

Agrarian Conflict and the Right to Food in Indonesia: Human Rights Implications of Large-Scale Agricultural Land Conversion

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Abstract

Large-scale land conversion for plantations, infrastructure, industrial development, and other commercial purposes may affect rural communities whose livelihoods depend on agricultural land. Beyond property disputes, such conflicts may have consequences for food security, livelihood protection, and the right to an adequate standard of living. This article examines the relationship between agrarian conflict and the right to food in Indonesia. Using normative juridical and policy analysis, the study evaluates agrarian regulation, land acquisition, food security policy, and human rights principles. The article argues that land governance should consider the broader livelihood and food-security consequences of land conversion rather than treating disputes exclusively as questions of formal ownership or compensation. The study proposes a rights-based land governance framework incorporating meaningful consultation, livelihood impact assessments, food-security considerations, fair compensation, and accessible remedies. Particular attention is given to rural communities whose dependence on agricultural land may not be adequately reflected in formal land documentation. The article concludes that protecting the right to food requires stronger integration between agrarian policy, development planning, and human rights protection.

[Konversi lahan skala besar untuk perkebunan, infrastruktur, pengembangan industri, dan tujuan komersial lainnya dapat memengaruhi masyarakat pedesaan yang mata pencahariannya bergantung pada lahan pertanian. Di luar sengketa kepemilikan, konflik semacam itu dapat berdampak pada ketahanan pangan, perlindungan mata pencaharian, dan hak atas standar hidup yang layak. Artikel ini mengkaji hubungan antara konflik agraria dan hak atas pangan di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis yuridis dan kebijakan normatif, studi ini mengevaluasi regulasi agraria, akuisisi lahan, kebijakan ketahanan pangan, dan prinsip-prinsip hak asasi manusia. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa tata kelola lahan harus mempertimbangkan

konsekuensi konversi lahan yang lebih luas terhadap mata pencaharian dan ketahanan pangan, daripada hanya memperlakukan sengketa sebagai masalah kepemilikan formal atau kompensasi. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja tata kelola lahan berbasis hak yang mencakup konsultasi yang bermakna, penilaian dampak mata pencaharian, pertimbangan ketahanan pangan, kompensasi yang adil, dan solusi yang mudah diakses. Perhatian khusus diberikan kepada masyarakat pedesaan yang ketergantungannya pada lahan pertanian mungkin tidak tercermin secara memadai dalam dokumentasi lahan formal. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa melindungi hak atas pangan membutuhkan integrasi yang lebih kuat antara kebijakan agraria, perencanaan pembangunan, dan perlindungan hak asasi manusia.]

Keywords: Agrarian conflict, right to food, land rights, rural communities, Indonesia

Introduction

Agrarian conflict remains a persistent structural issue in Indonesia because land is simultaneously an economic resource, a source of livelihood, a social institution, and a foundation for food production. Conflicts may arise when agricultural land is converted for plantations, infrastructure, industrial estates, mining activities, housing, or other development projects. Although land conversion is frequently justified through economic growth, urbanization, investment, or public-interest objectives, the consequences for rural communities may extend far beyond the transfer of property rights. Families whose livelihoods depend upon agricultural land can experience declining productive capacity, loss of employment, reduced household income, and increased dependence on market-based food systems. The conversion of productive agricultural land may therefore generate a direct relationship between agrarian governance and the enjoyment of the right to food. Existing research has shown that the continuing conversion of agricultural land creates significant risks for food security because productive land is a fundamental basis for domestic food availability (Gultom et al. 2021).

The human rights significance of agrarian conflict becomes particularly apparent when land is treated merely as a tradable or compensable asset. Such an approach may overlook the fact that rural households often derive multiple forms of security from agricultural land. Land may provide food directly, generate income for purchasing food, support livestock and household economies, and sustain social relationships based on shared access to natural resources. Consequently, monetary compensation for land acquisition does not necessarily restore the social and economic conditions necessary for realizing the right to adequate food. Hadiprayitno (2015) demonstrates that large-scale agricultural development can produce complex consequences for land access and food rights when

modernization projects redefine the relationship between communities and productive territories. The loss of control over land may therefore create food vulnerability even where development projects are formally authorized by law.

Indonesia's constitutional framework provides an important basis for analyzing this relationship. Article 28H paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution guarantees the right to live in physical and spiritual prosperity, while Article 28C and Article 28D provide broader protections concerning development, equality, and legal certainty. Article 33 paragraph (3) further establishes that land, water, and natural resources are controlled by the state and must be utilized for the greatest prosperity of the people. This constitutional principle requires development policies to be assessed not only according to economic output but also according to whether their distributional consequences advance public welfare. Where land conversion produces significant benefits for investors or urban development while transferring livelihood and food-security risks to rural communities, the constitutional legitimacy of such development requires critical examination.

