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Analyzing the Dynamics of Double Movement in Water Resource Conflicts: A Critical Examination of Umbul Gemulo Spring in Batu City

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Abstract

This study examines the resistance of Umbul Gemulo residents to the construction of The Rayja Hotel in Batu City, East Java, through the lens of Karl Polanyi's concept of the "double movement" and Jürgen Habermas's notion of the "public sphere." Employing qualitative methods, including field observation, interviews with key stakeholders, and document analysis, the research identifies how market liberalization, backed by state facilitation, attempting to commodify a vital water spring, triggering a countermovement led by *Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air* (FMPMA). The results reveal that FMPMA not only mobilized collective protest but also strategically reclaimed public discourse through legal ways and civic alliances. The study concludes that this resistance exemplifies a dual process, namely defending the socio-ecological entitlements and revitalizing deliberative democracy, thereby re-embedding market activities into a framework of environmental justice and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Double movement, public sphere, water commodification, social movement, environmental justice

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk perlawanan warga Umbul Gemulo terhadap pembangunan Hotel The Rayja di Kota Batu, Jawa Timur, melalui kerangka teori "gerakan ganda" (double movement) Karl Polanyi dan "ruang publik" Jürgen Habermas. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif berupa observasi lapangan, wawancara dengan aktor kunci, dan analisis dokumen. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa liberalisasi pasar yang difasilitasi oleh negara telah mendorong upaya komodifikasi sumber mata air yang vital, sehingga memicu gerakan balasan yang dipimpin oleh Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air (FMPMA). Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa FMPMA tidak hanya memobilisasi aksi kolektif, tetapi juga secara strategis merebut kembali ruang diskursus publik melalui jalur hukum dan aliansi sipil. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa bentuk perlawanan yang dilakukan mencerminkan dua proses sekaligus, yakni adanya upaya untuk mempertahankan hak sosial-ekologis serta menghidupkan kembali demokrasi deliberatif, sehingga melekatkan kembali aktivitas pasar dalam kerangka keadilan lingkungan dan kelestarian budaya.

Kata Kunci: Double movement, ruang publik, komodifikasi air, gerakan sosial, keadilan lingkungan

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, market expansion and development projects in Indonesia have frequently sparked conflicts between local communities and corporate actors. In many of these disputes, communities advocating for their right to a healthy environment face criminalization and intimidation. This starkly contrasts with Indonesia's legal framework, particularly Article 66 of Law No. 32 of 2009 on Environmental Protection and Management, which clearly states that “any person who defends the right to a good and healthy environment shall not be subject to criminal charges or civil lawsuits” (Republic of Indonesia, 2009). The visible gap between what is written on the law and the harsh field reality reveals a questionable inconsistency in Indonesia's environmental governance (FATASEA Working Group, 2024), making the local activists to further develop a new set of arguments and actively assemble legal mechanisms as an instrument to reclaim their democratic rights (Fatah, 2019; Suharko, 2006). One such environmental conflict that gained national attention is the dispute between the Umbul Gemulo spring community and PT. Panggon Sarkarya Sukses Mandiri who developed The Rayja Hotel in Batu City, East Java. This conflict is very symbolic as it illustrates how community-driven resistance not only confronts ecological threats but also innovatively reclaims shrinking public spaces. This study, therefore, contributes to scholarly debates on innovative local governance, participatory governance, and community-driven resistance—central themes to this journal's scope.

Historically, Batu City has been renowned since the Dutch colonial period for its climate and scenic beauty, making it a high-potential area for tourism development (Arifa, 2021). As a result, the city has seen a massive increase in its Tourism infrastructure investment, and also has undergone through a drastic transformation in its social and ecological landscape (Arifin, 2018). This state-backed development model promotes the commodification of local nature and culture for tourism, often at the expense of community access to resources (Purnomo, 2016). Thus, the shift in the social and ecological landscape has created a long standing clash with local environmental rights, as tourism growth has been shown to directly contribute to the degradation of vital water springs (Kodir, 2019; Romadhan et al., 2020), leading to a critical issue: Batu City's economic expansion has triggered the public concern regarding the threat it poses to the Umbul Gemulo spring, which sustains over 1,500 families for drinking water and agricultural irrigation (Maksum, 2023).

