

Exploitation and Resilience: The Singosari Community Faces Environmental Threats

Rico Tomboti^{1*}, Khoiron¹, Langgeng Rachmatullah Putra¹

¹Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Administrative Sciences, Islamic University of Malang

*Corresponding Author E-mail: 22201091062@unisma.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of Singosari residents' resistance to the Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project, focusing on the discursive mechanisms that construct meanings of exploitation, local identity, and ecological injustice. The researcher used Van Dijk's theory-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that integrates text triangulation, social cognition, and context. The primary data consisted of protest banners from residents and narratives from community leaders, including Ki Ardhi Purbo Antono and Fatkul Ulum (Gus Ulum), while supporting data were obtained from international literature on environmental injustice and the failure of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The results show that the narrative "SEZ = Capitalism Exploiting the Area" and the Javanese-language banners and the identity of Islamic boarding school students (santri) function as tools for deconstructing the discourse of state development. The discursive mechanisms were identified through the construction of binary oppositions (business district vs. Islamic boarding school, people vs. capital), the framing of structural injustice and environmental injustice, and the formation of collective consciousness through critical cognition of policy. These findings confirm that CDA effectively exposes the structural injustices hidden within the discourse of "rapid economic growth" and emphasizes the need for inclusive, participatory development that is oriented toward environmental sustainability and social justice.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Van Dijk, exploitation, special economic zone (SEZ), Singosari; discourse of resistance, Islamic boarding school students' identity, environmental injustice, Amdal.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid economic growth often depends on the exploitation of natural resources, but what is often overlooked is the balance between economic needs and environmental protection, where without sustainable management, the use of resources can actually degrade environmental quality and ultimately threaten the very foundation of economic growth itself

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(Hanifuddin & Sekaringsih, 2025; JPTAM, 2024). Ecosystem degradation, declining air and water quality, and the loss of biodiversity are some of the consequences of unsustainable exploitation practices (Tim Epistema Institute, 2012; Asia News Network, 2026). Therefore, it is important to explore the relationship between natural resource exploitation, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Dealing with the trade-off between efforts to preserve the environment and development goals is one of the main challenges facing economic development (Hidayat et al., 2025).

Exploitation is an action or activity carried out to gain profit or to unfairly and arbitrarily take advantage of something without accountability; in modern international literature, exploitative practices are often defined as a form of unfairly profiting from the weakness or powerlessness of another party (Ferguson et al., 2026). Rinjani et al (2024) Conceptually, exploitation is understood as the act of utilizing resources or deriving unfair and arbitrary profit, carried out without adequate accountability, and disregarding long-term consequences for others and the environment. In the context of economic zone development, profit-driven investment logic can transform into exploitation if the development process leads to resource depletion, the shifting of impact burdens onto surrounding communities, and weak environmental and social risk management, as demonstrated by international studies showing that patterns of natural resource exploitation often emerge when economic policies prioritize short-term profits over social justice and ecosystem stability (Chin, 2020). Singosari, as an area undergoing development transformation-particularly when linked to industrial/economic zone development agendas-has the potential to experience patterns of exploitation through changes in land use, pressure on local ecosystems, and an unbalanced redistribution of benefits and costs, as demonstrated by international studies confirming that land conversion and industrial zone development often lead to the exploitation of natural resources and inequities in the distribution of socio-environmental benefits (Aggarwal & Urpelainen, 2020; Hariz et al., 2018).

The Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project is currently under intense scrutiny from the public and the legislature. Development activities promising rapid economic growth are now facing serious challenges from the local community, as evidenced by international literature highlighting that large-scale investment projects in economic zones often lead to social tensions IPB Repository (2020), public distrust, and unequal distribution of benefits if not

supported by active community participation and robust ecological oversight (Baissac, 2015; Ikhlas et al, 2026). The Singosari community has expressed concerns regarding the transparency and adequacy of the environmental impact assessment (EIA), which is deemed insufficient and has the potential to cause ecological disasters in the future. This aligns with the findings of international studies confirming that weak or non-transparent EIA processes have the potential to fail in preventing long-term ecosystem damage caused by large-scale development projects (Ranah Research, 2023; Chu & Karr, 2017).

The Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project is currently under intense scrutiny from the public and the legislature. Development activities that promised rapid economic growth are now facing serious challenges from the local community. The people of Singosari have voiced their concerns regarding the transparency and adequacy of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is deemed insufficient and has the potential to cause ecological disasters in the future Sukananda & Nugraha (2024), as emphasized in prior international literature indicating that weak, non-transparent EIA processes with minimal public participation often fail to control ecological risks in large-scale infrastructure and economic zone projects (Sugiyanto et al., 2022).

