). Combined with climate change, these pressures have led to a sharp rise in wildfires ([WeForum, 2023](#)). One key driver is the conversion of peatlands (carbon-rich, moisture-retaining ecosystems) into monoculture plantations. Clearance and drainage of peatlands leave them highly flammable, increasing the risk of large-scale fires. This contributes to worsening haze ([Hanafi et al., 2018](#)). Between 2000 and 2019, wildfire incidents increased by 399% ([Noumer et al., 2020](#)). This threatens IPs with food and health insecurity ([Sahani et al., 2022](#)), especially with the destruction of ancestral land and natural resources ([Earth.org, 2023](#)).

In combating climate change, Malaysia has ratified major international climate agreements and adopted multiple national policies, but compliance and implementation remain weak. Internationally, Malaysia is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement (ratified in 2016). In its Fourth National Communication in 2024, it reaffirmed commitments to reduce carbon intensity by 45% by 2030 and achieve net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2050, emphasising renewable energy transition under the National Energy Transition Roadmap and sustainable forest management with community-based approaches. However, the document omitted recognition of IPs' roles ([UNFCCC, 2024](#)). In addition, progress is hindered by high costs, unclear policies and inadequate infrastructure to implement climate action ([Fernandez et al., 2024](#)).

Nationally, Malaysia has introduced several frameworks addressing climate change and deforestation. Among other plans, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025) focuses on economic, social and energy sustainability ([Food and Agriculture Organization, 2021](#)), and the National Policy on Climate Change 2.0 ([Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, 2024](#)) promotes low-emission development and stronger climate governance. Nonetheless, these frameworks face challenges from weak governance ([Piabuo et al., 2021](#)), implementation gaps between state and municipal levels ([Nahrudin et al., 2023](#)) and the limited inclusion of IP communities in climate solutions ([Eco-Business, 2024](#)).

In short, the interconnected crises of climate change and deforestation are not only environmental but also social. They place IPs at the centre of a complex struggle over land, survival, and cultural continuity, a vulnerability intensified by Malaysia's uneven legal protections and rapid economic and digital transformation, which is explained in the next section.

1.3. Malaysia's Digitalisation and Rise of Disinformation

This section explores the key drivers behind the emergence of climate disinformation in Malaysia. First, it examines the country's digital transformation, which has led to the digitalisation of the media landscape and fostered conditions that enable the spread of disinformation. Second, it investigates the

underlying causes that further fuel the spread of disinformation in Malaysia, ultimately contributing to the circulation of climate disinformation that negatively impacts IP communities in the country.

1.3.1. The Digitalisation of Media Sector

Since the rapid adoption of the internet in Malaysia, the country’s media landscape has dramatically changed. This shift is driven by the digitalisation of traditional outlets and the widespread use of social media and instant messaging apps.

Languages in Media Landscape

In Malaysia, Malay is the official language and is used by 58.4% of the population, followed by Chinese (10.7%), Tamil (3.9%), Iban (2.8%) and English (1.6%), among a total of 137 languages (Tirosh, 2021; Imminent, 2023).

Table 3: Major Malaysian Digital Media Outlets and Their Primary Publishing Languages

Astro Awani	Published predominantly in Malay, with content also available in English, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil.
Berita Harian	Published predominantly in Malay.
Bernama	Published in English, Malay, Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil.
Free Malaysia Today	Published predominantly in English and Malay.
Harian Metro	Published predominantly in Malay.
Malaysiakini	Published predominantly in English and Malay, with content also available in Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil.
Siakap Keli	Published predominantly in Malay.
Sin Chew	Published predominantly in Chinese (Mandarin).
Sinar Harian	Published predominantly in Malay.
The Star	Published predominantly in English.
Utusan Malaysia	Published predominantly in Malay.

Source: Reuters Institute, 2024.

In Malaysia, various publishing languages often convey distinct political viewpoints. Major ethnic groups, receiving news in their own languages, consume news in their main languages and on topics that reflect the respective concerns of each ethnic group (Wen et al., 2020). However, it must be noted that there still exists a diversity in opinions across the media sector, even among those reporting in the same language.

Engagement with traditional media is in sharp decline. Between 2017 and 2024, television as a primary news source fell from 60% to 40%, while print media dropped to just 17% (Reuters Institute, 2024). Public radio remains an exception with a 95% weekly access rate (Yahoo Malaysia, 2024). As reliance on traditional media declines, social media has emerged as the dominant news source, used by 65% of Malaysians in 2024 (Reuters Institute, 2024). In response, media outlets have rapidly adapted. Print, TV and radio content are increasingly offered online. For example, *Malay Mail* became fully digital in 2018

(Lim, 2018), and by 2024, 21% of Malaysians subscribed to online newspapers (Reuters Institute, 2024). Platforms like *Malaysiakini* and *Astro Awani* offer alternative viewpoints and localised content, appealing especially to younger audiences (Google, 2025).

This shift is part of Malaysia's broader digital transformation. Internet penetration (see Table 4) surged from 49% in 2005 to 71% in 2015. By 2023, internet usage reached 98% (World Bank, 2023), with Malaysia ranked 36th out of 133 countries in the Network Readiness Index⁶ (PORTULANS Institute, 2024). This also helps explain the country's high rate of social media penetration (see Table 5).

Table 4: Internet Penetration Index in Malaysia from 2000 to 2023⁷

2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023
21%	49%	56%	71%	90%	98%

Source: World Bank, 2023

Table 5: Social Media Penetration in Malaysia from 2011 to 2025⁸

Year	Social Media	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok
2011	41%	26%	N/A	–
2015	55%	32%	15%	–
2020	81%	89%	72%	21%
2025	70%	87%	52.8%	57%

Source: Kemp 2011, 2015, 2020, 2025

In Malaysia, the number of social media user identities accounts for 70.2% of the country's population (Kemp, 2025). Beyond passive consumption, Malaysians actively engage with news content, accessed and shared by 83% of Malaysians through instant messaging applications and social media as their primary source (Howe, 2024; Reuters Institute, 2024). Among these platforms, WhatsApp remains the top messaging channel, with 92.2% of users, followed by Telegram (65.3%) and Messenger (55.1%) (Kemp, 2025). Simultaneously, Facebook is the most widely used platform (Kemp, 2025). Additionally, TikTok has become particularly popular as a news source, utilised by 31% of Malaysians, along with Facebook and YouTube (Reuters Institute, 2024).

Despite high engagement levels, trust in media among Malaysians remains relatively low, at approximately 37% (Reuters Institute, 2025). Online news websites and platforms garnered the lowest confidence, with only 8% of respondents expressing trust (Ipsos, 2019). Conversely, traditional media outlets such as television and radio are considered the most reliable by a majority (72%), followed by newspapers (56%) (International Federation of Journalists, 2021). This suggests a stronger public trust in traditional media, despite being more politically aligned.

⁶ This index evaluates performance across four key dimensions: technology, people, governance and impact.

⁷ Data for 2023 is the most recent one.

⁸ Social media usage statistics in Malaysia first became available in 2011. N/A refers to the fact that respective data for each social media platform is inaccessible but does not necessarily indicate 0%. "–" refers to the fact that the platform had not been created during the survey year.

Nevertheless, the democratisation of media platforms through digitalisation has enabled IPs to challenge state narratives and control their representation (Ajani et al., 2024). Outlets like the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns disseminate IP-related news, policy updates and advocacy (ICAP Charity Day, 2015), while initiatives like the “Community Journalism Through Audio Storytelling” project supported by the Indigenous Voices in Asia Network equip Indigenous journalists with critical reporting skills on climate and socio-economic issues (Catoy, 2020; Fokno, 2025). These platforms raise awareness about land rights, environmental justice and culture. For example, the Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli project uses YouTube and TikTok to share films on environmental struggles and land rights, mobilising youth engagement (Sokong, 2024).

However, these opportunities are accompanied by challenges. One major barrier is limited internet infrastructure in rural areas, which restricts IPs’ access to digital tools and information. For example, fast mobile data access remains low in rural states like Kelantan (18.2%) and Pahang (17.3%) (Johan, 2025). Literacy also remains a constraint: while national literacy rates are high, around 70% of IPs have not completed secondary education, which can impede their ability to critically navigate digital content (Sawalludin, 2020). These structural inequalities hinder IP participation in online spaces.

Given this context, it is essential to investigate how Malaysia’s rapid digital transformation is concurrently creating an environment conducive to the proliferation of disinformation nationwide. This escalating challenge, particularly evident within the country’s burgeoning digital landscape, will be examined in the subsequent section.

1.3.2. The Rise of Disinformation

The rapid digitalisation of Malaysia’s media landscape has accelerated the spread of online disinformation. Between 2020 and 2022, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2022) received 3,285 complaints regarding fake news content. In 2024, the Commission removed 19,546 pieces of fake news content from various online platforms, including social media and 63,652 pieces of fake online content from social media (Malaysia Reserve, 2025; Marketing-Interactive, 2025). AI-generated disinformation has also increased sharply, with 1,225 pieces removed in 2024 compared to 186 in 2022 (Ibid.).

Beyond the sheer volume, disinformation in Malaysia often carries political and racial undertones. Studies show that bots and “cybertroopers” linked to government agencies and political parties amplify political, racial and religious narratives. For instance, in 2022, the emergence of the Malaysian Islamic Party and Perikatan Nasional political coalition catalysed narratives emphasising Malay-Muslim supremacy (Pusat KOMAS, 2025). Political campaigns have exploited racial fear-mongering to bolster Malay-Muslim claims over IP rights (Ibid.). This issue has been detailed in the Asia Centre’s (2022) publication *Youth and Disinformation in Malaysia: Strengthening Electoral Integrity*.

In response to growing concerns over fake news, the government launched *Sebenarnya.my* in 2017, a fact-checking portal designed to help social media users verify news reports (Freedom House, 2024). The government also launched “MyCheck Malaysia”, a fact-checking initiative, through the state-owned outlet *Bernama* (MyCheck, n.d.). However, analysts note that these platforms primarily target critics of government actions and policies, only secondarily addressing general misinformation (Schuldt, 2021; Fulcrum, 2024). This selective enforcement stifles political discourses while creating an environment where state-aligned disinformation thrives under a guise of credibility. Consequently, audiences are at a higher risk of disseminating sensational pro-state narratives rather than questioning their credibility (Mustaffa, 2025). For instance, a 2025 analysis by The Star revealed that a significant 70% of Malaysians accept online information without verification (Meikein, 2025).

Independent fact-checking initiatives seek to fill the gap. Platforms such as Malaysiakini's Kini News Lab tackle online fake news through data journalism (Malaysiakini, nd.). Additionally, JomCheck was established as Malaysia's first academia-civil society fact-checking alliance, while the department of "AFP Fact Check" has also been set up within Agence-France Presse Malaysia (AFP, nd.). Nevertheless, independent initiatives are constrained by the absence of robust and continuous mechanisms (Jalli & Jamaluddin, 2024). Agencies like MyCheck state their lack of focus on political content, creating a significant void in verifying critical political information (Ibid.). Furthermore, smaller initiatives are often seasonal, operating only during election periods (Ibid.), thus failing to address the persistent nature of disinformation.

Malaysia's restrictive legal environment further compounds the disinformation problem. Asia Centre's report *Internet Freedoms in Malaysia: Regulating Online Discourse on Race, Religion, and Royalty* tracked the restrictions through laws such as the Sedition Act (1948), Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) and Defamation Act (1957) that are frequently used to silence critics by blocking content and labelling dissenting views as "fake" or "illegal". Therefore, media investigations, publication confiscations and police summonses continue to curtail freedom of expression (Ibid.), and there is a prevalent culture of self-censorship. This legitimises the void in credible source verification, often resulting in the media reproducing official narratives instead of being critically examined. These concerns are reflected in international scores. In 2025, Malaysia scored 56.09⁹ out of 100 and ranked 161st of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index (Free Malaysia Today, 2025). In 2024, the country scored 60 out of 100, with 0 being least free and 100 most free, for Freedom on the Net, making the country "partly free" (Freedom House, 2024).

Despite Malaysians demonstrating high levels of concern over climate change (81%) (Azhari et al., 2025), weaknesses in Malaysia's information ecosystem extend to environmental and climate-related issues (UNDP, 2020). The general inaction in scrutinising narratives that either delay climate mitigation or deny the contributions of the state or corporations to the crisis inadvertently protects the reputation of perpetrators, including palm oil and rubber industries (KII03, 10; Bilu et al., 2024).

All in all, Malaysia's media and regulatory environment has created conditions that allow disinformation to thrive, including on environmental and climate issues. This environment heightens risks for IPs, who live in ecologically sensitive regions and are disproportionately affected by the consequences of climate denial and delayed action.

Chapter 1 has examined how the appropriation of Indigenous identity has worsened the struggles of IPs in Malaysia, particularly in the face of climate change and deforestation. The chapter also highlights the correlation between the rise of digital media and the spread of false information, which has made climate disinformation a major issue in the country. The next chapter outlines the key forms of climate disinformation in the Malaysian media landscape, which will serve as the foundation for the impact analysis presented in Chapter 3.

⁹ In this index, 0 means an absolute lack of media freedom and 100 means total media freedom.

2. Forms of Climate Disinformation

This chapter identifies four key forms of climate disinformation in Malaysia: greenwashing; the promotion of false climate solutions; false appeals to well-being; and the denial of deforestation narratives. The first three fall under “climate delayism”¹⁰, while the fourth – denial of deforestation narratives – is a form of “climate denialism”¹¹.

All three forms of information disorder – mis- dis- and malinformation – are relevant to the Malaysian context. Disinformation and malinformation are actively used to shape narratives and overwhelm the information environment surrounding climate change with distortions and selective truths. Misinformation, on the other hand, is benign in its intention to deceive, and its impact on climate narratives is negligible compared to the dissemination of disinformation and malinformation. In this context, the report, in Chapter 2, focuses on disinformation and malinformation. Their defining feature lies in their deceptive intent, which not only distorts facts but also undermines public trust, disrupts informed decision-making and can incite social or political harm.

2.1. Greenwashing

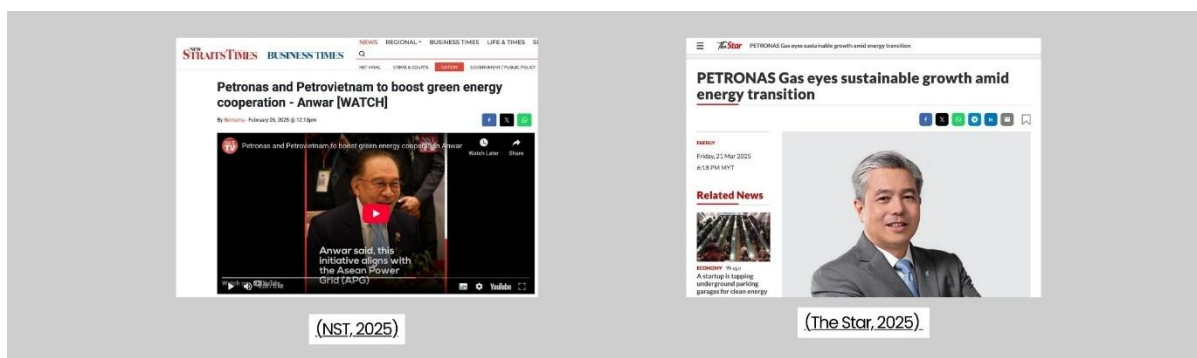
The first form of climate disinformation is greenwashing. This practice involves deliberately disseminating misleading claims to portray corporations, their business practices or their products as more environmentally friendly than they genuinely are ([Natural Resources Defense Council, 2023](#)). The primary aim is to deceive the public and postpone climate mitigation efforts (“climate delayism”) by improving public perception and hiding damaging practices ([UN, n.d.](#)). In Malaysia, corporate actors make false or misleading claims of environmental responsibility to defend their reputation (KII03). Their claims manifest as both disinformation and malinformation by selectively using scientific facts out of context to obscure their true business practices. This section will use examples from the energy and agricultural sectors, particularly oil and gas companies, palm oil plantations and the timber industry.