This local conflict is not an anomaly but reflects a broader global dynamic where essential resources become contested arenas between market liberalization and human rights. The UN General Assembly Resolution No. 64/292 (2010) explicitly recognizes access to clean water as a human right; yet, institutions like the IMF and World Bank continue to advocate for the privatization and commodification of water (Alexander, 2010; Bakker, 2007). In response to that, a transnational social movement by the name of *La Via Campesina* has emerged to actively advocate for the sovereignty over natural resources that are very substantial for the

farmers, such as water springs (Elake, 2022), thus connecting the local struggle in Umbul Gemulo to a global echo of water justice movements (Marwa, 2019; Shiva, 2002).

To analyze this complexity, this study adopts a dual-theoretical framework that synthesizes Karl Polanyi's concept of the double movement with Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. This combined approach will provide a more holistic analytical scope that explains not only *why* local resistance emerges (Polanyi) but also *how* such resistance is expressed and negotiated within a democratic arena (Habermas). By situating the Umbul Gemulo conflict within the strong tension between the ever-growing market forces and deliberative democracy, this paper contributes to the literature on how grassroots civic movements sustain democratic practices under conditions of market expansion.

In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (2010) outlines how market liberalization disembeds social elements such as land and water, and transforms them into fictitious commodities. As a consequence, a *countermovement* emerges to protect communities from the devastation caused by market expansion. In the context of post-authoritarian Indonesia, such countermovements are often a direct response to dispossession driven by the alliance between local political elites and capital (Anugrah, 2018). The main rotor of this resistance is not mainly driven by economic reasons, but is deeply rooted in local worldviews; in the case of Umbul Gemulo, it is animated by a form of "ecotheology," where ecological preservation and spiritual values are intertwined, providing a strong ethical motivation for collective action (Maksum et al., 2023). This struggle is typical of broader movements for ecological justice across Indonesia, as seen in the resistance of Kendeng Farmers against the construction of a cement factory (Suharko, 2016) or how the *Adat* communities opposed the Benoa Bay reclamation in Bali (Wardana, 2017). The resistance is then enriched by Habermas's (1989) theory of the *public sphere*, the domain where this countermovement, supported by strategic NGO partnerships (Nurlinah et al., 2025), deliberates and articulates its demands.

In modern capitalism, however, the public sphere is vulnerable to the *colonization of the lifeworld*, where market logic undermines the social fabric (Habermas, 1989). This is especially significant in Indonesia's post-*Reformasi* period. While decentralization policies have opened new participatory spaces for the local citizens to engage in local governance (Antlöv & Wetterberg, 2011), the quality of these democratic reforms has proven to be uneven across the country (Hadjpakdee, 2025). The active engagement of civil society is regarded as a critical factor in deepening local democracy (Cheema, 2011), yet these very actors now face significant challenges amid signs of democratic backsliding in Indonesia (Antlöv, 2025). Spaces for participation are often fraught with power imbalances where genuine influence is denied (Großmann, 2012). In the context of the Rayja Hotel conflict, the use of legal intimidation and the suppression of public protest can be interpreted as efforts to constrict the public

sphere and colonize lifeworlds by prioritizing market imperatives over communal interests, a pattern observed throughout Indonesia's complex democracy (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014).

Therefore, this study argues that the resistance of the Umbul Gemulo community led by Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air (FMPMA) represents a *countermovement* that manifests not only as physical protest but also as a strategic effort to reclaim the *public sphere*. Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air (FMPMA) is effectively challenging the state-corporate alliance through legal advocacy, shaping public discourse, and engaging in peaceful symbolic action to fight against the threat of water commodification and the colonization of the community's lifeworld. Through this struggle, the community seeks to re-embed economic activities within norms of social and ecological justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the dynamics of the double movement within the conflict at the Umbul Gemulo spring in Bulukerto Village, Batu City. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is considered most suitable for gaining an in-depth and contextual understanding of the local resistance, the organically evolving social processes, and the lived experiences of directly affected communities (Gaus, 2017). The research was focused in Cangar Hamlet, where FMPMA and the community movement to protect the Umbul Gemulo spring originated. To obtain more factual data, the researcher also conducted field observations by participating in several local community forums organized by FMPMA in response to the proposed construction of *Dapur Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi* (SPPG), or a Nutritional Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) building located less than 200 meters from the spring.

To ensure the analytical depth and validity, this study relied on methodological triangulation, combining three primary data collection techniques. First, an extensive document analysis was conducted, focusing on news articles from mainstream and alternative media, various academic papers, official court records, and Batu City official governmental documents, which provided the researcher with the historical and institutional context for the Umbul Gemulo conflict. Secondly, field observations in the Cangar Hamlet provided direct insights into the community's perspective on deliberative processes and local collective actions. Lastly, in depth interviews were conducted with six key informants.

