

## Corporate Agrarian Expansion and Rural Livelihood Reconfiguration: A Sociological Analysis of Agrarian Structure Transformation in Rural Maluku

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### Abstract

*This article examines how large-scale corporate plantation expansion reconfigures agrarian structures and reshapes rural household livelihood strategies in an island context. Focusing on the entry of PT Spice Island Maluku into abaca banana plantation development in Kawa Village and its surrounding areas in West Seram Regency, this study employs a qualitative sociological case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis of land lease agreements and village policies, involving 60 informants comprising landholding farmers, plantation laborers, customary leaders, and village officials. The findings reveal that corporate plantation expansion produces an asymmetric agrarian transformation in which formal land ownership remains with local farmers, while substantive control and land use are transferred to the corporation through long-term leasing mechanisms. This shift weakens farmers' effective control over land, accelerates the transition from diversified subsistence agriculture to market-oriented monoculture, and compels rural households to adopt defensive livelihood strategies reliant on wage labor and residual economic activities. The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating that agrarian change does not necessarily occur through formal land dispossession, but through functional land control that generates concealed agrarian domination and new forms of economic dependency. This research contributes to agrarian and rural sociology by advancing a more nuanced understanding of non-formal land control mechanisms and by enriching empirical discussions on agrarian transformation in underrepresented island regions.*

### Article Info:

**Keywords:** Agrarian Change, Agrarian Structure, Corporate Plantation, Livelihood Strategies, Rural Sociology

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## INTRODUCTION

Agrarian structural change resulting from the expansion of corporate plantations constitutes a classical issue in agrarian sociology that continues to evolve alongside the intensification of global capitalist logics in natural resource management. In many rural areas of Indonesia, particularly in archipelagic regions and peripheral zones, the entry of large-scale plantation companies has not only brought promises of economic growth but has also triggered profound transformations in agrarian social relations and the sustainability of smallholder livelihoods (Chrisendo et al., 2021; Leiwakabessy, 2024). Kawa Village and its surrounding areas in West Seram Regency offer a concrete illustration of how corporate expansion, specifically the development of abaca banana plantations by PT Spice Island Maluku, has generated complex structural changes that were often not fully recognized by

local communities in the early stages. Land that previously functioned as the primary basis for subsistence production and as a socio-economic safety net for farming households has gradually been reconfigured into a corporate production asset through long-term leasing mechanisms. While formally legal and ostensibly consensual, these arrangements have substantively displaced farmers' control and authority over the most vital resource in rural life.

The significance of this issue lies in the fact that land in rural Maluku is not merely an economic commodity but also carries deep social, cultural, and historical meanings embedded in customary institutions, soa structures, and collective identity (Johnson et al., 2025; Safiteri et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2025). When land is repositioned solely as a factor of production within a market-oriented monoculture system, fundamental changes occur in the relationships between people, land, and labor, with direct consequences for how rural households organize their livelihoods. Empirical evidence from the field indicates that although farmers remain formally registered as landowners, they lose effective decision-making power over land use, crop selection, and production orientation. At the same time, employment opportunities offered by corporations in the form of daily wage labor are insufficient to replace land's function as a long-term livelihood base. As a result, farming households are compelled to adopt defensive and highly vulnerable survival strategies. These dynamics underscore that corporate plantation expansion cannot be understood merely as an economic process; rather, it constitutes a far-reaching agrarian social transformation with significant implications for class structure, power relations, and rural social resilience.

Agrarian sociology has long positioned changes in agrarian structure as a central issue in understanding rural dynamics (Anggraini et al., 2025; Simanjuntak & Chalil, 2025). Classical works, such as Karl Marx's analysis of the separation of direct producers from the means of production and Karl Polanyi's concept of the disembeddedness of land from social relations, provide a theoretical foundation for interpreting how agrarian capitalism operates through mechanisms that are often invisible. In the context of developing countries, scholars have demonstrated that the penetration of market economies and external forces into rural areas frequently produces new forms of social differentiation and weakens the economic base of smallholders (Dharmawan et al., 2021; Habibi, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021). Li (2021) and Perrotta and Raeymaekers (2023), in particular, emphasize that farmers respond to such structural pressures through subsistence-oriented strategies and moral economic logics that prioritize livelihood security over profit accumulation.