The first case of greenwashing concerns PETRONAS, a state-owned oil and gas company. The organisation proclaims its commitment to green initiatives, aiming for net-zero emissions by 2050 ([PETRONAS, n.d.](#)). Online news agencies widely publicised its green initiatives, featuring headlines like “Petronas and Petrovietnam to boost green energy cooperation – Anwar” ([New Straits Times, 2025](#)), “Driving energy transition with inclusive leadership” ([The Star, 2025](#)), “PETRONAS drives environmental care in Southern region” ([The Star, 2025](#)), “PETRONAS Gas eyes sustainable growth amid energy transition” ([The Star, 2025](#)) and “Anwar hopes PETRONAS-PETROVIETNAM cooperation to be signed this May”¹² ([Berita Harian, 2025](#)). These articles portray PETRONAS as a champion of sustainable energy and committed to the energy transition.

¹⁰ Climate delayism refers to the strategic use of selective or misleading information, achieving the intention to deceive the public and postpone meaningful climate action ([Lamb et al., 2020](#)).

¹¹ Climate denialism rejects the existence of climate change and deforestation, denies their human causes or casts doubt on their severity and impacts ([LSE, 2024](#)).

¹² Translated from its original “Anwar harap kerjasama PETRONAS-PETROVIETNAM dimeterai Mei ini” in Malay.



However, these “green” narratives are misleading since they omit PETRONAS’s extractive operations that intrude upon, for example, the Tun Mustapha Marine Park in Sabah, a protected area ([Malaysian Reserve, 2024](#)). Furthermore, in 2023, the United Kingdom’s Advertising Standards Authority banned a PETRONAS TV advertisement, which had misleading claims of the company “connecting the dots, to become a progressive energy and solutions partner” ([Segal, 2023](#)). This was deemed an overstatement of their environmental efforts ([Ibid.](#)).

The decision was also based on PETRONAS’s exclusion of “scope 3” emissions¹³ from its net-zero target and its marketing of fossil fuel gas as “carbon neutral” ([Hicks, 2025](#)). The PETRONAS Kasawari Carbon Capture and Sequestration project – located offshore Sarawak to significantly reduce CO₂ emissions from the Kasawari oil and gas field – makes a notable example ([NS Energy, 2023](#)). PETRONAS boasted that the project will capture 3.3 MtCO₂ emissions annually from gas extraction in the Kasawari field. However, this capture only applies to operational CO₂ emissions, completely missing the “Scope 3” emissions – which are the vast majority (over 70%) of fossil fuel emissions from activities like burning the gas after it is sold – and other harmful non-CO₂ gases like methane. This means a significant portion of the total emissions remains unaddressed ([Greenpeace, 2024](#)), highlighting the company’s greenwashing stances as it falsely promotes its green reputation whilst in practice, failing to meet its green promises.

Another instance of greenwashing involves the Malaysia Palm Oil Council (MPOC) and its promotional tactics for palm oil. The MPOC’s greenwashing strategy leverages the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Scheme (MSPO), a certification system designed for palm oil management, dealers and supply chains ([MSPO, n.d.](#)). This standard was initially introduced in 2015 and strengthened in 2022 (known as MSPO 2.0). MPOC frequently uses the MSPO certification to promote Malaysian palm oil as sustainable ([MPOC, 2024](#)). News articles, like The Star’s “MSPO 2.0 reinforces Malaysia’s leadership in sustainable palm oil production – MPOC” ([2025](#)), portray MSPO 2.0 as beneficial to the economy for strengthening Malaysia’s leading role in sustainable palm oil production. In a recent disagreement with the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR),¹⁴ by which Malaysia is classified as “standard risk”, the MPOC has even urged the EUDR to recognise the MSPO standard, as it will “facilitate market access for sustainable, zero-deforestation palm oil” ([MPOC, 2025](#)).

However, since the late 2000s, MPOC’s claims about sustainable palm oil have been repeatedly challenged. In 2007, the environmental advocacy organisation Friends of the Earth accused MPOC of using misleading advertising language and visuals on the BBC, noting that palm oil plantations often cause deforestation of peatlands ([Friends of the Earth Europe, 2008](#)). Scientific research supports this, showing 20% of plantations are on peatland ([Wetlands International, 2016](#)). Two years later, in 2009,

¹³ Indirect GHG emissions from company activities.

¹⁴ It refers to the EU regulation designed to combat global deforestation by ensuring that specific products imported into or exported from the EU market are deforestation-free and legally produced.

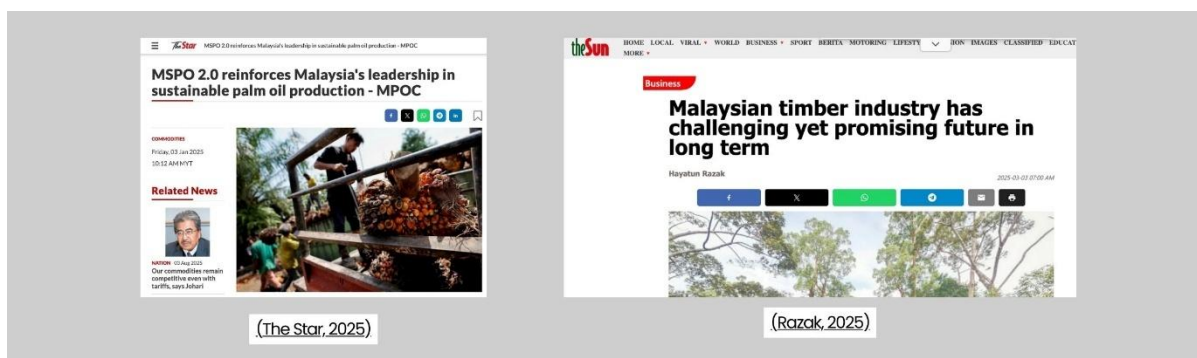
the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that an MPOC statement – that palm oil is the only sustainable way to meet global demand for oil crop-based products – was false advertising ([Friends of the Earth Europe, 2009](#)).

The MPOC continues to spread misleading narratives. In 2025, the South China Morning Post, partnering with the MPOC, published an article demonstrating the journey of sustainable palm oil production, using biomass energy generation through waste reuse ([South China Morning Post, 2025](#)). However, it failed to acknowledge that a significant amount of biomass generated in palm oil mills goes unused, posing environmental risks through pollution ([Hassan et al., 2024](#)). It also fails to shed light on how certified producers outsource non-certified third-party mills to compensate for inefficiencies. These mills tend to overlap with protected rainforests that are not covered by zero-deforestation commitments ([Zachlod et al., 2025](#)). As a result, accredited companies continue to rely on deforestation behind an environmentally-friendly facade, contributing to rapid land use change (the alteration of forest use).

In another example, the MPOC published an article through CNN crediting palm oil smallholders for “redefining what it means to grow responsibly” ([MPOC, 2025](#)). The source claims the MSPO certification covers environmental protection, labour rights and traceability for sustainable palm oil ([Ibid.](#)), which is contradicted by critics arguing its inadequate standards, poor transparency and weak implementation in regulating deforestation and peatland expansion ([International Sustainability and Carbon Certification, 2021](#)). Additionally, it exaggerates Malaysia’s environmental efforts, claiming a 70% deforestation reduction in 12 years due to state regulations ([MPOC, 2025](#)), despite losing 101 kha of natural forest in 2024 ([Global Forest Watch, 2024](#)).

Furthermore, the article misrepresents Peninsular Malaysian palm oil plantations as a “land of opportunity” for IPs to abandon “unstable” traditional reliance on fishing ([MPOC, 2025](#)). This malinformation distorts multiple contexts. Firstly, unstable traditional sustenance stems from climate change impacts exacerbated by extractive industries like palm oil ([Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2018](#)). This falsely appeals to the well-being of IPs (which will be further explored in Section 2.3), prioritising the income generation of IPs as smallholders while ignoring environmental costs. Secondly, it falsely suggests grassroots empowerment against corporate domination, omitting the state’s continued top-down approach that violates IP demands ([Zal et al., 2025](#); [International Sustainability and Carbon Certification, 2021](#)). Thirdly, the conflation of IPs with rural smallholders obscures the original goal of aid for the *Orang Asli*, which is to ensure their assimilation in economic contribution while abandoning traditional customs ([Ibrahim, 2021](#)). Therefore, MPOC’s sustainable framing – which correctly links environmental protection and labour rights while decontextualising palm oil impacts – solidifies their “green” reputation. This misleads the public as a responsible private entity that effectively adopts sustainable practices for palm oil plantations.

The assertion that palm oil plantations are sustainable in Malaysia is unsubstantiated, especially given the industry’s vast scale and impact. Malaysia, the world’s second-largest palm oil exporter, supplies 29% of the global demand ([Tradeimex, 2025](#)), with palm oil plantations dominating the country’s land use, spanning 6.67 million hectares, or 20% of its total land area ([Global Forest Watch, 2025](#)). The environmental consequences are significant: between 2005 and 2013, palm oil cultivation was responsible for 69% of deforestation in Malaysia ([Zachlod et al., 2025](#)). Moreover, these large-scale monoculture plantations contribute to increased greenhouse gas emissions, particularly when peatlands are converted for their establishment ([Hanafiah et al., 2022](#)). These factors underscore the substantial environmental footprint of palm oil plantations in Malaysia.



The last greenwashing case involves the timber industry, like the palm oil industry. The Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS) provides an assessment and certificate for sustainable timber sources ([Malaysian Timber Council, 2024](#)), which has been employed by private logging companies as justification to conduct logging activities. The scheme is presented as a successful model for advancing sustainable forest management in Malaysia, as demonstrated by news articles headings such as “Malaysia: A Leader In Sustainable Forest Management” ([The ASEAN Post, 2021](#)) and “Malaysian timber industry has challenging yet promising future in long term” ([The Sun, 2025](#)).

In these articles, terms like “forest management” read as the timber industry maintaining forest health to balance economic, social and environmental needs ([Forest Stewardship Council International, 2023](#)). However, recent data show that timber plantations, in practice, conduct deforestation and convert 1,794,887 ha of forest reserves into industrial monocultural plantations for commodities such as rubber and acacia ([RimbaWatch, 2023](#)). Furthermore, these plantations fall under programmes that state authorities refer to as “forest plantations”, further hiding their extractive intentions of land use and the impact it has on IPs ([Ibid.](#)).

The cases studied illustrate how greenwashing tactics are used to counter legitimate accusations of environmental damage. These tactics aim to safeguard the economic gains of the agricultural and energy sectors. By ignoring the real environmental and social ramifications of such projects, particularly their harmful impact on IP communities, these companies create a misleading image of sustainability. This not only highlights a gap between their statements and actual efforts but also shields these extractive industries, ensuring their profitability while actively hindering climate change mitigation.

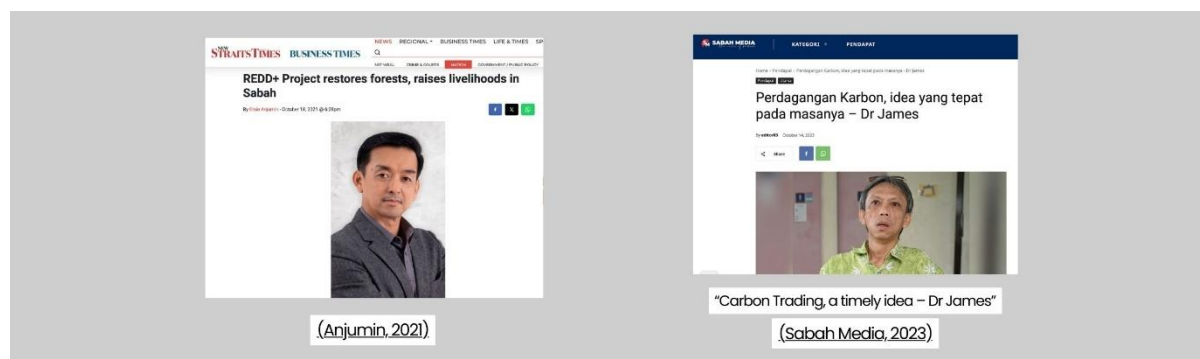
2.2. False Climate Solutions

The second form of climate disinformation involves the promotion of false climate solutions. This section will explore two main false climate solutions observed in Malaysia: the national REDD+ projects and hydropower dams. These initiatives aim for sustainability via carbon sequestration through conservation and the supply of renewable energy. However, narratives surrounding these projects often function as malinformation since these projects, in actuality, are largely ineffective in countering activities that contribute to climate change, thereby diverting attention from more sustainable actions. This makes this form of climate disinformation fall under “climate delayism”. In addition, they overlook and decontextualise their negative environmental and social impacts.

2.2.1. REDD+ Programme

Malaysia’s national REDD+ programme seeks to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions by addressing forest degradation and destruction ([Malaysia Forest Fund, nd.](#)). The program also outlines forest management strategies and aims to increase the country's carbon stocks ([Ibid.](#)). This initiative was

projected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by an estimated 15 to 25 million tonnes annually between 2016 to 2025 (*Ibid.*).



Media coverage frequently portrays the REDD+ programme as an effective climate solution centred on reforestation. This positive framing is evident in online news headlines such as “REDD+ Project restores forests, raises livelihoods in Sabah” (*New Straits Times*, 2021), “EU-REDD+ community-based project success to be replicated” (*New Straits Times*, 2021), “Carbon credits: A contested tool to fight deforestation” (*Malay Mail*, 2023) and “Carbon Trading, a timely idea – Dr James¹⁵” (*Sabah Media*, 2023). These narratives focus on the positive aspects of the REDD+ projects, including their contribution to reforestation.

However, media discussions often overlook the contentious outcomes and criticisms associated with these projects. According to Godden (2017), Malaysian forests are at high risk of deforestation, despite sustainable forestry initiatives and certification schemes. This is because REDD+ faces a major challenge in providing sufficient financial incentives (*Ibid.*). Studies indicate that the “modest profits from forest carbon financing” are ill-suited to slowing the expansion of profitable, intensive industries like oil palm and timber plantations (*Ibid.*). As a result, state governments – with jurisdiction over land, waters and forests – may override carbon sequestration goals to prioritise economic initiatives (*Ibid.*). This leads to regional variation in forest governance and challenges for thorough national-level REDD+ implementation.

Additionally, these programmes continue to face challenges in their Measurement, Reporting and Verification mechanisms, including the possible generation of “phantom credits”, which are issued for forest protections that would have occurred regardless of the project, or significantly overestimating actual reductions (*Berkeley Public Policy*, 2023; *The Guardian*, 2023). This fundamental disconnect between claimed benefits and actual environmental impact, combined with persistent social issues like land dispossession and human rights violations (see Chapter 3), highlights why they are considered false climate solutions.

Concerns also apply to accreditation bodies, like, for instance, the Malaysia Forest Fund. Founded in 2021 by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, the Fund plays a crucial role in the National REDD+ Strategy by providing funding and implementation support (*Iyer*, 2025). As a vital financial mechanism, the Malaysia Forest Fund is responsible for forest conservation and sustainable management (Malaysia Forest Fund, 2024a). Despite emphasising its commitment to transparency, Malaysia Forest Fund has been subject to independent scrutiny for its credibility, stemming from the alleged lack of a robust, independent Monitoring, Reporting and Verification system (*Malaysia Forest Fund*, 2024.d; *Law*, 2025; *Ho*, 2025). Without a clear and verifiable framework, carbon credits it issues risk being overstated, compromising both the environmental integrity of the fund and the efficacy of carbon offsetting claims.

¹⁵ Translated from its original “Perdagangan Karbon, idea yang tepat pada masanya – Dr James” in Malay.

2.2.2. Hydropower Dams

The second case of a false climate solution concerns the hydropower dam projects in the country. In Malaysia, hydropower is viewed not only as a source of renewable energy but also as an effective means of flood mitigation ([Energy Watch, 2021](#)). It is utilised to drive economic growth, particularly in energy-intensive industries, due to its low cost and flexibility in adjusting supply to match demand ([FULCRUM, 2022](#)).

