

# INDONESIA'S PEATLAND FIRES AND TOXIC HAZE

MEDIA DISCOURSES ACROSS SCALES OF GOVERNANCE

## MULTI-SCALE MEDIA RESPONSE TO THE 2015 FIRES



Fires indicated by hotspots in September 2015, with prevailing winds

The 2015 mega-fire event raised the profile of Indonesian peatland fires as toxic haze reached disproportionate levels across South East Asia. The multiple and severe impacts of peat fires include environmental damages, public health and economic losses. Peatland management has become a domestic and international priority, spurring intensely contentious debates of blame and solution pathways that have been reported in the media, from the provincial to the international level. **We analyse the representations of blame and solution for peat fire and toxic haze in media discourses across scales.** This analysis offers insights as to why fire management interventions (FMIs) have been ineffective to date and **how the media may better capture the complex of peatland fires.**

## BY THE NUMBERS: PEAT FIRES AND TOXIC HAZE

- 260,000** hectares of Indonesia's peatland forests have been destroyed each year since the 1990s
- 27%** of Indonesia's greenhouse gas emissions are due to peat fires and in 2015 daily emissions from peat fire exceeded those of the US economy
- 2300** Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) measured in Central Kalimantan in September 2015 (300 PSI is considered "safe")
- 12,000-100,000** premature deaths caused by exposure to fire related haze

## THE PEAT FIRE COMPLEX: MULTIPLE FACTORS THAT PURPETUATE PEAT FIRES



### Individuals

Landholders with no identifiable organisational or sector affiliations. They include medium size farmers and absentee landlords making investments in peatland agriculture.



### Large-scale industrial agriculture

This group is dominated by privately-owned large plantations and Indonesian and foreign companies, and includes state owned industry to a lesser extent. Fires have been detected in concession areas. The large-scale private sector is also proposing a number of initiatives to manage and mitigate fire.



### Policy makers

Provincial, national, and ASEAN-level governments, as well as local public figures, all have a role in setting policy and legislation. The actions of enforcement agents and processes of accountability are also relevant.



### Smallholder farmers

Actually a complex group which includes a range of landholding sizes and distinct socio-economic characteristics, e.g., indigenous or migrant farmers, large frontier pioneers, and consolidated producers.



### Consumers and market demand

Direct influences include, for example, the price of crude palm oil. Every product linked to toxic haze has its own global value chain in terms of raw material, manufacturing and distribution. On the other hand, consumer pressure can act as a powerful force to reduce burning.

## ADDITIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PEAT FIRES



### Media

Media is involved in influential storytelling which shapes public opinion, gives legitimacy to claims of blame and can impact the policy preferences of the public.



### Environment

Local wind patterns can carry haze great distances throughout the region. Peatlands are unique in that peat is a combustible soil type. Climate anomalies can increase fire risk.



### Governance space

Governments can enable burning through lack of coordination, capacity or political will to enforce against fire. Government-led fire management interventions have had mixed success and a new wave of interest brings new hope for fire-free futures.



### Ambiguous land tenure

Motivation to burn land is not only related to private cost-saving, but also to demonstrate an informal title, settle a grievance over land rights, or lay claim to disputed land. Ambiguous ownership enables an illegal land market and makes defining culpability for fires difficult.



### Civil society

A number of activities backed by CSOs can influence peat fires, for example, civil law claims and rights, mass organized activities (e.g., campaigns, demonstrations and public opinion polls). Direct action, position statements and research reports from NGOs are also significant.

## HOW DOES THE MEDIA MATTER? EXAMINING FRAMINGS FROM PROVINCIAL TO ASEAN

- Evaluating content of media reports** clearly defines what discourses are being used in the media to translate a phenomenon to a broad constituency. Fire and haze is a transboundary issue that has been widely reported in the media. The media is a far reaching, influential source of information and has the potential to impact perceptions of the populous and their policy preferences. Analysing media discourses can identify levels of agreement and areas of divergence in the way that specific policy issues are interpreted and what solutions are given preference.
- Shedding light on political economic and power relations** between stakeholders that led to rapid peatland conversion, associated fires and ultimate haze is an important role of the media. Media silences are also relevant, since certain positions or explanations may be omitted or sidestepped in preference of others.
- Identifying mismatch between cause and solutions** or across scales can offer insights as to why district regional, national and ASEAN scale fire management interventions (FMIs) have been ineffective to date, and how the media can rely more accurately on scientific evidence and better capture the complex of peatland fires.

## MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF FIRE AND HAZE ACROSS SCALES: WHO'S TO BLAME? WHO SHOULD FIX IT?

Which parties are responsible for peatland burning, and who should provide solutions, depend on which scale of media you read. News outlets based in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (at national and provincial scales) each offer a different story of blame and accountability:

	SINGAPORE		MALAYSIA		INDONESIA (NATIONAL)		INDONESIA (PROVINCIAL)	
	Blame	Solutions	Blame	Solutions	Blame	Solutions	Blame	Solutions
<b>EVASIVE/SILENCE</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>COMPANIES</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>FARMERS</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>INDIVIDUALS</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>INDONESIA GOV'T: CROSS SCALE</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>INDONESIA GOV'T: CENTRAL</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>MALAYSIA GOV'T: CENTRAL</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>SINGAPORE GOV'T: CENTRAL</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>ASEAN/INTERNATIONAL GOV'T</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>MARKET DEMAND/CONSUMERS</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%
<b>RESEARCH</b>	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%	30%+	20-29%

Frequency of blame/solution assigned: 30% or greater (dark green), 20%-29% (medium green), Less than 20% (light green)

## KEY RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



### EXPANDING COMMON CONCEPTIONS: MULTIPLICITY OF ACTORS CULPABLE FOR PEAT FIRES

The ASEAN-scale media discourse about who's to blame for peatland fires and toxic haze focuses on small-scale farmers and large-scale agro-industry, both seeking quick and cheap land clearing strategies. In fact, a multitude of actors are involved.



### EVASIVE FRAMING DOMINATES MEDIA REPORTS: HOW TO DISCUSS SOLUTIONS IN THE DARK?

The prevailing tendency across the media is to not make clear claims of blame. However, without being specific about fire attribution it is difficult to form an opinion on what solutions measures may be appropriate and necessary.



### DISCONNECT ACROSS SCALES: CONSENSUS BUILDING TO CHART THE WAY TO FIRE-FREE FUTURES

Different media sources give their own accounts of the fire and haze complex and what should be done about it. Consensus building, knowledge sharing and transparent dialogue may be important for reducing the controversy surrounding the peat fires.



[cifor.org/fire-and-haze](http://cifor.org/fire-and-haze)

This infographic is a summary of findings from research being led by Laura Porter-Jacobs (University of Melbourne, CIFOR), Rachel Carmenta (CIFOR) and Wolfram Dressler (University of Melbourne).

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 Map: Reuters with data from NASA, World Resources Institute, Global Forest Watch Fires, Windfinder.  
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 Global Fire Emissions Database (GFED).  
 The Straits Times (Singapore).



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