Fatkul Ulum, a community leader and environmental activist, emphasizes that the development of the Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on hundreds of hectares of land must account for significant environmental impacts, particularly the loss of vital water catchment areas (VoxDev, 2025). The worsening clean water crisis in Toyomarto Village serves as a warning sign of threats to natural resources, reflecting the collective anxiety of the community regarding the long-term impacts of this massive project.

The Malang Regency Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) added to the complexity with suspicions raised by the Chair of the PDI-P Faction, Abdul Qodir, regarding the Malang Regency Government, which appears to be defending the SEZ without critical evaluation. He highlighted potential conflicts of interest, demanded clarity on benefits for the community Firdaus (2025), and emphasized that public funds must benefit residents, not just investors. Zulham Akhmad Mubarrok, a member of Commission 4 of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), criticized the Regency Government's statement regarding its limited role in the SEZ which is dominated by the private sector since infrastructure and permitting still involve the government; the Regency Government must not wash its hands of

the matter (UI Law, 2025)aggarwal. The Regional People's Representative Council is committed to demanding a comprehensive evaluation of the Singhasari Special Economic Zone. Facing a water crisis and environmental threats, preventive action is urgent; if the project only benefits the elite and sacrifices the people's welfare and environmental sustainability, it must be stopped immediately (Marzaman, 2025; KabarJatim, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

The author uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Van Dijk's theory. The triangulation of text, social cognition, and Van Dijk's theoretical context within CDA will encompass primary data sourced from the 2025 KabarJatim local news report and statements by community figures such as Fatkul Ulum, as well as critiques from the Malang Regency DPRD by Abdul Qodir and Zulham Akhmad Mubarrok. Secondary data includes Hidayat's

2025 academic literature on economic-environmental trade-offs, Rinjani et al., (2024) definition of natural resource exploitation as unfair utilization without accountability (Simanjuntak et al., 2025; Van Dijk, 2015), and Chu & Karr's (2017) work on the failure of transparent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) in large-scale projects. The data focuses on the Singhasari SEZ case, covering the concerns of the Singosari community regarding the loss of water absorption in Toyomarto, the clean water crisis, the lack of transparency in the EIA, conflicts of interest within the Regency Government, and private sector dominance in infrastructure.

CDA was chosen because it is suitable for revealing structural injustice in narrative data, rather than merely providing a neutral description. Van Dijk's theory, which is critical of power discourse, is ideal for the Singhasari SEZ case Ramadhani (2025) and Van Dijk (2015), where the narrative of "rapid economic growth" masks natural resource exploitation and conflicts of interest. Unlike descriptive analysis, CDA systematically deconstructs the economic-environmental trade-offs by Rose (2022) and Hidayat (2025), justifies the urgency of the Regional People's Representative Council's preventive actions, and supports demands for EIA transparency-in line with empirical evidence of similar project failures cited by (Chu & Karr 2017). This approach is ethical, contextual, and actionable for sustainable policy in Singosari.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ), established via Government Regulation No. 68/2019 on September 27, 2019, in Singosari Subdistrict, Malang Regency (area: 120.3 ha), focuses on tourism and technology zones to leverage the proximity to Juanda Airport and the Malang Raya Human Development Index (HDI), which exceeds the East Java average. This significantly reflects the community's reaction through emotional protest banners such as "Singosari Is Not a Business Zone, but a Santri Zone!", "Singosari Is Not for Sale! The SEZ is destroying nature!", and "SEZ = Exploitative Capitalism in the Region!", which explicitly express strong opposition to environmental exploitation, evictions, and the lack of economic benefits after three years. Cognitively, residents have built an identity as a santri/pesantren area, while the context reflects the struggle against capitalist domination, the Toyomarto water crisis (voiced by Fatkul Ulum), and Ki Ardhi Purbo Antono's call for public participation in inclusive and sustainable development.

A Crisis of Trust in Authority

The development of the creative economic zone by the government in 2019. This creative economic zone was established through Government Regulation (PP) No. 68 of 2019 on September 27, 2019, and consists of a Tourism Zone and a Technology Development Zone. The primary reasons for establishing the CEA in the Singosari area include its proximity to Surabaya's Juanda International Airport, as well as the large population of the Malang Raya region and its Human Development Index (HDI) above the average for East Java Province—factors that will serve as a foundation for developing potential human resources, particularly in the digital ecosystem and creative economy.



