

Haruku Village, Maluku Province, Indonesia: Conservation embedded in Tradition and Culture

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Key Messages

- *Sasi laut* is a local knowledge and culture-based practice of coastal resource conservation.
- *Sasi laut* weakened due to a lack of government concern about destructive fishing activities.
- Through cooperation of multiple stakeholders, the *sasi laut* system has strengthened, helping locals to consider global issues related to conservation practices.
- Cooperation of multiple parties at multiple levels is the best approach for sustainable *sasi laut* practices.

Community Introduction

Haruku Village is located in Haruku Island, Maluku Province, Indonesia (Figure 1). The total area of Haruku Island is 150 km². Geographically, it is located at 132.28 - 132.42 degrees East Longitude, and 3.34 - 3.35 degrees South Latitude. This island consists of four Muslim villages and seven Christian villages. As almost all of the landscape of the island is hilly terrain and nearly all of the population is distributed along the coast⁽¹⁾. The people of Haruku Island depend on the plantation sector as their main livelihood. Locals have not realized that marine resources can be used as the main support system for livelihoods because of the limitations on the local utilization of fishery commodities.

In this area, there is an indigenous practice of coastal resource protection that has been used for hundreds of years called *sasi laut*. *Sasi laut* is a form of traditional institution regulating the management of coastal resources based on the knowledge, norms, and value systems of the indigenous people of Maluku. This system regulates the rights and obligations of the indigenous peoples in utilizing and protecting coastal resources. As defined by Harkes and Novaczek (2000), *sasi laut* "...prohibits the use of

destructive and intensive gear (poisonous plants and chemicals, explosives, small mesh lift-nets), but also defines seasonal rules of entry, harvest and activities allowed in specific parts of the sea. The regulations are guarded and enforced by an institution known as the *kewang*, which functions as a local police force. Their legitimacy, as well as that of the *sasi* institution itself, is based on adat or customary law".



Figure 1: Location of Haruku Island

Sasi laut has been implemented by the Harukunese for over 400 years. This practice is related to the establishment of Haruku Village and their motivation to save lompas fish, a sacred fish species



relating to the history of the formation of the village (Figure 2) (Thrissima balema)⁽³⁾.



Figure 2: Harvesting Lompa Fish

Climate change in these coastal areas, which is characterized by ecological and seasonal changes, has provided an understanding for indigenous peoples about the importance of maintaining *sasi laut* as a local institution to protect coastal areas. Maintaining *sasi laut*, amidst the impacts of climate change and social transformation, will have an important impact on the preservation of coastal and inland resources, the preservation of culture, and ensuring the availability of fish in the waters.

Conservation and Livelihood Challenges

Recently, the practices of *sasi laut* have weakened due to the external and internal pressures of involved actors. The external factors that threatened the existence of the legal practice of *sasi laut* were modernization and commercialization, which resulted in the erosion of traditional values⁽⁴⁾. In the internal level of society, *sasi laut* practices were faced with challenges, such as internal political conflicts, contestation of local economy, regeneration of *kewang*, and the power of outsiders who did not consider the social and cultural conditions of the indigenous community. In addition, locals spoke of such factors as access to fishery commodity markets, capital limitation, and lack of human resources, as the main constraints to change their orientation of livelihood income from

the plantation to fishery systems (i.e., fishing/aquaculture).

The actors involved in the development of *sasi laut* had three main interests, i.e. economic, ecological and cultural interests. The economic interests were normally represented by communities, businesses, and local governments. The ecological interests were represented by the traditional leaders, NGOs, universities, donor agencies, environmentalists and researchers. Meanwhile, cultural interests were represented by the indigenous communities, universities, and government. This mixture of interests in the region created uncertainty about the implementation of *sasi laut*, as *kewang* were unsure of which motivations to follow, thus weakening *sasi laut* practices.

