

## Bordered by Nickel: Multi-Impact of Mining Governance on the Konawe–North Konawe Boundary, Indonesia

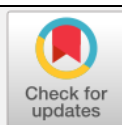
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### ARTICLE INFO

**Publication Info:**  
Research Article



#### How to cite:

Praja, S. J., Wulandari, S., Simanjuntak, T. H., Sudrajat, I., & Lambelanova, R. (2025). Bordered by Nickel: Multi-Impact of Mining Governance on the Konawe–North Konawe Boundary, Indonesia. *Society*, 13(2), 964–984.

DOI: [10.33019/society.v13i2.942](https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v13i2.942)

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Received: February 13, 2025;  
Accepted: April 25, 2025;  
Published: July 5, 2025;

### ABSTRACT

Decentralization in Indonesia is designed to strengthen local development. Yet, the prolonged boundary dispute between Konawe and North Konawe Regencies reveals a governance paradox in which resource abundance within contested territories generates cascading multidimensional impacts. This qualitative case study employs purposive sampling of government officials, electoral supervisors, community leaders, and industry actors, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis, and processed in NVivo 12 using iterative coding. The findings demonstrate that unresolved territorial fragmentation, compounded by intensive nickel mining, produces a multi-impact cascade: environmental degradation manifested in flooding, soil erosion, water and air pollution; economic uncertainty that constrains welfare distribution; social tensions arising from labor absorption and demographic shifts; political vulnerabilities such as duplication risks in the Final Voters List (DPT); and governance stagnation in land administration and investment. By advancing the concept of local spatial geopolitics of mining, this study shows how boundary disputes create a governance vacuum that amplifies ecological, economic, social, political, and administrative risks, and calls for joint-boundary management mechanisms, strengthened environmental regulation, and coordinated law enforcement to restore legitimacy and resilience in mining regions.

**Keywords:** Boundary Disputes; Decentralization; Indonesia; Local Geopolitics; Multi-Impact Cascade

## 1. Introduction

Indonesia's decentralization framework, evolving from Law No. 1 of 1945 to Law No. 23 of 2014, has profoundly reshaped the relationship between the central government and local authorities. The legislation was designed to devolve power and resources, allowing provincial and district governments to manage their own affairs in accordance with their capacities and local potential (Laritmas & Tondo, 2021). In principle, decentralization was expected to overcome structural constraints such as underdevelopment, inequality, and poverty. It was also believed to improve accountability, responsiveness, and participatory governance at the local level. However, the reality of implementation has often fallen short of these aspirations. One of the most persistent issues has been the proliferation of new autonomous regions (*daerah otonom baru*, DOB), a phenomenon that, while framed as democratization and local empowerment, has frequently been driven by fiscal incentives and political interests rather than developmental needs (Ratnawati, 2007; Verianty, 2024).

The expansion of DOBs has resulted in significant changes to administrative and geospatial boundaries. Ideally, the creation of new districts should resolve long-standing governance challenges and facilitate more equitable resource distribution. In practice, however, boundary confirmation often lags or is neglected altogether. As a result, many new regions remain in dispute with their parent districts for years, creating zones of legal and administrative ambiguity. These unresolved boundaries not only generate conflicts between district governments but also produce uncertainty for local communities who depend on public services and resource access. The persistence of such disputes demonstrates that decentralization, rather than eliminating governance problems, may sometimes reproduce or even exacerbate them at new scales (Holqi & Salam, 2024).

The case of Konawe and North Konawe Regencies in Southeast Sulawesi provides a striking example. Established as a new district in 2007, North Konawe emerged from the division of Konawe Regency, a process that was contested both administratively and politically. Almost two decades later, several boundary segments between the two regencies remain unresolved. This lack of clarity has become more than a bureaucratic issue: it has created what scholars call a “gray zone” of governance (Eagleson, 2003; Franks et al., 2013), where competing claims over territory, authority, and resources intersect. What makes the Konawe–North Konawe case distinctive is that this unresolved boundary coincides with areas rich in natural resources, particularly nickel deposits and coastal fisheries (Congge & Gohwong, 2023).

Nickel, in particular, has become a strategic commodity in Indonesia's development trajectory and global energy transitions. As a critical mineral for electric vehicle batteries, nickel has attracted significant foreign investment and large-scale industrial development in Southeast Sulawesi and other regions (Wang et al., 2020). Yet, as the literature on the “resource curse” suggests, resource wealth does not automatically translate into prosperity; rather, it can generate rent-seeking behavior, environmental degradation, and governance challenges (Mensah et al., 2015). In contexts of territorial uncertainty, these risks are amplified. The absence of clear jurisdiction not only fuels disputes between governments but also opens opportunities for companies and local elites to exploit regulatory ambiguities, often to the detriment of environmental sustainability and community welfare (Alwi et al., 2016; Rahma et al., 2022; Setyadi & Muttaqin, 2022).