Figure 1. Banner "Singosari Is Not a Business Zone, but a Santri Zone"

In several locations, signs posted by the community can be seen as a form of protest against the development of the SEZ in the Singosari area. The banner reads: "Singosari Is Not

a Business Zone, but a Santri Zone! Reject the Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) That Destroys Nature and Life!"

Figure 1 show Textually, the banner "Singosari Is Not a Business Zone, but a Santri Zone! Reject the Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ) That Destroys Nature and Life!" employs harsh and confrontational language ("Not... but...", "Reject!") reflecting an anti-capitalist ideology. The choice of words "Santri Zone" versus "Business Zone" constructs a binary opposition between local-religious identity versus the neoliberal economic domination of the state/investors, rejecting the hegemony of imposed development power.

Cognitively, the banner's author consciously understands that the SEZ is a state instrument for capital accumulation, not for the people's welfare. This understanding reflects an ideological awareness of exploitation: the SEZ as a state project that sacrifices local identity for the sake of the economic elite. This cognitive resistance indicates an understanding that "development" is actually a tool of power legitimization to seize the living space of the community.

Contextually, Singosari, as a "santri/pesantren area," opposes the state's narrative that categorizes it as a "potential business zone." This conflict reflects a struggle over the right to interpret space: the community defends its cultural-religious identity against state power that imposes market logic. Local ideology (pesantren-harmony with nature) clashes with the state's development ideology (creative economy-high HDI), where power is marked by Government Regulation No. 68/2019, which sanctions spatial transformation without inclusive dialogue with residents.

The Struggle for Identity

Beyond the discourse above, there is another banner reading: 'Singosari is not for sale! The SEZ only displaces people and destroys nature! Where is the benefit for the residents?' The public dissatisfaction expressed in this banner highlights the need for their involvement in the planning and decision-making processes. Public participation ensures that development takes into account the needs and rights of local communities

Figure 2 show Textually, the banner "Singosari isn't for sale! The SEZ only displaces people and destroys nature! Where's the benefit for the residents?" uses emotional and rhetorical local Javanese language ("ora didol!", "mek nggusur", "Endi manfaate?") to construct an identity politics of "the people" versus "the SEZ." The rhetorical question "Where is the

benefit?" activates the injustice framing (Snow & Benford, 1988) in social movement theory, constructing the KEK as an existential threat to collective identity and land rights.



Figure 2. banner "Singosari isn't for sale! The SEZ only displaces people and destroys nature! Where's the benefit for the residents?"

Cognitively, the community internalizes a relational identity (land-residents-nature) threatened by the SEZ, creating cognitive liberation (McAdam, 1982) through the reinterpretation of eviction as an attack on local identity. The question "What benefits are there for the residents?" demonstrates a critical diagnostic framing: identifying the SEZ as a structural issue (exploitation + eviction) while demanding a prognostic framing (public participation). This reflects a collective awareness that development = dispossession.

In this context, the banner serves as a collective action frame within resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), where the Singosari community mobilizes local identity (Javanese + "the people") against state/economic power. Identity politics emerges as a resistance strategy against neoliberal homogenization that transforms the "kampung santri" into a "business district." The context of three years without economic benefits reinforces strain theory in social movements: material dissatisfaction + threats to identity trigger collective mobilization demanding inclusive dialogue and the redistribution of benefits.

Resilience Amid Uncertainty

In the context of globalization and the ongoing expansion of capitalist development, Special Economic Zone (SEZ) projects often come under scrutiny, particularly in areas with strong cultural and environmental ties. Banners appearing in Singosari, such as "SEZ = Exploitative Capitalism in the Region!" and calls to save the area from "colonizers," reflect

deep-seated dissatisfaction among the community regarding the impacts of development perceived as detrimental.

This dissatisfaction is not limited to the economic sphere but also touches on social, cultural, and environmental aspects. Cultural figure Ki Ardhi Purbo Antono and community leader and environmental activist Fatkul Ulum, also known as Gus Ulum, have voiced the long-simmering frustration within the community, questioning the effectiveness and sustainability of development programs that are supposed to aim for the improvement of people's welfare. The display of these banners signifies a growing collective movement reflecting the community's dissatisfaction with unfulfilled development promises. In essence, the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project in Singosari has sparked various reactions from the community, reflected in protest banners stating, "SEZ = Exploitative Capitalism in the Region! Singosari must be saved from the colonizers!" and "It's been 3 years running with no benefits for Singosari residents. President Prabowo, please just dissolve this SEZ!"



Figure 3. slogans like "SEZ= Exploitative Capitalism in the Region!"

