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EMPOWERING PAWANG UTEUN (LOCAL FOREST HANDLERS) AS CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS TO COMBAT ILLEGAL LOGGING IN NORTH ACEH DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Illegal logging remains widespread in the protected, conservation, and production forests of North Aceh District, despite the government's reliance on repressive enforcement measures. This persistence stems from limited personnel and the vast forest coverage, which undermine effective law enforcement. To address this issue, this qualitative study adopts an empirical legal approach to explore how empowering local forest custodians (*pawang uteun*) can enhance the prevention and prosecution of illegal logging. Primary data were collected through interviews and secondary data were gathered from literature and documentation. The findings reveal that while *pawang uteun* are recognized under Law No. 44/1999 on the Implementation of Aceh's Privileges, Law No. 11/2006 on the Government of Aceh, and Aceh Qanun No. 10/2008 on Customary Institutions, these provisions do not grant them sufficient authority to participate in law enforcement. This study recommends that the Aceh government promptly revise local regulations to formally integrate customary institutions, such as *pawang uteun*, into forest protection efforts. This study contributes to forest governance by proposing the Pawang Uteun Empowerment Model, which strengthens community-based participation in combating illegal logging in North Aceh.

Keywords: Empowerment, customary law, *pawang uteun*, illegal logging, North Aceh District.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, together with Brazil and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is among the three countries possessing the largest expanses of tropical forests in the world. However, despite this abundance, Indonesia faces a serious problem of deforestation, experiencing significant yearly reductions in forest cover (Sufriadi et al., 2024). According to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia, the total area affected by deforestation—both within and beyond designated forest boundaries—reached 187 million hectares in 2021 (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Hutan, 2021). Similarly, data compiled by Mikaela Weisse and Elizabeth Goldman show that Indonesia ranked fourth globally in forest loss in 2020, with approximately 400.000 hectares affected (Weisse & Goldman, 2021).

Illegal logging remains one of the significant factors of forest loss in Indonesia (Yuza et al., 2023). This activity is prevalent in nearly all of Indonesia's tropical forest regions, including Aceh Province—particularly in the North Aceh District. Lukmanul Hakim, GIS Manager of the Aceh Natural Forest and Environment Foundation (HAKA), reported that between June 2020 and July 2021, Aceh lost about 19.443 hectares of forest cover, equivalent to approximately one hectare every 27 minutes (Zulkarnaini, 2022). The most severe deforestation in Aceh occurred in three districts: South Aceh (1.924 ha), followed by North Aceh (1.851 ha) and Gayo Lues (1.494 ha) (Azri, 2023).

According to data from the GIS division of HAKA, North Aceh District lost approximately 2.853 hectares of forest cover between 2020 and 2022. In 2020 alone, forest loss in the district reached 1.422 hectares, consisting of 779 hectares within utilization areas, 421 hectares in production forests, and 221 hectares in protected forests (Azri, 2023). Illegal logging has been identified as a major contributor to this deforestation, occurring widely across Aceh's tropical forest regions, including those within North Aceh District.

Efforts to address illegal logging in North Aceh District have primarily relied on a repressive approach, emphasizing legal enforcement in accordance with Law No. 18 of 2013 and other applicable laws. However, this approach has proven to be less effective, as the number of illegal logging incidents continue to rise (Dekiawati, 2022). The ineffectiveness of repressive law enforcement measures is largely attributed to the limited number of law enforcement personnel and the vast expanse of forested areas in North Aceh District (Fachrozi, 2022). Thus, a more participatory and community-based approach is needed—one that actively involves local forest handlers, known in Acehnese as *pawang uteun*. These individuals live within forested areas and possess valuable knowledge about local ecosystems and illegal logging activities, positioning them as key actors in sustainable forest protection efforts (Maghfirah et al., 2025).

In accordance with the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, particularly Article 18B, Section (2), the government formally recognizes and respects the existence of indigenous peoples and their traditional rights. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, concerning the Judicial Review of Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry, affirms that customary institutions play a vital role in safeguarding environmental ecosystems and preventing forest degradation (Jemarut & B, 2025). Similarly, Law No. 32 of 2009 on Environmental Protection and Management and Law No. 18 of 2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction acknowledge the function of customary institutions in promoting community participation and enforcing legal measures against individuals involved in illegal logging across Indonesia (Nasution & Triadi, 2025).

At the provincial level, Aceh Qanun No. 10/2008 on Customary Institutions and Qanun No. 08/2009 on Forest Management emphasize the role of indigenous communities in conserving Aceh's forests. However, these qanuns do not clearly define the specific authority of indigenous peoples in addressing illegal logging within the North Aceh District. In practice, efforts to combat illegal logging in the region have largely centered on strengthening the capacity of forest police and other law enforcement agencies to hold perpetrators accountable. Nevertheless, the extensive forest coverage in North Aceh District poses significant challenges for monitoring and prosecution, as the current number of forest police personnel remains insufficient.