Scholars have extensively analyzed decentralization in Indonesia, the politics of regional expansion, and conflicts over resource governance. Previous studies highlight how decentralization has fragmented authority (Aspinall, 2003), how boundary disputes have persisted due to weak institutional mechanisms (Januari, 2015), and how resource extraction

often magnifies socio-ecological pressures (Sholikin, 2020). However, there remain important gaps. First, research on DOB and boundary conflicts has tended to emphasize administrative and political aspects, with less attention to how these disputes reshape mining governance at the local level. Second, studies on mining impacts often focus on national or provincial frameworks, neglecting the micro-geopolitical dynamics of contested borderlands. Third, the interaction between unresolved boundaries and resource exploitation, which this study conceptualizes as a multi-impact cascade, has received limited scholarly treatment.

This paper argues that the conflicts in Konawe and North Konawe illustrate a distinctive form of local spatial geopolitics, in which boundary ambiguities create governance vacuums that trigger cascading effects across multiple domains. Rather than being confined to administrative disputes, the Konawe–North Konawe conflict demonstrates how contested borders intersect with resource exploitation to produce environmental, economic, social, political, and institutional impacts simultaneously. For example, unclear boundaries complicate the enforcement of environmental regulations, foster economic uncertainty for communities living in disputed territories, and increase vulnerabilities in electoral governance, such as duplication in the Final Voters List (DPT). These dynamics show that unresolved boundaries can scale up into broader governance crises, undermining the very goals of decentralization.

Building on these insights, this study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how the unresolved boundary between Konawe and North Konawe has shaped the governance of nickel mining and its wider consequences. The study introduces the concept of a multi-impact cascade to describe the chain of effects that arise when territorial disputes and resource governance intersect. By analyzing the Konawe–North Konawe case, this paper seeks to contribute to both theoretical debates and policy discussions. Theoretically, it advances the integration of resource curse and ecological modernization perspectives with the literature on conflict management and local geopolitics. Empirically, it offers detailed evidence from one of Indonesia's most resource-rich yet institutionally fragile border regions.

Accordingly, this research seeks to answer three interrelated questions. It examines how the unresolved boundary between Konawe and North Konawe has produced a governance vacuum in the management of nickel mining. It investigates the mechanisms through which this governance vacuum generates a multi-impact cascade that cuts across ecological, economic, social, and political domains. Finally, it explores what kinds of institutional and policy responses are most appropriate to mitigate these cascading impacts while promoting sustainable development in contested border areas. By engaging with these questions, the study aims to advance both theoretical and empirical understandings of how local spatial geopolitics and resource governance intersect in Indonesia's decentralization era.

## **2. Literature Review**

Conflicts related to territorial disputes are widely recognized as one of the principal drivers of civil conflict and internal wars. They not only create instability at the state level but also produce long-term consequences for communities, including increased poverty, environmental damage, and forced population mobility. The works of Guo provide a particularly comprehensive framework for understanding and managing territorial disputes through structured resolution mechanisms. In *Territorial Disputes and Conflict Management: The Art of Avoiding War*, Guo outlines six principal schemes and five negotiation techniques that emphasize comparative advantage, the calculation of costs and benefits, and the art of balancing structural with procedural approaches. Although the book focuses on interstate disputes, the framework is adaptable to subnational contexts where administrative boundaries

remain contested. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that natural resources, particularly mining deposits, are often located in areas where boundaries are unclear, creating conditions that can prolong disputes and intensify their impacts. Applying Guo's framework suggests that dialogue, structured negotiation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration can mitigate the risks of escalation while simultaneously opening pathways for sustainable natural resource governance (Guo, 2012).

In parallel, a significant strand of literature has explored the multidimensional impacts of mining activities, providing the theoretical foundation for understanding the socio-ecological consequences of extractive industries. Hilson demonstrates that mining not only degrades ecosystems through deforestation, water pollution, and soil erosion, but also reshapes the socio-economic structures of communities. The introduction of mining frequently disrupts traditional livelihoods, alters patterns of labor absorption, and leads to uneven distribution of economic benefits (Hilson, 2002). This resonates with the "resource curse" thesis, which highlights the paradox of resource abundance: rather than guaranteeing prosperity, resource wealth often produces corruption, elite capture, rent-seeking behavior, and political instability (Hill & Pasaribu, 2022; Majdi et al., 2022; Sholikin, 2020). The paradox becomes particularly pronounced in fragile governance environments where overlapping jurisdictions and weak institutions allow competing actors to exploit ambiguities in authority and regulation.

At the same time, alternative perspectives offer a more optimistic vision of reconciling resource extraction with sustainability. The theory of ecological modernization suggests that the environmental impacts of mining can be minimized when strict regulatory frameworks are combined with technological innovation and participatory governance (Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000). In this perspective, economic development and environmental protection are not inherently contradictory but can be aligned through institutional reforms and inclusive decision-making processes. The application of ecological modernization in mining contexts underscores the importance of multi-level regulation and the integration of community voices in determining the trajectory of development.