Community Initiative

The indigenous community of Haruku, which had been more moderate and adaptive to the issues of coastal resource management, drew on cooperation among actors to further develop *sasi laut*. Advocacy of relationships with outside parties aroused a new awareness to expand the scope of *sasi laut*, and the adaptation of new values in *sasi laut* gained the support of the community. Furthermore, people were actively involved in such programs as a mangrove nursery and rehabilitation of mangrove areas in the estuary of the Learisa Kayeli River, one of the lompa fish habitats. The importance of mangrove rehabilitation had been increasingly recognized after the occurrence of coastal erosion in the last few years, which directly threatens human settlements and other public infrastructure.

Practical Outcomes

Due to both external and internal pressures, changes in the political, governance, natural resources and societal livelihood systems have affected the orientation of the *sasi laut* management system in Maluku, resulting in some positive and negative changes:



First, there has been an increasing awareness of efforts to protect coastal areas and the natural resources therein. This awareness encouraged the emergence of the *kewang*, assisted by outside parties, such as NGOs and donor agencies, to widen the area protection of the *sasi laut* system on other resources.

Second, the emergence of gender awareness has encouraged women's involvement in the *sasi laut* institution. The involvement of women in the institution was based on the consideration that one of the dimensions of indigenous *sasi* is female, providing a certain space for the presence of women in the *sasi* institution pertaining to the processes of law enforcement against woman offenders on *sasi*.



Figure 3: Village Leaders of Haruku

Third, as a social institution, *sasi* is vulnerable to family economic problems during its implementation. To overcome this problem, *kewang* have been provided a business unit in the form of economic management of marine tourism. *Kewang* have some guest houses with some units rented to researchers and tourists (local and foreign) visiting the Haruku Island, thereby providing additional income locally.

Fourth, there has been a decline in involvement in *kewang* that is needed to perform surveillance on resources. Some NGOs and donors have noticed

problems of *kewang* regeneration through education and training.



Figure 4: Gosong Bird Conservation

Fifth, the rise of awareness of *kewang* in empowering *sasi laut*. Their experience in dealing with outside parties (NGOs, universities and donors) has encouraged *kewang* empowerment. *Kewang* of Negeri Haruku have established a foundation to empower *kewang* in Maluku -- the Foundation of Haru-Ukui Kalesang -- in terms of coordinating the implementation of inter-*kewang* of *sasi laut* in Haruku Island. Through this foundation, the *kewang* in Haruku Island have facilitated some *kewang* leaders from other villages to attend national seminars on coastal conservation and empowerment of indigenous people (Figure 3).

Recently *sasi laut* has been developed by expanding the objects of conservation, including: mangrove ecosystems, the gosong bird (*Eulipoa wallacei*), turtles, and other coastal resources (Figure 4). In addition, *sasi laut* is supporting marine tourism through a *sasi laut* festival in Haruku Village (Figure 5). Gender discourse has also been adopted through the representation of women in the local police corps, *kewang*. This was facilitated through the efforts made by such external parties as NGOs, donor agencies, and universities.





Figure 5: Sasi Laut Festival of Haruku Village

In terms of legislation, the practice of local wisdom in Indonesia, such as *sasi laut*, has been recognized by the state through two laws and regulations, namely: Act no. 06 Year 2014 (on Village) as well Act no. 23 Year 2014 (on Regional Government) as a replacement of Act no. 32 Year 2004. Sectorally, *sasi laut* has received recognition from three laws and regulations namely; (i) Act no. 31 Year 2004 amended by Act no. 45 year 2009, on Fisheries; (ii) Act no. 27 Year 2007 amended by Law no. 1 year 2014, on Management of Coastal Areas and Small Islands, and (iii) Act no. 32 Year 2014, on Marine. Political and natural resource governance changes coupled with the strengthening of marine conservation discourse in Indonesia make *sasi laut* more effective for coastal area protection and resources therein.

The strengthening of *sasi laut* practices in Maluku is able to answer the challenges of sustainability in the local system, particularly the challenges with implementing Traditional Ecological Knowledge, amid global efforts to develop marine conservation networks. Therefore, the authority of *sasi laut* management must be responsive to the dynamics of the political system, economy, law, governance, science and technology. That is, the transformation of *sasi laut* should be aimed at strengthening the capacity of human and institutional resources that are adaptive and responsive to external changes.

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