Malaysia's largest hydropower developer, Sarawak state-owned Sarawak Energy Berhad, currently operates three major dams in Sarawak: Batang Ai Dam (generating approximately 108MW), Bakun Hydroelectric Project (2,400 MW), and Murum Dam (944 MW) ([International Hydropower Association, 2023](#)). Sarawak Energy plans to build in total of twelve mega-dams in the region, aiming to produce 7,000 MW of electricity ([Cultural Survival, 2014](#)). These dams serve as a foundation of the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy initiative launched in 2008 to drive economic growth and development in the central and northern regions of Sarawak ([Regional Corridor Development Authority, n.d.](#)).



These dams are portrayed in the media as a climate solution, supporting the expansion of renewable energy projects and advancing goals for economic development, as seen in headlines such as “Hydropower for high income economy” ([Borneo Post, 2015](#)), “Energy from hydroelectric dams able to generate revenue for Sarawak, says state utilities minister” ([Malay Mail, 2021](#)), “Sabah launches mixed renewable energy hydroelectric dam in Ulu Padas” ([The Star, 2023](#)), “Sarawak hydroelectric dam project not in vain – Rundi¹⁶” ([TVS, 2021](#)) and “Sarawak is the leading power generation company¹⁷” ([Berita Harian, 2018](#)).

Despite the positive aspects of these narratives, they fail to address the impacts these dams have on the environment and the IP communities living in Sarawak. Firstly, the dams are estimated to bring about the loss of 2,425 km² of rainforest ([Borneo Project, n.d.](#)), resulting in the increase of GHG emissions and the loss of biodiversity. Secondly, the construction of the dams also resulted in the forced eviction and displacement of IPs. The Murum Dam in 2014, for instance, left over 350 *Penan* and *Kenyah* families without adequate housing or means to sustain their livelihoods ([Keeton-Olsen, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the construction of the Murum Dam was expected to displace approximately 10,000 IPs and flood over thousands of hectares of forests, including the *Penan* people ([University of British Columbia, n.d.](#)). *Penan* land claims were excluded from consideration by Sarawak Energy because Malaysian authorities do not formally recognise Indigenous land ownership ([Ibid.](#)).

Regardless of the negative impacts the dam projects brought to the environment and IP communities, the projects are still expanding across Malaysia. They are, once again, being portrayed as the means to

¹⁶ Translated from its original “Projek empangan hidroelektrik Sarawak bukan sia-sia – Rundi” in Malay.

¹⁷ Translated from its original “Sarawak teraju utama penjana kuasa” in Malay.

achieve environmental and economic sustainability, as seen with headlines such as “Petronas, Terengganu MBI explore building mini hydro power plant” (New Straits Time, 2023), “Sabah to build RM4 billion hydro dam in Ulu Padas, Tonom - Hajiji¹⁸” (Bernama, 2023) and “Expanding hydropower to make Peninsular Malaysia sustainable” (Free Malaysia Today, 2024).

Ultimately, disinformation inflates the sustainable economic growth contributed by REDD+ and hydropower projects. This is achieved by downplaying their limited environmental benefits and significant flaws. Such narratives ignore these projects’ contributions to flawed carbon crediting, deforestation and ecological disruption, instead promoting misleading solutions that prioritise reputational gains over actual climate impact. Simultaneously, these narratives omit and thereby enable the detrimental impacts on IPs, including forced evictions and land rights violations, which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 3.

2.3. Appeal to Well-being

Appeal to well-being is the third form of climate disinformation within the “delayism” approach, which frames fossil fuel and plantation industries as indispensable for economic growth and for people’s livelihoods (Lamb et al., 2020). In Malaysia, mainstream media primarily uses malinformation to do so. This is achieved by weaponising misconceptions of their poverty to legitimise projects as a need to improve the nation’s overall standard of living. Portrayals of development as the singular path to prosperity entail concealing the deforestation, carbon emissions and biodiversity loss that accompany such projects while sidelining IP ecological knowledge that could guide genuine climate mitigation, as well as the impacts they face.

To be sure, this was not the main narrative used before widespread internet use. Instead, development projects publicised in the media, which cited benefits for people’s livelihoods, did not include IPs. IPs, on the other hand, were explicitly antagonised as barriers to progress, thereby manifesting as a form of disinformation (Tay, 2017). For instance, in East Malaysia, the Bakun Dam project, proposed in 1996, was promoted as a strategy to develop Sarawak by 2020, concentrating development in various sectors that would advance job opportunities (South China Morning Post, 2002). The project encountered protests by IPs for displacing 10,000 individuals during construction, which was a consequence of inundating 70,000 hectares of rainforests and farmlands, coupled with an additional 23,000 hectares of deforestation (Tay, 2017).

In response, the government suppressed opposition, utilising nationalist propaganda that characterised IPs as “anti-development” or swayed by Western influences to sabotage Malaysia’s standard of living (Ibid.). They also framed IPs’ poverty as a consequence of their “backward” relationship with forests rather than a result of systemic marginalisation has solidified the othering misconception of IPs as “helpless” and “uncivilised” in the media (Baharun & Ismail, 2022).



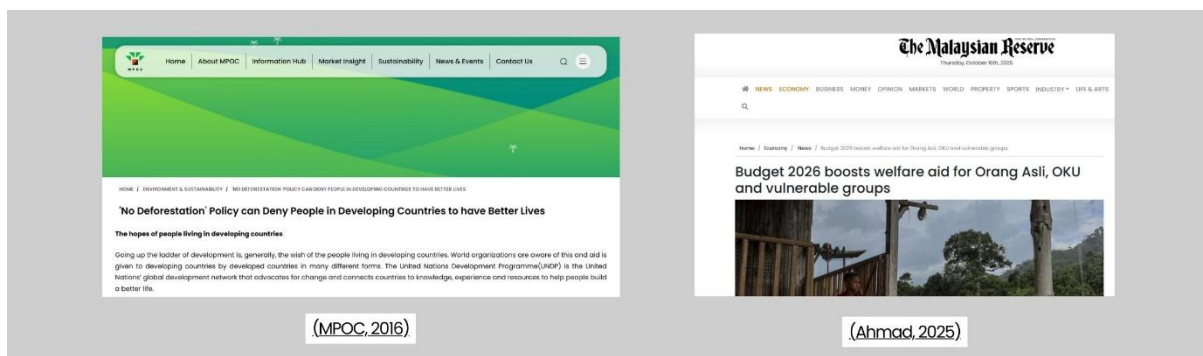
¹⁸ Translated from its original “Sabah Bakal Bina Empangan Hidro Rm4 Bilion Di Ulu Padas, Tnom-Hajiji” in Malay.

Yet, such narratives have evolved over time, while continuing to exploit a degrading image of IPs to push for projects in the media, while omitting their environmental destruction and other negative consequences for the IPs. Jamal's (2016) study revealed the source that perpetually portrays IPs as "backwards", pointing to mainstream media for echoing the perspectives of state organisations. One of these entities, the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, is positioned – unjustly so due to a lack of meaningful connection with Indigenous communities – as speaking on behalf of IPs (Ibid.). What is being undertaken is the use of the "backward" image of IPs to justify "developmental opportunities" for IPs in various ways, though nevertheless still resulting in the interests of the state and corporates being protected.

Firstly, news articles tend to necessitate development projects for improving the quality of life by utilising misleading depictions of IP livelihoods in the natural environment as a cause of their own impoverishment. For instance, quotes in articles such as "*Orang Asli ... led a low-profile life and were lost in the mainstream of development*" and "*they could earn a fixed income apart from ... hunting and foraging in the forest and doing odd jobs*" can be found in mainstream news platforms like *The Star* (Jamal & Ganasan, 2021). Such messages frame IPs lacking assimilation with modern society as incompetent to adapt to modern ways (Chun & Jamal, 2023). This overlooks the lack of customary land rights as the core issue of IP poverty, instead depicting the sustainable relations of IPs with forests as a low standard of sustenance. This was further elaborated by a representative of an *Orang Asli* community (KII05):

"...Yes, it's true Orang Aslis faces hardship – but you have to ask why they face hardship. If you don't disturb their lives, the Orang Aslis are not poor. They become poor because their land is taken, their forests are destroyed and their way of life is disrupted. ... Then, when [outside entities] don't want to understand why Orang Aslis experience widespread poverty, they tell the media "they don't have enough to eat" ... For me, this is misleading information (KII05)."

As a result, the media values development projects over sustainability as the main approach to enhancing the quality of life. This is compounded by omitting the need for IP environmental stewardship to mitigate climate change, which is exacerbated by "progressive" initiatives (Diansyah et al., 2022).



For example, an article on Food Navigatory framed palm oil as fundamentally essential for Malaysian socio-economic well-being by directly linking the commodity to basic human needs: "Food and fuel; fuel and food" (Basiron, 2016). The narrative emphasises that palm oil cultivation is a significant source of

both “income and pride” for 300,000 small farmers, actively bringing “investment and prosperity to previously desolate rural communities” (*Ibid.*).

By highlighting its role in poverty alleviation and job creation within rural Malaysia, the article frames development through an economic lens, omitting the importance of including environmental sustainability in the picture of a progressive Malaysia. Moreover, by failing to distinguish the income gap between independent and managed smallholders, the article omits the fact that smallholders managed by the government in Sabah, mostly IPs, earn an average of RM 1,600 (USD 393) (*Ahmad et al., 2023*). This amount is inadequate for basic needs, despite Sabah contributing approximately 10% of global palm oil production (*Ibid.*). The impacts of the media obscuring the extractive nature of palm oil production, which relies on exploiting both humans and the environment as resources, will be further explored in Chapter 3.3.

Secondly, some articles highlight the economic hardships of IPs to victimise them, utilising this lens to valorise their need to depend on development projects instead of forests. For instance, an article in *The Star* reflected testimonies of state authorities claiming “the only way for [*Orang Aslis*] to have a better life is to change their attitude and lifestyle” (*Jamal, 2016*). Furthermore, online news platforms like Malaysiakini and The Star, among others, regularly represent *Orang Aslis* as “dependents” who require state assistance like those handed out by JAKOA (*Chun & Jamal (2023)*).

For instance, MPOC published an article through CNN portraying palm oil smallholders as “redefining what it means to grow responsibly” (*MPOC, 2025*). It depicts Peninsular Malaysian palm oil plantations as a “land of opportunity” for smallholder IPs, crediting government aid for encouraging sustainable practices and income generation (*Ibid.*). However, it overlooks how IP decision-making is often overridden by state-appointed trustees, giving palm oil companies the upper hand in joint ventures with IPs (*Majid, 2012*). As a result, it falsely appeals to the well-being of IPs to justify the continued extractive practices of the palm oil industry on the environment.

In another example, Bernama (*2025*) published an article titled “JAKOA Allocates RM 478,000¹⁹ for STR payments to Orang Asli in Gua Musang”, which is a newly established government cash programme for households to manage their living expenses. Despite the IPs' need for financial assistance, the overwhelming dissemination of media portraying the JAKOA in a positive light obscures their weaknesses in advancing the customary land rights of the *Orang Asli* to prevent being a target of palm oil developers, causing environmental degradation to their soil (*Mahmud and Ishak, 2024*).

Furthermore, narratives that exclusively portray government programmes positively can create misleading perceptions of IPs among the audience. For instance, KII05, an *Orang Asli* community representative, observed that state narratives often focus on government assistance to IPs while neglecting the difficult realities they encounter. This imbalance can lead the audience to incorrectly perceive *Orang Aslis* as “lazy” or not hardworking, thus dependent on government support. This is also falsely validated by government departments, as KII05 elaborated:

“The government often says, “every year, we allocate a huge budget for the Orang Asli, ut it’s not the government’s fault [that so much of the budget has to be given], the problem lies with the Orang Aslis themselves”. That’s another piece of disinformation (KII05).”

¹⁹ USD 117,530

As such, the imbalanced perception between state programmes and the realities of IPs legitimises the systemic marginalisation of *Orang Aslis*, continuing the unchecked implementation of economic initiatives that disrupt the natural environment that IPs rely on.

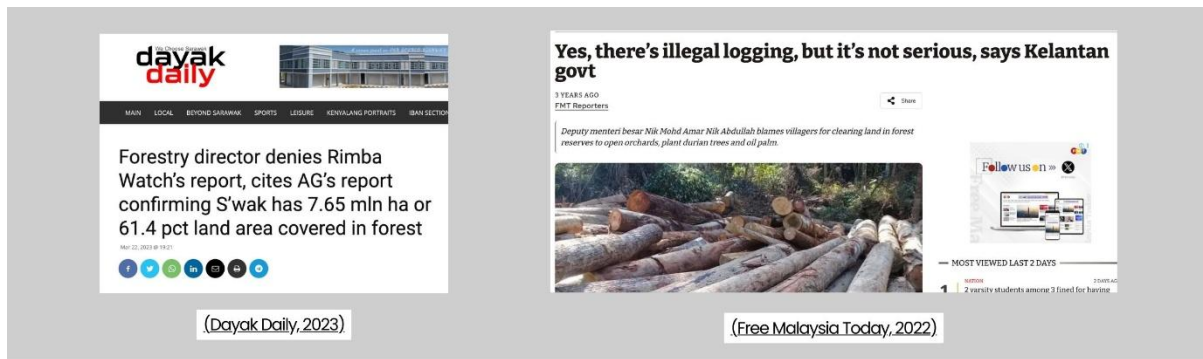
The cases explored demonstrate how Malaysian media frequently frames development as a necessary path to improving the well-being of IPs. This framing constitutes malinformation as it presents partial truths while omitting the structural causes of Indigenous poverty, including state land-use policies that undermine traditional and sustainable practices. By portraying integration into state development programmes as a solution to poverty, the media obscures how these initiatives have also contributed – while shielding destructive economic activities from criticism – to Indigenous marginalisation. This narrative normalises environmental degradation for economic gain and delays effective climate action by framing extractive industries as essential to national progress.

2.4. Denial of Deforestation

The fourth form of climate disinformation in Malaysia – and a form of climate denialism – concerns the denial or downplaying of deforestation. The media relies on statistics provided by government officials and the private sector that present Malaysia as a nation of stable forest cover and “sustainable logging”. These actors further question scientific findings from independent sources and redefine plantations as forests to sow doubt in the public about the urgency of deforestation. As such, denial narratives are classified as disinformation that shields large-scale extractive projects – especially palm-oil expansion and commercial logging – from public scrutiny. This enables a lack of accountability from major sources of GHG emissions.

During the mid-2010s, deforestation was outright denied by state authorities despite contemporary evidence indicating otherwise. For instance, in 2014, the CEO of MPOC claimed that 80% of Sarawak’s forests remained “undeveloped”, asserting there were “no issues of deforestation”. This statement was made at the 4th International Palm Oil Sustainability Conference in Kota Kinabalu and subsequently reported by *The Star* (2014). Nevertheless, this was contradicted by a scientific study that concluded that only 14.6% of Sarawak’s forests remained intact (Gaveau et al., 2014).

Similarly, MPOC rejected the scientific reports from two environmental NGOs – FERN (2015) and Forest Trends (2015). These reports asserted that European demand for commodities like palm oil might be contributing to illegal deforestation, including in Malaysia. Specifically, the FERN report (2015) detailed that European palm oil imports linked to illegal deforestation from Malaysia amounted to EUR 550 million in value and covered an area of 130,000 hectares. MPOC disseminated these claims through their publication – *Global Oils & Fats Business Magazine* (2015) – by stating that the accusation lacked evidence and that FERN failed to counter back when the report was discredited by MPOC. This disparity between scientific findings and statements from the palm oil industry hinders the spread of accurate climate information.