Despite the North Aceh District Government's expressed interest in formulating a *Qanun* on Customary Institutions, the role of *pawang uteun* in the Sawang sub-district has not yet been fully utilized. Their potential contribution in addressing illegal logging in North Aceh District remains largely untapped. Empowering the *pawang uteun* is essential for ensuring sustainable forest management, as they possess deep knowledge of the forest ecosystem and live within it. With proper support and institutional recognition, the *pawang uteun* can play a more active role in forest preservation—monitoring forest conditions, preventing illegal activities and collaborating with government authorities to enforce forestry laws. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine and analyze the empowerment of *pawang uteun* in combating illegal logging in North Aceh District.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Illegal logging has been a critical issue contributing to the degradation of forest ecosystems, primarily due to the continuous decline in forest cover. Angga Satrya Wibawa (2023), in his study titled "Criminal Actions of Illegal Logging in the Perspective of Forestry Law," identified that widespread illegal logging activities—conducted by both local communities and corporations engaged in large-scale plantation development—are among the main causes of extensive forest destruction in Indonesia (Wibawa et al., 2023).

Similarly, Safiullah Aziz (2024), in "Illegal Logging and Its Impact on Forest Ecosystems in Southeast Asia," defines illegal logging as a series of activities within the forestry sector that involve the logging, transportation, processing, and export of timber conducted in violation of existing laws or regulations, leading to forest degradation (Aziz et al., 2024). Illegal logging thus encompasses a range of operations—such as timber harvesting, transportation, processing, and trade—that contravene legal provisions or pose serious threats to forest sustainability (Ganapathy et al., 2022). Accordingly, illegal logging can be understood as a collection of unlawful practices within the forestry industry that not only disregard legal frameworks but also have damaging environmental consequences. These studies highlight the evolution and complexity of illegal logging activities from their origins to their endpoints. Their insights are particularly relevant to the present research, which emphasizes the empowerment of *pawang uteun* as a key strategy in the early phases of combating illegal logging.

To mitigate illegal logging in Indonesia, indigenous communities hold a strategic position that is formally recognized and regulated by law. Totok Dwi Diantoro (2025) asserts that the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 35/PUU-IX/2012 provides strong legal legitimacy for the recognition of customary forests and the rights of indigenous peoples to manage and protect forest resources within their territories (Diantoro, 2025). This ruling has established a robust legal foundation for customary institutions in addressing forest-related issues, including illegal logging. However, the decision does not explicitly define or empower the specific role of *pawang uteun* in combating illegal logging. It is

worth noting that the concept of *pawang uteun*—traditional forest handlers or custodians—is acknowledged across various indigenous communities in Indonesia, although it may be referred to by different local terms depending on the region.

From a legal perspective, the position of indigenous peoples in Indonesia is governed by Article 18B, paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry. However, Aceh as a special province, possesses distinctive customary rights regulated under Law No. 44 of 1999 on the Implementation of the Special Status of the Province of Aceh, Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Government of Aceh, and Aceh Qanun No. 10 of 2008 on Customary Institutions. In a study titled “Revitalization of Panglima Uteun in Forest Management in Aceh Besar District,” Mahmuddin et al. (2024) emphasized that in combating illegal logging in Aceh, the customary authority lies with the *pawang uteun* (local forest handlers), who serve as one of the key frontlines in forest conservation. The *pawang uteun* play an important and strategic role in educating and mobilizing local communities to participate in forest conservation efforts (Mahmuddin et al., 2024). Hierarchically, the *Keuchik* (village head) and *Imeum Mukim* (head of several villages) oversee and coordinate the activities of *pawang uteun* within their respective areas. Acting as partners of the government at the village, sub-district, and district levels, these customary figures hold autonomous and independent responsibilities in local governance. However, the study also revealed that existing laws and regulations do not grant *pawang uteun* formal enforcement authority. Their role is primarily limited to coordination with the *Keuchik* and *Imeum Mukim* in addressing forest-related issues. Consequently, *pawang uteun* are not authorized to initiate prosecutions based on customary law or directly enforce such laws against individuals involved in illegal logging activities.

However, studies examining the authority of *pawang uteun*, particularly in mitigating illegal logging, remain limited. According to Safrida et al. (2023), research on illegal logging in the Sawang area of North Aceh District is constrained by the lack of publicly available data from law enforcement agencies (Safrida et al., 2023). Consequently, the role of *pawang uteun* is often confined to administrative functions and tends to be overlooked during legal processes related to illegal logging enforcement.

Absori (2024) argue that the persistence of illegal logging is largely attributed to the ineffective implementation of legal measures, which permits the unobstructed transport of timber from forested regions to urban centers (Absori et al., 2024). Building on this perspective, the present study critically investigates the role of weak and corrupt law enforcement as a pivotal factor contributing to the escalation of illegal logging in tropical forest nations such as Indonesia. In response, this study proposes an alternative and innovative strategy that emphasizes the empowerment of traditional institutions—particularly the *panglima uteun*—as a key mechanism for addressing and reducing illegal logging activities.

The participation of indigenous people in environmental and forest protection is widely regarded as both important and strategic. Delfi Suganda (2024) notes that the global conservation movement increasingly emphasizes the establishment of conservation or protected areas that actively involve indigenous communities. Indigenous and local communities living near conservation zones—encompassing both forest and water resources—have been recognized for their capacity to safeguard ecosystems and maintain environmental balance. Indeed, indigenous peoples are often acknowledged as the most effective stewards for protecting forests and the natural environment (Suganda, 2024).

