Forest is not mere a collection of trees and animals. Forest is also a vital part of indigenous communities’ lives. Indigenous communities and forests are comparable to two sides of a coin; the two are inseparable. The harmony between both of them should be maintained. Indigenous communities such as Kamoro Community in Papua, have a strong bond with mother nature. Cutting the ties means destroying the nature where people thrive.

Indigenous communities are often deemed illegally occupying an area of a forest. This myth is what concerns many people including Mathea Mamoyou. Mathea is a politician, who used to be an activist, and is trying hard to fight for the rights of the communities living in or surrounding the forest.

A plan to build an industrial complex near to Kamoro mangrove forest is her biggest concern at the moment. He believes that the livelihood of indigenous communities are often ignored. Mathea speaks loudly so that indigenous communities will be involved in decision making processes, including the decision to build an industrial area near to Kamoro region.
“There are inhabitants in the area. Any developmental plans should be communicated with the inhabitants. [In this case.] Kamoro people are the inhabitants. Mangrove is the life of Kamoro community”.

Fighting for Justice

Mathea Mamoyou was born in Agats in 1960s. Her firm personality is an upbringing from her parents. She once dreamed of becoming a soldier similar to her father, a police officer. Mathea chose to enter Women’s Corps of the Indonesian National Armed Forces instead of becoming a policewoman. During her upper primary years, she liked watching military parachuting when she was playing volley ball. Unfortunately, she had to give up her dream. Her parents wanted Mathea to be a police offer instead. Mathea ran away from home and lived in her uncle’s house temporarily. She then pursued secondary education in Sentani. Feeling uncomfortable, Mathea chose to drop out.

Mathea continued her education until tertiary level in Faculty of Social and Political Science of Cenderawasih University in 2009. Mathea believes that education is key to Papua’s prosperity. Mathea has experienced many ups and downs in life including being a victim domestic violence. Various life experiences have forged her into a strong woman she is.

Mathea started her journey from working in a presb- bytery office which was also her temporary shelter. While serving the church, she joined YPPK from which she discovered her passion. Under John Jonga Bishop guidance, her motivation started to rise again. In 1998, along with Frater John Jonga and Mama Yo-sepa Alomang, Mathea formed Teamwork Communication Forum of Amungme Kamoro Women (Forum Komunikasi Kerja sama Perempuan Amungme Kamoro). Mathea was also appointed to be the leader. This is where her journey defending the Papuans began.

Mathea observes that local people are always ignored in development plans, by either companies or the government. Local people should be fully informed of benefits or harms of a development project. She believes, if the project is communicated properly, the impact would be greater even though it will consequently take longer time to plan.

“If we want to utilize the mangrove, it is impossible that we do not involve Kamoro people. The mangrove forest is home to many people’s assets: crabs, lizards, and others. These animals are very useful and valuable during rituals. For example, lizard skin is used for Tifa. Snails and crabs are the dishes of the party. If the mangrove forest is cleared, it will be difficult to find those animals. Kamaro community takes care of the forest traditionally. They will be upset if there is someone clears the forest without permission.”

Sago Diplomacy

In 2014, Mathea opposed a construction of a sago factory in Kokonau. Mathea emphasized that she did not oppose development in general; she opposed unsustainable developments. Mathea regretted that the company would have to cut down sago trees in a massive scale for their operation. Mathea believes that the plan did not only will trigger environmental disaster; but also conflict. For the people of Kamaro, sago is a gift from God.
When the construction plan was nearly realized and sago trees were started to be cut down, the women of Kamoro planned to hold a protest ritual. This ritual is believed to be able to bring ‘bad things’. Before the ritual was held, Mathea reached the company and explained what affects the ritual could bring. The company eventually withdrew.

“Kamoro people do not carelessly cut down sago trees. [They cut down the trees] only for ritual purposes. Not every sago tree can be cut down. For the people of Kamaro, Sago trees are their souls; this is their [staple] food.”

Papuans have known sago since ages. They know the seeds, its growing and processing techniques. The techniques are all sustainable. Sago is not only a food, but also a ‘cultural glue’.

As a female activist, Mathea tries to spread the positive virus of women empowerment so that papuan women try to fight for their rights. Since the discontinuation of sago tree logging, Mathea has been trying to instill the importance of nature to female papuans. Mathea has been trying to push for women empowerment in Papua. She trained women to create handicrafts from pandan leaves, such as hats, mats, and etc. Besides increasing their earnings, the training indirectly teaches them to appreciate nature. Female papuans are basically taught that nature is a source of livelihood worthy of protection.

Not only about protections of environment and livelihood, Mathea also concerns about the issue of injustice and violence against women. She participated in a legal training about identification and case analysis and it made her passionate about fighting for injustices. One of her memorable experiences is mediating conflict between five villages and PT Freeport pertaining trust fund compensation.

**Political Career**

Her journey did not finish there. Political path attracted her attention because she believed she can make great impacts there. Even though she failed the first time she tried to be a legislator, she did not give up. Mathea continued her campaign for local people’s rights. In 2014, Mathea tested her luck again. Luckily, she successfully reserved a seat in Regional House of Representatives of the third Voting Region in Papua and specifically work under Commission I handling politics, governance, human rights, land, and defense.

“By being a member of the House, I hope I can influence public policy to help marginalized communities. I pray to God so that I can allocate funding and create programs for the people to help them improve their lives. It is my passion to help helpless, small people.”

Politics for Mathea is an endless battle and she will continue her career there as long as inequality is still prevalent and people are not prosperous. She wants to change the policies that only side a certain group of people.

Even though her responsibility in the House does not directly related to environmental problems, she does not choose to abandon it. Especially when it involves the well-being of the Kamoro community and the preservation of mangrove forest.

“The lives of Kamaro people rely on the river, sampan and sago (also known as 3S - Sungai, Sampan dan Sagu). They make sampan/small boat because they live in mangrove and sago palm forest. These things are irreplaceable to them.”

Cutting the ties between Kamaro people and mother nature will destroy the balance of universe. Mathea Mamoyau feels that her fight to preserve
mangrove forest, the inheritance from our ancestors, has only just began and will continue as long as she lives. Through the USAID LESTARI program, Mathea hopes that the Kamoro community will be supported in their efforts to preserve the mangrove forest in the Mimika Regency, Papua.