Conflict management theory and mining impact studies thus provide complementary insights into the governance dilemmas faced in resource-rich borderlands. In Indonesia, resolving land and mining conflicts often requires more than formal legal frameworks; it necessitates approaches grounded in local wisdom and cultural legitimacy. Empirical studies demonstrate that community mediation and customary institutions can serve as effective mechanisms to reduce tensions, build trust, and increase the legitimacy of conflict settlements (Hilmawan & Clark, 2019; Zuada et al., 2021). These findings highlight that while structural and procedural solutions, such as those outlined by Guo, are indispensable, they must be adapted to the local socio-political context in order to gain acceptance and durability. In resource-dependent regions, the combination of legal authority, customary practices, and negotiated settlement becomes critical in ensuring both social stability and sustainable resource management.

Despite this extensive body of scholarship, notable gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies of territorial conflict in Indonesia emphasize political or administrative dimensions, giving less attention to the specific ways in which unresolved boundaries affect the governance of extractive industries. Second, mining impact studies, while well developed, tend to concentrate on national or provincial levels of analysis, often overlooking the micro-dynamics of conflict in border areas where jurisdictional ambiguities are most acute. Third, few efforts have been made to explicitly integrate conflict management theories with resource governance



perspectives to capture the cascading impacts that arise when contested boundaries intersect with resource extraction.

This study seeks to address these gaps by linking the literature on territorial conflict management with the literature on mining impacts, under the analytical lens of local spatial geopolitics. By doing so, it frames the unresolved boundary between Konawe and North Konawe not merely as an administrative dispute but as a site where governance vacuums amplify ecological degradation, economic uncertainty, social tensions, and political vulnerabilities. In short, the literature suggests that the interaction between conflict management mechanisms and resource governance frameworks is critical for understanding the multi-impact cascade of mining in disputed territories. This integrated perspective provides the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach designed to explore in depth the dynamics of regional conflict between Konawe Regency and North Konawe Regency, particularly with respect to the governance of mining activities at the local level. The qualitative design was chosen because it enables the researcher to capture the complexity of social interactions, perceptions, and power relations that underlie the conflict. Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize measurement and generalization, qualitative research provides space to examine the context and lived experiences of actors, allowing the study to generate a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of governance challenges (Creswell, 2017).

The research is framed as a case study, focusing on the unresolved boundary dispute between Konawe and North Konawe as a representative site of broader issues linking decentralization, territorial conflict, and resource governance in Indonesia. This case was selected because it embodies the tensions between administrative fragmentation and natural resource exploitation, particularly in relation to nickel mining. By concentrating on one critical case, the study seeks to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the discussion on how local spatial geopolitics intersect with extractive industries.

Informants were identified using purposive sampling, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with direct involvement in or significant knowledge of the conflict. These informants included officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Southeast Sulawesi Provincial Government, and the administrations of Konawe and North Konawe Regencies, as well as community leaders, electoral supervisors, and actors representing mining companies. The purposive strategy was intended to gather a wide range of perspectives from state, community, and industry stakeholders who are directly affected by or involved in boundary-related governance issues. The number of informants was determined by the principle of information saturation, meaning interviews continued until additional data no longer produced new themes or insights.

Data collection was conducted through three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, field observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring the perspectives of informants while maintaining a focus on key themes such as boundary ambiguity, the governance vacuum, the socio-economic impacts of mining, and political vulnerabilities in border areas. Observation provided a valuable means of capturing on-the-ground dynamics, including signs of environmental degradation, demonstrations, and the day-to-day functioning of local government institutions. Document analysis further enriched the study by examining regulatory frameworks, boundary maps, memoranda of understanding related to the “pending zone,” government decrees, and

statistical records. By combining these methods, the research applied triangulation to cross-validate findings and reduce the risk of bias (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

The analytical process followed the Data Analysis Procedure by Application (DAPA) with the assistance of NVivo 12 software. The data were examined in stages, beginning with coding, in which interview transcripts and observational notes were broken down into smaller segments of meaning. These codes were then grouped into broader categories such as environmental damage, economic uncertainty, social tension, political vulnerability, and governance stagnation. In the final stage, thematization, the categories were synthesized into overarching themes that explained the interconnections between unresolved boundaries and mining governance. This iterative process led to the identification of what this study conceptualizes as the “multi-impact cascade.” NVivo facilitated the systematic organization of large volumes of qualitative data and enabled the visualization of recurring patterns, word frequencies, and thematic relationships (Saldana, 2009).

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings was a central concern throughout the research. Several strategies were adopted to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Data triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple sources, interviews, observations, and documents, to verify consistency in the evidence. An audit trail was maintained to record key decisions and analytical processes, thereby improving transparency. To safeguard informants, anonymization procedures were strictly applied, particularly for government officials and community members whose disclosures might otherwise expose them to risk. In addition, member checking was conducted in selected instances by presenting preliminary interpretations to informants for feedback, which helped refine the accuracy of the analysis.

Ethical considerations were prioritized at all stages. Participation in interviews was voluntary and based on informed consent. Sensitive information regarding governance failures, electoral manipulation, or corporate practices was treated with discretion, ensuring that informants were not exposed to harm as a result of their involvement. The study also adhered to institutional ethical standards for social science research, reinforcing its integrity and legitimacy.