More recent studies on land grabbing and corporate agriculture have extended analyses of agrarian change into the broader context of globalization and transnational corporate expansion. Researchers have highlighted how corporations and states collaborate in establishing new agrarian regimes that facilitate capital accumulation through large-scale land control (Hofman & Visser, 2021; Vicol et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). Drawing on the framework of agrarian political economy, Fu and Niu (2023) as well as White and Wijaya (2022) argue that contemporary agrarian transformations are not always marked by overt dispossession but often occur through contractual arrangements, leasing schemes, and

partnership models that appear inclusive while concealing deeply unequal power relations. These insights are particularly relevant for understanding how plantation expansion in rural Indonesia unfolds within a legal-formal framework that obscures processes of social exclusion.

In Indonesia, studies on plantation expansion have largely focused on commodities such as oil palm, sugarcane, and industrial timber plantations. Research shows that although schemes such as partnerships and plasma arrangements are frequently promoted as win-win solutions, smallholders often experience reduced control over land and increased economic dependency in practice (Kurnia et al., 2022; Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2023). Other studies in Sumatra and Kalimantan demonstrate that the shift from subsistence farming to monoculture systems affects not only household income but also food vulnerability, the loss of local biodiversity, and the erosion of social solidarity at the community level (Apriyana et al., 2021; Faxon, 2022; Valerio et al., 2022). However, most of these studies concentrate on large mainland regions with relatively better infrastructure and more integrated market dynamics.

By contrast, research on agrarian change in archipelagic regions, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, remains limited. While several studies in Maluku and Papua have addressed land conflicts, customary institutions, and natural resource investments, micro-level analyses of how corporate plantation expansion reconfigures rural household livelihood strategies are still scarce. Livelihoods studies influenced by Ellis, Chambers, and Scoones have predominantly been applied to mainland agricultural contexts and community-based natural resource management, with insufficient attention to land control dynamics operating through non-expropriative mechanisms. This gap is significant, given that archipelagic contexts are characterized by limited productive land, high dependence on local resources, and strong customary institutions that interact in complex ways with market and state logics.

Within this body of literature, agrarian change is often understood dichotomously in terms of land ownership versus land loss. Such an approach fails to capture more subtle processes in which farmers retain formal certificates or customary claims while losing their effective capacity to determine how land is used. Moreover, previous studies frequently separate analyses of agrarian structure from household livelihood strategies, leaving the reciprocal relationship between changes in land control and farmers' economic adaptations insufficiently explored. This condition opens an analytical space to conceptualize agrarian transformation as a process of functional control operating through local power relations, customary negotiations, and the facilitative role of village-level institutions.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the expansion of abaca banana plantations in Kawa Village as an entry point for understanding how agrarian change operates concretely at the local level. By focusing on the relationships among corporations, village governments, customary institutions, and farming households, this research demonstrates that changes in agrarian structure are not always confrontational but often unfold through agreements that appear rational and mutually beneficial. It is precisely within this space that new forms of dependency emerge, binding rural households to wage labor and market-oriented economic logics while constraining their capacity to achieve long-term livelihood sustainability.

The primary objective of this study is to sociologically analyze how corporate plantation expansion reconfigures agrarian structures and reshapes rural household livelihood strategies in the archipelagic context of Maluku. Specifically, the study seeks to uncover processes of land control transformation, identify the actors involved in agrarian negotiations, and examine the implications for agricultural practices and household economic choices. In doing so, this research aims not only to contribute to debates in agrarian and rural sociology but also to offer a more context-sensitive understanding of agrarian change dynamics in Eastern Indonesia.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach because the issues under investigation are closely related to social experiences, power relations, and the meanings that local actors attach to the agrarian changes they encounter. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to capture social processes, dynamics, and negotiations that cannot be reduced to numerical indicators or measurable variables. As Asyraff et al. (2024) emphasize, qualitative research is particularly appropriate for understanding complex and context-dependent social realities. Through this approach, changes in land control, shifts in agricultural practices, and adaptations in household livelihood strategies are analyzed as ongoing and socially embedded processes rather than as static outcomes.

The research site was purposively selected in Kawa Village, West Seram Regency, on the grounds that this area constitutes one of the main locations of abaca banana plantation expansion involving corporate actors and local communities through long-term land leasing schemes. Kawa Village represents an archipelagic rural context in Maluku characterized by limited productive land, the strong presence of customary institutions, and a high degree of household dependence on land as a primary source of livelihood. The site was also chosen due to the intensity of interactions among farmers, village institutions, and corporate actors, which allows for direct observation of agrarian transformation processes and their implications for everyday rural life.

