

LAW & SOCIAL POLICY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Principle of Legality in Corporate Criminal Liability for Environmental Crimes in Indonesia

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: September 10, 2025

Revised: September 23, 2025

Accepted: October 27, 2025

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grspr.v5i1.1724>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relevance of the principle of legality in corporate criminal liability for environmental crimes in Indonesia. The principle of legality, which is the main principle in criminal law, faces challenges when applied to corporations as legal entities. The existing legal framework does not fully accommodate the characteristics of corporations, thereby creating legal uncertainty in the handling of environmental crimes. This study uses a normative juridical method with a legislative approach and a conceptual approach. The data sources were obtained from a literature review of relevant laws, regulations, legal literature, and court decisions. The results of the study indicate that the application of the principle of legality to corporations still needs to be strengthened, either through the harmonization of regulations, the formulation of technical guidelines, or the strengthening of the capacity of law enforcement officials. This strategy is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of corporate criminal liability and fair protection of the environment.

Keywords: Principle of Legality, Corporations, Criminal Liability, Environmental Crimes.

I. Introduction

Criminal law plays a strategic role in state affairs due to its fundamental function as the guardian of justice and social order. As part of the public legal system, criminal law is not merely an instrument of state power to punish criminals, but also serves as a means of protecting the constitutional rights of citizens (Khatun & Suma, 2024). Within the framework of a modern constitutional state, criminal law must be built on strong principles, one of which is the principle of legality. This principle states that no act can be punished without first being defined as a criminal offense in legislation. The principle of legality, or *nullum crimen sine lege*, *nulla poena sine lege*, has long been a mainstay of criminal law systems in various countries, including Indonesia. In the national context, this principle is explicitly stated in Article 1 paragraph (1) of the Criminal Code (KUHP), and is now reaffirmed in Law Number 1 of 2023 concerning the National Criminal Code. Philosophically, the principle of legality aims to guarantee legal certainty, prevent abuse of power, and uphold the principle of justice. This principle acts as a barrier to state power so that it does not act arbitrarily against citizens. However, in practice, the implementation of the principle of legality in the Indonesian criminal justice system faces serious challenges. Many articles in various laws, especially sectoral laws, are still vague, open to multiple interpretations, and even allow for the use of legal analogies, which is prohibited in criminal law doctrine (Riono & Haris, 2021). This contradicts the principles of *lex certa*, *lex scripta*, and *lex praevia*, which are derived from the principle of legality itself. The challenge becomes even more complex when criminal law is confronted with the new reality of crimes committed by non-individual entities, such as corporations.

Corporations are now recognized as subjects of criminal law in modern legal systems. Corporate crime, particularly in the area of the environment, is becoming increasingly common and has a tremendous impact on the sustainability of ecosystems and public health. Environmental crimes committed by corporations are not only local in nature but also global in scope, as they destroy resources that belong to all of humanity. Therefore, the state has an obligation to ensure that corporations as perpetrators of crimes are also subject to the same principles of criminal law as individual perpetrators, including in terms of the application of the principle of legality (Isnawati, 2018). Unfortunately, in many cases, law enforcement against environmental crimes committed by corporations still shows the state's weak commitment to ensuring corporate criminal liability. Law enforcement officials tend to target individuals who represent legal entities and ignore the corporate entities themselves. Furthermore, the existing normative framework has not been able to address the complexity of corporate organizational structures and internal mechanisms that enable criminal acts to occur collectively and systemically (Ridwan, 2020).

This situation is exacerbated by political intervention in the criminal justice process. Large corporations with connections to those in power often receive legal protection that is political rather than juridical in nature. In this context, the principle of legality loses its substantive meaning as a guarantee of justice and equality before the law (Musa et al., 2024). Criminal law then became dysfunctional as a means of freeing society from the threat of collective crime. Another equally important challenge is the lack of understanding among law enforcement officials regarding the construction of corporate criminal liability and its relationship to the principle of legality. In judicial practice, many officials still apply a conventional approach based on individual perpetrators, without considering the structure of liability within legal entities (Musa et al., 2024). This shows the need to improve the intellectual and professional capacity of law enforcement officials, including in legal education and continuing training.