## 4. Results

The unresolved boundary dispute between Konawe and North Konawe has created a governance vacuum that magnifies the ecological, economic, social, political, and institutional consequences of nickel mining. Rather than remaining a technical issue of demarcation, the ambiguity of boundaries has produced cascading effects that are directly experienced by local communities and reflected in patterns of environmental degradation, economic uncertainty, social tension, political vulnerability, and governance stagnation. This section discusses the findings thematically, beginning with environmental impacts that emerged most strongly from the analysis.

### 4.1. Environmental Impact

North Konawe, located in Southeast Sulawesi, has emerged as one of Indonesia’s most strategic nickel-producing regions, contributing substantially to the country’s mineral exports and global energy transitions. However, the rapid and often unregulated expansion of nickel mining in Konawe and North Konawe has produced a complex web of environmental degradation, ecological imbalance, and socio-environmental vulnerability. NVivo word frequency analysis (Figure 1) highlights four dominant themes, flooding, soil degradation,

water pollution, and air pollution, that together illustrate the scale and depth of environmental disruption in this border region.



**Figure 1. Word Frequency Environmental Impact**  
Source: Processed by researchers from NVivo 12, 2025

From an ecological standpoint, the most visible consequence of mining expansion is the intensification of flooding and hydrological damage. Extensive land clearing for open-pit nickel extraction has eliminated vast tracts of vegetation that previously served as natural barriers for water retention and soil infiltration. The loss of forest cover in upstream areas has drastically reduced the land's ability to absorb rainfall, resulting in excessive surface runoff and flash floods that devastate settlements and infrastructure (Fitriyanti, 2016). Residents in North Konawe report that flooding, once an occasional phenomenon, now occurs regularly during the rainy season, with greater intensity and unpredictability. This confirms what environmental hydrology literature describes as anthropogenic acceleration of hydrological cycles, where rapid deforestation and industrial expansion amplify natural water flows beyond ecosystem thresholds.

Community narratives collected through field interviews reinforce these findings. Residents attribute increased flooding directly to mining deforestation and soil compaction, reflecting a form of local ecological knowledge that complements scientific evidence. This understanding, grounded in lived experience, underscores the importance of participatory approaches to environmental management. Local communities often function as “early-warning systems” for environmental change, and their knowledge should be integrated into adaptive mitigation policies (Aswani et al., 2018; Davis & Wagner, 2003).

Alongside hydrological disruption, severe soil degradation has emerged as a pervasive issue. Open-pit mining methods have left deep, steep pits and unstable slopes, disrupting geomorphological stability and creating persistent erosion risks. The exposure of lateritic soil layers and the absence of post-mining reclamation measures further compound the problem. In several mining areas, abandoned pits have transformed into artificial ponds contaminated with heavy metals, posing long-term hazards for both groundwater quality and biodiversity (Maani & Nurdin, 2025). These conditions align with the broader “resource frontier” literature, which identifies how extractive industries often generate ecological scars, irreversible transformations of the landscape that signal a shift from productive ecosystems to degraded terrains (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Water pollution represents another critical dimension of environmental decline. The discharge of untreated mining waste containing nickel, chromium, and cadmium has increased river turbidity and reduced aquatic oxygen levels, leading to the collapse of local fisheries and the contamination of freshwater sources (Nurholis & Mokodompit, 2024). In Morosi District, for instance, the case of widespread river pollution led WALHI Southeast Sulawesi to file a lawsuit

against PT OSS and PT Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry (VDNI), presenting physical evidence of damaged fish ponds and sedimentation layers containing metal residues (Rosniawanti, 2025). The spread of contaminants is not confined to rivers; coastal areas such as Labengki Island, inhabited by the Bajau community, have reported declining fish stocks and visible changes in water coloration. The Bajau, traditionally reliant on fishing and small-scale ecotourism, now face dwindling livelihoods as ocean currents carry nickel tailings and sedimentation from upstream mining sites (Baraputri, 2023).

From a governance perspective, these pollution cases reveal the fragility of environmental regulation in decentralized Indonesia. Despite the existence of environmental laws, such as Law No. 32/2009 on Environmental Protection and Management and Law No. 3/2020 on Mineral and Coal Mining (Minerba Law), their enforcement remains inconsistent. Permits are often issued without adequate Environmental Impact Assessments (AMDAL), while post-mining reclamation obligations are either delayed or ignored. This regulatory gap mirrors findings by previous research, which note that local governments frequently prioritize short-term revenue from mining licenses over long-term ecological stability (La Baco Sudia et al., 2023; Taufik et al., 2025). Weak coordination between provincial and regency authorities further undermines monitoring, allowing environmental degradation to persist unchecked.

The consequences extend beyond the physical environment. As studies in political ecology emphasize, environmental degradation in extractive frontiers is inseparable from power relations between the state, corporations, and local communities (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Robbins, 2019). In the Konawe–North Konawe case, the decentralization of authority without adequate institutional capacity has led to what scholars describe as a governance vacuum: an institutional space where overlapping jurisdictions create loopholes exploited by mining companies. This condition facilitates regulatory capture, where local elites and corporate actors collude to maintain production while ignoring environmental obligations. The result is not only ecological decline but also the erosion of public trust in environmental governance.