Research participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the inclusion of key actors involved in local agrarian dynamics. A total of 60 informants participated in the study, comprising landowning farmers, plantation day laborers, customary leaders (soa representatives), and village officials. Landowning farmers were selected as primary actors experiencing changes in land control and land use. Plantation day laborers were included to capture shifts in livelihood strategies and emerging labor relations following corporate expansion. Customary leaders were involved due to their central role in the social and cultural legitimation of land control, while village officials were selected to examine the role of formal institutions in facilitating or regulating cooperation between communities and corporate actors. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data sufficiency, whereby data collection was concluded once thematic saturation had been achieved.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit informants' narratives, experiences, and perceptions regarding changes in agrarian structure and household livelihood strategies. This method was chosen because it enables reflective dialogue and allows informants to articulate their experiences in a comprehensive and non-fragmented manner. Field observations were carried out to document everyday agricultural practices, labor relations within plantation settings, and social interactions at the community level that may not be fully captured through interviews alone. Document analysis, including land lease agreements, village meeting minutes, and local policies related to land use, was undertaken to examine the formal institutional frameworks underpinning agrarian change in Kawa Village.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, this study employed source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from farmers, laborers, customary leaders, and village officials in order to identify convergences and divergences in perspectives. Methodological triangulation involved cross-referencing interview data with observations and document analysis, thereby reducing reliance on a single data source. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach through processes of data reduction, thematic coding, and the interpretation of sociological meanings, with particular attention to power relations, transformations in agrarian structure, and the dynamics of household livelihood strategies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Corporate Entry and the Reconfiguration of Local Agrarian Structures

The entry of PT Spice Island Maluku as a corporate actor in the development of abaca banana plantations since 2018 marks a new phase in the configuration of agrarian structures in Kawa Village and its surrounding areas in West Seram Regency. This corporate presence did not emerge through confrontational or expropriative processes but rather through administrative mechanisms and locally negotiated agreements that were socially perceived as legitimate and mutually beneficial. Within this context, agrarian change has unfolded gradually, almost without overt conflict, yet has substantively altered the relationships among land, production, and power at the local level.

The initial phase of corporate entry involved engagement with village governments and customary leaders, particularly soa authorities who hold collective rights over customary land. In several interviews, village officials explained that the company's presence was framed as an opportunity to generate employment and stimulate the village economy. One village official (coded A.D.) stated that the company arrived with promises of long-term investment and a commitment not to transfer land ownership from the community. This narrative played a crucial role in shaping early perceptions that the collaboration would be secure and non-threatening to local land rights. At the customary level, a soa leader (coded T.N.) reported that consent was granted following internal deliberations, based on the belief that land would remain under soa ownership and merely be temporarily allocated for production purposes.

Land lease agreements between the community and the company became the primary instrument through which local agrarian structures were reconfigured. Formally, these agreements stipulated that land ownership, whether private, familial, or soa-based, would not be transferred. In practice, however, the contracts granted the company full authority to manage, utilize, and determine the production orientation of the land throughout the lease period. A landowning farmer (coded M.L.) explained that once land was leased, landholders no longer had the freedom to cultivate food crops as they had previously, except for pre-existing perennial plants. Thus, while ownership status remained unchanged, substantive control over land shifted to the corporate actor.

Field observations corroborate these accounts. Areas that were previously characterized by diverse food crops and mixed gardens have been transformed into orderly and uniform rows of abaca banana plants. Multicultural farming activities traditionally practiced by farming households, such as cultivating cassava, maize, or local vegetables, have largely disappeared. Community access to land has also become restricted, both physically and symbolically, as plantation areas are demarcated as corporate work zones. These changes in the agrarian landscape are not merely ecological but also reflect a reconfiguration of power relations, with the company emerging as the dominant actor in determining the use and direction of village agrarian space.