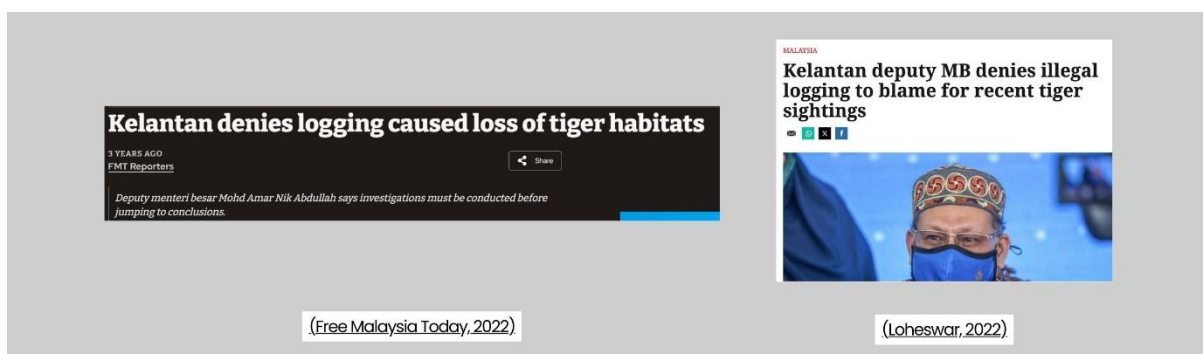


A representative of environmental media, KII03, explained the intention behind authorities denying accountability for deforestation:

“It’s mostly about self-protection – covering their own mistakes or avoiding blame for mismanagement of funds or development issues. Politicians, developers and big businesses all want to avoid criticism or accountability. For the government, political stability matters, especially since it’s a coalition government and opposition parties are ready to politicise any issue (KII03)”

As such, cases of denial persist well into the 2020s, faced with overwhelming evidence of deforestation online. For instance, in 2022, the Pahang forestry department was criticised after massive amounts of wood debris were found in the Telemong area, which was a result of illegal and uncontrolled logging activities (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). However, a news article by The Straits Times (2022) repeated the Department’s claims that there were no “legal or illegal activity alleged by the public on social media”. The Department also claimed to utilise an aerial survey, tracing the debris to the landslides in hilly areas, swept by water surge incidents (Ibid; Free Malaysia Today, 2022). The news agency implying the government’s credibility of inspection without concrete evidence of transparency perpetuates unearned trust towards their claims, perpetuating doubt on the scale of deforestation.

Furthermore, in 2023, a RimbaWatch report (2023) predicted that Malaysia’s rainforest cover would soon drop below 50%. Between 2017 and 2021, Malaysia experienced 349,244.9 hectares of nationwide deforestation, with Sarawak and Pahang accounting for a combined loss of 216,338 hectares, making them the top deforested areas. However, Sarawak Forest Department officials dismissed these claims, emphasising that Sarawak’s development was undeniable and that the region “strives to balance development with environmental sustainability” (Dayak Daily, 2023; TVS, 2024).



While not a direct denial of deforestation, it's crucial to address an incident where government officials have rejected the connection between deforestation and wildlife preservation. In 2022, a debate surged between Malaysian officials and IP communities when an Indigenous *Temiar* man was attacked and killed by a Malayan tiger in Kelantan state (Donald, 2022). In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Kelantan Orang Asli Village Network and other IP advocacy groups argued that deforestation caused by logging, agriculture and infrastructure projects is the root cause of tiger attacks in the region (*Ibid.*). The Kelantan officials claimed that deforestation played no role in the man's death, denying the drone image proving logging activity near the tiger habitat while suggesting capturing the tigers as a solution (Malay Mail 2022; Bernama, 2022). This hasty solution, without scientific consideration, reflects KII03's, a representative of environmental media, claims:

"Media attention tends to spike during major natural disasters, like floods. But coverage is usually reactive – focusing on immediate aid rather than underlying causes (KII03)"

Additionally, following the incident, the Kelantan Department director asserted that deforestation was beneficial to the tigers – during a press conference for Relai Forest Reserve – as “the tiger population will become larger when small trees grow in the deforested area. The area will see the presence of animals such as mouse deer, which is food for tigers” (Free Malaysia Today, 2022; Newsweek, 2022; Malaysiakini, 2022). In a rebuttal to this position, Dr Mark Rayan Darmaraj²⁰ published an article in the Malay Mail (2022), asserting that deforestation is unequivocally the greatest threat to tigers and other wildlife species. He emphasised that it leads to reduced habitat for tigers and the fragmentation of forests into smaller, isolated patches. Furthermore, Thomas Gray²¹ concurred, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of forest loss and emphasising that unlogged forests are more beneficial for biodiversity (Donald, 2022).

The examples examined in this section illustrate how the persistent downplaying of deforestation serves to protect extractive development through climate disinformation. This obscures the true perpetrators of carbon emissions, thus evading their accountability and perpetuating unsustainable land-use practices. Consequently, the invaluable forest-management knowledge of IPs, crucial for climate change mitigation, is sidelined. The media further contributes to this by relying on statements and inflated forest-cover statistics from the state without critical review, leaving the public with the illusion of sustainable development. This ultimately hides resistance and counternarratives that disrupt the conversion of rainforests into timber concessions, dams and oil-palm estates, thereby intensifying the impacts of climate change.

These four forms of climate disinformation (greenwashing stances, false solutions, appeal to well-being and denial of deforestation) illustrate how climate narratives in Malaysia are often shaped by selective information that privileges state and corporate interests. This issue goes beyond simple informational gaps; it reflects deeper dynamics where official narratives conceal the environmental and social impacts of development projects, stifle critical discussion and marginalise the voices of Indigenous and local communities. The next section explores their impacts on IPs.

²⁰ Dr. Mark Rayan Darmaraj is the Country Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society Malaysia Programme.

²¹ Thomas Gray is a tiger landscape and recovery lead of World Wide Fun for Nature, a conservation organisation for endangered species.

3. The Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

This chapter examines how the forms of climate disinformation, as outlined in Chapter 2, create four distinct yet interrelated impacts on IPs: exclusion from decision-making, displacement from ancestral lands, exacerbation of living conditions and the criminalisation of IPs' resistance. This sustains the economic and political disempowerment of IPs, hence catering to their marginalisation structurally masked due to the state appropriating the entitlement of IPs.

3.1. Exclusion from Decision-Making

The first impact of climate disinformation is the exclusion of IPs from critical decision-making processes concerning initiatives in their traditional lands. This exclusion directly violates their right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) by denying them access to information. By keeping IPs uninformed, state and corporate actors gain leverage in decision-making with land use, thereby prioritising their own interests over the needs of Indigenous communities. This points to the systemic withholding of entitlements to non-dominant IPs unless in alignment with the interests of the Malay-Muslim state. The exclusion of IPs manifests in two primary ways. First, climate disinformation, especially greenwashing, is used to justify bypassing thorough consultations for state- or corporate-led business projects. Second, IPs are restricted from accessing information and participating in discussions about climate initiatives due to the promotion of false climate solutions that deliberately conceal their social costs.

3.1.1. Exclusion from Development Projects

In Malaysia, development projects that affect the ancestral lands of IPs often proceed without proper consultations, typically failing to provide information that is thorough, precise and before their operations (KII07).

Available statistics concerning corporations or government entities acquiring customary lands without FPIC (UN, 2021) fail to represent the scale of FPIC violations, which is further downplayed by greenwashing narratives that misleadingly promote development projects as "IP-inclusive" (See chapter 2.1). In this regard, climate disinformation obscures legal structures that enable state or corporate actors to frequently deny IPs' rights to FPIC. For instance, as mentioned in 1.2.1, government aid schemes and joint-venture models established under the Sabah Land Ordinance place decision-making power in the hands of state-appointed trustees (Cramb, 2013). These trustees often prioritise commercial crops such as oil palm, while excluding IPs from access to critical information and decision-making processes (Cramb, 2013). KII04, a representative of an IP community, expounded on this deliberate violation of self-determination to prioritise state interests:

"State governments are desperate for revenue, so exploiting natural resources is the easiest way to make gains. In some states, there's a department that handles Indigenous affairs (JAKOA), but coordination and priorities differ (KII04)"

This points to a systemic disempowerment of IPs in customary participation, which is further entrenched by tokenistic representation. For instance, *Orang Asli* senators are appointed by Ministers based on recommendations from JAKOA, rather than elected by their communities (Cultural Survival et al., 2023). Similarly, village headmen (*Batin*) can be appointed or removed by government authorities, while in Sabah and Sarawak, headmen and community chiefs are state-appointed (Ibid.). These arrangements deprioritise community representation and customary decision-making (Ibid.). This sets a pattern where the interrelated mechanisms across Malaysia enable state and business activities to proceed without genuine participation or consent from IPs.

This is further legitimised by climate disinformation. Firstly, the exclusion of IPs is obscured by the performative nature of consultations by timber companies. This is supported by greenwashing practices that invoke MTCS. The scheme often legitimises logging practices as sustainable while obscuring IPs' experiences of deforestation. For instance, in 2020, Samling was granted a 148,305-hectare Gerenai concession despite persistent objections from 36 *Penan*, *Kenyah* and *Jamok* communities residing in Sarawak's Limbang and Baram districts (Wong, 2020). The IP groups noted the lack of adequate consultation and transparency on environmental impact assessments (Al Jazeera, 2021).

In response to their retaliation, Samling organised a seminar with MTCC and the Sarawak Forest Department, inviting affected communities to learn about the certification process (Wong, 2020). However, IP members claimed the event was a “facade to fulfil corporate obligations” and a “non-interactive” session where their concerns were ignored (Al Jazeera, 2021). Moreover, in 2021, complaints were filed pointing to inconsistencies between the certification and Samling's practice on the ground (Ibid.).

Therefore, Samling and certifying bodies perpetuate false perceptions of accountability in forest management through superficial consultations. This performativity validates climate disinformation that frames controversial projects as sustainable and participatory while, in practice, FPIC is reduced to a mere procedural formality. A representative of an IP community (KII02) expounds on the mutual necessity of these consultations:

“While discussing with development authorities, we could have explained what’s [happening] in the area ... but instead, they just talked among themselves. They didn’t ask whether the villagers agreed or not, or what important things are located in those areas ... Our area is quite [environmentally] rich, but half of our resources are already destroyed (KII02)”

As such, not only does climate disinformation legitimise ecologically damaging activities, it also downplays IPs' rightful protections that protect them from marginalisation towards the interest defined by the Malay-Muslim-led government, hence reinforcing the disparity created by the state's appropriation of IPs' rights.

Secondly, the exclusion of IPs is prolonged due to state inaction. This delay is exacerbated by greenwashing narratives that obscure the insufficient consultations that mega dam projects conduct with IPs by frequently framing the initiative as an important shift to renewable energy and economic growth (see Chapter 2.2). For example, in 2024, the High Court in Malaysia's Perak State mandated that companies building a mini-hydro dam in Ulu Geruntum must immediately cease operations for failing to secure proper consent from the *Semai* community (Yoh, 2024). This can be traced back to 2012, when

the project cleared the ancestral land of the *Orang Asli* group without consulting them, resulting in experiences of environmental and cultural destruction (Yeong, 2024).

Impacts of FPIC violations for this case included the contamination of rivers, felling half their fruit trees and the desecration of the community's grave site (*Ibid.*). Despite *Semai* members causing their shutdown 12 years later, the hydro dam projects were authorised to operate for more than a decade without their consent (*Ibid.*). This prolongation stems from a lack of urgency to cover cases of IPs facing FPIC violations, a result of prioritising the economic interests of the dominant Malay-Muslims over the voices of the IPs.

This exclusion of input from IP communities hinders land ownership reforms that would advance IP decision-making, thereby preventing their essential self-sustenance (Saifullah et al., 2018). As a result, entitlements remain reserved for the dominant Muslim-Malay state, enabling them to prioritise economic policies defined by themselves, while undermining the IPs' right to land recognition.

3.1.2. Exclusion from Climate Action

Another impact of climate disinformation is the frequent denial of IPs in climate decision-making, which remains state-controlled. Despite Malaysia's ambitious goal of becoming a "potential green energy revolution global leader" and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 (Bernana, 2025; Jacob, 2024), state-backed initiatives like forest conservation and carbon credit schemes – often justified as an effort to protect the citizens and natives from the impacts of climate change by appropriating languages of Indigenous rights – are often inadequate in addressing the climate crisis. A key function of climate disinformation is to falsely promote these actions as "climate solutions" by exaggerating their benefits while downplaying their negative consequences, specifically on IPs. This narrative is sustained by limited freedom of expression, allowing state-aligned media to heavily publicise the government's "green" accomplishments and minimise the on-the-ground impacts.

Already facing a lack of proper engagement, Indigenous communities are excluded from fully grasping the detrimental effects of state-led conservation management on their ancestral lands and livelihoods. As demonstrated by a representative from an Indigenous NGO, KII01 claims:

"The media is very much controlled by the government ... and publication is misleading. ... If I do not go out of the village, I will not know there are projects [led] by the government [that are] cutting trees in the forest reserve [classified as] class 2, [meaning that the government] can develop the areas and [conduct] replanting [projects] (KII01)"

This points to the exclusive control over climate mitigation efforts by the state, justified by *Bumiputera* (Malay-Muslim domination) narratives that emphasise their Indigeneity and, therefore, rightful ownership of land. By appropriating the languages of Indigenous rights and protection, climate actions are implemented without consideration as to how they potentially adversely affect IPs, while also being – of themselves – false solutions. Further, keeping IPs uninformed grants state governments leverage to exclusively enforce their interests in land management (KII01), typically rationalised as good for climate mitigation despite the marginalisation of IPs residing in these areas.

This exclusion is a reflection of authorities operating under fragmented legal frameworks, where laws are selectively enacted to reclaim IP residences as forest reserves and national parks without obtaining their FPIC through proper consultations ([Cultural Survival et al., 2023](#)).

As of 2023, 467 terrestrial protected areas are under the responsibility of three primary agencies: the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), responsible for the protection, management and preservation of wildlife and national parks; the Department of Forestry (FDPM), which is in charge of managing, planning, protecting and developing Permanent Reserved Forests; and state-level authorities ([Cultural Survival et al., 2023](#)). The DWNP and FDPM – as departments of the federal government – typically come into conflict with upholding conservation efforts against the development interests of state governments, especially in Sarawak ([Keeton-Olsen, 2021](#)). With limited transparency in conservation projects, IPs are often left unaware of the land acquisition’s purpose for controlled logging and replanting.

Firstly, IPs are excluded from climate initiatives due to the absence of consultations, in which the deliberate withholding of information overrides their FPIC and customary land rights. This is exemplified by the Bakun Islands National Park in 2019, where state authorities utilise narratives of false climate solutions to emphasise the environmental benefits of their initiative while omitting its social costs. The government first announced the creation of the Bakun Islands National Park in 2011 and, in 2013, issued notices to gazette 18 islands without informing the affected Kenyah and Kayan communities ([University of Arizona, 2024](#)).

Baru Bian, Sarawak PKR Chief, called out on the unfair process, arguing that news of the plan to take control of the island would never likely reach the affected IPs, as it was only printed in the legal notices section. This selective dissemination of information demonstrates how the implications of land acquisition are concealed due to narratives of false climate solutions. By 2019, the state again moved to formalise the park, prompting protests from residents who argued their Native Customary Rights remained valid ([Ibid.](#)). Despite a 2015 Court of Appeal ruling affirming “pemakai menua”²², authorities framed the park as a conservation measure, using narratives of false climate solutions to downplay the forced displacement and the denial of their FPIC ([Rhoades, 2019](#)). This narrative enabled the state to treat IPs’ land stewardship as expendable, appropriating the entitlement of IPs to engage in decision-making over their own territories.

Secondly, the exclusion of IPs from climate initiatives occurs when corporate actors conduct tokenistic consultations (similar to the tokenistic consultations explored in Section 3.1.1), reducing them to procedural formalities while failing to acknowledge IPs’ input. This is exemplified by carbon credit schemes, which rely on narratives of false climate solutions that emphasise the initiative as a path to national decarbonisation, while omitting its limitations. This includes ecological disadvantages such as the replacement of diverse natural forests with monoculture plantations, thereby damaging biodiversity and undermining local livelihoods ([Ibid.](#); [Friends of the Earth Malaysia, 2022](#)).