Air pollution adds yet another layer to this multi-impact cascade. Emissions from nickel smelters and coal-fired power plants in Morosi, Motui, and Kapoila subdistricts have severely compromised air quality. Continuous release of fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and sulfur dioxide has produced chronic respiratory problems among residents, alongside reports of eye irritation and skin allergies (Imanshary et al., 2024). Field observations documented by community monitors show thick plumes of black dust covering homes and crops, reducing visibility and overall quality of life (Kamarudin, 2020). Reports from WALHI Southeast Sulawesi indicate that at least four subdistricts experience persistent air degradation due to the absence of effective emission filtration systems (Wicaksono, 2025; Yunus, 2020). Visual documentation of the Morosi power plant's continuous smoke emissions, as captured in field reports (Saharuddin, 2025), starkly illustrates this chronic pollution problem.

The persistence of air pollution exemplifies structural weaknesses in Indonesia's environmental governance system, particularly the lack of consistent monitoring, data transparency, and community involvement. The precautionary principle, which mandates preventive action in the face of potential environmental harm, is rarely implemented. Instead, the approach remains reactive, responding to disasters only after significant damage occurs. As ecological modernization theorists argue (Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000), sustainable industrialization requires not merely cleaner technology but also institutional modernization: transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making. Yet, in practice, these dimensions remain underdeveloped in the Konawe–North Konawe region.



The cumulative impact of flooding, soil degradation, water contamination, and air pollution thus represents what this study conceptualizes as a multi-impact cascade, a series of interconnected environmental consequences that amplify each other and erode ecological resilience. Flooding accelerates sedimentation that worsens water pollution; soil degradation intensifies erosion that clogs rivers; and air pollution compounds public health burdens, limiting communities' capacity to adapt. These cascading effects confirm that environmental impacts in mining frontiers are systemic rather than isolated.

From a justice perspective, the situation in North Konawe reflects a broader pattern of environmental injustice in Indonesia's resource peripheries, where rural and indigenous populations disproportionately bear the costs of development. While the benefits of mining accrue to investors and urban centers, local communities are left with degraded land, polluted air and water, and fragile livelihoods. Environmental justice requires not only equitable distribution of risks and benefits but also recognition of local voices and participation in environmental decision-making. The lack of such mechanisms in North Konawe perpetuates inequality and social disempowerment.

To reverse these trends, a comprehensive policy shift is needed, one that moves beyond technocratic mitigation to embrace integrated ecological governance. This includes the mandatory implementation of post-mining reclamation and rehabilitation plans, real-time environmental monitoring using open data systems, and the institutionalization of community-based oversight mechanisms. Strengthening AMDAL enforcement, enforcing sanctions for non-compliance, and embedding environmental education within local governance structures are crucial steps toward achieving this goal.

The environmental impact of nickel mining in the Konawe–North Konawe border region exemplifies the intertwined relationship between ecological degradation and governance failure. The case underscores the urgent need for Indonesia to align its resource governance framework with principles of sustainability, justice, and local participation. Without a decisive shift toward integrated and accountable environmental management, the region risks crossing ecological thresholds from which recovery will be increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

## 4.2. Economic Impact

The blurring of administrative boundaries between Konawe and North Konawe has generated significant economic implications, extending beyond inter-regional disputes to affect both the strategic value of the territory and the welfare of local communities. Analysis using NVivo word frequency produced a visualization of dominant terms associated with economic impacts, as shown below.



**Figure 2. Word Frequency Economic Impact**

Source: Processed by researchers from NVivo 12, 2025

The results of this analysis highlight two key themes. The first is the uncertainty in natural resource management, and the second is the paradox of persistent poverty in resource-rich areas. These themes represent how boundary disputes translate into broader economic vulnerabilities.

Unclear natural resource management is rooted in the absence of definitive boundary regulations. Although the formation of new regions has been legally supported by national legislation, the physical demarcation of boundary points often remains contested. In the case of Konawe and North Konawe, the lack of a Minister of Home Affairs Regulation specifying exact boundary markers has left the governance of natural resources in a state of uncertainty. This has led to overlapping claims, delayed development initiatives, and heightened tension over resource use. The situation has been temporarily addressed through a Memorandum of Understanding between the district and provincial boundary confirmation teams, which established a “pending zone” where activities would be suspended until a definitive regulation is issued. Yet this provisional arrangement has not resolved the underlying problem: communities continue to live within a governance vacuum that prevents them from fully accessing or benefiting from local resources. The Chronological Document on the Boundary Dispute further illustrates the problem, noting disputes over three newly established villages, Banggina, Tobimeita, and Sama Subur, as symptomatic of the broader uncertainty. This unresolved status has obstructed the optimal utilization of land and mineral resources, ultimately delaying both local development and community welfare.