Informant selection began with purposive sampling to identify key actors from diverse backgrounds, including village government officials, representative from Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Jawa Timur (WALHI-JATIM), environmental journalists (Mongabay), and the member of Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air (FMPMA). The researcher employs a snowball sampling method to gather additional data, where the informants recommend other relevant stakeholders to be interviewed by the researcher. While this method is effective for accessing

embedded networks, the researcher was mindful of its potential for selection bias. To resolve the potential bias, informants were deliberately chosen by the researcher from opposing or neutral standpoints, then the researcher also sought some contradicting evidence to ensure that the subsequent referrals would not be confined to a single echo chamber of activists.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher from June 2025 to August 2025 to gain valuable in depth data from the informants. The interviews were all audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim to maintain data originality. The resulting transcripts and field notes were then sorted and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Data gathered from the interviews were then systematically grouped to identify the recurring patterns, and unique narratives from each informant that related to market expansion (the first movement), community resistance (the countermovement), and the strategic use of discourse (the public sphere). Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to critically assess how their own positionality as a local resident from Batu City might subjectively influence data access and interpretation, striving to build rapport and ensure a faithful representation of the informants' diverse perspectives.

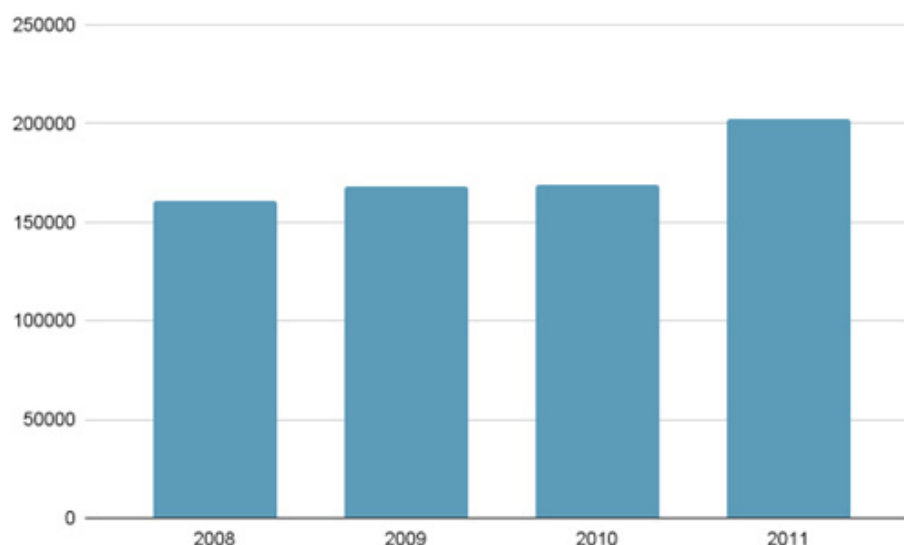
RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Conflict Between Umbul Gemulo Spring and Hotel The Rayja (2011–2017)

The field investigation conducted by the researcher has revealed compelling facts that emphasize the urgency of environmental awareness. The conflict over the Umbul Gemulo spring in Bulukerto Village, Batu City, became a widely publicized environmental dispute that garnered national attention, including from the media, parliament, the Supreme Court, and even the Presidential Secretariat (Saturi, 2016).

The Roots of the Umbul Gemulo Conflict: From Private Anxiety to Public Action

The protracted conflict over the Umbul Gemulo spring, which gained nationwide attention in 2015, originated from the proposed construction of The Rayja Hotel in Bulukerto. In a city where the tourism industry was booming, such a proposal was initially unsurprising. Hospitality statistics confirmed a steady increase in tourist stays, validating investor interest in new hotel ventures (Central Statistics Agency of Batu City, 2009-2012).

Table 1. Number of Guests at Star-Rated Hotels in Batu City

Source: Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Batu, 2009 - 2012

However, what began as a common construction project with no worries from the community quickly evolved into the main source of civic apprehension. Then disaster struck as it was revealed that the hotel's proposed location is directly on elevated land near the spring, which really provoked the community, since the community has deeply-rooted concerns for the spring's sustainability. For the residents, Umbul Gemulo was not merely a water source; it was a socio-economic lifeline and a sacred cultural space deeply embedded in their identity (Kanna, 2017).