Various gaps and weaknesses in law enforcement indicate that Indonesia's criminal justice system is not yet fully capable of reaching corporate entities as subjects of criminal acts, especially in environmental cases. This is where the urgency lies in developing a criminal justice system that is capable of combining the principle of legality with the doctrines of corporate criminal law that are developing globally (Isnawati, 2018). It is important to ensure that the law does not lose its reach over the actors who are most responsible for environmental damage. Countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada have been much more progressive in developing a framework for corporate criminal liability (Kurniawan & Disemadi, 2020). They adopted theoretical approaches such as identification theory, aggregation theory, and vicarious liability to ensure that corporations could not hide behind their organizational complexity. Indonesia, despite having established normative regulations in environmental protection and management laws and several other sectoral laws, has yet to develop a consistent and effective law enforcement system in this regard (Alauddin et al., 2024).

The ratification of the National Criminal Code in 2023 provides new hope for the formation of a more structured and responsive criminal justice system. This codification includes strengthening the principle of legality and further recognition of corporate entities as criminal actors. However, without harmonization between the Criminal Code and sectoral laws, as well as without institutional readiness, the ideals of criminal law reform will be difficult to achieve (Shidarta, 2019). This study stems from the awareness that the application of the principle of legality should not stop at the normative dimension alone. It must be able to reach legal practices in the field, especially in the context of law enforcement against environmental crimes by corporations. Therefore, this study will critically examine how the principle of legality is practiced in the Indonesian criminal justice system, as well as how this principle can be strengthened to effectively and fairly enforce corporate criminal liability (Ridwan, 2020). Using normative, conceptual, and case approaches, this study aims to develop an in-depth analysis of the position of the principle of legality in the enforcement of environmental criminal law. The normative approach is used to examine relevant legislation, the conceptual approach to elaborate on the doctrines and theories of corporate criminal law, and the case approach to evaluate how the principle of legality has been applied in court decisions involving corporations as defendants (Nguyen, 2022). The issues raised in this study are: How relevant is the principle of legality in

corporate criminal liability for environmental crimes? And what strategies are used to strengthen the principle of legality in the enforcement of corporate criminal law in Indonesia? (Sulaiman, 2023).

This study will also review several important decisions, such as Constitutional Court Decision Number 1/PUU-XI/2013 and Supreme Court Decision Number 1555 K/PID.SUS/2019, which are relevant in interpreting the application of the principle of legality and forms of corporate accountability in the national criminal law system. In addition, references from leading legal journals and international experiences will be used as comparisons and conceptual enrichment (Indradjaja et al., 2024). Thus, this study not only contributes to the theoretical development of criminal law studies but also offers practical solutions for criminal law reform in Indonesia. Especially in an era when environmental issues have become a global concern, the national legal system needs to demonstrate its capacity to provide fair and sustainable protection (Mahadiansar et al., 2023). The overall analysis aims to promote the strengthening of the principle of legality as the main foundation for the enforcement of environmental criminal law, while ensuring that corporations as perpetrators of crimes are not immune to the law. By strengthening the regulatory system and law enforcement agencies based on the principle of legality, it is hoped that substantive justice and environmental protection can be realized in practice (Anwar & Sari, 2021).

II. Research Method

This study is a normative legal study that aims to examine and analyze the principle of legality in the context of corporate criminal liability for environmental crimes in Indonesia. A normative approach was chosen because the issues examined originate from written legal provisions, legal doctrines, and basic principles in criminal law relating to the principle of legality. This research focuses on understanding positive legal norms and their systematics in relation to legal subjects in the form of legal entities or corporations, particularly in the realm of environmental crimes (Imanuddin, 2019).