The second and more profound issue concerns the paradox between abundant natural resource wealth and persistent poverty. North Konawe is endowed with vast mineral deposits, particularly nickel, with measured saprolite reserves exceeding 43 million wmt and limonite reserves surpassing 61 million wmt (Mahesa C & Nalendra, 2019). Despite this extraordinary potential, the economic benefits have not translated into improved living standards for the majority of residents. Hundreds of mining companies operate under business permits in the region, generating revenues in the trillions of rupiah. Yet the allocation of revenue sharing funds (Dana Bagi Hasil, DBH) to the region remains disproportionately small, amounting only to hundreds of billions of rupiah. Local governments thus remain heavily dependent on their annual budgets (APBD), much of which is absorbed by employee expenditure rather than development programs. This structural imbalance underscores the limitations of fiscal decentralization in ensuring equitable benefit distribution.

The persistence of poverty is further reflected in statistical data. Between 2016 and 2024, the number of poor residents in North Konawe fluctuated, with a sharp increase recorded in 2017 and peaking at over 9,000 individuals in 2021, before slightly declining to 8,940 in 2024. Field observations confirmed that many households continue to live in inadequate housing despite decades of mining operations in their vicinity. This situation epitomizes the “resource curse” thesis: the paradox of regions rich in natural resources but trapped in cycles of underdevelopment, poverty, and dependence (Hilson, 2002; Sholikin, 2020).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, often promoted as a mechanism to distribute benefits more equitably, have not consistently met community expectations. While CSR initiatives have the potential to provide infrastructure, health and education facilities, scholarships, and skills training, evidence from the field suggests that implementation remains sporadic and insufficient. Many communities continue to report limited access to clean water, underdeveloped local infrastructure, and a lack of sustainable livelihood opportunities. The gap between company reports and community experiences raises questions about accountability and the effectiveness of CSR as a tool for development.

From a broader policy perspective, the economic impact of unresolved boundaries highlights the fragility of governance in resource-rich border regions. The ambiguity of jurisdiction not only fuels competition over resource rents but also creates conditions in which wealth is extracted without meaningful redistribution to local populations. In this sense, the economic outcomes reinforce the multi-impact cascade: boundary uncertainty undermines institutional capacity, which in turn perpetuates inequality, constrains development, and deepens poverty. Without clear regulatory frameworks and stronger fiscal mechanisms to ensure fair distribution, the paradox of “rich land, poor people” will persist in North Konawe and similar regions.

#### 4.3. Social Impact

The third impact of the unresolved conflict in the border area between Konawe and North Konawe is the social dimension, which has emerged as one of the most visible and contested consequences of mining governance in this region. NVivo word frequency analysis ([Figure 3](#)) highlights terms associated with labor, migration, conflict, and community change, underscoring how territorial ambiguity and resource exploitation intersect to reshape local societies.



**Figure 3. Word Frequency Social Impact**

Source: Processed by the researcher from NVIVO 12, 2025

A persistent issue concerns the underutilization of local communities as part of the mining workforce. While the establishment of large-scale nickel industries was initially expected to create broad-based employment opportunities and to stimulate community development, field findings indicate that this expectation has not materialized. Instead, residents have been marginalized in the labor recruitment process, as companies tend to rely on migrant workers from other regions of Indonesia and, more significantly, foreign workers from China. According to BRIN’s Political Research Center, Chinese workers constitute nearly 44.49% of all foreign labor in Indonesia, a figure disproportionate to the scale of China’s actual investment ([Madrim, 2023](#)). This phenomenon reflects the “labor enclave” model in resource frontiers, whereby foreign investors import labor as part of their investment package, thereby bypassing local workers who often lack access to vocational training and certification programs ([Ballard & Banks, 2003](#)).

Observations in Konawe and North Konawe further confirm these trends. Foreign workers not only dominate technical and managerial roles but are also provided with superior housing and social facilities within company compounds, as illustrated in [Figure 4](#). By contrast, indigenous residents are excluded from these facilities and forced to commute daily, often



under difficult transport conditions. This segregation of living spaces not only mirrors labor stratification but also reinforces social distance between local and foreign populations.



**Figure 4. Employee Accommodation and Dormitories in the Smelter Company**

Source: (Galuh, 2023)

Unsafe and high-risk working conditions for local laborers compound the employment gap. Many are concentrated in hazardous positions, such as furnace guards, where repeated accidents and explosions have resulted in serious injuries and fatalities. Between 2015 and 2022, six major smelter fires occurred at PT Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry (VDNI), resulting in seven deaths, and another explosion at PT OSS in 2025 shook nearby settlements (Handayani, 2024; Sunarto, 2025). Figure 5 documents these repeated incidents. In effect, local workers bear the disproportionate risks of industrial accidents, while foreign workers are shielded by their placement in safer, higher-skilled positions. Such inequities have triggered local discontent, exemplified by the 2020 demonstrations in Konawe, where workers set fire to furnaces and dozens of trucks to protest unsafe conditions and exclusionary hiring practices (Yunus, 2020).