This transformation from private anxiety into collective civic action began with the growing concern among members of the *Himpunan Penduduk Pengguna Air Minum* (Drinking Water Users Association, HIPPAM), who worried that the construction of the hotel could seriously damage the Umbul Gemulo Spring. As one activist recalls, their specialized understanding of the spring's hydrology made them the first to recognize the existential threat posed by the construction plans:

"This conflict began around late 2010 or early 2011... Once we learned of the exact location being directly above the spring, worry set in—especially among HIPPAM members. At first, the concern was simply pollution, but it worsened as we discovered they would use deep pile foundations and would have a basement."

— Resident, affiliated with FMPMA—

This initial awareness from HIPPAM members did not immediately trigger a collective mass movement. Instead, it triggered the very first crucial step of civic engagement, in which the residents approached their village chief to ask for his explanation. However, their

concerns were dismissed, and tensions peaked when heavy machinery began digging on the site. This act of insensitivity from the local government was a critical juncture, demonstrating that trusting the village officials was a complete waste of time and pushing residents towards more organized forms of resistance (Arifin, 2018). As another resident explains:

"We raised our concerns with the village authorities, but they said the project was fine as it was considered distant. Our worry escalated once bulldozers started excavation. Eventually, we held a public meeting and formally protested."

—Resident, affiliated with FMPMA—

The movement gained significant analytical leverage upon discovering procedural flaws that delegitimized the project in the eyes of the law and the public. Residents found that the public consultation process had been a mere formality from the government, excluding the most affected communities, and crucially, that the building permit (IMB) was issued *before* the completion of an environmental impact assessment (UKL-UPL). This discovery was pivotal, thus transforming the community's narrative from one of simple opposition to one of defending the rule of law against administrative malpractice.

"We found that the permit process was administratively flawed. One of the strongest pieces of evidence was that the building permit was issued before the environmental documents were complete. Additionally, the public hearing was merely a formality, excluding affected communities."

—Resident, affiliated with FMPMA—

This process illustrates a classic trajectory of grassroots mobilization. It began not with a grand ideology, but with the specific anxieties of those most affected. These anxieties were then translated into civic inquiries through formal channels. When those channels failed, the community escalated its actions, and its moral claims were powerfully amplified by the discovery of legal and procedural violations by the state itself. This laid the foundation for the more structured and strategic resistance that would follow (Mahrida, 2017).

The First Movement: Market Liberalization and State Contestation

The construction of The Rayja Hotel is a classic manifestation of what Karl Polanyi (2010) terms the "first movement," explained as the push of market logic to disembed social and natural resources from their communal context, transforming them into fictitious commodities. In Batu City, this movement was not an invisible hand of the market but a deliberate development strategy driven by a local state focused on maximizing revenue from the tourism sector (Romadhan et al., 2020). The increasing demand for star-rated accommodations was not merely a market signal; it was the intended outcome of a city government that actively promoted a development model centered on large-scale tourism infrastructure (Arifin, 2018).

The commodification of the Umbul Gemulo spring lies at the heart of this process. For the local community, the spring was deeply embedded in their socio-economic and spiritual lives, a vital resource for agriculture, drinking water, and cultural rituals (Kanna, 2017; Maksum et al., 2023). However, within the logic of the tourism-driven market, the spring was forcefully disembedded from its original context and reframed as a mere economic asset to the market actors, thus making it a prerequisite resource for hotel operations and a potential commodity to be controlled. This state-led push to convert natural landscapes into new tourist attractions represents a well-documented pattern of commodification in Indonesia, where the socio-cultural value of a place is subordinated to its market potential (Purnomo, 2016).

Crucially, Polanyi argues that the self-regulating market cannot expand without active support from the state. However, the state's role in this case is more complex than that of a simple facilitator for the market expansion, it also acts as the primary site of contestation for civil society (Antlöv & Wetterberg, 2011). In the context of Indonesia's post-authoritarian decentralization, local governments possess the power to either open or close their democratic spaces for citizen participation. The Umbul Gemulo case illustrates a deliberate act of political closure by the local government. By issuing permits to the developer without proper local consultation and ignoring important environmental regulations, the local government did not just enable the unrestrained movement of the market, it also actively closed a deliberative space that civil society expected to be accessible.