Law No. 18 of 2012 concerning Food also recognizes food as a fundamental component of human welfare and establishes the state's responsibility to pursue food availability, accessibility, and utilization. The law cannot be separated from land governance because agricultural production depends substantially upon continued access to productive land. Law No. 41 of 2009 concerning the Protection of Sustainable Food Agricultural Land similarly seeks to protect agricultural areas from uncontrolled conversion. Nevertheless, the persistence of land conversion demonstrates a gap between legal protection and implementation. Research examining Indonesia's land-use governance has shown that legal restrictions on conversion may be weakened by competing development priorities, fragmented spatial planning, and inconsistent administrative enforcement (Krisanto et al. 2025). The legal recognition of agricultural land protection is therefore insufficient when development authorization continues to undermine the productive basis of rural communities.

This article argues that agrarian conflict should be examined as a human rights issue because land conversion can affect the substantive conditions necessary for the enjoyment of the right to food. The discussion does not assume that all land conversion is inherently unlawful or incompatible with development. Economic development, infrastructure construction, and industrial activity may serve legitimate public purposes. The central question is whether the processes and consequences of land conversion adequately protect the communities whose access to food and livelihoods may be affected. The analysis therefore focuses on four interrelated issues: the relationship between agrarian conflict and the right to food, the human rights consequences of large-scale land conversion, the adequacy of Indonesia's legal framework, and the development of a rights-based model of land governance.

Agrarian Conflict, Land Access, and the Right to Food

The right to food should not be understood solely as a right to receive food during conditions of emergency or poverty. In international human rights law, the right is connected to the availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability of food. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, and recognizes the fundamental right to freedom from hunger. Indonesia ratified the Covenant through Law No. 11 of 2005. These obligations are particularly relevant to agrarian governance because access to land may constitute an essential means through which rural households produce or obtain food. When state policies or private development projects substantially interfere with such access, the consequences may affect the substantive enjoyment of the right to food.

The relationship between land and food is particularly strong for smallholder farmers and rural communities whose livelihoods depend directly on agriculture. Agricultural land may provide crops for household consumption and generate income used to purchase other necessities. The loss of land can therefore produce multiple layers of vulnerability. A family may lose both its direct food-producing capacity and its principal source of income. Hadiprayitno (2015) argues that conflicts surrounding agricultural modernization demonstrate how land access and food rights are closely connected, particularly when development projects alter the territorial conditions under which communities sustain their livelihoods. The human rights analysis must consequently consider whether individuals retain effective access to sufficient resources for maintaining food security after land conversion occurs.

Formal ownership documentation does not always provide an adequate measure of this dependence. Rural communities may cultivate land through customary arrangements, family inheritance, informal tenure, sharecropping, or long-term occupation that is not fully reflected in official registration systems. When land acquisition or commercial development prioritizes formal documentation, individuals with weaker documentary status may receive limited recognition despite substantial dependence on the land. This produces an important distinction between legal ownership and actual livelihood reliance. A narrow approach to compensation may protect registered titleholders while excluding cultivators, agricultural laborers, tenants, and other community members whose food security depends upon continued agricultural activity. The assessment of agrarian conflict should therefore examine actual relationships with land rather than relying exclusively upon formal title.

Land conversion can also produce indirect food insecurity at the community level. The loss of productive agricultural land may reduce local food availability, weaken agricultural labor markets, and transform rural economies toward dependence on external food supplies. These consequences are particularly significant where multiple parcels of agricultural land are converted

simultaneously. Individual project assessments may underestimate cumulative effects because each conversion is treated as an isolated administrative decision. Gultom et al. (2021) emphasize that the continuing reduction of productive agricultural land can undermine food security and that agricultural conversion therefore requires coordinated governance among institutions responsible for land, spatial planning, and food policy. A rights-based approach should similarly examine cumulative impacts rather than limiting analysis to individual parcels.

Agrarian conflict also frequently reflects unequal bargaining power between rural communities, corporations, and government institutions. Large-scale projects may be supported by legal expertise, financial resources, administrative authority, and technical information that are unavailable to affected communities. Individuals may be asked to negotiate compensation without understanding the long-term value of land or the consequences of losing agricultural livelihoods. In such circumstances, formally voluntary transactions may not necessarily represent meaningful and informed consent. Communities may accept compensation because they face economic pressure or lack realistic alternatives. Hanum and Zaman (2024) argue that the protection of human rights in land conflicts requires consistency between legal frameworks, administrative practice, and judicial interpretation. This observation is important because formal compliance with land-acquisition procedures cannot by itself establish that the substantive interests of affected communities have been adequately protected.