**Figure 5. Repeated Smelter Fires in Konawe and North Konawe**

Source: (Handayani, 2024; Sunarto, 2025)



Beyond labor exclusion, mining-induced social change has profoundly altered the social structure of border communities. Compensation payments for land acquisition and opportunities for wage labor have encouraged many residents to abandon traditional livelihoods such as farming and fishing. This transition from subsistence-based to wage-dependent economies mirrors what Bebbington et al. describe as the “recomposition of livelihoods” in extractive frontiers, where communities shift from self-sufficiency to dependency on external capital (Bebbington et al., 2008). While such transitions can temporarily increase incomes, they also create long-term vulnerability, as households become tied to volatile global commodity cycles and company policies rather than diversified local economies.

Migration further complicates this picture. Mining regions attract three categories of migrants: circular migrants who commute for work, semi-permanent settlers establishing small businesses such as shops and workshops, and permanent migrants who rent local housing near mining sites. In North Konawe, all three forms are visible, contributing to demographic transformation and increased competition for jobs, land, and services. Migrant in-migration also raises the risk of cultural tensions, as local communities perceive their traditions and norms to be under threat. Such patterns echo findings from other global mining regions, where rapid in-migration has destabilized community cohesion and led to social conflict (Hilson, 2002).

At the same time, the presence of mining companies and migrant labor has introduced new social behaviors and lifestyles. Reports from local leaders indicate rising levels of gambling, alcohol consumption, and conspicuous consumption associated with increased disposable income among workers (Basuki, 2017). These behaviors risk fostering social jealousy, especially among households excluded from direct economic benefits. More broadly, they point to a cultural shift in which younger generations are increasingly oriented toward consumerism, thereby weakening traditional values of frugality, solidarity, and collective subsistence.

These dynamics underscore the profound social transformations triggered by the unresolved Konawe–North Konawe boundary conflict and associated mining governance. The exclusion of local communities from equitable employment opportunities, combined with demographic pressures from migration and the erosion of traditional practices, illustrates the cascading nature of social impacts in resource frontiers. What emerges is not merely a set of isolated problems. However, a structural reconfiguration of local societies, marked by dependency on external actors, heightened risks for vulnerable workers, and weakened social cohesion. Unless addressed through inclusive labor policies, community-based development programs, and stronger safeguards for local culture and livelihoods, these trends risk entrenching long-term inequalities and undermining the resilience of border communities.

#### **4.4. Political Impact**

The political implications of the unresolved territorial conflict between Konawe and North Konawe extend far beyond administrative boundaries, affecting the legitimacy of local democratic processes. The rapid influx of migrant labor associated with the nickel mining industry has created complex demographic shifts that challenge the integrity of population registration and electoral administration. NVivo word frequency analysis (Figure 6) highlights the prominence of terms related to voters, migration, and duplication, reflecting how mining expansion has intertwined with political governance challenges in border regions.



**Figure 6. Word Frequency Political Impact**

Source: Processed by researchers from NVivo 12, 2025

One of the most striking political consequences is the duplication of the Permanent Voter List (DPT) during general elections. The combination of overlapping jurisdictional claims and large-scale migration of workers to mining sites has blurred population records, increasing the risk of double registration. Weak verification systems and fragmented administrative coordination between the two regencies have created openings for both inadvertent errors and deliberate manipulation. Such practices undermine the principle of free and fair elections and open pathways for electoral fraud and illegal political mobilization by vested interests (Agussalim et al., 2023).

Reports from the field and local oversight agencies such as Panwaslu indicate that voter duplication has been exploited for short-term political gain, deepening social polarization in the process. Local communities feel deprived of political control, while migrant workers, many of whom lack long-term residency, are often mobilized by local elites to influence electoral outcomes. This situation not only breeds resentment but also erodes public trust in election organizers and regional administrations (Setiawan & Widyana, 2022). The border conflict, therefore, has transformed from a territorial dispute into a political governance crisis, exposing how administrative fragmentation can weaken democratic institutions.

Moreover, the jurisdictional ambiguity resulting from unclear borders has hampered effective political oversight and encouraged transactional politics. The lack of clear electoral constituencies and population databases enables local elites to manipulate voter mobilization, vote-buying schemes, and bureaucratic patronage networks. In the long term, these practices risk entrenching political clientelism, reducing the quality of local democracy, and exacerbating social disintegration. To address these challenges, cross-regional population administration reform is urgently required, one that integrates civil registration systems, harmonizes voter databases, and strengthens coordination between the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu). Without such reforms, the overlapping governance structure in border regions like Konawe and North Konawe will continue to jeopardize electoral legitimacy and the inclusiveness of local democracy (Dian Paramita, 2020; Laode, 2025).

#### **4.5. Impact of Governance**

The governance dimension represents the culmination of the multidimensional effects caused by the prolonged territorial conflict between Konawe and North Konawe. NVivo word frequency analysis (Figure 7) shows that keywords such as development, service, authority,

and uncertainty dominate the discourse, indicating how unclear boundaries disrupt governmental functions and undermine institutional coherence.