This reflects a systemic failure in local governance, where pro-investment policies consistently override environmental protection mandates (Romadhan et al., 2020). By prioritizing capital interests, the state transformed itself from a probable mediator between the market and society into a direct party in the conflict, demonstrating how the greed driven alliance between political elites and investors became a common trait in the post-authoritarian Indonesia's political economy (Anugrah, 2018). Essentially, the conflict's origin is not simply a local environmental dispute but a clear outcome of a fraudulent state facilitated market movement, which was made possible by governance practices that purposefully silenced civic rights to enable capital accumulation. This act of closure inevitably provoked the second movement: the societal countermovement aimed at forcibly re-opening these contested state spaces and re-embedding the economy within social and ecological protections.

The Countermovement: Civil Society Formation and Democratic Learning

In response to the state-facilitated market encroachment, residents organized a collective countermovement that culminated in the formal establishment of the *Forum Masyarakat Peduli Mata Air* (FMPMA) in 2011. The creation of this forum was not merely a spontaneous protest; it was a deliberate act of civil society institutionalization. As one activist explains, the community recognized that to effectively challenge state and corporate power, their individual

grievances needed to be channeled through a formal, collective entity capable of engaging in the public sphere:

"FMPMA was established in 2011, initially under the name Aliansi Masyarakat Pengguna Sumber Umbulan (AMPSU), but later renamed to FMPMA. The formation of FMPMA arose from our collective anxiety. The main goal was efficient: we realized that to submit protests or formal letters to the government, we could not act as individuals. We needed a collective entity or institution to make our voices heard seriously."

—Resident, affiliated with FMPMA—

The movement's growth evolved through a process of civic consciousness-building and democratic learning. While support was initially limited, awareness spread as community leaders translated the technical threat into a tangible risk to livelihoods. This grassroots educational effort, described by residents as *getok tular* (word of mouth), was crucial in transforming a latent sense of injustice into a shared political consciousness. The mobilization was fueled by a powerful combination of economic urgency and the community's deep ecotheological worldview, which framed the spring as both a source of life and a sacred, non-negotiable entity (Maksum et al., 2023).

"Culturally, the community also considers this spring a 'wingit' or sacred place. We believe that nature has its way of reminding those who would destroy it. So, defending Umbul Gemulo became a top priority for the community, not just for the water, but also for the sustainability of life and culture."

—Resident, affiliated with FMPMA—

This spiritual connection is manifested in the long-standing traditions that reinforce the spring's role as a communal and sacred site. One such example is the *Barikan* ceremony, a ritual feast expressing gratitude for the water's blessings, which highlights the spring's social and cultural significance beyond its mere physical existence.

"To me, the Gemulo Spring has been a communal space and a playground since childhood, before the era of gadgets. It was a social meeting point. Culturally, there is the 'Barikan' tradition, or a very sacred spring ceremony. The community believes in the presence of an 'Mbah' or guardian who must be respected and revered. However, in the past, its practice was often limited to the elders."

—Resident, affiliated with WALHI—

The gravity of the threat was confirmed by local officials, who acknowledged the spring's vital role for thousands of residents across multiple villages. This shared vulnerability unified the community and provided a solid foundation for collective action.

“The main trigger (for the movement) was a sense of threat to the sustainability of their water spring, which is the source of livelihood for a community predominantly working in the agricultural sector. This is what organically moved them to resist and rebel. The Gemulo Spring is vital; it is used for drinking water by almost all residents of Bumiaji Village, 40-60% of the residents of Sidomulyo Village, and one resident in Bulukerto Village. In addition, its water is used for irrigation and by the PDAM in Batu City. So, the threat was felt collectively.”

—A representative of the Bulukerto Village Government—

A pivotal step in strengthening their democratic capacity was forming a coalition with established civil society organizations. Recognizing their limitations, FMPMA actively sought partnerships with NGOs known for their expertise, namely Malang Corruption Watch (MCW) and *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia Jawa Timur* (WALHI JATIM). This networking is a key strategy for grassroots movements to mobilize critical resources—such as legal expertise and advocacy training—thereby leveling the playing field against powerful state-corporate alliances (Mahrida, 2017).

With this coalition in place, FMPMA escalated its actions into a multi-pronged advocacy campaign. They submitted formal complaints to independent state bodies like Komnas HAM and the Ombudsman, demonstrating a sophisticated use of national accountability mechanisms. Simultaneously, they partnered with environmental media outlets like Mongabay Indonesia, recognizing their crucial role in shaping public opinion and amplifying their struggle. For these media allies, supporting the movement was a moral imperative.