Empowering indigenous communities as guardians of forest ecosystems is particularly strategic, as they live within and depend directly on these forest ecosystems for their livelihood (Jamin & Hermawan,

2024). In Acehese tradition, the use of forest areas is organized into four main categories of activity. The first involves land use for farming (*meuladang*) and gardening (*meulampoh*), typically led by local leaders known as *peutua ladang*, *peutua gle*, or *peutue seuneubok*. The second category pertains to the collection of non-timber forest products such as rattan, resin, agarwood, sap, *jelutong* (*Dyera costulata*) sap, *jernang* (dragon's blood) resin, and *alin* wood. The third encompasses hunting activities, including deer hunting (*meurusa*), while the fourth involves fishing (*meu-eungkot*), especially the capture of *keureuling* (*jurung*) fish, which are abundant in the upper reaches of forest rivers. These forest-based resources constitute the primary source of livelihood for many indigenous Acehese communities (Suganda, 2024).

Forest protection within indigenous communities is carried out by customary institutions whose names and authorities vary according to the local culture and customs. Bukhari's research indicates that the control and regulation of *mukim* (the smallest administrative district) forest utilization are vested in *mukim* institutions. Therefore, any decisions related to the management and use of *mukim* forests must be made collectively through meetings attended by all village heads (*Keuchik*), *Imuem Meunasah*, *Tuha Peut Gampong*, and representatives of youth and women from all villages within the *mukim*. *Mukim* elected a board member of the *Lembaga Panglima Uteun* (Bukhari et al., 2024). It implements customary provisions relating to forests and supervises forest utilization activities.

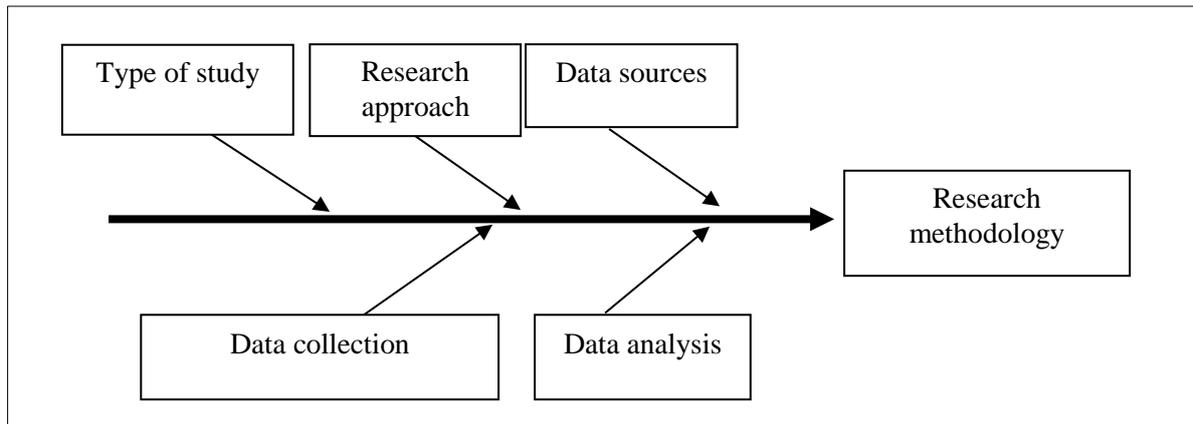
Under Aceh's customary law, the *Panglima Uteun* (forest commander)—also known as *pawang uteun*—serves as forest guardian appointed to protect the forest from various disruptions that could degrade its ecological functions. Customary norms in North Aceh District prioritize the importance of maintaining soil fertility, as it sustains human life and is intrinsically connected to *waih* (water), *kampong* (settlement), *ume* (rice field), and *uteun* (forest), which include both village-owned and protected forests. Community members seeking access or usage rights over forest areas must obtain *dowa* (permission) from the *keuchik* to obtain *bakul edem* (personal rights) to specific portions of the forest. Despite these customary mechanisms, the authority of the *pawang uteun* remains limited to handling minor cases of forest damage. In fact, the most significant threat to forest sustainability stem from large-scale illegal logging conducted by companies, individuals, and communities engaged in land clearing for plantation development. Therefore, strengthening and empowering the role of local forest handlers (*pawang uteun*) is critical to enable them to act effectively in protecting forest ecosystems and the environment within the jurisdiction of North Aceh District.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to analyze the role of local forest handlers (*pawang uteun*) in addressing illegal logging in North Aceh District. A qualitative research design was employed using an empirical legal research approach. The empirical legal approach integrates elements of normative law with empirical inquiry, thereby combining the analysis of legal norms with the observation of their application in practice (Wiraguna, 2024). According to Noor (2023), empirical legal research focuses on examining the implementation and effectiveness of legal provisions as they operate in real-life situations within society.

Figure 1

Methodology



This study used both primary and secondary data. In empirical legal research, secondary data are typically collected through literature review or document study. These data serve as theoretical and contextual foundation of the research and are analyzed using the documentation study method. This involves a comprehensive examination of library materials, including books, scholarly articles, and government documents relevant to the research subject.

Additionally, primary data collection in this study included structured interviews and direct observations. In legal research, the structured interview technique employs a consistent and predetermined set of questions for all participants to ensure both objectivity and ease of data analysis (Disemadi, 2022). The researcher maintained a uniform sequence of questions throughout the interviews and evaluated participants' responses using a specified rubric. In this study, primary data were gathered directly from participants and field sources to complement the secondary data obtained through the literature review, thereby providing a thorough understanding of the current situation.