**Figure 7. Word Frequency Impact of Governance**

Source: Processed by the researcher from NVIVO 12, 2025

From a governance perspective, the lack of definitive boundary demarcation has paralyzed development initiatives and disrupted the delivery of public services. Territorial boundaries define the spatial scope within which local governments can exercise authority. When these boundaries are ambiguous, officials hesitate to implement policies or allocate resources for fear of overstepping jurisdictional limits. Conversely, some local administrations act assertively to maintain *de facto* control over disputed areas, thereby triggering intergovernmental friction (Kristiyono, 2008). Both dynamics lead to administrative paralysis and duplication of authority.

Field interviews reveal that both the Konawe and North Konawe governments acknowledge that unresolved boundary determinations have hindered investment and local development. Investors interested in establishing operations in contested areas face dual licensing requirements and inconsistent regulations, as each regency claims jurisdiction over the same territory. This bureaucratic uncertainty discourages investment, delays smelter construction projects, and prevents infrastructure expansion. The dispute over the ownership of three villages, Banggina, Tobimeita, and Sama Subur, illustrates the problem vividly. Officials note that these villages have expanded beyond their natural boundary, the river, leading to overlapping claims that neither side is willing to relinquish. As one official from Konawe stated, “Our only problem is why the three villages have expanded and entered our territory; the boundary is the river, not the irrigation canal.” Such ambiguities create a vacuum of authority that stifles both governance and economic growth.

Public service delivery has also been significantly disrupted. One of the central goals of decentralization was to bring government closer to the people, enhancing efficiency and citizen oversight. Yet in the border zones of Konawe and North Konawe, overlapping jurisdictions have produced confusion in basic administrative services such as land registration and certification. Land documents, which form the basis for ownership rights under Indonesia’s Basic Agrarian Law (Law No. 5 of 1960), rely on village-level administrative units for verification. When two villages from different regencies both claim authority over the same territory, land certification becomes impossible. Residents face uncertainty about whether their property belongs to Konawe or North Konawe, undermining legal certainty and deterring land-based investment.

Such governance paralysis extends beyond land administration to a wide range of public services, including education, health, and civil registration, where bureaucratic responsibility is contested. Decentralization’s promise of local empowerment is undermined when regional autonomy produces fragmentation rather than coordination (Pinori, 2014). The Konawe–North

Konawe case demonstrates how boundary ambiguity transforms local governance into a zero-sum struggle for authority. Ultimately, this situation undermines the core purpose of autonomy: improving service delivery, ensuring equitable development, and fostering community participation.

Unless definitive boundary regulations are enacted and inter-regional coordination mechanisms strengthened, this governance uncertainty will persist, obstructing both administrative efficiency and social welfare. The challenge is not merely technical or legal, but institutional and political, requiring the central government, local administrations, and civil society to collaboratively restore administrative clarity and rebuild public trust in the legitimacy of local governance.

## 5. Conclusion

The territorial conflict between Konawe and North Konawe Regencies in Southeast Sulawesi Province represents far more than an administrative boundary dispute; it constitutes a multidimensional governance crisis with cascading environmental, economic, social, political, and institutional consequences. The findings of this study demonstrate that the absence of clear and definitive borders, exacerbated by the presence of lucrative mineral resources, has generated a series of interconnected negative impacts that extend across all sectors of local life.

Environmentally, intensive nickel mining has caused severe ecological degradation, including flooding, soil erosion, and water and air pollution, all of which directly threaten community health and the sustainability of local livelihoods. Economically, the uncertainty surrounding resource management has created “pending zones” in which development is stalled and investment delayed. This condition reinforces a structural paradox, abundant natural resources existing alongside persistent poverty and inequality. Socially, the exclusion of local workers from industrial employment and the influx of migrant labor have transformed community structures, eroding traditional livelihoods and fueling new forms of social tension. Politically, the blurred boundaries have led to the duplication of the Permanent Voter List (DPT), undermining the integrity of local elections and weakening public trust in democratic institutions. At the governance level, unclear jurisdictional authority has disrupted service delivery, discouraged investment, and paralyzed intergovernmental coordination.

Collectively, these findings affirm that conflict resolution in border mining regions cannot be achieved merely by drawing physical lines on a map. A sustainable solution requires an integrated, multi-scalar approach that addresses institutional, environmental, and social dimensions simultaneously.

From a policy standpoint, this study proposes four key recommendations. First, strengthen mining governance by enforcing environmental regulations, conducting regular ecological audits, and ensuring strict law enforcement against violations to prevent further degradation. Second, enhance local welfare and participation through community-centered development programs and the optimization of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes that prioritize skills training, local labor absorption, and inclusive economic empowerment. Third, reform population administration systems to eliminate duplication in the voter database and ensure electoral integrity, through stronger coordination between the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), and local civil registration offices. Finally, institutionalize conflict resolution mechanisms through community mediation, participatory dialogue, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, rebuilding social trust and reinforcing local governance capacity.



## 6. Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to all individuals and institutions who provided valuable support throughout this research. Constructive feedback, insightful discussions, and professional guidance have greatly contributed to improving the quality of this study. Any remaining errors are solely the responsibility of the authors.

## 7. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, or publication.

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