“When a community cries out to fight for the environment, for Mongabay, it is a moral obligation to get involved and help amplify the voices of those who cannot speak, so that future generations can hear them.”

—A journalist from Mongabay (environmental media)—

This entire process from institutionalization and consciousness-building to coalition formation and media advocacy exemplifies how grassroots civil society can actively construct and sustain democratic practices, creating new spaces for deliberation and accountability even when formal state channels are closed (Antlöv, 2025).

The Countermovement as Grassroots Democratization

The community’s resistance, spearheaded by FMPMA, is a classic manifestation of what Polanyi (2010) calls a “countermovement”—a protective societal response to defend the “human and natural substance of society” from market-driven destruction. However, when viewed through a civil society lens, this countermovement is more than a mere reaction from the society, it has become a profound act of grassroots democratization. It represents the process of transforming localized, often private, anxieties about economic and cultural

survival into articulated political claims that demand accountability from state and corporate actors (Antlöv, 2025). The establishment of FMPMA was the first step in this process, creating an institutional platform to convert shared grievances into a coherent political voice.

Grounded in both economic and ecotheological concerns, the people of Umbul Gemulo collectively rejected the disembedding process driven by market expansion. They asserted that any new economic development, in this case the construction of Hotel The Rayja, must be re-embedded into the existing social and ecological relations. Polanyi (2010) then argued that the human economy is, as a rule, “submerged in his social relationships,” and the community’s avid resistance was seen as a spontaneous and straightforward attempt to uphold this principle. Their struggle shows us that they demand protection for their community-based agricultural economy, which is being threatened to be sacrificed for a new, externally imposed economic model that threatens their entire way of life.

This spontaneous civic mobilization which emerged as an action to retain their way of life, exemplifies a form of defensive democracy, where civil society actively resists the oppressive authoritarian tendencies that emerge from the lawless alliances formed between the market and the state (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014). The primary goal of FMPMA was not to overthrow the corrupted system but to compel it to adhere to its own democratic and legal principles. Such movements work to protect existing social entitlements, such as the right to water, a sustainable livelihood, and cultural heritage, from being consumed by the greedy market logic. By doing so, the local society not only defends their own interests but also helps to revitalize democratic accountability for the entire political community.

The success of this democratic project depends on the society’s ability to build solidarity among them and to form a strong alliance with external actors such as NGOs. In the case of Umbul Gemulo conflict, FMPMA’s success lies in its ability to unite the residents and form a strong alliance and coalition with numerous external actors. Their coalition with formidable NGOs like WALHI-JATIM and MCW provided the technical expertise and political leverage needed to navigate in the complex legal and political terrains that FMPMA are unfamiliar with. Then, their local struggles are amplified by massive media support from Mongabay and many others, and thus transformed it into a huge national issue, peaking in mass demonstrations involving thousands of people. This transformation of collective consciousness into a tangible political force on the ground demonstrates how grassroots movements can effectively reshape governance from below.

Contesting the Public Sphere: Intimidation and Shrinking Civic Space

The community’s democratic mobilization led by FMPMA was met with fierce resistance through the use of shady tactics that exemplify the phenomenon of “shrinking civic space”, a process where state and non-state actors use many forms of questionable intimidation and legal persecution to shut the opposition and limit the freedom of association of the

citizens (FATASEA Working Group, 2024). The response given by the state actors was not merely a reaction to the protest and the opposition, but it became a deliberate strategy to take control of the public sphere and punish those who dared to occupy it. The challenges faced by FMPMA activists thus serve as a stark case study of the broader pressures for democratic backsliding confronting civil society in Indonesia.

The first strategy used to shut FMPMA from its further actions was using a direct form of intimidation and threats aimed at instilling fear in the society and demobilizing activists before their voices could gain wider traction. These unlawful actions created a scary atmosphere for the residents who were directly involved with the movement, representing a direct threat to the prerequisites of a functioning Habermasian public sphere, which requires a space free from coercion. Activists reported a constant state of surveillance and harassment:

“Residents are often intimidated. For example, being visited at home without a clear purpose is already a form of intimidation, as is being called continuously. In the Gemulo case, FKPPi even entered the village with clubs to find one person and confront him together. There were also intelligence officers constantly around, and as for thugs, it seems FKPPi resembled that.”