The right to food therefore introduces a broader evaluative standard into agrarian governance. Development authorities should not ask only whether compensation has been paid or whether formal ownership has been transferred. They should also ask whether affected households can maintain adequate access to food after land conversion. This requires consideration of lost agricultural production, employment, local food systems, income security, replacement land, and the capacity of vulnerable households to adapt to economic change. A land transaction that is legally valid but produces foreseeable and avoidable food insecurity may satisfy a narrow administrative standard while remaining inconsistent with the state's broader human rights obligations.

Large-Scale Land Conversion and the Human Rights Consequences for Rural Communities

Large-scale land conversion may affect rural communities through several interconnected mechanisms. The most direct consequence is the loss of access to productive land. However, the human rights implications become broader when conversion alters the entire local economic structure. Farmers may lose employment, agricultural laborers may lose work opportunities, and local businesses connected to agricultural production may experience declining demand. These consequences can reduce household purchasing power and therefore affect economic access to food. The conversion of land should

consequently be understood as a potential disruption of the food system rather than merely a physical change in land use. The impact is particularly severe when alternative employment is unavailable or requires skills that displaced agricultural workers do not possess.

Large-scale conversion may also create long-term vulnerability because compensation is often provided as a one-time payment, while agricultural land can provide recurring income over generations. Monetary compensation may appear substantial at the time of acquisition but may be inadequate when measured against the future productive value of land. Households may use compensation to repay debts, purchase consumer goods, or meet immediate needs, leaving them without a sustainable source of income. This creates a temporal problem in land governance: immediate financial payment may be considered adequate, while the long-term erosion of livelihood security remains insufficiently assessed. Research on land conversion and food security confirms that the reduction of productive agricultural land can create broader structural risks for food availability and rural welfare (Gultom et al. 2021).

The effects of conversion are also unequally distributed among community members. Registered landowners may receive compensation, whereas tenant farmers, sharecroppers, agricultural workers, women participating in household agriculture, and younger community members may receive little or no direct benefit. Nevertheless, these groups may experience significant livelihood losses. This distributional problem illustrates why a rights-based approach must distinguish between property compensation and livelihood protection. A project may compensate the formal owner while leaving other persons economically dependent on the land without meaningful protection. The principle of equality requires government institutions to identify who is actually affected by land conversion and not simply who possesses the strongest documentary claim.

Land conversion for plantations presents additional concerns concerning long-term control over territory. Recent research in Riau demonstrates that the expansion of commercial plantations can interact with insecure land rights and contribute to land-use conflict through the manipulation of weak or uncertain tenure arrangements (Hakim et al. 2024). Such circumstances illustrate how agrarian transformation may intensify existing inequalities in land governance. Where communities possess insecure tenure, development actors may acquire access to land more easily, while affected populations face greater difficulty asserting their interests. This can produce a cycle in which legal insecurity increases the likelihood of dispossession and subsequent livelihood vulnerability.

The human rights consequences of conversion also depend upon the availability of information and meaningful participation. Communities cannot effectively protect their interests if they lack access to information concerning project boundaries, environmental impacts, land requirements, compensation methods, and expected changes in local economic conditions. Consultation conducted after major decisions have already been made cannot be considered

equivalent to meaningful participation. Communities must have the opportunity to influence decisions while alternatives remain available. Public participation is particularly important where development plans may permanently alter agricultural landscapes. Soediro et al. (2024) argue that public participation is essential to agricultural land-conversion governance because decisions affecting productive land involve wider public interests relating to food security and sustainability.

Environmental consequences may further intensify food-related risks. The conversion of agricultural land can alter water availability, soil conditions, local ecosystems, and access to natural resources that support agriculture. If productive land is lost and agricultural activity expands into new forested areas, Indonesia may face a broader sustainability dilemma involving both food production and environmental protection. Rondhi et al. (2024) explain that agricultural land conversion can create a dual challenge because the loss of farmland may undermine food production while agricultural expansion into forest areas can increase environmental degradation. This interaction demonstrates why food security cannot be addressed through agricultural policy alone. Effective protection requires coordination among agrarian, environmental, spatial, and development institutions.