This is exemplified by a case in Pahang, where Enggang (Pekan) Sdn. Bhd. promoted a 97,000-hectare Peatland Restoration Project as a carbon credit initiative, beginning operations in 2022 ([Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025](#)). The company initially withheld key project information from affected *Orang Asli* communities until July 2024 ([Ibid.](#)). In its March 2025 carbon certification submission to AENOR, the company falsely claimed no IP groups required FPIC as rights would not be affected ([Ibid.](#)). In June 2025, consultations were deceptively framed as supportive despite objections by community representatives ([Ibid.](#)). This “performative engagement” represents climate disinformation, feigning IP inclusion while exploiting ancestral lands for profit.

²² “Pemakai menoa” is an Iban customary law that refers to a person’s right to land or territory based on their customary use and occupation.

Thirdly, violations of IPs' FPIC rights are sustained due to state inaction in holding the perpetrators accountable. This is exemplified by a case in Sabah, where a carbon credit scheme promoted as a false climate solution served as a facade for economic concessions rather than genuine conservation. For instance, in October 2021, the state government signed a 100-year extendable Nature Conservation Agreement (2021) with the Singapore-based firm Hoch Standard, granting exclusive rights over 2 million hectares of forest land for carbon and other ecosystem services (Asia Pacific Women, Law and Development, 2023). The project, framed under the REDD+ mechanism, was approved without FPIC from IP communities residing in the area. Despite UN concerns over the agreement's lack of transparency and failure to respect IP rights, the concession remains in place (Cannon, 2024).

These violations persist despite an established REDD+ Roadmap in Sabah, which necessitates the enforcement of FPIC rights. Nevertheless, critics have pointed to state inaction, including its slow progress in formalising these safeguards for IPs (Cultural Survival, 2018; Godden, 2017). Additionally, FPIC lacks a binding legal basis in Malaysia due to poor IP land recognition and the influence of non-gazetted tenure (see Section 1.2.1) (Cultural Survival, 2018). As such, state and corporate actors employ REDD+ narratives as a false climate solution to negate the necessity to prioritise IPs in participation and decision-making. Consequently, the program increases state control over forests and excludes IP communities who have historically protected these areas.

A primary impact of excluding IPs from government-led climate initiatives is the failure to adopt Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (Ibid.). This creates a weakness for climate mitigation as global assessments confirm that IPs' conservation practices are highly effective in preventing deforestation and maintaining biodiversity (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019). As explained by KII05, a representative of an *Orang Asli* community:

"The Orang Asli have a unique perspective on climate change based on their lived experience and traditional knowledge. Because they live in villages and forests, they feel these changes. They are aware through their own observation and reasoning, not from official education or media. They understand that when you cut down trees and replace them with oil palm plantations, or use chemical fertilisers and pesticides, it damages the planet. ... They know things are changing. They see that the seasons are no longer predictable (KII05)"

Without the input of IPs' stewardship, state and corporate actors end up shaping climate initiatives, like replanting projects, for profit rather than ecological balance (Macaranga, 2025; KII01). This exclusion is justified by pro-development Bumiputera narratives that appropriate IPs' entitlements to land management, effectively stripping IPs of their traditional authority to oversee ancestral ecosystems. As KII01 explained, many "replanting projects" marketed as carbon sinks are "only for giving licenses for logging and replanting", showing how climate programmes can mask commercial exploitation. As such, climate disinformation supports authorities in upholding their economic goals by delaying thorough climate change mitigation, which entails replacing IPs' sustainable land management practices.

Overall, climate disinformation systematically excludes IPs from decision-making processes regarding state- or corporate-led projects by obscuring the true nature of these initiatives. This strategic information imbalance allows authorities to bypass IPs' entitlements under the *Bumiputera* category, instead prioritising extractive ventures that amplify the leverage of state and corporate actors. Consequently, the Malay-Muslim state authority gains greater control over land use than IPs, effectively appropriating provisions meant to benefit IPs for their own interests, including for business and resource exploitation. Further, the lack of meaningful *Orang Asal* participation results in ineffective climate policies that disregard IP community knowledge, thereby hindering a balanced approach to both development and environmental sustainability.

3.2. Displacement of IPs from Ancestral Lands

The second impact of climate disinformation is the displacement of IPs from their ancestral lands, manifesting as either land rights violations or forced evictions. Firstly, land rights violations occur when customary territories are converted into production forests, plantations or conservation areas, actions often rationalised as climate mitigation or sustainable management through all four forms of climate disinformation. Secondly, forced evictions result from projects like dam construction, timber concessions and eco-tourism developments, which are obscured by narratives of greenwashing, false climate solutions and appeals to well-being. This displacement highlights a lack of practical recognition for IPs' land ownership, despite the entitlement to the land being *Bumiputeras*. By prioritising state-approved, business-oriented policies – even if they forcibly remove IPs from their homes – IPs' entitlements, and therefore their land, are appropriated by the Muslim-Malay state.

3.2.1. Land Rights Violations

In Malaysia, insecure tenure of IPs' customary land makes them highly vulnerable to encroachment through state-granted land concessions. These concessions represent a primary avenue for land acquisition, like conservation zones, which may grant activities that cause environmental degradation, including production forests, monoculture plantations and industrial development (*Friends of the Earth Asia Pacific, 2019*). For example, by 2017, Peninsular Malaysia had designated 399,861 hectares of reserved production forests for timber plantations, while Sabah allocated 451,239 hectares to tree plantations and another 77,134 hectares to oil palm cultivation (*World Rainforest Movement, 2019*). These monoculture projects, covering at least 3.7 million hectares nationwide, often overlap with customary territories and displace IP communities (*Ibid.*). By reclassifying ancestral domains as state-owned assets for industrial exploitation, the Malay-Muslim hegemony effectively appropriates IPs' land entitlements to fuel a national growth model that excludes the very people it dispossesses.

These land uses result in land rights violations of IPs by, firstly, restricting IPs' access to their ancestral lands. For instance, in 2024, Shin Yang Group Berhad – a Malaysian investment and property-holding company – utilised false climate solutions to narrowly emphasise its efforts in mitigating climate change, while simultaneously omitting its restrictions on freedom of movement for IPs. The company's "Jalin Forest Carbon Management Project" was estimated to cover several *Penan* communities in the Baram area of Sarawak (*The Edge Malaysia, 2025*). A meeting regarding the social impact assessments for the project was held in April 2024, with the presence of *Penan* communities of Long Iman and Long Lowok/Liwe villages (*Ibid.*). Within the implementation of the project, the communities would no longer be allowed to enter the forests, cut wood and collect forest products for their living (*Ibid.*). This restriction in accessing their lands is a reflection of legal shortcomings, as explained by KII07, A representative of an environmental IP NGO:

“The Malaysia Forestry Act does not make an exception for communities who reside within protected forest. It simply says “anyone” entering a forest reserve without a permit can be penalised. These vague statements allow authorities to punish anyone they choose, especially vocal Orang Asli or NGO activists (KII07)”

Secondly, land rights violations caused by development projects may manifest as threats to the subsistence of IPs. For instance, the Samling/SaraCarbon Marudi Forest Conservation and Restoration Project in Sarawak relied on a false perception created as a genuine climate solution to omit its environmental and social costs. Registered in 2023, the project converted over 30,000 hectares of swamp forest into acacia plantations, despite local reports that the land was unsuitable for acacia and the plantations threatened the subsistence of nearby communities ([World Rainforest Movement, 2025](#)). Furthermore, doubts on SaraCarbon’s carbon credit claims sparked when Samling’s tree plantations converted natural forests into economic timber operations, despite these areas still being categorised as “planted forests” and counted towards Malaysia’s official forest cover ([Eco-Business, 2024](#)).

In another instance, greenwashing narratives were utilised by Borneo Land Timber Resources to enable large-scale logging, thereby omitting its contamination of natural resources that the *Penan* and *Kenyah* (*Jumok*) communities relied on. Initially, its operations were framed under the guise of “sustainable forest management”, promoted through partnerships with foreign entities such as Japan’s International Tropical Timber Organisation ([Bruno Manser Fonds, 2025](#)). However, in 2025, satellite images showed how the corporation cleared 55,000 hectares of the Suling Silan Forest within the Baram Peace Park, despite its protected status since 2002 ([Ibid.](#)). The company extracted over 4,000 tonnes of timber monthly under an undisclosed logging permit from the Sarawak government, resulting in the destruction of gardens, hunting grounds and rivers, as well as soil erosion and water contamination ([Save Baram Forest, 2025](#)).

Moreover, after IP communities residing in the area resisted, highlighting the environmental and social harms of the company’s operations, the Sarawak government shifted its narrative ([Ibid.](#)). Authorities defended the logging as essential for “development” and “economic growth”, thus justifying the continuation of its operations ([Ibid.](#)). This combination of greenwashing and appeals to societal well-being conceals the displacement of IPs, the destruction of biodiversity and the violation of IP land rights, effectively legitimising exploitation under the pretext of conjoining sustainability and national progress. Thirdly, land rights violations also occur when the cultural land use of IPs is desecrated by encroachment. In a 2023 case, seven *Orang Asli* villagers from Pekan sued Agrobrest (M) Sdn. Bhd. for bulldozing ancestral graves in Kampung Batu 20 during an agricultural development project ([Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025](#)). The Kuantan High Court ruled in their favour in 2023, awarding compensation, but the Court of Appeal overturned the decision in 2024, stating the plaintiffs lacked legal standing as they no longer held possession of the land ([Free Malaysia Today, 2025](#)). The case illustrates how development framed as a public good conceals the dispossession and cultural harm experienced by IPs.

Fourth, land rights violations are further perpetuated by climate disinformation that denies environmental destruction, dismissing IPs’ claims of encroachment. In 2025, the *Orang Asli* community of Kampung Chang Lama in Bidor, Perak, accused quarry operator Siong Emas Sdn. Bhd. of encroaching

on their ancestral land without FPIC ([Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025](#)). Despite these claims, the Menteri Besar of Perak, Saarani Mohamad, denied any wrongdoing, citing assurances from the Perak Land and Mines Office and JAKOA that no encroachment had occurred ([Nambiar, 2025](#)). The company, holding a lease valid until 2066, countered that the *Orang Asli* were the ones encroaching on its property ([Ibid.](#)). This conflicting narrative reflects how state and corporate actors use denial to obscure environmental harm and delegitimise IP grievances. Such disinformation erodes public scrutiny, reinforces institutional bias against IP communities, and allows environmentally destructive operations to continue unchecked.

Ultimately, these systematic land rights violations demonstrate that the *Bumiputera* status of IPs functions as a hollow entitlement, easily superseded by state-facilitated climate disinformation. By utilising these narratives to legally and physically alienate communities from their customary territories, the state effectively appropriates IPs' ancestral assets to serve its capital interests, benefiting, broadly, the Malay-Muslim elite.

3.2.2. Forced Evictions from Ancestral Lands

The second way IPs in Malaysia face displacement is through forced evictions, driven by external pressures from state and corporate entities. These actions, which include reclaiming land for projects such as dams, timber logging and carbon offsets, are initiated in two main ways. Firstly, the lack of official gazetting for IP lands emboldens corporate actors to conduct land grabs. Secondly, evictions are carried out for “sustainable” or “green” initiatives operating within IP territories. Climate disinformation – which appeals to well-being, promotes false climate solutions and employs greenwashing – legitimises these initiatives by omitting or downplaying their social costs. This disinformation reinforces state land ownership, a position often justified by dominant Muslim-Malay state actors who appropriate IPs' entitlements.

Firstly, corporate actors justify their land grabs and the forceful eviction of IP communities by emphasising their legal compliance with development conditions. These violations are further shielded by pro-development narratives that prioritise “national” well-being (though in effect, referring to the “benefits” (albeit false) for, strictly, the dominant Malay-Muslim group), thus minimising the severity of social consequences IPs face. For instance, in 2025, 96 non-IP individuals, who obtained 99-year leasehold titles between 2020 and 2022, filed a claim in the Kuantan High Court seeking to evict families from the *Jakun* Indigenous community of Kampung Sena in Pekan ([Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025a](#)). The lawsuit entailed driving the IPs from their ancestral lands and demolishing their homes to establish oil palm plantations ([Ibid.](#)).

Despite the community's official recognition by JAKOA for over four decades, the absence of gazettelement as an *Orang Asli* Reserve allowed the land office to reallocate their territory ([Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025b](#)). The plaintiffs justified their actions on the basis that oil palm cultivation fulfilled the lease's “development conditions”, a framing aligned with the state's narrative that land development equates to economic and social progress ([Ibid.](#)). A representative of an environmental IP NGO, KII07, further expands on the legitimisation of forced evictions:

“80% of [Orang Asli] land is not gazetted. If it overlaps with state land, forest reserve or private land, communities can legally be evicted. They do have the right to compensation and they can fight against evictions in court if they have maps and documentation proving long-term occupation. But those without knowledge or documents often face forced eviction without power to resist (KII07)”

Although the *Kampung Sena* community was eventually allowed by the High Court to be named as collective defendants, this case highlights how the bureaucratic and rhetorical manipulation of “development” enables the selective legal compliance of perpetrators. This allows forceful evictions and further diminishes the already precarious land rights of IPs, accelerating their dispossession.

Secondly, state or corporate actors justify the evictions of IPs by valuing their sustainable or “green” initiatives – which the government deems beneficial – over the fragile land rights of IPs. This results in the appropriation of land rights and control over land use from IPs by effectively seizing the IPs’ ability to manage their land. Industrial corporations, for instance, frequently employ greenwashing narratives to omit, downplay or deny the social costs. In 2025, the *Iban* people from the Rumah Jeffery community in Sarawak were threatened to lose their ancestral land by Zedtee, part of the Shin Yang Group’s timber conglomerate ([Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025](#)). The company plans to establish a timber plantation in a part of Sarawak, overlapping the 60-member Rumah Jeffery territory ([Sabillo, 2025](#)), and they were granted two leases – one for a logging concession and one for a tree plantation ([Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025](#)). Their logging concession was certified under the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme²³, which typically mandates that companies respect IPs’ land rights ([Sabillo, 2025](#)). However, the *Iban* people did not give their consent, resulting in protests ([Ibid.](#)). Resistance was met with threats by the Sarawak Forest Department to arrest the demonstrators ([Ibid.](#)). Thereafter, Zedtee filed a case accusing Rumah Jeffery of encroaching on its leased land. In response, the Sarawak Forest Department stated that the forest was “designated for the purpose of sustainable production management” and stressed that Zedtee holds a legal license to operate within the forest area ([Ibid.](#)). This case highlights how IPs often find themselves powerless when confronted by timber companies and formal legal concessions, a burden compounded when “green” language is used as a weapon against their rights and claims.

Similarly, overwhelming emphasis on the benefits of “clean energy” for mega-dam projects, using false climate solutions, has concealed and, thereby, legitimised the authorisation of large-scale evictions and dispossession of IPs. The company Sarawak Energy, with state backing, planned 12 hydroelectric dams by 2020, presenting them as central to Malaysia’s renewable transition ([Cultural Survival, 2018](#)). Yet the Murum Dam, completed in 2014, forcibly displaced hundreds of Penan from their ancestral forests to insecure resettlement areas already allocated for logging concessions linked to political elites ([Ibid.](#)). Environmental impact assessments and resettlement plans were withheld, denying communities the information needed to challenge the project ([Ibid.](#)). The Baram Dam threatened to displace another 20,000 IPs, leading to years of blockades and resistance until the government cancelled the project in 2016 ([Ibid.](#)). Despite this, IP communities remain vulnerable: other dams like the Baleh Dam are under construction and have ongoing impacts.

²³ The Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme is frequently used by timber companies as a means of greenwashing their operations (see Section 2.1.).

In 2025, media reports have positively portrayed the Baleh Dam project, asserting that post-project efforts prioritise biodiversity preservation and the well-being of local communities (Lorna, 2025). However, proposed initiatives such as large-scale replanting do not address the specific ecological and social impacts they will create (Ibid.). This includes the alteration of river sediment and flow, which would disrupt local ecosystems (Yi, 2023). Ultimately, this contaminates the resources IP communities rely on while obstructing their movement for land use (Ibid.). This indicates that patterns of disinformation and displacement persist, with officials justifying their priorities of development with low-carbon facades. These are posed as climate solutions that, in practice, have destructive impacts on rivers, their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and the forced relocation of IP communities.