The role of village governments and customary institutions in this process is ambivalent. On the one hand, they function as mediators bridging corporate interests and community concerns. On the other hand, the legitimacy they provide effectively strengthens the corporation's position in controlling land. A village official (coded S.K.) stated that the village administration merely facilitated agreements and did not intervene in technical land management matters. However, this facilitative role indirectly positions the village as part of an administrative legitimization mechanism that renders corporate land control seemingly lawful and unproblematic. Changes in agrarian structure before and after the arrival of the abaca banana company are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1** Changes in Agrarian Structure Before and After the Establishment of the Abaca Banana Plantation

| No. | Indicator                    | Before                        | After   |
|-----|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1   | Land ownership status        | Private, family, and soa land | Ownership retained, functional control by company |
| 2   | Land use                     | Multicultural farming         | Abaca banana monoculture                          |
| 3   | Strength of ownership rights | Full control by landholders   | Restricted ownership rights                       |
| 4   | Land control                 | Landholders                   | Corporate actor                                   |
| 5   | Effective land area          | ±2 ha                         | <0.5 ha   |

Source: Field findings, 2025

The table illustrates that agrarian change in Kawa Village and surrounding areas has not occurred at the level of formal ownership but rather at the level of land control and



utilization. Farmers remain legally recognized as landowners yet have lost the ability to freely use their land. This condition directly weakens the effective power of land ownership, as farmers are confined to utilizing residual agrarian spaces through perennial crops such as coconut, sago, clove, and sugar palm. In some cases, landowners with substantial sago resources can maintain production by employing others through sharecropping arrangements, while farmers with limited resources must rely on family labor or wage work as plantation laborers.

Land control that was previously exercised by individuals, families, and soa institutions has thus shifted functionally to the company. A farmer (coded R.S.) explained that prior to corporate entry, they could freely determine planting schedules, crop types, and land use. After leasing their land, all strategic decisions are made by the company, including restrictions on activities within plantation areas. This shift has generated a sense of loss of control that is rarely articulated openly but is deeply felt in everyday practice.

Conceptually, these findings indicate that the reconfiguration of agrarian structures in Kawa Village represents a form of gradual and concealed agrarian restructuring. Consistent with Junior (2022) and White and Wijaya (2022), contemporary agrarian transformation does not necessarily proceed through direct expropriation or forced dispossession but rather through contractual relations that appear legally neutral while embedding significant power asymmetries. In this context, land leasing functions as a key mechanism enabling corporate control over agrarian resources without altering formal ownership status. This process aligns with analyses of control grabbing Stock (2023) and Stone (2022), which emphasize that contemporary agrarian struggles center not solely on ownership but on control over the functions and benefits of resources.

### **Formal Ownership and Substantive Control: Asymmetries in Agrarian Relations**

Historically, land ownership in rural Maluku has not been merely a matter of formal legality but is deeply intertwined with social relations, customary institutions, and everyday practices of control. In Kawa Village and neighboring villages, Hatusua, Lohiatala, and Nuruwe, the entry of PT Spice Island Maluku has significantly altered how land ownership and control are enacted in practice. Legally, farmers continue to be recognized as the rightful owners of land leased to the company. However, research findings demonstrate that such formal recognition does not correspond to farmers' actual capacity to control land use. This disjuncture constitutes the core of the agrarian asymmetry that has emerged following the expansion of the abaca banana plantation.

Interview data indicate that most farmers initially understood land lease agreements as a secure form of cooperation because they did not revoke ownership status. A farmer (coded H.K.) explained that the company consistently emphasized that land would remain community-owned and would only be temporarily used for abaca cultivation. This assurance underpinned community acceptance of long-term leasing schemes. In practice, however, the agreements grant the company full authority to determine crop types, planting patterns, and permissible activities on the land throughout the lease period. Consequently, while formal ownership remains with farmers, functional control is fully transferred to the corporation.

The 35-year land lease mechanism serves as the primary instrument in this process. The scheme includes a rental payment of IDR 2,000,000 per hectare, accompanied by promises of employment opportunities for landowners' family members as plantation laborers and access to health insurance cards. For some farming households, this arrangement is perceived as a solution to economic constraints and limited employment access. One informant (coded R.M.) noted that although the rental value is relatively small compared to long-term production potential, job security was the primary consideration in accepting the agreement. This situation illustrates how economic pressures compel farmers to accept arrangements that structurally place them in a weak bargaining position.

Field observations clearly reveal the shift in land control. Within plantation areas, community activities are restricted by corporate regulations, both formal and informal. Landowning farmers can no longer freely enter or cultivate their land without permission from supervisors or company representatives. In several instances, farmers were observed accessing their land solely in their capacity as laborers rather than as owners. This signifies both a symbolic and material transformation of farmers' status, from owner-managers to workers on their own land.