The consequences of agrarian conflict may therefore include a broader deterioration of the right to an adequate standard of living. Food insecurity can be accompanied by reduced access to housing, education, healthcare, and social protection when agricultural households lose their primary income source. The right to food should consequently be considered within a broader livelihood framework. Where development produces unavoidable displacement from productive land, affected communities should receive support that enables them to establish sustainable alternative livelihoods. Compensation should not represent the end of governmental responsibility when evidence indicates that land conversion will substantially transform household economic conditions.

Legal Protection, Land Governance, and the Limits of Existing Regulation

Indonesia possesses an extensive legal framework governing land, agriculture, food, development, and human rights. The Basic Agrarian Law, Law No. 5 of 1960, establishes the fundamental principles of land governance and recognizes the social function of land rights. This principle is important because it demonstrates that land is not regulated exclusively as private property. Land governance must consider broader social purposes, including public welfare and justice. However, the implementation of the social function principle remains contested when development policies prioritize economic conversion over the continued productive role of agricultural land. The challenge is therefore not the complete absence of legal principles but the difficulty of reconciling competing policy objectives within administrative practice.

Law No. 41 of 2009 concerning the Protection of Sustainable Food Agricultural Land establishes a specific framework for protecting land necessary for food production. The law reflects recognition that productive agricultural land possesses strategic importance beyond its immediate market value. Nevertheless, agricultural land continues to face pressure from infrastructure, industrialization, urban development, and commercial expansion. The persistence of conversion suggests that legal protection can be weakened by spatial planning decisions, development permits, and exceptions associated with public-interest projects. Gultom et al. (2021) argue that conversion policy has direct implications for food security and therefore requires stronger coordination among government institutions responsible for land and development authorization.

Law No. 18 of 2012 concerning Food further establishes the importance of food security and state responsibility in ensuring the availability and accessibility of adequate food. Yet the relationship between this legislation and land-acquisition policy remains insufficiently integrated. Food policy may focus on increasing production or improving distribution, while land policy simultaneously allows the continued loss of productive agricultural areas. This institutional fragmentation can produce contradictory outcomes. The state may invest in food-security programs while permitting development practices that undermine the productive basis of rural food systems. A rights-based approach requires these policy areas to be considered together rather than treated as separate administrative sectors.

Land acquisition for public purposes is regulated through Law No. 2 of 2012 concerning Land Acquisition for Development in the Public Interest and its implementing regulations. The legislation provides procedures for planning, preparation, implementation, compensation, and the release of rights. These procedures are important for legal certainty, but formal administrative compliance should not be regarded as conclusive proof of human rights compatibility. Hanum and Zaman (2024) emphasize that land acquisition undertaken in the name of public interest requires substantive protection of affected rights and cannot justify arbitrary alteration of the purposes for which land is acquired. This concern is relevant to situations in which communities experience irreversible livelihood losses despite the formal completion of administrative procedures.

The Job Creation Law, currently reflected in Law No. 6 of 2023 concerning the Stipulation of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 2 of 2022 on Job Creation into Law, also influences land governance through broader changes in investment and licensing policy. Efforts to simplify administrative procedures may support economic development, but they also create concerns when accelerated licensing reduces opportunities for meaningful participation or weakens environmental and social assessment. The pursuit of regulatory efficiency should not diminish the state's responsibility to examine how land conversion affects vulnerable communities. Economic acceleration is not a human rights justification in itself. Where development decisions create foreseeable risks to livelihoods and food security, government institutions must apply stronger safeguards.

Indonesia's human rights framework also requires the state to respect and protect economic and social rights. Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights recognizes the right to a decent life and establishes broader obligations concerning welfare and equality. Indonesia's ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights through Law No. 11 of 2005 further requires the progressive realization of the right to adequate food. These obligations suggest that public authorities should avoid policies that foreseeably and disproportionately undermine existing access to food. The state must therefore consider whether large-scale land conversion causes retrogressive consequences for households dependent upon agricultural production.

The principal weakness of the current framework lies in institutional fragmentation. Land authorities may evaluate tenure and compensation, spatial-planning authorities may assess land use, agricultural authorities may focus on production, and social institutions may address poverty after livelihood losses occur. However, no single process necessarily evaluates the full relationship between land conversion, livelihood disruption, and the right to food. A more integrated approach is therefore required. Development authorization should incorporate food-security and livelihood considerations before land conversion occurs rather than attempting to address social consequences only after conflict emerges.

Towards a Rights-Based Framework for Agrarian Governance and Food Security

A rights-based approach to land governance should begin by recognizing that agricultural land performs a social and productive function that cannot always be replaced by monetary compensation. Before authorizing large-scale conversion, public institutions should conduct comprehensive livelihood and food-security impact assessments. These assessments should identify not only formal landowners but also tenant farmers, agricultural laborers, customary communities, women involved in agricultural production, and other individuals who depend on the affected territory. The analysis should consider how conversion may affect direct food production, household income, employment, access to water, local food markets, and long-term community resilience.