Ki Ardhi Purbo Antono demonstrated his firm stance through the historical framing of "the sacred land of Singosari" and sharp criticism of "intellectual brokers," which served as the catalyst for the mass action. The basis of his firm stance is his moral authority as a cultural figure, mobilizing collective identity by framing the protest as an "outpouring of pent-up frustration over the years" and threatening massive demonstrations. This reflects the role of a local hero in social movements, where firmness rooted in traditional legitimacy reinforces

Fatkul Ulum reinforces his firm stance with the metaphor "EIA must not become a paper tiger" and a concrete warning about the loss of the catchment area, which triggers daily water

crises in Toyomarto. The basis of his firm stance is his environmental expertise as an activist, demanding a serious evaluation of the development of hundreds of hectares that threatens livelihoods. This firm stance is preventive in nature, positioning him as a defender of community rights against bureaucratic formalities, in line with the struggles of local leaders on ecological issues.

Cognitively, Ki Ardhi builds collective consciousness (Durkheim via) through the reinterpretation of “suppressed frustration” as a narrative of structural oppression, where “intellectual brokers” symbolize Gramsci’s hegemony–state-sanctioned organic intellectuals legitimizing the neoliberal ideology of development. This interpretation fosters identity-based solidarity in Klampok Village as a collective consciousness against state power, driving critical cognition toward the deconstruction of the SEZ’s empty promises and massive resistance.

On the other hand, Gus Ulum links social cognition to the framing of environmental injustice (Foucault’s governmentality), in which the “paper tiger” of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) represents the state’s biopower, which controls citizens’ bodies and environments through seemingly formal regulations. The Toyomarto water crisis metaphor triggers a cognitive reframing of development as exploitation, promoting participatory epistemology—a collective awareness that citizens must actively monitor policies to prevent marginalization, in line with Scott’s “hidden transcript.”

The cognition of these two figures forms an ideological counter-discourse against the state’s development ideology (Government Regulation No. 68/2019 as a tool for capital accumulation), where collective consciousness becomes a counter-power tool (Gramsci). Ki Ardhi represents the cultural-historical perspective, while Gus Ulum embodies the ecological-empirical approach; together, they spur collective action for moral legitimacy, demanding inclusive dialogue to balance elite power with the rights of local subordinates.

In this context, critical banners such as “SEZ = Capitalist Exploitation of the Region! Singosari must be saved from the colonizers!” have spread widely after three years of SEZ implementation, reflecting the failure of promises of tangible economic benefits for local residents. This tension arises from the contrast between the state’s vision (Government Regulation No. 68/2019), which prioritizes growth, and the reality of minimal redistribution of benefits to the people of Singosari.

Ki Ardhi Purbo Antono described the protests as the culmination of “years of pent-up frustration,” where residents feel neglected by policies that have failed to deliver prosperity. His criticism of “intellectual brokers” highlights the alienation resulting from minimal community involvement in planning, sparking solidarity from Klampok Village in response to empty development promises.

Fatkul Ulum (Gus Ulum) firmly highlighted the impact of development spanning hundreds of hectares that eroded the catchment area, triggering a daily water crisis in Toyomarto Village. He demanded that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) not be merely a “paper tiger,” emphasizing the connection between the environment and daily life—a critical issue amid the threats of climate change and the exploitation of natural resources.

Figure 2 and figure 3 urged community unity to oppose exploitation and create a space for government-community dialogue to achieve economic, environmental, and social balance. This context highlights the need for an inclusive sustainable development paradigm, where active participation prevents marginalization and ensures equitable benefits for local communities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a detailed analysis of protest banners, public statements, and community narratives related to the Toyomarto water crisis and resistance to the Singhasari Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The findings show that residents of Singosari construct resistance through emotional Javanese expressions, santri/pesantren identity, and criticism of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is perceived as merely formalistic. These findings demonstrate how local communities challenge state-led development discourse by mobilizing cultural, religious, and environmental arguments. The case also offers an important lesson for other SEZs in Indonesia: development policies that ignore local voices may trigger resistance, while meaningful community participation can strengthen social and ecological legitimacy.

Based on these findings, future studies and policy development should focus on strengthening participatory governance, sustainable social-environmental impact assessment, and ecological justice in SEZ planning. Further research may compare resistance discourses across different SEZs in Indonesia to develop a broader theory of local resistance to economic

development. In addition, the role of local figures, religious identity, and community-based environmental knowledge should be more systematically examined. The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is also recommended as a relevant method for studying development conflicts, particularly those involving land, water, environmental impact assessments, and community rights.

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