—Resident, Affiliated with FMPMA—

Secondly, the use of local mass organizations (*ormas*) like *Forum Komunikasi Putra Putri Purnawirawan & Putra Putri TNI POLRI* (FKPPi) demonstrated the deployment of “uncivil society” actors by political elites to enforce their interests and unlawfully silence those who get in their way, which became a recurring feature in Indonesian politics (Hansson & Weiss, 2023). The use of this shady tactic allows powerful stakeholders to maintain a safe distance while effectively orchestrating chaos and repression on the ground.

Beyond direct intimidation, a more insidious strategy was the criminalization of dissent through the weaponization of the law. This approach seeks to delegitimize activists by reframing their civic actions as criminal offenses. The civil lawsuit filed by the developer against FMPMA’s leader, H. Rudi, for sending letters of complaint is a classic example of a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP). Such lawsuits are not designed to be won, but to exhaust the financial and emotional resources of activists, a reality underscored by the absurdity of the initial claims and the prolonged psychological burden it placed on the community. An activist recalls the exhausting nature of this legal battle:

“From 2013 to 2015, we (FMPMA) went through a long legal battle. Our act of sending letters to the government was considered criminal; our filing of a complaint was considered criminal.”

—Resident, Affiliated with FMPMA—

Taken together, these forms of repression represent a concerted effort to colonize the community's lifeworld (Habermas, 1989), where the instrumental logic of power and capital violently displaces the communicative rationality of democratic debate. By attempting to silence the countermovement through both coercion and legal manipulation, the state-corporate alliance sought to reassert control over the public sphere itself.

Reclaiming the Public Sphere: Discursive and Institutional Democratization

If Polanyi explains *what* was at stake in the Umbul Gemulo conflict, then Habermas (1989) explains *where* the battle was fought: within the public sphere. The campaign of intimidation and criminalization against FMPMA was a direct assault on the public sphere, an attempt to colonize the community's lifeworld by replacing communicative action with the instrumental logic of repressive power. However, response from FMPMA towards the repression demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to reclaim this contested space through both discursive and institutional means.

First, the movement engaged in a powerful form of discursive democracy, expanding the debate far beyond the village boundaries. Rather than getting drawn into a lengthy legal battle, FMPMA strategically utilized the coverage provided by media partnerships and national advocacy to frame the Umbul Gemulo conflict to be a crucial national concern towards environmental justice and human rights issues. Coverage by huge media like *Mongabay* was a vital step in shaping a public narrative that favored the local community. Furthermore, by successfully lodging complaints with various independent state bodies, such as the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) and the Ombudsman RI, FMPMA subsequently used the moral authority of these institutions to substantiate its claims. This tactic effectively broadened the public sphere, forcing a local issue onto the national stage and compelling a wider audience to recognize the legitimacy of the community's struggle.

The discursive victory achieved by FMPMA then paved the way for an institutional one. FMPMA's strategic shift into the courtroom represented an act of institutional democratization, where state institutions themselves were utilized as democratic safeguards. In Habermasian terms, the court became a formal public sphere where the principle of publicity (*Publizität*) forced the state-corporate alliance to justify its actions based on rational-legal standards, rather than arbitrary power. The court rulings in favor of the community instead of the state-market actor were therefore more than just legal victories, they were accomplishments of communicative rationality, affirming that even powerful market driven interests are subject to legal and environmental norms. This use of citizen lawsuits is a vital tool for environmental movements in Indonesia, providing a formal channel to hold both state and private actors accountable (Fatah, 2019).

Ultimately, the case of the Umbul Gemulo conflict offers a deep critical policy lessons for strengthening local governance. It highlights the need to reform participatory planning mechanisms to ensure they are genuinely deliberative and really capture what the community wants, not merely procedural. Moreover, it highlights the power of multiple stakeholder coalitions as a model of collaborative governance when formal institutions fail (Cheema, 2011). By successfully navigating both discursive and institutional ways, the people of Umbul Gemulo not only reclaimed their own public space, but they also reinforced the very foundations of democratic accountability.

The Evolving Countermovement: From Protest to Policy Engagement

The resolution of The Rayja Hotel conflict did not end the pressures of the “market movement” on Umbul Gemulo. In June 2025, a new threat emerged when Batu City’s Mayor speech during a plenary session discussing the draft Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) for 2025–2029, announcing the proposed location to construct a Nutritional Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) within the Umbul Gemulo spring protected zone (Batu City Government, 2025). This speech alone signals that the logic of development continues to encroach upon protected ecological spaces. However, the community’s response to this new threat reveals a significant maturation of civil society and adaptation, marking a strategic evolution from protest to proactive policy engagement.