Meaningful participation should constitute the second element of the framework. Communities should receive timely and accessible information regarding proposed projects and should be consulted before fundamental decisions become irreversible. Participation should not be reduced to a procedural meeting in which affected populations are informed about predetermined plans. Rural communities must have the opportunity to raise objections, propose alternatives, and challenge information that they consider inaccurate. Soediro et al. (2024) demonstrate the importance of public participation in land-conversion governance, particularly because agricultural land decisions involve broader consequences for

food security and sustainable development. Participation is therefore both a procedural human right and a mechanism for improving the substantive quality of government decisions.

The framework should also distinguish between compensation and livelihood restoration. Financial payment may be necessary when land is acquired, but it should not be presumed sufficient where the loss of land removes a household's principal source of long-term economic security. Livelihood restoration may require replacement land, agricultural assistance, vocational training, employment guarantees, transitional income support, or access to credit and social protection. The appropriate remedy should depend upon the nature of the community's relationship with the land. A farmer who loses a subsistence farm may require a different form of protection from a landowner whose primary income is derived from non-agricultural sources.

Protection for persons without strong formal documentation should be strengthened. Agrarian governance should recognize that actual dependence on land can exist outside registered ownership. Authorities should therefore identify legitimate users and other persons whose livelihoods will be substantially affected. Excluding these groups from consultation and compensation may create new forms of inequality and deepen agrarian conflict. A rights-based framework should adopt a functional assessment of land dependence in addition to formal tenure analysis. This approach would not eliminate the importance of legal registration but would prevent administrative documentation from becoming the sole determinant of who receives protection.

Independent review and accessible remedies are also necessary. Communities affected by land conversion should have access to administrative and judicial mechanisms capable of reviewing the legality and human rights implications of development decisions. Complaint mechanisms should be available before displacement or conversion occurs, not only after the land has been irreversibly transformed. Courts and administrative institutions should also be empowered to examine whether consultation was meaningful, whether impact assessments adequately considered food security, and whether compensation genuinely addressed livelihood losses. Remedies should include corrective measures capable of addressing structural harm rather than limiting relief to financial damages.

Finally, Indonesia should develop stronger policy coordination between agrarian reform, food security, spatial planning, environmental protection, and development policy. Rondhi et al. (2024) demonstrate that the relationship between land conversion, food security, and environmental degradation requires integrated policy responses. Development planning should therefore include a cumulative assessment of agricultural land loss within particular regions. A project that appears acceptable when evaluated individually may contribute to significant food insecurity when combined with other conversions. Protecting the right to food requires government institutions to assess the aggregate consequences of land-use change rather than treating each permit as an isolated decision.

Conclusion

Agrarian conflict in Indonesia cannot be understood exclusively as a dispute over land ownership or the adequacy of financial compensation. Large-scale agricultural land conversion can directly affect the material conditions necessary for rural communities to enjoy the right to food. The loss of productive land may reduce household food production, weaken agricultural employment, diminish purchasing power, and increase dependence on unstable market conditions. These consequences are particularly severe for smallholder farmers, tenants, agricultural workers, customary communities, and other groups whose dependence on land may not be fully reflected in formal ownership documentation. The human rights implications of land conversion therefore require a broader assessment of livelihood, food security, equality, participation, and access to remedies.

Indonesia possesses a substantial legal framework relevant to these issues, including the 1945 Constitution, the Basic Agrarian Law, Law No. 18 of 2012 concerning Food, Law No. 41 of 2009 concerning the Protection of Sustainable Food Agricultural Land, Law No. 2 of 2012 concerning Land Acquisition for Development in the Public Interest, Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Nevertheless, the existence of legal rules has not eliminated the institutional fragmentation that separates agrarian policy from food-security and human rights considerations. Land conversion may therefore remain administratively lawful while producing significant long-term livelihood and food-related vulnerabilities.

A stronger rights-based approach should require meaningful participation, comprehensive livelihood and food-security impact assessments, recognition of actual dependence on land, fair compensation, livelihood restoration, and effective remedies. Public authorities should assess the cumulative consequences of land conversion and ensure that development policies do not transfer disproportionate social costs to rural communities. The right to food must be integrated into land governance before conversion decisions are made rather than treated as a social problem to be addressed after productive land and livelihoods have already been lost. Sustainable development requires not only economic growth and investment but also the protection of the human conditions that enable communities to maintain their livelihoods, dignity, and food security.

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