This asymmetry is further evident in the management of perennial crops. Although agreements provide compensation for felled trees such as coconut, clove, or sago upon landowner consent, farmers are only permitted to retain crops deemed non-disruptive to abaca production. These crops subsequently become the sole independent livelihood sources accessible to farmers. One informant (coded S.N.) reported that while they could still harvest sago and sugar palm within plantation areas, they no longer had space to establish new gardens or cultivate short-term food crops. This condition demonstrates how the strength of land ownership rights becomes severely constrained despite remaining legally intact.

**Table 2** Asymmetry between Formal Ownership and Substantive Land Control in Kawa Village and Surrounding Areas

| No. | Aspect                    | Formal Ownership   | Substantive Control       |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1   | Legal land status         | Owned by farmers   | Not controlled by farmers |
| 2   | Crop determination        | Landowners' right  | Determined by company     |
| 3   | Land access               | Legally recognized | Practically restricted    |
| 4   | Production management     | Landowners         | Corporate actor           |
| 5   | Primary economic benefits | Indirect           | Predominantly corporate   |

Source: Field findings, 2025

The table underscores the unequal agrarian relations that have emerged, wherein corporations exercise effective control over resources while farmers retain only legal claims devoid of substantive power. Sociologically, this condition can be understood as functional land control, in which land is governed based on use and practice rather than formal ownership alone. This concept extends discussions on control grabbing developed by Asare-



Nuamah et al. (2021), Balkrishna et al. (2023), and Yu et al. (2023), which highlight how contemporary agrarian resource appropriation frequently occurs through legal and contractual mechanisms that preserve formal ownership while transferring effective control.

This analysis also resonates with Kühling et al. (2022) and Lee (2022), who argue that contemporary agrarian transformations are increasingly shaped by asymmetric contractual relations. In Kawa Village, land lease contracts mediate between capital interests and farmers' subsistence needs while simultaneously reproducing structural inequalities. Farmers lose agrarian decision-making autonomy and become increasingly dependent on wage labor provided by the corporation. This dependency is structural in nature, as livelihood alternatives outside corporate schemes diminish alongside restricted access to land.

### **From Subsistence Multiculture to Market-Oriented Monoculture: The Transformation of Production Practices**

Changes in agricultural production practices in Kawa Village and its surrounding areas reflect a fundamental shift in how land, labor, and livelihood sustainability are understood by local communities. Prior to the establishment of the abaca banana plantation, farming households practiced a subsistence-oriented, multicultural agricultural system. Land was managed through diversified cultivation, combining food crops such as sweet potatoes, cassava, maize, and local vegetables with perennial crops including coconut, clove, sago, and sugar palm. This system not only ensured household food provision but also functioned as a social safety mechanism during periods of economic fluctuation or seasonal scarcity. In everyday practice, gardens served simultaneously as spaces of production and social interaction, where local knowledge, kinship relations, and community solidarity were continuously reproduced.

The entry of PT Spice Island Maluku significantly altered this system. As land was leased for the development of abaca banana plantations, subsistence production spaces gradually diminished and were replaced by a monoculture system integrated into global market chains. Farmers lost autonomy in determining crop selection, as production orientation became exclusively directed toward abaca bananas. In an interview, a farmer (coded J.L.) explained that prior to land leasing, he cultivated various crops for household needs and customary obligations; after the lease, these activities ceased, leaving only perennial crops that were not cleared by the company. This narrative indicates that changes in agricultural practices did not emerge gradually from farmers' choices but rather as a direct consequence of shifts in land control.

Field observations reinforce these findings. Plantation areas are now characterized by uniform abaca banana stands, with standardized planting distances and minimal vegetation diversity. Mixed gardens, previously a defining feature of local agriculture, have largely disappeared. Land is intensively cleared to support a single crop, while short-cycle food crops have almost entirely vanished. This condition reflects what the political ecology literature describes as ecological simplification, namely the reduction of biodiversity resulting from the implementation of market-oriented monoculture production systems (Andriansyah et al., 2023; Jansen et al., 2022). Such simplification affects not only ecological resilience but also

increases the social vulnerability of farming households by eliminating alternative food sources.