In its implementation, this study uses two main approaches. First, the statute approach, which involves examining various relevant legal provisions, both in the old criminal code and the latest National Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023), as well as sectoral laws such as Law No. 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management (Yuliana, 2022). This approach also includes an analysis of other implementing regulations that form the legal basis for assessing the extent to which the principle of legality has been consistently applied to corporate actors. In addition, several decisions of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court that reflect the dynamics of the application of the principle of legality in criminal court practice were reviewed (Apriyandi & Prasetyo, 2022).

Second, this study uses a conceptual approach that aims to dissect and explain relevant legal doctrines and theories, particularly those related to the principle of legality and corporate criminal liability. This approach provides a theoretical framework for interpreting legal norms and comparing the ideal concept of criminal law with its empirical implementation in Indonesia. By combining these two approaches, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the normative structure, legal gaps, and the need to reformulate criminal law policy in an effort to strengthen the principle of legality in law enforcement against environmental crimes committed by corporations (Kotlán et al., 2021).

III. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Relevance of the Principle of Legality in Corporate Criminal Liability for Environmental Crimes

The principle of legality (*nullum crimen sine lege, nulla poena sine lege*) is a key pillar of the modern criminal justice system that serves as a barrier to the state's power to punish individuals or legal entities. This principle has historical roots in the traditions of Continental European law, particularly in the thinking of Cesare Beccaria, who emphasized the importance of legal certainty, justice, and the protection of individual rights from arbitrary state action. In the Indonesian context, this principle is explicitly stated in Article 1

paragraph (1) of the Criminal Code and reaffirmed in Article 2 paragraph (1) of Law Number 1 of 2023 concerning the Criminal Code (National Criminal Code) (Susanti, 2021).

Doctrinally, the principle of legality encompasses four main components: *lex scripta* (the law must be written), *lex certa* (the law must be clear), *lex stricta* (no analogies may be used), and *lex praevia* (no retroactivity unless it benefits the defendant). These components function not only formally, but also substantively in ensuring procedural and material justice. However, in the context of modern crime, such as environmental crimes committed by corporations, this principle faces significant implementation challenges. Corporations as perpetrators of criminal acts are part of the development of contemporary criminal law, (Hermawan et al., 2023). Initially, criminal law only recognized individuals as legal subjects, but in its development, particularly through the theory of Strict Liability and the Vicarious Liability approach, corporations began to be recognized as entities that could be held criminally liable. This view is supported by the thinking of Nemesio B. Coquia, who states that legal entities can be subject to criminal liability because they have a corporate will and corporate acts that are expressed through their management or deeds. (Basu et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, recognition of corporations as subjects of criminal law has only recently appeared explicitly in several sectoral laws, such as Law No. 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management (PPLH Law), Law No. 8 of 2010 on Money Laundering, and Law No. 31 of 1999 in conjunction with Law No. 20 of 2001 on Eradication of Corruption. In the PPLH Law, for example, Article 116 explicitly states that corporations can be held criminally liable if a criminal act is committed by a person who, based on an employment relationship or other relationship, acts for and on behalf of the corporation. (Sjawie, 2018). However, problems arise when the norms in the law are not clearly and thoroughly formulated regarding how corporate criminal liability is proven, who is responsible within the corporate structure, and how fault (*culpa* or *dolus*) can be attributed to non-personal entities. This is where the principle of legality, particularly the elements of *lex certa* and *lex stricta*, becomes distorted because it opens up room for multiple interpretations and abuse of law enforcement. (Joelman Subaidi & Budi Bahreisy, 2024).