In empirical legal research, purposive sampling is used to select participants or informants based on specific criteria that align with the research objectives (Chang, 2024). This method enables the researcher to identify individuals who possess substantial knowledge and detailed insights into the legal issues under examination. Accordingly, the participants in this study included the Head of the Criminal Investigation Unit (Kasat Reskrim) of the Resort Police of Lhokseumawe, the Head of the Environment and Forestry Service of North Aceh District, and several *pawang uteun* from various villages within North Aceh District.

In empirical legal research, data analysis predominantly employs descriptive and qualitative methods. These methods facilitate the organization, interpretation, and integration of primary data—such as interviews and observations—with secondary data derived from literature reviews to clarify legal phenomena. Furthermore, triangulation techniques were used to assess the validity and credibility of the findings. By comparing and cross-verifying information from various sources, triangulation ensured objectivity and strengthened the reliability and confidence in the study's findings.

RESULTS

Legal Framework for Addressing Illegal Logging

The increasing prevalence of illegal logging in Indonesia has prompted the government to implement a series of regulations aimed at reducing its occurrence. In response, several laws and penalties have been enacted to deter individuals and organizations involved in such activities. Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry, specifically Article 50, paragraph 2, classifies illegal logging as a crime act that causes forest destruction and, therefore, warrants criminal penalties (D, 2021).

In addition, the government enacted Law No. 32/2009 on Environmental Protection and Management. Although this law does not explicitly address illegal logging, it establishes provisions for preventing environmental degradation and protecting forest ecosystems. Article 76 outlines penalties for environmental destruction, including administrative sanctions such as written warnings, suspension of environmental licenses, and government-imposed coercive measures.

Because the two previously mentioned laws do not specifically regulate or define the crime of illegal logging, the Indonesian government enacted Law No. 18 of 2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction and Presidential Instruction No. 4 of 2005 on the Eradication of Illegal Logging in Forest Areas and its Distribution Throughout the Territory of the Republic of Indonesia. Article 12 of Law No. 18 of 2013 stipulates that every person is prohibited from engaging in the following activities:

- a. Conducting logging activities in forest areas that are not in compliance with a valid forest utilization permit.
- b. Engaging in logging activities in forest areas without a permit issued by an authorized official.
- c. Illegally cutting down trees in forest areas.
- d. Loading, unloading, releasing, transporting, controlling, or possessing timber products from forest areas illegally.
- e. Transporting, controlling, or possessing timber forest products without proper documentation or a certificate of legality for forest products.
- f. Carrying tools commonly used for felling, cutting, or splitting trees in forest areas without permission from an authorized official.
- g. Using wood forest products suspected of originating from illegal logging.
- h. Circulating timber from illegal logging by land, water, or air.
- i. Smuggling wood originating from or entering the territory of the Republic of Indonesia by river, land, sea, or air.
- j. Collecting, buying, selling, exchanging, receiving in trust, or possessing forest products obtained through illegal logging.
- k. Buying, marketing, and/or processing timber forest products originating from forest areas that were illegally harvested.
- l. Receiving, selling, exchanging, storing, or possessing timber forest products that were illegally extracted or collected.

The aforementioned regulations include numerous provisions aimed at combating illegal logging. These are detailed in Articles 82 to 106, which prescribe penalties such as imprisonment, fines, and the confiscation of tools used in the commission of the crime. Additionally, the regulations allow for the revocation of business licenses and other administrative penalties (Yani & Din, 2021). Despite the

implementation of various legal policies by the government, criminal activities contributing to deforestation continue to occur in Indonesia at an alarming rate.

Specific regulations governing the protection and management of forest areas in Aceh are outlined in several laws and regulations, including Law No. 6/2011 on the Government of Aceh and Aceh Qanun No. 7/2016 on Forestry. These provisions affirm Aceh's authority to manage natural resources within its jurisdiction. Article 156 of Law No. 11/2006 on the Government of Aceh explicitly grants the Government of Aceh and districts or city governments the authority to manage Aceh's forests—covering aspects such as planning, implementation, utilization, and supervision of exploration, exploitation, and cultivation activities. Furthermore, Law No. 23/2014 delineates the division of authority between provincial and central governments in managing the forestry sector. The Aceh government subsequently enacted Qanun No. 7/2016 on Aceh Forestry to reinforce local forest governance. To ensure effective implementation, it is crucial to disseminate this Qanun widely among stakeholders at the provincial and district/city levels. Such dissemination promotes alignment, cooperation, and synergy among all forest management institutions in Aceh, thereby strengthening collective efforts toward sustainable forest governance.

Despite the existence of adequate regulations governing forest protection and management, illegal logging remains prevalent in Aceh, Indonesia. According to Absori (2024), this persistence stems from the ineffective enforcement of the legal framework, which enables timber from forested areas to be easily transported and traded in urban markets (Absori et al., 2024). The reliance on penal approaches to address illegal logging in Aceh has not yielded optimal results, highlighting the need for alternative strategies. One promising approach involves empowering customary institutions, particularly the *panglima uteun*, to play a more active and recognized role in forest conservation.

Illegal Logging Practice in North Aceh District

Forestry-related crimes—such as poaching protected wildlife, illegal logging, forest encroachment, and illegal mining—have drawn increasing public and governmental attention in recent years. Indonesia is home to an exceptionally rich biodiversity, comprising approximately 720 species of mammals, 1,605 species of birds, 409 species of amphibians, 723 species of reptiles, 1,900 species of butterflies, 187,964 species of invertebrates, 3,892 species of vertebrates, 151,847 species of insects, and 30,000 species of Hymenoptera inhabiting both land and marine ecosystems (Widarto et al., 2022). However, with rapid technological advancement, environmental crimes—particularly those that destroy forests—have become increasingly sophisticated and damaging. If these crimes in the forestry sector are not effectively addressed, the biological and non-biological ecosystems of Indonesia's forests may face irreversible destruction.