The decline in crop diversity has had a direct impact on household food security. Before plantation expansion, most food needs were met through household gardens, supplemented by marine resources or reciprocal exchange among villagers. Following the shift to monoculture, farming households have become increasingly dependent on market purchases for daily food consumption. One informant (coded M.R.) stated that he now regularly purchases rice and vegetables from the market, an uncommon practice prior to plantation expansion, when most food was obtained from the garden. This growing dependence on the market places farming households in a more vulnerable position, particularly given fluctuating prices and the uncertainty of income derived from irregular daily wage labor on plantations.

The transformation of production practices has also reshaped work rhythms and time allocation within farming households. Subsistence-based multiculture allowed flexible labor arrangements, enabling farmers to align agricultural activities with household needs and ecological cycles. In contrast, plantation labor requires strict time discipline and adherence to corporate operational standards. Field observations indicate that plantation workers begin activities early in the morning under structured task divisions, while traditional gardening practices have nearly disappeared from leased land. This shift reorients farmers from autonomous land management toward wage labor governed by corporate production logics.

Within agrarian sociology, the transition from subsistence multiculture to market-oriented monoculture cannot be understood merely as a technical change in farming methods. Rather, it reflects a broader reorientation of farmers' livelihoods from social sustainability toward market production imperatives. Land is no longer treated as a foundation of life providing food, identity, and social security, but as a factor of production within global value chains. Nasikh et al. (2021) and Sekaranom et al. (2021) argue that under contemporary agrarian capitalism, smallholders are often compelled to integrate into market-based production systems in ways that diminish their autonomy over resources and labor. The findings from Kawa Village illustrate this dynamic concretely, as farmers lose control over production practices and become increasingly dependent on a single commodity exposed to global market volatility.

The political ecology of agrarian change further emphasizes that monoculture is not merely an economic efficiency issue but a political process that reorganizes human–environment relations. Faxon (2022) and Wang et al. (2023) demonstrate that plantation expansion often marginalizes local knowledge and ecological practices that have historically supported rural sustainability. In Kawa Village, knowledge related to mixed-garden management, crop rotation, and diversified resource use has begun to erode. Younger generations working as plantation laborers are increasingly detached from traditional agricultural practices, raising concerns about the intergenerational loss of locally embedded knowledge.

Dependence on a single commodity also creates long-term economic vulnerability. Although abaca bananas have high export value, economic benefits for farmers remain indirect and largely confined to wage income. When production is disrupted or market prices decline, farming households lack adequate alternative production systems to sustain their livelihoods. In an interview, one informant (coded S.P.) expressed concern about the future, noting that if the company ceases operations, the land may no longer be readily usable for food cultivation as before. This concern highlights how market-oriented monoculture erodes the adaptive capacity of rural households.

### **The Reconfiguration of Rural Household Livelihood Strategies**

Changes in land control structures in Kawa Village and surrounding areas have not only affected agricultural production practices but have also directly reconfigured rural household livelihood strategies. Prior to the expansion of abaca banana plantations, farming households relied heavily on relatively autonomous land control and management. Land functioned as the primary livelihood base, as a site for food production, a source of cash income, and a social safety net. Households managed mixed gardens combining tubers, local bananas, and perennial crops such as coconut, sugar palm, sago, clove, and durian. The presence of eucalyptus oil-producing trees around garden areas provided additional seasonal income. Some household heads also utilized marine resources for subsistence or small-scale sale, while others supplemented income through non-agricultural activities such as petty trade, small kiosks, or motorcycle taxi services.

This diversification reflects an adaptive livelihood strategy oriented toward long-term sustainability. By drawing on multiple resources and economic activities, farming households were able to absorb economic and ecological shocks. In this context, livelihoods were not primarily oriented toward accumulation but toward maintaining everyday survival and subsistence security. Jansen et al. (2022) and Nasikh et al. (2021) emphasize that livelihoods encompass the totality of resources accessible to individuals or households to sustain life and, under certain conditions, improve well-being. Field findings indicate that prior to agrarian transformation, households in this area retained considerable flexibility in combining diverse livelihood sources.

This situation changed markedly after community-owned land was leased to PT Spice Island Maluku for abaca plantation development. Restricted access to productive land forced farming households to restructure their livelihood strategies. Gardening activities that previously formed the core of household livelihoods diminished significantly as most land was converted into corporate plantations. In an interview, an informant (coded A.H.) explained that after leasing his land, he no longer had sufficient space to cultivate food crops and became dependent on daily wage labor on the plantation to meet household needs. This narrative illustrates how wage labor has become an unavoidable primary livelihood source for many farming households.