For example, Article 98 paragraph (1) of the Environmental Protection and Management Law states that “any person who deliberately commits an act that results in environmental pollution or destruction shall be subject to criminal sanctions.” The phrase “any person” often confuses practice: does it include corporations directly or only individuals? This ambiguity causes law enforcement officials to tend to avoid prosecuting corporations and prefer to prosecute directors or managers as individuals, even though in many cases the acts were carried out under corporate structural policy. (Johnson, 2024). In judicial practice, as seen in Indonesian Supreme Court Decision No. 1555 K/PID.SUS/2019, the court rejected corporate criminal liability due to the absence of specific legal criteria regarding corporate *mens rea*. This shows that although corporations are theoretically subjects of criminal law, their application in law enforcement remains very weak. Constitutional Court Decision No. 1/PUU-XI/2013 also reinforces that the ambiguity of criminal norms constitutes a violation of the principle of legality because it does not provide fair legal protection to legal subjects. (Bárd & Kazai, 2022).

When the principle of *lex certa* is not upheld, the enforcement of criminal law loses its foundation. Corporations, as entities with vast resources, can exploit legal ambiguities to avoid criminal prosecution. This phenomenon also points to a legal vacuum in regulations that should serve as a bridge between classical criminal law and the dynamics of modern corporate crime. Criticism of this condition has also been voiced by Barda Nawawi Arief, who states that criminal law in Indonesia has not yet succeeded in establishing a systematic corporate criminal liability, because it is still based on an individualistic paradigm in its normative structure and evidence. In fact, the approach to the formulation of corporate criminal law in Indonesia is still fragmentary and lacks harmony between laws and regulations (Nurohman et al., 2022). In addition, the use of analogies in interpreting criminal acts committed by corporations is also common. For example, investigators use general articles in the Criminal Code on destruction (Article 406) to prosecute corporations in cases of environmental pollution, even though the objective and subjective elements in these norms do not

correspond to the structure of corporate acts. This practice contradicts the principle of *lex stricta*, which prohibits analogical interpretation in criminal law (Kuzmicz, 2023).

From the perspective of legal system theory, as proposed by Niklas Luhmann, law is an autonomous normative system with its own logic. When criminal law is unable to regulate itself in dealing with entities such as corporations, a system collapse will occur, causing the law itself to become dysfunctional. This is very dangerous because it creates a vacuum of criminal responsibility and, at the same time, destroys public trust in legal justice. (Veitch, 2024). Criminal law reform through the enactment of the National Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023) has provided new momentum to reorganize the concept of corporate criminal liability. The new Criminal Code explicitly recognizes legal entities as subjects of criminal acts and establishes clearer criteria for liability. However, the implementation of these regulations requires harmonization with sectoral laws and the establishment of derivative legal instruments in the form of implementing regulations and technical guidelines. On the other hand, this normative approach needs to be combined with a criminal policy approach, (Fadri, 2010). Marc Ancel, in his theory on humanist penal policy, states that criminal law must evolve in line with the needs of society and the challenges of the times. In this context, criminal law policy towards corporations must be directed towards creating a strong deterrent effect through real criminal threats that can be effectively enforced.

Therefore, strengthening the principle of legality in the context of corporate criminal liability for environmental crimes requires not only revisions to legal norms, but also a shift in the mindset of law enforcement. Specific standards of proof and criminal law doctrines that are adaptive to the complex and hierarchical characteristics of corporate organizations are needed. By referring to the practices of developed countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, where corporate criminal liability has a clear structure and is separated from individual responsibility, Indonesia can learn important lessons for building a criminal law system that is capable of reaching and controlling collective perpetrators. (Astri Safitri Nurdin et al., 2022). In these countries, the principle of legality is not compromised, but it also does not become an obstacle to corporate prosecution because it is supported by a precise regulatory system and capable law enforcement agencies.

Thus, it can be concluded that the principle of legality remains relevant and crucial in the enforcement of corporate criminal law, especially against environmental crimes whose impacts are massive and systemic. However, this relevance will continue to be threatened if it is not accompanied by the reform of legal norms, the establishment of a solid corporate criminal law doctrine, and the strengthening of the capacity and integrity of law enforcement officials. The principle of legality is not only a matter of normative formalism, but also concerns the alignment of the law with substantive justice and environmental protection. In the context of sustainable development, the successful enforcement of the principle of legality in corporate crimes will be an important indicator of the state's courage in subjugating the power of capital under the rule of law.