Illegal logging, in particular, has played a significant role in the decline of forest cover across Indonesia (Yuza et al., 2023). This issue remains widespread throughout the nation's tropical forest regions, including Aceh, and is especially prominent in the North Aceh District. According to the HAKA, between June 2020 and July 2021, Aceh lost approximately 19,443 hectares of forest cover, equivalent to approximately one hectare of forest disappearing every 27 minutes (Zulkarnaini, 2022). The most extensive deforestation in Aceh occurred in three regions: South Aceh District (1,924 ha), followed by North Aceh District (1,851 ha) and Gayo Lues (1,494 ha) (Zulkarnaini, 2022).

Figure 2

Overview of Forest Deforestation in Aceh in 2022

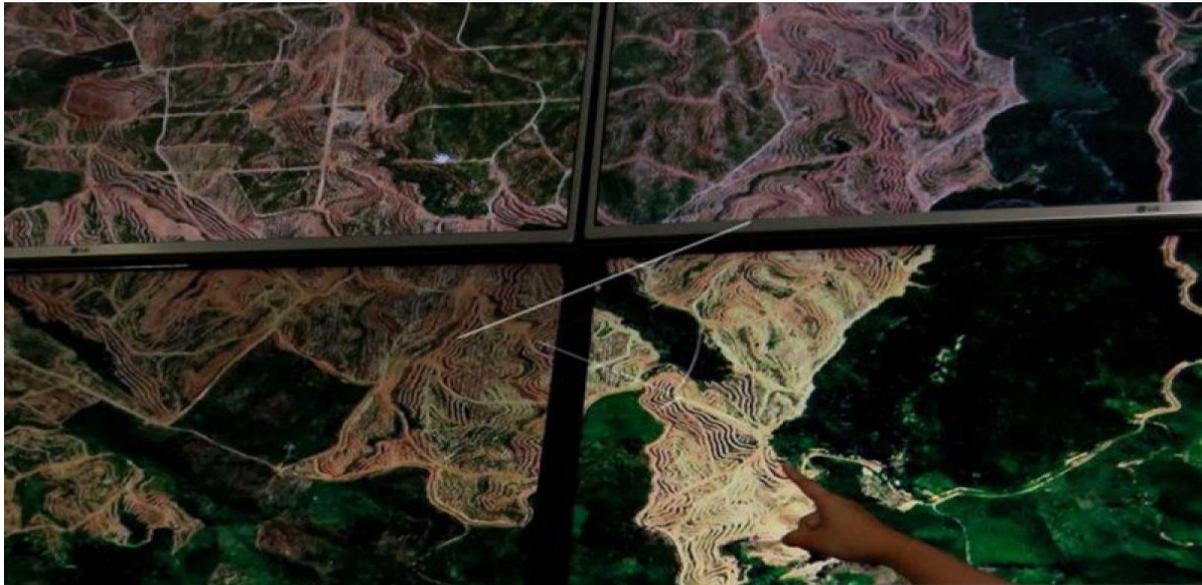


Figure 2 illustrates the growing extent of forest destruction resulting from illegal logging. According to the Aceh Natural Forest and Environment Foundation (HAKA) and the Leuser Conservational Forum (FKL), the primary causes of deforestation in Aceh are forest encroachment for plantation development and illegal logging activities. Data collected by the Geographic Information System (GIS) team of HAKA between 2020 and 2022 revealed that North Aceh District experienced a total loss of 2.853 hectares of forest cover. HAKA's GIS Manager further reported that in 2020 alone, North Aceh District lost 1.422 hectares of forest, comprising 779 hectares of utilization area, 421 hectares of production forest, and 221 hectares of protected forest (Azri, 2023).

Table 1

Total Loss of Forest Cover in North Aceh District

Forest Area	Forest Cover Loss			
	2020 (Ha)	2021 (Ha)	2022 (Ha)	2023 (Ha)
Production forests	421	173	140	155
Protection forests	221	63	45	65
Other	779	766	665	646
Total	1.422	766	665	866

Table 1 clearly shows a continuous annual decline in forest cover. The conversion of forested regions into plantations and illegal logging are the primary factors contributing to deforestation in North Aceh District. The consequences of this forest loss are severe, resulting in reduced water absorption capacity, increased risks of floods and landslides, drought, and disruption of ecological balance.

The Sawang sub-district in North Aceh has been identified as one of the areas most affected by illegal logging. According to a report from the Sawang sub-district office in January 2020, the area spans

384.65 km² (38.465 hectares), comprising 39 villages and two settlements. The forested portion alone covers 35.943 hectares across several villages (Yulia & Herinawati, 2022).

Most residents of the Sawang sub-district depend on forest resources for their livelihoods. An Integrated Team from the Provincial and North Aceh District Forestry Services, supported by the police, successfully confiscated approximately 40 tons of processed timber, believed to have been harvested illegally (Yulia & Herinawati, 2022). The timber extracted from the Sawang sub-district forests is often stockpiled in nearby regions, such as the Dewantara and Krueng Mane sub-districts, as well as in Lhokseumawe City.