In another instance, the eviction threat faced by the *Mah Meri* in Bagan Lalang shows how narratives of false climate solutions operate by disguising dispossession as lawful, sustainable and “benevolent” for IPs’ development. The Sepang GoldCoast project used its brand as part of Selangor’s “world-class eco-city” expansion to justify displacing families who had foraged and lived along the coast for centuries, recasting their ancestral presence as illegal encroachment (Donald, 2021). In April 2021, the Sepang Land Office and the Selangor State Government subsidiary, Permodalan Negeri Selangor Bhd., served the community with a notice demanding they clear the land within 30 days at their own expense or face fines and imprisonment (Ibid.). This threat came just days after the land had been transferred to a private tourism developer, exposing how state and corporate interests collude under the rhetoric of “sustainability and value creation” (Ibid.).

Officials further entrenched this framing by insisting the Mah Meri’s beach settlements were only “temporary posts,” erasing their ancestral connections and undermining their customary land rights (Mahmud & Ishak, 2024). Permodalan Negeri Selangor Bhd., defended the eviction, asserting adherence to “necessary procedures and laws” (Ibid.). They presented negotiations and the eventual relocation to Bukit Bangkong as proof of the state’s commitment to supporting IP communities (Ibid.). However, these statements omit their suppression of the Mah Meri’s attempt to legally assert their rights, which forced them into a private settlement instead (Ibid.).

Despite reaching an agreement to relocate the IP community inland to new housing, the *Mah Meri* voice their reluctance since it deprives them of access to the vital ecosystems that sustain both their livelihoods and cultural practices. This demonstrates the state’s false use of the *Bumiputera* entitlements of IPs when it serves national identity, yet systematically appropriates that same land by framing their dispossession as “lawful” sustainable development. This is further legitimised by “benevolent” compensations provided to IPs, further concealing the legal gaps that entrench the marginalisation of IPs. A representative of an IP community, KII06, expanded on the limitations of promising relocations for IPs:

“When a village is about to have development, they provide PPR housing. But when the houses were given, only those who had documents or an IC (Malaysian identity card) received them. Usually more than half of the people without documents have to create new settlement elsewhere (KII06)”

The displacement of IPs in Malaysia is driven by the convergence of weak tenure recognition, corporate economic interests and the strategic deployment of climate disinformation. These narratives prioritise state control and industrial growth by framing extractive projects as essential for “national

advancement” – a concept that implicitly serves the interests of the Malay-Muslim majority. Consequently, the state utilises *Bumiputera* rhetoric to mask the systemic appropriation of IPs’ entitlements, reframing coercion and dispossession as lawful, benevolent development. Ultimately, this displacement is not an unintended byproduct of climate policy, but a structural feature of a governance model that prioritises the hegemony’s expansion over the fundamental rights of IPs.

3.3. Exacerbating Structural Inequalities

The third impact of climate disinformation on IPs is the exacerbation of structural inequalities. Driven by extractive development, the effects of poor access to healthcare and traditional economic infrastructure are worsened by climate change, including the contamination and reduction of resources. Disinformation conceals the root cause of IPs’ struggles, particularly pro-development narratives that appeal to the well-being of IPs while omitting their ecological and cultural failures. This naturalises a lower societal status for IPs, diverting attention from the enforced preservation of privileges for Malay-Muslims – through the appropriation of IPs’ entitlements – by suggesting their struggles stem from a failure to assimilate with the modern society instead. This is evident in two primary consequences: a decline in IP well-being and heightened economic pressures essential for their survival.

3.3.1. Worsening the Well-being and Sanitation of IPs

Among Malaysia’s IPs, particularly the *Orang Asli*, health outcomes are consistently poorer than those of the general population. This disparity is a direct consequence of inadequate sanitation infrastructure, including insufficient access to safe water, proper waste disposal and reliable healthcare. For instance, only about 22% of *Orang Asli* communities in Peninsular Malaysia have access to decent toilets, forcing many to resort to using clothes or immediate urination (Gunawaut and Ramzy, 2023). As a result, these deficiencies contribute to higher incidences of parasitic infections, diarrhoeal illnesses and malnutrition (Mahmud, 2022; Muslim et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). Within the context of these structural vulnerabilities, the prevalence of bacterial contamination is further intensified by climate change (see Chapter 1.2.1).

Despite these acute challenges, government surveys and national WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) data often fail to account for the conditions within these communities. This oversight in official statistics effectively renders the systemic failures that cause IPs to struggle invisible (Goodson et al., 2023). For example, media attention is diverted to isolated incidents like chemical spills, which garner more public traction due to the greater concern for environmental sustainability. While these hazardous events directly impact IP communities, the reporting is often selective, focusing on the broader effect on Malaysian citizens. Crucially, the particular and disproportionate impact of these incidents on the health of IPs, within the context of their systemic vulnerabilities, is largely overlooked in media coverage (Afroz & Rahman, 2017). Such information gaps result in the failure to counter disinformation that misleadingly correlates their dire health outcomes to their “backward” way of life. These framings are exploited by pro-development narratives that appeal to wellbeing in two ways: obscuring the state’s inadequacy in healthcare infrastructure and concealing the contribution of extractive development to the worsening health of IPs, thereby downplaying the urgency to address these issues.

Firstly, the state’s inadequate provision of essential health infrastructure for IPs is often masked by narratives that falsely appear to appeal to IPs’ well-being. This is exemplified in a 2023 study, which examined the lifestyle of *Orang Aslis* in the Johor River Basin. Despite their heavy reliance on untreated river water for domestic needs, these IP families are denied adequate health facilities on their ancestral lands (Goodson et al., 2023). Rather than investing in necessary local infrastructure, the proposed “solution” is to resettle them in urban areas to access medical services (*Ibid.*), an approach that subtly endorses the dispossession of IP communities.

This strategy faces strong resistance, with only 0.7% of *Orang Asli* in the study willing to relocate (*Ibid.*). Those who choose to remain on their ancestral lands are then portrayed as resistant to change due to their culture, suggesting they “choose” unhygienic living conditions, a framing documented in media representations (*Ibid.*; Ismail et al, 2019). This results in IPs continuing to rely on poor infrastructure that worsens their well-being. For instance, the IP community residing near the Johor Basin River has to conserve water due to financial constraints, lacks reliable electricity and often consumes untreated water, leading to higher rates of infection (*Ibid.*). Although the community is aware of waterborne illnesses, the media failure to prioritise covering the root cause of IPs’ poor well-being skews the urgency to address these issues (*Ibid.*).

In another instance, in 2025, the death of an 18-year-old, followed by a leprosy outbreak in Chergun and Guntur villages of Negeri Sembilan, was similarly decontextualised to conceal infrastructure failures with use narratives that appeal to well-being (Sipalan, 2025). Despite the youth receiving public healthcare, conflicting reports about the cause of death – ranging from leprosy to liver failure – fueled mistrust between the community and government (*Ibid.*). As a result, statements from authorities resorted to framings of the outbreak as the villagers’ fault, reinforcing perceptions of the *Orang Asli* as uneducated or unhygienic (Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025).

In the same year, the findings from Praveena et al. (2025) concerning Pos Kemar reveal that structural issues are responsible for patterns of illness within the indigenous community. A major contributing factor is the compromised water quality: all drinking water samples from 108 households contained levels of *E. coli* far exceeding safe limits (*Ibid.*). This contamination was attributed to inadequate sanitation and poor water management, with 31% of the residents reporting waterborne ailments such as diarrhoea and skin infections (*Ibid.*).

Secondly, pro-development climate disinformation narratives that appeal to well-being are employed to conceal how extractive development contributes to the illnesses experienced by IPs resulting from contaminated natural resources. For instance, in 2024, the *Temiar* tribe of Pos Pasik, Kelantan, reported that extensive logging polluted Sungai Temer, their main water source for drinking, bathing, fishing and farming (McIntyre, 2024). The loss of deep-rooted trees, replaced by oil palm and rubber, destabilised the soil, causing flash floods, mudflows and heavy sedimentation (*Ibid.*). Within a month, the river was undrinkable, forcing IP women to travel far for clean water. Despite complaints, authorities ignored the issue, while officially promoting logging as development and sustainability (Newswav, 2024). A representative of an IP community, KII04, further expanded on the effects of logging:

“Because of logging, water quality is very bad. Sometimes the water tastes of chemicals – it’s not clean but it’s their only source. There are also strange disease patterns now and many cancer cases. Some villagers reported cadmium and lead contamination in the water (KII04)”

The health crisis among the Batek people, involving a deadly 2019 outbreak in Kuala Koh, illustrates the lethal impact of climate disinformation that prioritises “development” narratives (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). Forced from their ancestral lands by palm oil and mining, the Batek suffered from contaminated water, pollution, malnutrition and poor healthcare access, resulting in 15 deaths (*Ibid.*). Government claims of

a measles outbreak were disputed, while delayed investigations and inaction reflect broader neglect (*Ibid.*). The crisis highlights how messaging that frames industrial development as essential national progress downplays environmental and health risks, thereby exacerbating the vulnerabilities of marginalised populations.

By prioritising industrial expansion under the guise of national progress, the state treats the health and lives of Indigenous Peoples as secondary to the economic growth of the Malay-Muslim majority. This creates a sharp contradiction: the state exploits Indigenous land for profit while failing to uphold its legal obligation to protect and provide for the well-being of the *Orang Asli*. Instead of receiving the benefits of their *Bumiputera* status, these communities see their basic rights to clean water and healthcare appropriated and replaced by state-sanctioned environmental destruction.

3.3.2. Economic Pressures

The structural context IPs reside in render them economically poor due to state land ownership, particularly the strict regulations and licensing requirements imposed by the Department of Wildlife Drainage and Forest Department. Consequently, IPs face restricted access to resources, hindering them from foraging for food and marketable products. Alternatively, extractive projects of companies receive state approval to encroach on IPs' lands, resulting in the conversion of vast forest areas for new towns and infrastructure projects (*Saifullah et al., 2021*). This has contaminated the natural resources IPs economically rely, disrupting their foraging, which has historically been crucial for the economic livelihoods of these communities (*Ibid.*). This impoverishment reveals that the state's commitment to "uplifting" IPs under the New Economic Policy – justified as an effort to ensure the rightful entitlement for IPs – had broadly failed; and meanwhile, the state continues to appropriate IPs' protections by dismantling their traditional livelihoods to subsidise the industrial growth and wealth of the Malay-Muslim majority.

Despite the use of economic upliftment narratives, government efforts to relocate and resettle IP communities in permanent agricultural areas have largely failed to improve their socioeconomic conditions. Setbacks stem from the inability to access forests for economic activities in these new locations (*Ibid.*) (see Chapter 3.2.1). These obstacles, overall, are legitimised by narratives that emphasise job creation as a benefit for IPs, while omitting the detrimental effects of eroding traditional economies.

Extractive companies attempt to placate IPs for the disruption to their livelihoods by offering narratives that appeal to their economic well-being, including pledges to improve the standard of living. For instance, the *Jakun* community of Kampung *Orang Asli* Sungai Peroh, Johor, experienced severe pollution of the Kahang and Semberong Rivers due to quarry and oil palm operations. This encroachment led to a decline in fish populations, thereby undermining local river conservation efforts (*Ibid.*). As defence against IPs' retaliation, companies like Thye Plantation claimed that the Department of Environment assured controlled pollutant levels within limits while assuring provisions of jobs to IP communities (*Ibid.*).

As such, plantations pose a dilemma: while they emphasise employment benefits and development access, they simultaneously minimise the resulting environmental damage and the rendering of traditional economies as insufficient, which are crucial to the local culture and identity. This passively coerces IPs to assimilate with development and the cash economy, which results in three main outcomes: the reliance on low-wage jobs; lack of legal obstacles; and contradictions in traditional stewardship. Its implications are further elaborated by KII07, a representation of an environmental IP organisation:

“JAKOA often used modernisation narratives to pressure Orang Asli to accept unsustainable development of oil palm and rubber plantations. They say Orang Asli cannot live traditionally and must earn fixed wages. They offer plantations as job opportunities, but these plantations belong to companies. In practice, profits are withheld by the companies while Orang Asli receive daily wages. This is a method used to push [Orang Aslis] to accept deforestation (KII07).”

This points to the first outcome of IPs assimilating with the state’s economy, which is the reliance on low-wage jobs. Although pro-development narratives that appeal to IPs’ well-being emphasise providing job entitlements to IPs for their benefit, they tend to obscure the structural barriers that hinder them from improving their livelihoods due to appropriation. According to Saifullah et al. (2021), IP communities have low income levels due to limited educational opportunities, leaving them ill-equipped for employment or high-wage jobs. Consequently, only about 14% of Orang Aslis engaged in the private or government sectors (Wahab et al., 2020). As a result, 80% of the Orang Asli remain below the global poverty line (The Borgen Project, 2025).

These economic hindrances stem from limited educational opportunities, which are exacerbated by increasing patterns of *Orang Asli* students dropping out of schools (Wahab et al., 2020). Various factors, including uncondusive school environments due to weak teaching support and negative stereotyping by teachers and a deep distrust of outsiders, shaped by past experiences of land loss and exploitation, also lead some parents to keep children at home (Adnan et al., 2021; Bernama, 2022). Nevertheless, the primary contributor that has been severed by narratives appealing to economic well-being is the widespread poverty of *Orang Aslis*, which restricts families’ ability to afford schooling and forces parents to prioritise basic survival needs.

This is exemplified by a 2025 case, in Kampung Sungai Temun, where an increasing number of Orang Asli children are missing school to work in local eateries (Seng, 2025). According to the village head, Salim Palon, teenagers from the Orang Asli community are compelled to work at coffee shops during school hours to help support their families (Ibid.). This situation arises because parents require their children’s help for immediate day-to-day income, unable to afford long-term investment in their children’s education (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, solely giving IPs access to education would fail to amount to a solution. In 2025, an Orang Asli senator, Ajis Sitin, claimed that less than 10% of Orang Aslis enter universities and an even smaller number enrol for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (Zainudin, 2023). Even so, most qualified IPs return to villages because they are unable to find jobs in the city due to employment discrimination (Ibid.). For instance, in Putrajaya, JAKOA has over 1,000 job opportunities that are currently held by non-Orang Asli individuals instead (Ibid.). This exclusion is explained by KII08, a representative of an IP NGO:

“When you talk about access to government jobs or benefits, [Orang Asli] are not the first one. There are two kinds of Bumiputera: first class and second class. Those who are Muslims and non-Muslims. Immediately, religion already filters you.

IPs generally prefer to stay in rural areas, but because the economy is very centralised, opportunities there are very limited...if you measure in terms of GDP or income, [IPs] are considered poor. So to access more benefits, they are often asked to convert to change their religion (KII08)”

Aware of this systemic exclusion, children are discouraged from receiving education, thereby resorting to low-value-added occupations in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry (*Ibid.*). This outcome reveals how the promise of educational and employment reform – amplified through development narratives – serves as a rhetorical cover for a system that sustains economic dependence and political marginalisation. Ultimately, this economic dependence shows that the state treats *Bumiputera* rights as conditional. By systematically withholding the infrastructure for educational and professional mobility for IPs, the state effectively appropriates the IPs’ right to self-sufficiency, turning it instead into a source of cheap labour for the ruling group.

A second outcome for IPs that assimilate with the state’s economy involves navigating legal frameworks that favour large corporations over Indigenous small-scale landholders. For instance, in 2025, the Pahang Orang Asli Corporation (ORACO), working alongside JAKOA, was accused of encroaching on customary land without notice and imposing new administrative burdens on *Orang Asli* smallholders who rely on palm oil income (Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025). Smallholders report that renewing their Malaysian Palm Oil Board licenses now requires land verification through ORACO, accompanied by complex forms and conditions that did not exist previously (*Ibid.*). Additionally, community members stated that documents introduced during a December 2024 briefing were used to pressure them into agreeing to pay “tapping rights” to ORACO, which all licensees rejected (*Ibid.*).