3.2. Strategies for Strengthening Legal Principles in Corporate Criminal Law Enforcement in Indonesia

The strategy of strengthening the principle of legality in the enforcement of corporate criminal law, particularly in environmental crime cases, cannot be separated from the need for comprehensive legal system reform. The principle of legality as a fundamental principle in criminal law requires not only the existence of written legal norms, but also the guarantee that these norms can be applied consistently to all legal subjects, including corporations. Therefore, conceptual and institutional reformulation is key to strengthening this principle. Normatively, recognition of the principle of legality has been affirmed in Article 1 paragraph (1) of the Criminal Code and in the transitional provisions of the National Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023) (Azizah, 2021). However, in practice, this general formulation is insufficient to cover legal entities such as corporations, which have different structures, mechanisms, and forms of wrongdoing than individuals. This gives rise to the need to reconstruct the criminal law approach to collective subjects, without disregarding the principle of *nullum crimen sine lege*.

Within the framework of progressive legal theory developed by Satjipto Rahardjo, law should not be static and trapped in formalism. It must be able to respond to social needs and provide substantive justice. In the context of environmental crimes committed by corporations, the principle of legality must be understood as an instrument for upholding fair legal certainty, not merely as an obstacle to legal innovation. Therefore, the first strategy that needs to be taken is the restructuring of criminal norms in legislation. This restructuring includes harmonization between the National Criminal Code and various *lex specialis*, such as Law No. 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management (PPLH), Law No. 5 of 1990 concerning Conservation of Living Natural Resources and Their Ecosystems, and Law No. 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry. The harmonization aims to eliminate overlaps, contradictions, and legal loopholes in corporate criminal liability (Lembut & Oktariani, 2023).

The importance of this harmonization is in line with Lawrence M. Friedman's theory of legal systems, which views that the effectiveness of law is determined not only by legal substance, but also by legal structure and legal culture. If legal substance does not support law enforcement against corporations, then the principle of legality will experience stagnation in its implementation. In the context of legal structures, the next strategy is to strengthen law enforcement agencies by establishing special units or divisions to handle corporate crimes, especially in the field of the environment. For example, the Attorney General's Office and the Police can form work units that specifically handle corporate criminal cases, with an interdisciplinary approach involving legal, environmental, and forensic accounting experts. This step is necessary so that the investigation, prosecution, and evidence-gathering processes in corporate cases are no longer based solely on an individual approach (Ruhayat et al., 2019).

The next strategy is the formulation of judicial and administrative guidelines. In this regard, the Supreme Court has an important role to play in issuing Supreme Court Circulars or Supreme Court Regulations on the technicalities of evidence and the assessment of corporate criminal liability. These guidelines will clarify the application of the principle of legality, particularly in assessing the elements of fault, the relationship of responsibility, and criminal sanctions against corporations. Several countries have successfully implemented similar measures. In the Netherlands, for example, the criminal justice system recognizes the doctrine of functional perpetrator, which allows corporate liability to be based on function or position within the organization, rather than simply on the actions of individuals. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 has been enacted, which facilitates the imposition of criminal penalties on legal entities. Indonesia can learn from these models to develop derivative legal instruments that are adaptive to the principles of legality and the need for evidence against corporate perpetrators.

The next strengthening strategy touches on the aspect of legal culture. One of the weaknesses in the implementation of the principle of legality in Indonesia is the lack of understanding among law enforcement officials regarding the construction of corporate criminal liability. Therefore, legal education and special training must be a priority. The curriculum of law faculties at both the undergraduate and professional levels must include courses on Corporate Criminal Law and Environmental Criminal Law, using a case-based method and problem-solving approach. In addition to educational reform, it is necessary to provide legal education to the public so that they understand that corporations can be perpetrators of crime and must be held accountable. With increased public legal awareness, social pressure will be formed that can encourage fairer and more transparent law enforcement. To support the effectiveness of the principle of legality, strengthening can also be directed through the application of regulatory effectiveness evaluation mechanisms. In this case, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, together with the National Law Development Agency (BPHN), can conduct a regulatory impact assessment of laws related to environmental crimes. This evaluation must consider the aspect of legal accessibility for corporate perpetrators and the consistency of the formulation of norms with the principle of legality.