Among the most highly sought after species by illegal loggers are Meranti trees, valued for their high economic value. These are classified into two main groups: the red Meranti group (*Shorea leprosula*, *Shorea parvifolia*, *Shorea ovalis*, and *Shorea quadrinervis*) and the white Meranti group (*Shorea agamii*, *Shorea gratissima*, *Shorea lamellata*, and *Shorea virescens*). Red Meranti species are identified by their reddish wood color. In some cases, loggers also receive specific orders for Meranti trees growing in hilly or swampy areas, such as *Shorea macrantha*.

The North Aceh District Environment and Forestry Service reported that the types of timber targeted by illegal loggers in the district are similar with those found in other regions of Indonesia. These include high-quality and economically valuable species such as *Merbau*, *Meranti*, *Damar*, *Semantok*, *Semaram*, *Krueng*, and *Sengon*. These woods are primarily harvested for construction purposes, including residential and commercial building projects, as well as various industrial applications.

Table 2

Most Commonly Logged Tree Species in North Aceh District Forest Areas

Local Name	Scientific Name	Family
Merbau	Leguminosae	Fabaceae
Meranti	<i>Shorea</i> Roxb. ex C.F.GaerTN	Dipterocarpaceae
Damar	<i>Agathis</i> Loranthifolia	Dipterocarpaceae
Seumantok	<i>Shorea</i>	Dipterocarpaceae
Semaram	<i>Shorea</i> Platyclados	Dipterocarpaceae
Keruing	<i>Dipterocarpus</i>	Dipterocarpaceae
Sengon	<i>Albizia</i> Chinensis	Fabaceae

Table 2 highlights that one of the main drivers of forest exploitation is the abundance of timber species with high economic value. Over the past two years, illegal loggers in North Aceh District have increasingly targeted Sengon wood (*Albizia chinensis*) to meet the growing demand driven by the rapid expansion of the plywood industry in the Lhokseumawe and Bireuen districts. This industry requires substantial quantities of timber, making Sengon trees particularly sought-after. Consequently, several areas across Aceh Province, including the forests of North Aceh District, have experienced widespread illegal logging of Sengon trees.

Obstacles and Challenges to Addressing Illegal Logging in North Aceh District

Efforts to combat illegal logging in North Aceh District presents numerous obstacles and challenges. Geographically, the district contains approximately 23.455 hectares of forest area, forming part of the

2.96 million hectares of total forest cover in Aceh. Between 2020 and 2022, North Aceh District lost 2.853 hectares of forest, primarily due to illegal logging activities. The substantial loss of forest cover is largely attributed to inadequate supervision and enforcement by relevant authorities. According to a statement by an investigator from the Lhokseumawe Police, limited resources, including an insufficient number of personnel and a lack of supporting infrastructure, significantly hinder effective monitoring and legal enforcement. These constraints make it challenging for law enforcement agencies to patrol and take action across the extensive forested areas of North Aceh District.

Table 3

Comparison of the Number of Law Enforcement Officers with Forest Area in North Aceh

Law Enforcement Officer	Total	Forest Area
Lhokseumawe Resort Police (Specific Crime Investigator)	12	23.455 Ha
Forest Police	8	

Table 3 indicates a disproportionate ratio between the number of law enforcement officers and the total forest area in North Aceh. Law enforcement personnel face numerous challenges during their investigations, particularly when illegal logging occurs in remote forest areas. These activities are typically carried out at night, with perpetrators using small sensors as a sound dampener (muffler/silencer) equipped with silenced exhausts to avoid detection by nearby inhabitants. Individuals involved in illegal logging acknowledge that accessing these remote locations is challenging. Moreover, investigators from the North Aceh District Police have reported significant challenges in transporting confiscated teak wood to the district police station due to the heavy weight and large volume of timber, as well as the rugged and hilly terrain that must be traversed to access the crime scenes.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity in the legal framework concerning measures to combat forest destruction. For example, Article 111, Paragraph (2) of Law No. 18/2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction stipulates that, following the establishment of the institution referred to in Paragraph (1), all criminal acts of organized forest destruction fall under the authority of the Institute for the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction (LP3H). However, Article 78 of Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry authorizes Forest Investigators (*PPNS*) to investigate criminal acts of forest destruction caused by illegal logging. This overlap in regulations has led to uncertainty and hesitation among *PPNS* officers in enforcing the law effectively.

Another significant challenge is that illegal logging activities in North Aceh District are mainly carried out by companies that enlist the involvement of local communities and, in some cases, receive assistance from law enforcement officials. According to statements from the *pawang uteun* of North Aceh District and the Sawang sub-district, residents living in close proximity to forest areas are often aware of ongoing illegal logging but refrain from reporting such incidents. This reluctance stems from the fact that the perpetrators are often members of their own communities or extended families. Moreover, community members fear potential repercussions not only from the perpetrators but also from certain law enforcement officials. Consequently, local residents are generally reluctant to serve as witnesses in cases of illegal logging within the forest areas of North Aceh District.

Role of Local Forest Handlers (*Pawang Uteun*) in Addressing Illegal Logging in North Aceh District

The inadequate response to illegal logging crimes in North Aceh District can be attributed primarily to the vast forest areas and limited resources, including insufficient law enforcement personnel and infrastructure. These constraints have significantly hindered the effectiveness of conventional law enforcement strategies, which tend to emphasize repressive measures.