This lack of community inclusion is significantly obscured by pro-development narratives that emphasise the necessity of the palm oil industry in increasing job opportunities, thereby providing a rhetorical shield for the state to institutionalise the appropriation of IPs’ entitlements. By using climate disinformation to reframe corporate encroachment as “national progress”, the state effectively converts the independent economic rights of IP smallholders into a state-regulated revenue stream, ensuring that the wealth and autonomy derived from ancestral lands are transferred to government-linked corporations.

The third outcome is pressuring IPs to rely on state-sponsored programmes for economic sustenance, which results in the adoption of extractive practices that contradict their traditional stewardship. This situation reveals how development narratives on plantations, often framed as “economic upliftment”, can obscure the disconnect from traditional ecological stewardship. A 2025 study highlights the ineffectiveness of the Economic Development Programme for IP communities in RPS Legap, RPS Ulu Kinta and RPS Air Banun, due to organisers failing to understand the daily realities of IPs (*Ramli et al.*,

2025). At RPS Air Banun, government rubber plantation projects, intended for the sustenance of IPs, ultimately failed due to disrupting local wildlife (*Ibid.*). This resulted in elephants and wild boars damaging the crops that JAKOA had provided and which were essential for the IPs' subsistence (*Ibid.*). Regardless of complaints, solutions to counter wildlife disturbances are considered expensive. Although RPS Legap and RPS Ulu Kinta benefited from initiatives such as monthly dividends and improved infrastructure, these benefits only reached a minority of IPs because not all were participants (*Ibid.*).

Overall, the exacerbation of structural inequalities by using climate disinformation indicates the centring of the interests of economic growth, thereby disregarding traditional lifestyles and subsistence practices of IPs. This situation fosters a dependency where IPs must rely on state-sponsored programmes for healthcare and economic opportunities. However, due to policies that privilege the Malay-Muslim majority, these programmes frequently involve resettlement or offer livelihood options that do little to genuinely improve their standard of living for IPs in ways that the New Economic Policy and other pro-*Bumiputera* policies have been able to deliver to a large extent to Malay-Muslims. These limited choices and delayed interventions fail to tackle the structural issues that prevent IP self-sufficiency due to the perceived threat of empowering non-dominant IPs.

3.4. Criminalising the Resistance of IPs

The fourth impact of climate disinformation involves the systematic suppression of IPs who resist environmental exploitation to assert their customary rights (OHCHR, 2023). This suppression is carried out through various reactionary measures aimed at silencing their resistance, which is not only an exposure of the ecological and cultural damage concealed by disinformation but also an assertion of rights. Methods of suppression include the criminalisation of dissent through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and arbitrary detentions, often justified by greenwashing narratives and false climate solutions. Additionally, state and corporate actors employ intimidation and physical violence, ranging from forced religious conversions to lethal force against land defenders. Ultimately, by denying the assertion of rights by IPs – despite their constitutional recognition as *Bumiputera* – these actions uphold the existing hierarchy of Malay-Muslim dominance facilitated by the appropriation of Indigenous entitlements explored in the previous sections.

3.4.1. Legal Prosecutions

The first way IPs' resistance is suppressed is through criminalisation, which manifests in two ways: the use of legal mechanisms and imprisonment to suppress dissent against extractive activities. Companies and state actors often employ SLAPPs and arbitrary arrests to frame legitimate land defence as illegal “disinformation” or “encroachment”. This tactical use of the law serves to shield exploitative operations and maintain a public narrative that prioritises policies that cater to Malay-Muslim elites over Indigenous customary rights.

Firstly, extractive companies frequently use SLAPPs, supported by greenwashing narratives, to counter IPs who protest destructive logging activities. A notable instance occurred in 2021, when Syarikat Samling Timber targeted IPs in Long Moh village, Sarawak. The company leveraged greenwashing claims like “sustainable palm oil” and “responsible forestry” disseminated through both media channels and “backed” by certificates (Mongabay, 2021). To legitimise its logging operations, the company cited official documentation, specifically an MTCS certificate (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, Syarikat Samling Timber asserted its right to pursue legal action against anyone accusing it of trespass, damage or destruction (*Ibid.*). This reliance on “official” sustainability credentials serves as climate disinformation, effectively shielding exploitative actions while attempting to frame local dissent as defamatory disinformation (*Ibid.*).

In a similar incident in 2021, Samling Plywood (Miri) Sdn. Bhd. and Samling Plywood (Baramas) Sdn. Bhd. initiated a defamation lawsuit against the Sarawak-based NGO SAVE Rivers, relying on greenwashing narratives that conceal IPs' realities. This legal action was a direct response to seven articles published by the NGO that highlighted IPs' concerns regarding the 148,305-hectare Gerenai Forest Management Unit, a concession holding MTCS certification (Keeton-Olsen, 2023) (See Section 3.1.1). The articles challenged the validity of the certification process, claiming it was rushed during the COVID-19 pandemic without securing proper FPIC and deliberately excluding dissenting communities (*Ibid.*). Samling countered by labelling the reports as defamatory, seeking RM 5 million (USD 1,233,000) in damages, a retraction and a court injunction (*Ibid.*).

Following the lawsuit, MTCC halted its ongoing investigations into the community complaints, citing the active legal proceedings (*Ibid.*). Although Samling withdrew its lawsuit in 2023, losing its Ravenscourt Forest Management Unit certificate as a result of successful IP resistance, the case underscores how the threat of legal persecution is enabled by portrayals of legitimate dissent as “disinformation” (*Ibid.*). This effectively grants logging companies time to continue operations unchallenged, with such misleading characterisations serving to rationalise the legal intimidation of IPs, thereby reinforcing a public perception that tends to minimise IPs' issues (KII09).

Secondly, IPs who protest often face law enforcement to suppress concerns about extractive development and preserve its perceived legitimacy derived from climate disinformation. To resist external encroachment on their ancestral lands, IPs may resort to actions like road blockades (Amnesty International, 2018). However, certain IP groups, typically those who are undocumented, may not have access to legal information to defend themselves from criminalisation. As KII06, a representative of an IP community, claims:

“Those who are unable to defend their land do not know the process, who to report to, what laws protect them. They are afraid to approach the government bodies because they lack identification documents and may be treated as “illegal residents”. There are NGOs who try to help, but if the lawyers are not registered to practice, they cannot officially bring the case forward. So, cases are often stalled for years with no resolution (KII06)”

This has resulted, in some instances, in the successful suppression of IPs' resistance through detainment or imprisonment (Survival, 2013). The legitimacy of extractive operations is regained by reframing IPs' resistance as a disruption or encroachment on state or corporate activities. For instance, in 2025, two members of the *Penan* community from Long Tepen village in Sarawak were detained by forestry officials, legitimised by greenwashing narratives that emphasise their legality due to the “sustainable” consideration in palm oil operations. The arrests were made under the authority of Section 103 of the Sarawak Forestry Ordinance (Bruno Manser Fonds, 2025). This specific legal provision broadly defines the offence of obstructing or interfering with the lawful performance of duties by forest officers, police or other public servants. The two Indigenous Penan individuals were reportedly arrested while allegedly blocking a forest enforcement team from proceeding with their operations, a clear act of defence for their forest resources and way of life (Dayak Daily, 2025).

Similarly, narratives on false climate solutions are employed to criminalise IPs' resistance as encroachers of protected zones. For instance, in 2017, freelance television producer Jules Rahman Ong and journalist Chi Too were arrested alongside 16 IP activists while documenting Temiar blockades in Gua Musang, Kelantan ([Malaysiakini, 2017](#)). Charged under Section 47(1) of the National Forestry Act (1984) for entering a forest reserve without a permit, they were surrounded by 40 forestry officers, handcuffed and detained for 12 hours before being released on bail ([Lim, 2017](#)). Their equipment was seized and later returned after authorities admitted a lack of jurisdiction ([Ibid.](#)). The Forestry Department later offered to drop the case if they pleaded guilty and paid a RM1,000 fine, which Ong refused, citing the need to defend press freedom and public access to environmental information ([Ibid.](#)).

In other instances, state authorities rely on greenwashing to deny the realities of IPs as a way to suppress their concerns, thereby enabling the continuation of their development operations. For instance, in 2019, when members of a *Temiar* tribe in Perak erected blockades to stop logging in the Air Cepam Forest Reserve, including two in the Cunex village and one in Ong Janking ([The Diplomat, 2019](#)). The community faced conflicts to fight for over 12,465 hectares of their claimed ancestral lands ([Ibid.](#)). Several villagers reported having been arrested following the blocking efforts, including three Temiar community members, Jamal bin Endi, Mohd Nazerin bin Dahadu and Zaiman bin Long ([TRP, 2019](#)). In response to the incident, among other land issues between local state governments and IP communities, the Chief Minister of Perak explained that there was no incident of IP communities being chased or displaced to make way for logging activities ([The Diplomat, 2019](#)).

Similarly, in 2025, *Penan* and *Kenyah* communities from the Upper Baram region protested Urun Plantations Sdn. Bhd, alleging that the company had violated Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) standards – a greenwashing certification ([SAVE Rivers, 2025](#)). The protest stemmed from the company's rapid forest clearing for new palm oil plantations, which reportedly involved environmental violations and a failure to respect the IPs' right to FPIC ([The Borneo Project, 2025a](#)). Following an official complaint filed by the communities, the blockades were established but subsequently received repeated police intimidation, were dismantled twice since 2024 and resulted in the arrest of five local villagers ([The Borneo Project, 2025b](#); [SAVE Rivers, 2025](#)). Although specific charges were not detailed, the attempts to dismantle these peaceful protests clearly indicate an effort to silence dissent against extractive development and maintain its legitimacy.

3.4.2. Intimidation and Physical Violence

Beyond legal suppression, IPs also face intimidation and physical violence aimed at silencing their spiritual and territorial defence. These tactics preserve a hierarchy of dominance by forcibly assimilating or eliminating dissenters, thereby securing the state's appropriation of Indigenous entitlements to maintain Malay-Muslim political and resource control. This harassment manifests primarily through forced religious conversions and the use of physical or lethal force against land defenders. While narratives of well-being to legitimise religious coercion target the IPs' personal identity, physical violence is often legitimised by narratives of national economic progress that obscure the underlying brutality from the public eye.

Firstly, religious harassment is legitimised by narratives that appeal to the well-being of IPs, framing forced conversion as attempts to introduce modern spiritual practices that civilise IPs from marginalisation. Despite the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom under Article 11, *Orang Asli* communities in Malaysia face persistent pressure regarding their religious identity ([Hakim, 2019](#)). This coercion, which is also practised by Christian proselytisers, often takes the form of forced Islamisation, justified by a narrative of assimilating IPs into a modern, civilised society under the guise of concern for their wellbeing ([Ibid.](#)). As a result, harassment and forced assimilation remain tools of control and political dominance of Muslim-Malays.

A notable example is the *Temiar Orang Asli* in Gerik, Perak, who in 2019 submitted a memorandum to the government publicly seeking protection against ongoing forced religious conversions (*Ibid.*). The harassment they encountered manifested in multiple ways, including the non-consensual registration of IPs as Muslim on their identity cards and the forceful indoctrination of children in schools, where they are unwillingly taught Islamic practices, such as fasting during Ramadan (*Ibid.*). By increasing the number of individuals who fall under the constitutional definition of “Malay”, the numerical dominance of the Malay population significantly increases to maintain their political power base.

While state authorities publicly deny forced conversions of IPs, they simultaneously condition the access of *Orang Aslis* to welfare and development entitlements upon their assimilation (*Al Jazeera, 2010*). Additionally, *Orang Asli*’s efforts to defend their spiritual and cultural identity are obstructed by difficulties in converting out of Islam (*Masilmany, 2024*). For instance, in 2025, 137 Bateq Mayah Orang Asli from Pahang challenged an alleged mass conversion dating back 30 years, claiming JAKOA representatives had pressured village leaders to convert and threatened eviction and destruction of homes when they refused (*Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2025*). Listed as Muslims without understanding the legal implications, the plaintiffs retained their traditional beliefs and now seek recognition of their true religious status (*Ibid.*).

The state’s violent response to the IPs’ refusal to convert highlights this resistance as a perceived threat to Malay-Muslim political power and the status of Islam as the official religion. This demonstrates a heightened political sensitivity among conservative Muslim-Malays, which contributes to the hesitancy in enacting clear laws against forced conversion. By establishing Malay-Muslim values as the moral and cultural benchmark of Indigeneity, this framework effectively legitimises the erosion of non-state IP culture and identity.

Secondly, the harassment and violence that environmental and IP land defenders face are justified by their depictions as threats to progress, which align with disinformation that appeals to the well-being of the general public. In November 2016, the Kelantan State Forestry Department halted the issuance of permits to enter forest reserve areas where the *Orang Asli* reside, reportedly in retaliation for the blockades they had erected to stop logging (*Mongabay, 2017*). The department, which profits from licensing logging operations, responded with aggressive enforcement tactics, including the use of chainsaws to dismantle manned barricades, allegedly leaving one IP protester seriously injured (*Ibid.*). Despite the *Orang Asli*’s peaceful stance, the authorities framed their actions as illegal under Section 47(1) of the National Forestry Enactment, which criminalises entry into forest reserves without a permit (*Ibid.*).

Lethal violence against activists represents the most extreme manifestation. Amongst the underreported killings of environmental and land defenders in Malaysia (*Amnesty International, 2018*), the 2016 murder of land rights activist Billy Kayong remains a notable one till today (*Malay Mail, 2022*). The incident highlights how state development initiatives, often valorised by narratives that appeal to well-being, entail obscuring such violence. Kayong, a Dayak activist, supported the Sungai Bekelit community in Sarawak, which had long opposed the state-backed Tung Huat Niah Plantation’s takeover of IPs’ land for palm oil cultivation (*Global Initiative, 2020*).

The state’s claim of ownership over forest land reflects how *Bumiputeraism* enables Malay-Muslim elites to legitimise resource control while sidelining IP custodians. Between 2006 and 2016, Kayong helped villagers contest the lease and raise awareness of corporate abuses, but as tensions grew, he received death threats (*Ibid.*). However, on 21 June 2016, Kayong was shot dead in Miri, allegedly by men linked to plantation head Stephen Lee, who later fled the country. Only the gunman, Mahamad Fitri Pauzi, was convicted, who also assaulted a local IP village chief, Jambai Ali (*Ibid.*).

These incidents reveal a broader pattern of violence used to silence IPs' resistance. While the Federal court refused Pauzi's appeal to commute his death sentence to imprisonment in 2024, the alleged masterminds remain acquitted. Additionally, Kayong's death set a current precedent for activists in Dayak, sowing fear in them to retaliate (Ting, 2024). Therefore, Kayon's death was a result of shielding palm oil operations, in which its integrity is maintained by climate disinformation that necessitates development for the well-being of the nation.

Overall, the systematic suppression of Indigenous resistance functions to maintain Malay-Muslim dominance by reconfiguring IP customary rights into state-controlled privileges. By framing land defence as "illegal encroachment" and enforcing religious assimilation, dominant actors neutralise the threat IP identity poses to the unified *Bumiputera* narrative. This violence ensures that the contradictions exposed by IP resistance are silenced to preserve the political and economic interests of the dominant group.

4. Recommendations

This chapter presents a set of actionable recommendations to address the rise of climate disinformation and its disproportionate impact on IPs in Malaysia. Grounded in the findings of this report, these recommendations aim to support more inclusive and evidence-informed climate governance. They are directed at key stakeholders, including the United Nations, international and national NGOs, the Malaysian government at national and subnational levels, civil society organisations, media actors, technology companies and IP communities, who play critical roles in countering disinformation, protecting IP rights, and ensuring IPs' meaningful participation in climate action.

The United Nations and International Human Rights Mechanisms should:

- UN Human Rights Council's Special Procedures and treaty bodies should explicitly integrate climate disinformation into human rights monitoring by including its impacts within the mandates of their mechanisms.
- Convene regional consultations on climate disinformation and Indigenous rights, bringing together UN bodies, Indigenous representatives and civil society actors to identify cross-border patterns and inform global human rights standards with context-specific insights.
- Provide technical assistance and clear, legally binding guidance to the Malaysian government to adhere to and endorse international human rights frameworks and implement national laws accordingly.
- Support the establishment of effective legal mechanisms for IPs to challenge FPIC violations, land rights abuses and SLAPPs.
- Utilise mandates to investigate and publicise the systemic impacts of development policies and climate disinformation narratives on IP well-being, including water contamination, health disparities and economic marginalisation, linking these directly to extractive projects.