Another strategy worth considering is the application of additional penalties in the form of restitution and environmental restoration. This principle is already recognized in the Law on Environmental Protection and Management, but has not been fully implemented. In the context of the principle of legality, these

additional penalties must be clearly formulated, unambiguous, and include quantitative indicators or execution procedures so as not to cause legal uncertainty. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court must play an active role as the guardian of the constitutionality of criminal norms. The Constitutional Court must be more responsive in reviewing sectoral criminal provisions that are open to multiple interpretations and potentially violate the principle of *lex certa*. Constitutional Court decisions can also guide interpretation in line with the principle of legality, particularly in cases involving corporations and the public's right to a healthy environment.

One of the important foundations in strengthening the principle of legality is the application of an integrated criminal policy model. This concept emphasizes synergy between legislators, law enforcement officials, and the community in designing and implementing an adaptive and effective criminal justice system. Within this framework, corporations should be positioned not only as objects of law but also as partners in crime prevention through internal compliance mechanisms (compliance programs). The principle of legality can also be strengthened through the application of a compliance-based criminal liability system, which is a criminal scheme that provides incentives for corporations to proactively prevent crime. Corporations that fail to demonstrate adequate internal control systems may be considered negligent and held objectively criminally liable. This model has been successfully adopted in the German legal system and can be adapted to the Indonesian legal system, taking into account local characteristics.

From all of these strategies, it is clear that strengthening the principle of legality cannot be separated from the structural and paradigmatic transformation of the criminal justice system. The goal is not only to create legal certainty, but also to uphold substantive justice, ensure corporate accountability, and protect the public's right to a clean and sustainable environment. Within this framework, criminal law must be seen not merely as a means of formal retribution, but as a mechanism for social and ecological restoration. In other words, strategies to strengthen the principle of legality in corporate crime must be in line with restorative and ecological principles, as developed in modern criminal law doctrine. With the simultaneous strengthening of regulations, institutions, and legal culture, the principle of legality will become a living principle in the Indonesian criminal justice system. It will no longer be merely a normative declaration in the articles of law, but will truly function as the guardian of legal justice in the modern era, including in dealing with the complexity of environmental crimes committed by corporations.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the results of an analysis of the relevance of the principle of legality in the context of corporate criminal liability for environmental crimes in Indonesia, it can be concluded that the principle of legality has a fundamental yet problematic position. This principle serves as a normative foundation for ensuring legal certainty, but in practice, it faces various structural, conceptual, and operational challenges when applied to legal entities. Existing laws and regulations do not fully accommodate the complexity of corporations as perpetrators of criminal acts, especially in the environmental sector, which is fraught with technical and ecological dimensions. Therefore, there is a normative vacuum and interpretative uncertainty that has the potential to hinder effective and fair law enforcement against corporate entities.

In line with this, a strategy to strengthen the principle of legality needs to be implemented through a multidimensional approach. Measures such as harmonizing sectoral regulations with the National Criminal Code, developing judicial and administrative guidelines, strengthening the capacity of law enforcement officials, and integrating the principles of restorative justice and ecological restoration are important foundations for building a criminal justice system that is responsive to the development of corporate crime. The principle of legality must not only be upheld in terms of its normative existence, but must also be transformed into an actual tool for upholding substantive justice. In this context, strengthening the principle of legality is not merely a matter of legal formalism, but rather a means of ensuring corporate accountability and protecting the rights of the community to a healthy and sustainable environment.

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