To overcome these challenges, a collaborative approach involving the *pawang uteun* is essential. These individuals, who are members of the indigenous community, can serve as key partners in both preventive and repressive efforts to safeguard the forest ecosystem in North Aceh District. The *panglima uteun* (forest commander), or *pawang uteun* represents a traditional institution entrusted with upholding and enforcing customary laws related to forest management and conservation. This institution holds the authority to protect forest areas and take appropriate action to ensure their preservation for the collective benefit of the community.

The participation of the *pawang uteun* in efforts to combat illegal logging is highly justified, as they are integral members of the indigenous community who understand the significance of forests as a source of livelihood, conservation, and water supply. Moreover, because indigenous people often reside within or near forested areas, they possess an intimate knowledge of the local environment and are often familiar with individuals involved in illegal logging. Their proximity to forest entry and exit points—frequently located within their own village areas—enables them to effectively monitor and identify those engaged in illegal forest activities.

Figure 3

Structure of the Forest Handler Customary Institution (Panglima Uteun)

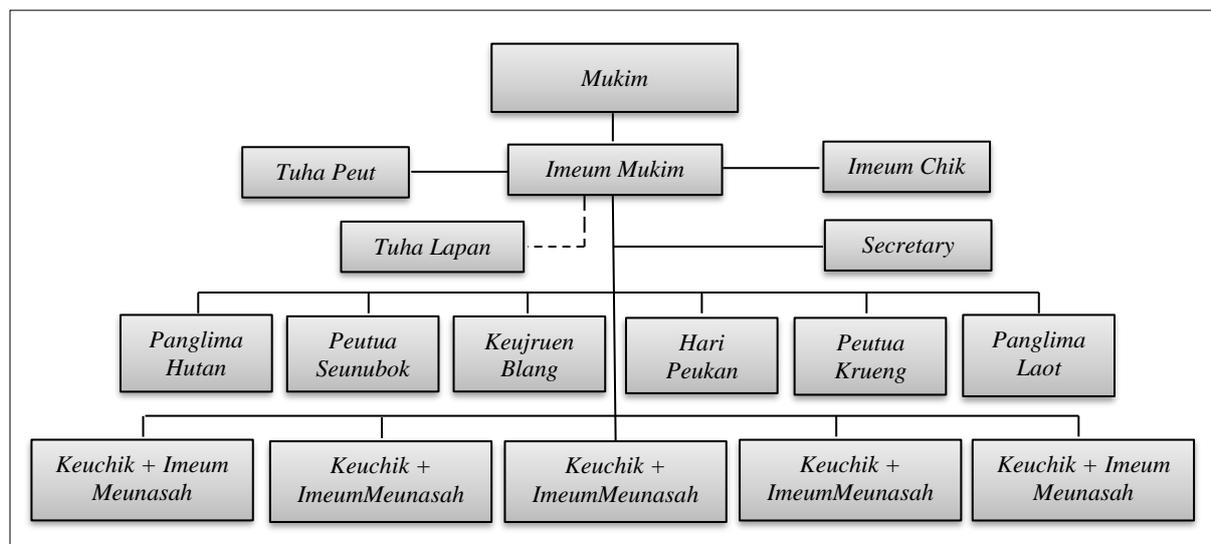


Figure 3 illustrates that customary institutions in Aceh are organized according to their respective status, functions and roles. According to Yulia and Herinawati (2022), the *pawang uteun* is considered as a key player in ensuring forest sustainability. As a forest commander, the *pawang uteun* plays a crucial and strategic role in promoting sustainable forest conservation through education and engagement with local communities. Within the village hierarchy, the *pawang uteun* operates under the coordination of

the village head (*Keuchik*), yet maintains autonomy and independence as a government partner at the village, sub-district, and district levels (Article 3). The *pawang uteun* may also seek *Keuchik's* guidance and advice in resolving various issues (Yulia & Herinawati, 2022).

The *pawang uteun* functions as part of the *Mukim* administration under the authority of the *Imum Mukim*. Their jurisdiction is influenced by the size of the forest area, which often transcends village boundaries. The primary role of the *pawang uteun* includes upholding traditional forest regulations (*adat glee*), enforcing customary prohibitions and tax collection (*wasee glee*), mediating disputes arising from violations of customary forest laws, and guiding ceremonial practices related to forest traditions.

Article 31 of the Aceh Qanun No. 10/2008 on Customary Institutions stipulates that the *pawang uteun* is responsible for managing and preserving forest environments through customary practices, supporting government efforts in forest management, enforcing customary forest laws, coordinating traditional ceremonies, and mediating disputes among community members concerning forest utilization. However, despite these roles, the *pawang uteun's* influence on forest preservation remains limited due to the restricted scope of customary law.

The North Aceh District Environment and Forestry Service mentioned the following.

“The role of *pawang uteun* in protecting forests within the North Aceh District is commendable and has provided significant support to the government. However, their involvement in addressing forest degradation is limited by the enforcement of customary forest laws. It is crucial to expand the duties and authority of the *pawang uteun*, particularly in tackling illegal logging in the North Aceh District, both through preventive and punitive measures.”

The *pawang uteun* contributes to combating illegal logging by fostering community engagement, which strengthens the effectiveness of law enforcement. Community participation is vital in upholding and enforcing the law. In an active and engaged community, legal violations are less likely to be ignored. Law enforcement officers are consequently encouraged to perform their duties more diligently, as they operate under community oversight. Notable examples of effective public oversight include the investigation of Ferdi Sambo's criminal case, the corruption case involving the chairman of the Constitutional Court, the premeditated murder case of former Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) chairman Antasari Azhar, and the corruption case of former Industry and Trade Minister Bob Hasan, also known as the “king of Indonesia's forests” (Sudiana et al., 2025).