The Relevant Ministries of the Government of Malaysia should:

- Formally endorse and integrate UNDRIP into national legal frameworks and policy roadmaps, ensuring these rights have a binding legal basis in Malaysia.
- Institutionalise FPIC as a mandatory federal standard that empowers IPs to withhold consent for all projects, supported by regulatory reforms that scrutinise schemes like the MTCS and MSPO to prevent the subversion of land rights under the guise of sustainable development.
- Amend Act 134 to grant permanent, indefeasible legal titles to ancestral territories (*Wilayah Adat*), ensuring the formal gazettement of all customary tenures to prevent state reclassification of lands as "green" development zones.
- Reform colonial-era frameworks like the National Forestry Act (1984) to eliminate the legal loopholes that currently criminalise IPs' presence and facilitate state land appropriation.
- Reform state narratives and policies (including those related to JAKOA's modernisation programs) that justify exploitative projects by framing poverty as a cultural failure, obscuring the root causes of land loss, exclusion and environmental destruction.

- Institutionalise a requirement for full public access to all environmental and social impact assessments, logging permits and land concession details, making this information readily available to affected IP communities before any operation.
- Create an inter-ministerial, CSO-inclusive, multi-stakeholder task force to actively analyse and respond to climate disinformation and misleading narratives that directly lead to FPIC violations and the criminalisation of IPs.
- Establish a high-level Indigenous Climate Council that formalises traditional ecological knowledge and grants IP leaders direct veto power over national land-use policies, supported by strict *Orang Asli* representation quotas within JAKOA and the public sector to ensure Indigenous affairs are managed by the community rather than the Malay-Muslim hegemony.
- Create mechanisms that allow IP communities to directly access national and international climate finance, rather than relying on intermediaries. This funding can support community-led conservation projects and climate adaptation initiatives.
- Formally incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), customary land management and ecological expertise into national climate strategies, particularly those related to forest management, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation.
- Decentralise climate governance by empowering IP communities and their traditional governance structures (e.g. Batin, community chiefs) to manage local environmental resources. This bottom-up approach counters the systemic exclusion that overlooks IP-based knowledge.

INGOs should:

- Submit joint stakeholder reports, in collaboration with local CSOs and IP groups, to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of IPs, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights and UN Treaty Bodies. These reports must highlight how climate disinformation enables the systematic violation of FPIC, land dispossession and the criminalisation of IP defenders through SLAPPs and arrests.
- Forge international partnerships across ASEAN with local fact-checking institutions. Pool resources and ensure early detection, shared analysis and coordinate responses to cross-border disinformation.
- Strengthen collaboration with local CSOs and IP groups to map the disinformation landscape, document the sources and impacts of narratives that label IPs as "unhygienic" or "backward" and co-design community-informed, rights-based counter-narratives.
- Provide sustained funding and technical support for digital safety initiatives and information-sharing networks. Build IP capacity for real-time monitoring of corporate and state actions and the associated narratives, enabling them to document FPIC violations and environmental harms before they are obscured by denial.
- Provide sustained funding and technical support specifically for legal defence against SLAPPs and criminal prosecution. This must include legal aid for IPs who are undocumented or lack legal knowledge, helping them document their long-term land occupation to strengthen their defence against evictions and land grabs.

- Commit to providing direct and flexible funding to IP-led organisations in Malaysia, bypassing large international or national intermediaries. This empowers communities to control and implement their own climate adaptation, land-mapping and sustainable livelihood projects based on their priorities and TEK, which are often suppressed by state-defined development models.
- Support and contribute to movement building by facilitating safe, non-state-controlled convenings, cross-community dialogue and alliance formation among IP groups, environmental defenders, and civil society actors, to foster collective resistance against shared threats of displacement and criminalisation.
- Provide sustained funding, logistical support and legal guidance to support IPs' presence within global climate summits and UN bodies. Facilitate their travel and help them prepare submissions and statements that highlight the lack of a binding legal basis for FPIC in Malaysia and the specific climate solutions offered by TEK.

Civil Society Organisations should:

- Identify, document and report climate disinformation cases that obscure FPIC violations, enable displacement and justify extractive projects on IP customary lands. Share findings with national and international partners such as INGOs.
- Actively seek collaborations from INGOs and pro-bono lawyers to expand immediate legal aid and advocacy support for IPs facing persecution, specifically those targeted by SLAPPS, arrests and detention. Provide rigorous assistance with legal processes for IPs lacking identification documents.
- Offer legal, technical and financial support to IP communities to help them document their customary lands and long-term occupation (e.g., land mapping), which is crucial for defending their rights in court against evictions and land grabs.
- Deliver culturally appropriate training and workshops (accessible to IPs who may lack formal education) to aid IP communities in recognising the specific types of disinformation they face and develop effective counter-narratives to assert their right to FPIC and participation.
- Conduct training for IP community leaders and youth to enhance their understanding of climate policy, resource management and advocacy techniques. This should specifically focus on empowering them to formally incorporate and assert TEK into national and international forums as a valid, evidence-based climate solution.
- Offer direct, flexible financial support to IP communities to help them implement their own climate-related projects based on their TEK and priorities, including assistance in navigating administrative challenges related to land disputes or applying for direct climate finance.
- Foster and build strong coalitions and networks with other CSOs, environmental groups, and human rights organisations, both within Malaysia and internationally, to form a unified front. This coalition must specifically work to increase pressure on the government to end the systemic denial of environmental destruction and the criminalisation of dissent.
- Utilise their platforms and media channels to amplify the stories and concerns of IP communities, focusing on the structural causes of poor well-being and the economic pressures

that push IPs into low-wage, environmentally destructive sectors. This counters narratives that frame IP poverty as a cultural failure.

The Media Sector should:

- Move beyond mere monitoring of incidents by focusing on investigative reporting that exposes the structural links between the systemic lack of transparency and the severing of IPs' access to their entitlements. Applying a constructive journalism approach should ensure the exploration of solutions, accountability mechanisms and inclusive climate governance models that prioritise IP rights.
- Invest in training journalists to understand the complexities of Indigenous rights, non-gazetted land tenure issues and the structural causes of poor health and poverty faced by these communities.
- Promote constructive storytelling by encouraging coverage that foregrounds Indigenous TEK as an effective climate solution and emphasises rights-based narratives, explicitly counterbalancing the dominant Malay-Muslim, urban and development-oriented biases.
- Collaborate and co-create content with IP communities, ensuring ethical co-production of stories that foster trust and accurately represent their lived realities and objections. This directly counters the state's deliberate violation of IPs' self-determination.
- Cooperate with NGOs, local CSOs and IP communities to establish awareness-raising campaigns and training programs specifically regarding the manipulation of FPIC principles through greenwashing and false climate solutions.
- Equip Indigenous communicators with the necessary tools and skills for media production through capacity-building programs. Training should focus on community radio and low-tech communication methods to effectively deliver credible, localised information to remote communities that are often kept uninformed by state outlets.

Tech companies should:

- Enforce stricter moderation policies against climate disinformation, including false claims promoting harmful environmental projects.
- Strengthen content governance and transparency to effectively counter climate disinformation. This is particularly crucial for addressing state-aligned narratives that often deny state or corporate responsibility for environmental destruction and encroachment, thereby avoiding to justify extractive projects or undermine the grievances of IPs.
- Develop clear, consistent policies with stakeholder input (including IP representatives) and ensure they are applied fairly, consistently, and effectively across all relevant local languages and contexts.
- Publish regular transparency reports detailing detection, removal, and enforcement actions against climate disinformation, broken down by language and the type of harmful narrative.

- Proactively adjust algorithms to reduce the amplification of climate disinformation that promotes harmful or extractive projects. Simultaneously, prioritise the surfacing of credible, diverse and local sources, including IP-led media and community information channels, to counter the dominance of corporate and state narratives.
- Implement clear, easily accessible mechanisms for users, CSOs, and IP groups to submit content moderation requests specifically targeting narratives with state-aligned or corporate disinformation that directly impact Indigenous territories, ensuring early detection and containment of their dissemination.
- Make significant investments in connectivity initiatives in rural and Indigenous areas to ensure the Orang Asal have reliable and affordable access to diverse and credible information sources, countering their systemic exclusion from official information channels.
- Provide subsidised digital tools and culturally appropriate training for IP communities on digital safety, content verification and effective ways to document and share their perspectives and TEK, strengthening their presence and influence in online climate discussions.

Indigenous Communities should:

- Formalise and reinforce IP communities' internal, customary governance structures to serve as a unified and non-state-appointed voice in all negotiations with the government, corporations and NGOs. These bodies must act as the sole legitimate representatives, ensuring that decisions reflect collective priorities and counter the power of state-appointed headmen (Batin) or senators.
- Systematically document and codify TEK related to sustainable land use, forest management, climate patterns and biodiversity. Use this documented knowledge to challenge top-down, extractive climate policies and assert that customary management is not incompatible with sustainable economic models.
- Foster spaces where elders can transfer their TEK and the history of their land claims to the younger generation, ensuring that the wisdom of the past is preserved and can be adapted to contemporary climate challenges. It also reinforces community identity, participation and resilience against pressure for assimilation and displacement.
- Work proactively with independent media and CSOs to disseminate accurate Indigenous climate information, ensuring IP voices are heard and providing counter-narratives to state-aligned media saturation and misleading publications.
- Conduct capacity-building activities and training workshops on recognising climate disinformation. Training should be led by trusted local CSOs/NGOs and delivered in Indigenous languages, prioritising communities who are undocumented and lack the knowledge or resources to resist eviction or criminalisation.
- Engage in direct, collective lobbying at both the state and federal levels to demand the formal legal recognition and gazettement of customary lands. This includes participating in public consultations for climate bills and submitting official policy recommendations to the relevant ministries.

- Foster transparent and fluid communication channels among diverse Indigenous communities to improve the flow of accurate climate information, share successful strategies for resisting encroachment and enhance understanding of the collective challenges posed by the appropriation of IP entitlements.
- Collaborate proactively with technology companies and the media sector to create and implement holistic digital literacy and safety modules through training programs, enabling IPs to effectively document abuses and counter online misinformation.

5. Conclusion

Malaysia's governance systematically marginalises Indigenous Peoples (IPs), known as *Orang Asals*, in political, economic and environmental decisions. Despite their formal constitutional recognition, *Bumiputeraism* – institutionalised over successive Malay-Muslim-led governments – subverts the entitlements intended to benefit and protect IPs by conflating the “Indigenous” Malay-Muslim identity with the human rights concept of “Indigenous Peoples” as a group who are non-dominant ethnically and religiously and are marginalised.

This subsumes the importance of IPs in the *Bumiputera* category without granting them substantive rights. Meanwhile, Malay-Muslim-led state institutions appropriate the rightful entitlements of IPs, including decision-making over land, resources, culture and livelihoods, to rather serve their own interests while further entrenching the marginalisation of IPs. This appropriation erases IPs’ distinct cultural and ecological identities.

This report has examined how such structural exclusion intersects with the rise of climate disinformation in Malaysia. With rapid internet expansion and the proliferation of social media in the 2010s, disinformation has become a key instrument through which state and corporate narratives are shaped, circulated and legitimised. In this context, the digital media ecosystem has evolved into a key site for shaping public understanding of environmental issues. And, in this way, climate disinformation reframes the political reality of environmental governance by legitimising the appropriation of IPs’ entitlements.

The report identifies four key forms of climate disinformation operating within Malaysia’s governance and media landscape. First, greenwashing diverts attention away from the ecological and social costs that business projects inflict. Second, false climate solutions that promote unsustainable market-based mechanisms while concealing the impacts of deforestation and displacement. Third, appeals to well-being justify economic development as necessary for improving livelihoods and minimising the economic and social harms of these initiatives. Fourth, denial of environmental destruction to discredit IP claims of encroachment and pollution. These overlapping forms of disinformation collectively maintain the illusion of climate progress, masking the exploitation of IP territories.

Climate disinformation has four significant impacts on IPs in Malaysia. First, encouraging the exclusion of IPs from decision-making and climate governance by conducting poor or performative consultation processes that undermine their FPIC. Second, enabling the displacement of IPs occurs through land rights violations and forced evictions, reinforcing the state’s land ownership over IPs’ customary land rights. Third, exacerbating structural inequalities due to the undermining of their well-being and sanitation, as well as worsening their poverty by forcing their dependence on unstable wage labour. Fourth, justifying the criminalisation and intimidation of IP communities, portraying their resistance as anti-development, while silencing their voices through state repression. Together, these outcomes provide the moral and legal cover for the Malay-Muslim state to appropriate IPs’ entitlements while entrenching a system where IP dispossession is downplayed and perpetuated.

Beyond these direct impacts on IPs in Malaysia, several broader findings emerge from the analysis. Firstly, climate disinformation in Malaysia operates as an active political strategy rather than an incidental byproduct of poor communication. With the intention of maintaining state integrity, climate disinformation manifests as a defensive mechanism that legitimises the consolidation of state actors’ control over natural resources. As a result, the public – not just IPs – becomes the target of these campaigns. Media narratives depicting Indigenous resistance as anti-development foster public apathy and reinforce the political legitimacy of extractive governance.

Secondly, climate disinformation protects state integrity by concealing legal frameworks that allow actors to exploit governance loopholes. While IPs are officially recognised as *Bumiputera*, this inclusion is largely performative: the state adopts Indigenous rhetoric to bolster national identity while simultaneously undermining their protections. This has continued in the era of climate disinformation, where both modern business activities and climate action prioritise economic targets over IPs' involvement and protections.

Thirdly, these dynamics are further sustained by international corporate demand for palm oil, rubber and tropical timber – sectors that rely on global consumption patterns and certification schemes that often legitimise extraction despite documented harms. As long as multinational buyers and international sustainability frameworks reward high-output production while overlooking IPs' dispossession, climate disinformation will remain a tool used to protect the economic integrity of these industries.

Taken together, these findings reveal that climate disinformation is a mechanism of governance that reproduces the appropriation of entitlements under a contemporary, digital guise. Countering it, therefore, requires more than fact-checking or technical reforms.

It demands a transformation of Malaysia's climate governance architecture – one that centres Indigenous participation, transparency and rights-based approaches. This includes constitutionally acknowledging through distinctions between the definition of "Indigenous" and the human rights concept of "Indigenous People" reserved for non-dominant and marginalised groups. Additionally, legally recognising customary land tenure, institutionalising FPIC as a binding standard, ensuring public access to environmental data, and embedding Indigenous ecological knowledge in climate policymaking.

Ultimately, addressing climate disinformation and the appropriation of IPs' entitlements are inseparable goals. Without dismantling the political and economic hierarchies that subjugate IPs, Malaysia's climate governance will remain extractive rather than restorative. Genuine climate justice can only emerge when Indigenous self-determination, environmental protection and equitable development are pursued as mutually reinforcing objectives.

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Annexe I: List of Respondents

Interview Code	Respondent's Background	Date of Interview
KII01	Representative of an Indigenous CSO	29 July 2025
KII02	Representative of Indigenous Community	6 October 2025
KII03	Representative of Environmental Media Organisation	9 October 2025
KII04	Representative of Indigenous CSO	10 October 2025
KII05	Indigenous Activist	22 October 2025
KII06	Representative of Indigenous Community	5 November 2025
KII07	Representative of Indigenous Environmental CSO	6 November 2025
KII08	Representative of Indigenous CSO	7 November 2025
KII09	Representative of Media Organisations	7 November 2025
KII10	Representative of Indigenous Community	17 November 2025

Annexe 2: List of Participants of Focus Group Discussion

Interview Code	Respondent's Background
FGD01	Representative of Human Rights CSO
FGD02	Representative of Human Rights CSO
FGD03	Representative of Human Rights CSO



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Asia Centre is a civil society research institute in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC).

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