Instead of immediately mobilizing mass street demonstrations, FMPMA’s first move was to organize a deliberative forum, inviting NGOs, media, and local government officials to share their opinions on their new concern. This shift in their strategy demonstrates a move from contentious politics to a more mature institutional engagement. Their success in securing the support of the current village head, who then formally submitted a letter of objection to the mayor and committed to support environmental sustainability by prioritizing the drafting process of the new village regulation (*Perdes*) to protect the spring protected zone, marks a pivotal change. An activist reflected on this newfound responsiveness:

“Regarding the new threat posed by the SPPG development plan, we have noticed a change in the attitude of our current village officials. They are more open and willing to facilitate discussions with residents, unlike in the past. This is a sign of progress, even though the struggle to protect this water source is far from over.”

—Resident, Affiliated with FMPMA—

This new strategy reflects a deeper understanding of governance, aiming not just to block a single project but to embed environmental sustainability awareness into the local law. This evolved approach is essential for navigating the complex terrain of formal planning documents like the Batu City Long-Term Regional Development Plan (RPJPD) for 2025–2045. On paper, the RPJPD appeared to give us an overview of “sustainable, advanced,

and globally competitive” city, with sustainability and inclusion as stated pillars (Batu City Government, 2024). However, the recurring key analytical question is whether such documents genuinely open or foreclose their participatory spaces from the society. Looking through the Habermasian perspective, the documents made by the city government can be seen as discursive tools. While they employ the language of participation, their primary function can be to legitimize state-led development in one way or another, treating local citizen input as a mere procedural checkbox rather than a substantive component of decision-making.

The case of the Umbul Gemulo conflict thus serves as a critical lens for us to evaluate future government development plans. The continuous effort shown by the FMPMA has cautioned us that the true measure of “innovative local government” lies not in the sweet promises imprinted on the planning documents, but in its ability to facilitate inclusive public hearings and to prevent the same ecological conflict from ever happening again. FMPMA has matured their strategy by engaging directly with the policy process and demanding sustainability based local regulations to be formed, has become a refined mechanism for claiming the government’s promises on its progressive rhetoric. This ongoing civic vigilance by FMPMA and their alliances keeps the public sphere alive as an inclusive space for debate, making sure that the lofty promises of sustainable development are constantly checked against the authentic experiences of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

The Umbul Gemulo conflict demonstrates that ecological disputes are deeply intertwined with the quality of democracy. The ecological conflict in Umbul Gemulo shows that environmental struggles are always closely connected to democratic practices. By employing Karl Polanyi’s concept of the “double movement” and Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the “public sphere,” this study affirms that community resistance, institutionalized through FMPMA, was not only an effort to defend socio-ecological rights but also to revitalize the public sphere as a deliberative arena. This illustrates that sustainability and democracy are co-produced through grassroots struggles.

This case provides at least three broader implications. First, for civil society, it highlights the democratic value of collective action. Institutionalized resistance, supported by strong alliances with NGOs such as WALHI and MCW and amplified by media exposure, transformed local grievances into powerful public claims while revitalizing a healthy deliberative space. Second, for local government, the case underscores the urgency of improving their responsiveness to community concerns and ensuring that public input is genuinely accommodated within deliberative spaces. Establishing meaningful deliberative forums in environmental planning and licensing is crucial to rebuilding public trust and preventing similar conflicts. Third, from a comparative perspective, the Umbul Gemulo conflict offers lessons

that can be generalized to other ecological conflicts in Indonesia and across the Global South. It demonstrates how grassroots movements, when strategically networked, can balance state–market alliances and press for greater democratic accountability.

From these findings, several practical recommendations can be made. Policymakers and local governments should design participatory forums that are both binding and inclusive, ensuring that community voices genuinely shape development trajectories. Civil society organizations need to strengthen strategies for legal empowerment and coalition-building so that civic space remains open despite intimidation. Finally, cross-local solidarity among ecological struggles must be reinforced to elevate democratic and environmental agendas to a broader scale.

In conclusion, the defense for Umbul Gemulo's water springs is not only about ecological survival but also about safeguarding democratic health. This case reminds us that a just and sustainable future for all can only be realized when local communities are involved as primary actors in governance, and when civil society is empowered to protect both environmental sustainability and the democratic public sphere.

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