Community involvement in law enforcement can be achieved through public policy oversight, as stipulated in Law No. 28 of 1999 on State Administration Free from Corruption, Collusion, and Nepotism. This law affirms that the public holds the right and responsibility to participate in achieving a corruption-free system of governance. Community participation in law protection and enforcement efforts is becoming increasingly crucial, particularly in establishing an open and transparent administrative system where every voice from the community is acknowledged and respected (Alelxaender, 2023).

The prevention and eradication of forest destruction in Indonesia also prioritizes community involvement. Article 4 (d) of Law No. 18/2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction identifies community participation as a crucial element in combating forest degradation. Article 7

further emphasizes that the responsibility for preventing forest destruction lies with communities, legal entities, and corporations holding forest utilization permits. These entities are required to report any incidents or suspicions of forest destruction to the relevant authorities, either verbally or in writing. Furthermore, Article 61 mandates that the community collaborate with agencies dedicated to eradicating forest destruction and actively participate in monitoring and enforcing related laws.

Aceh's customary institutions hold a strong position due to the special privileges granted to the province under Law No. 44/1999 on the Implementation of Aceh's Privileges. This law provides Aceh with special authority to regulate and uphold traditional customs, including defining the roles and responsibilities of its customary institutions. Although there are no specific procedural laws that formally integrate *pawang uteun* as partners in law enforcement against illegal logging, their participation in preserving local forest ecosystems remain crucial in addressing such crimes in North Aceh District. However, the absence of explicit regulations has limited the active participation of *pawang uteun* in formal law enforcement efforts.

The *pawang uteun* should serve as partners in the law enforcement process for addressing illegal logging crimes. A *pawang uteun* from Riseh Baroh Village, Sawang Sub-district, North Aceh District, expressed the following:

“As forest guardians, our responsibilities are crucial for maintaining the ecosystem and resolving conflicts among community members regarding forest use. However, when it comes to law enforcement—particularly in cases of illegal logging—our involvement is minimal and lacks proper coordination. In such cases, law enforcement agencies merely seek our input, and in the absence of clear regulations, we are reluctant to report instances of forest destruction because we lack legal protection.”

Regulations that define the role of *pawang uteun* as customary institutions in Aceh, such as Qanun Aceh No. 10/2008, do not explicitly address their involvement in the law enforcement process. However, Law No. 18 of 2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction mandates that communities actively engage and collaborate with relevant institutions in efforts to combat forest degradation. Therefore, it is essential that *pawang uteun*, as representatives of indigenous communities residing within forest areas, be granted the authority to participate in the law enforcement process.

The Head of the Specified Crimes Unit responsible for handling illegal logging cases stated the following:

“The general public is allowed to participate in law enforcement activities; however, specific regulations must first be established to avoid misinterpretation during implementation. For example, community members may provide information or reports on illegal logging activities within the forest areas of North Aceh District. While the involvement of *pawang uteun* in law enforcement is valuable and appreciated, it must be supported by a clear and firm legal framework.”

The novelty of this study lies in the proposed strengthening of the *pawang uteun* customary institution in combating illegal logging in the North Aceh District. Typically, illegal logging operations rely on routes that pass through local villages, making it easier to identify both residents and outsiders involved in such activities. Therefore, collaboration between *pawang uteun* and law enforcement authorities is highly beneficial, as these customary forest handlers possess extensive knowledge of forest dynamics

and the patterns of environmental degradation. The Aceh government should promptly introduce or amend regulations to enhance community engagement in law enforcement, with particular emphasis on formalizing the role of customary institutions—such as *pawang uteun*—in addressing illegal logging in the North Aceh District.

CONCLUSION

Illegal logging in North Aceh District is prevalent across protected forests, conservation areas, national parks, and production forests. Although repressive law enforcement measures have been implemented to address this issue, the number of illegal logging cases continues to rise annually. This study identifies a key factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of law enforcement in combating illegal logging crimes in North Aceh District—namely, the limited number of law enforcement personnel relative to the vast forest areas under their jurisdiction.

To address this challenge, a novel approach is required to empower the *pawang uteun*, who within or near forested areas, to actively participate in efforts to combat illegal logging. The customary institution of *pawang uteun* in North Aceh District is regulated by Law No. 44/1999 on the Implementation of Aceh's Privileges, Law No. 11/2006 on the Government of Aceh, and Aceh Qanun No. 10/2008 on Customary Institutions. However, these provisions do not yet provide *pawang uteun* with authority to engage in the formal law enforcement process against perpetrators of illegal logging. Meanwhile, Law No. 18 of 2013 on the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction mandates community participation as partners or supervisors in forest protection and law enforcement efforts.

The participation of *pawang uteun* in curbing illegal logging is highly beneficial, as they and other indigenous community members possess intimate knowledge of forest use, access routes, and patterns of destruction. Although no specific legislation currently governs their role in law enforcement, it is imperative that the Aceh government take prompt action to enact or amend relevant laws and regulations. Strengthening the legal foundation for *pawang uteun* is particularly important in North Aceh District, where these customary institutions can play a vital role in preserving forest ecosystems and supporting sustainable forest governance.

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