Field observations reveal how reliance on wage labor has reshaped daily life rhythms in the village. Each morning, groups of day laborers gather at designated points before being assigned tasks by plantation supervisors. Work continues throughout the day under strict task

divisions, with relatively low and uncertain daily wages. This contrasts sharply with previous work patterns that were more flexible and household-oriented. Dependence on wage labor places farming households in a vulnerable position, as income sustainability is contingent upon the continued operation of the company.

Nevertheless, farming households have not entirely abandoned previous livelihood strategies. To compensate for limited wage income, they combine plantation labor with residual economic activities. The utilization of remaining perennial crops around plantation areas constitutes a key strategy. One informant (coded M.S.) reported continuing to harvest clove and coconut trees not cleared by the company and processing coconuts into copra and broom materials. Although these activities generate limited and seasonal income, they remain crucial livelihood supplements. Some households also utilize sugar palm to produce palm sugar on a small scale.

Beyond agriculture, informal labor and small enterprises provide additional livelihood options. Women often play a central role by engaging in petty trade or operating small kiosks near residential areas, while some men seek supplementary income as motorcycle taxi drivers or casual laborers. In an indirect interview, an informant (coded R.K.) stated that income from a single activity is no longer sufficient to meet household needs, requiring all family members to participate in multiple economic activities. This strategy reflects efforts to expand livelihood portfolios, even as available options become increasingly constrained.

From a rural sociology perspective, these changing livelihood strategies can be understood as forms of defensive adaptation. Farming households are not positioned to accumulate capital or significantly improve well-being; instead, they focus on sustaining everyday life under structural pressures that limit access to key resources, most notably land. The livelihood vulnerability approach emphasizes that vulnerability emerges when households face asset constraints, narrow economic opportunities, and dependence on unstable income sources (Dharmawan et al., 2021; Habibi, 2022). Findings from Kawa Village indicate that livelihood strategies are largely reactive to agrarian structural changes rather than the result of free and rational economic choice.

This vulnerability becomes more pronounced when households confront long-term uncertainty. Dependence on plantation wage labor exposes them to corporate policy shifts, production fluctuations, and global market volatility affecting abaca fiber demand. Field observations indicate the absence of adequate social protection mechanisms to mitigate these risks. Although the company provides health insurance for workers, this provision is insufficient to secure long-term livelihood sustainability. Such concerns were also expressed by an informant (coded S.L.), who noted the lack of alternative employment options should the company cease operations.

### **The Production of Dependency and Covert Agrarian Control**

The expansion of abaca banana plantations by PT Spice Island Maluku in Kawa Village and its surrounding areas has not only transformed agrarian structures and production practices but has also gradually generated a new, systemic form of economic dependency. This dependency has not emerged through overt coercion or direct land dispossession; rather,

it has been constructed incrementally through the erosion of production alternatives outside the corporate scheme and the strengthening of institutional relations that legitimize corporate presence. In this context, agrarian control operates in a covert manner, embedded within local agreements, customary legitimacy, and the active role of village institutions that function simultaneously as mediators and guarantors of social stability.

At the household level, economic dependency is most visibly manifested in the shift of farmers' primary livelihoods toward wage labor on plantations. As discussed in the previous section, restricted access to productive land has rendered daily wage labor no longer a temporary option but a fundamental pillar of household survival. An informant identified as Y.T. explained that although wages are relatively low and unstable, plantation work remains unavoidable because there is no longer sufficient land to cultivate independently. This account indicates that dependency is not driven by economic incentives alone, but by the progressive narrowing of alternative livelihood spaces that once enabled households to maintain a degree of autonomy.

Field observations further reveal how this dependency has become institutionalized in everyday village life. Economic activities are increasingly centered on the plantation work cycle. Labor schedules, rest days, and even the social rhythms of the village have adjusted to the operational needs of the company. Small shops that have emerged around plantation areas primarily serve plantation workers, while other forms of economic activity remain largely stagnant. This condition has produced a localized economic ecosystem revolving around the company, thereby tying collective community survival more closely to corporate presence and decision-making.

Dependency is further reinforced by the disappearance of production alternatives outside the corporate framework. Prior to plantation expansion, farming households retained the capacity to manage mixed gardens, produce food independently, and sell surplus crops on a small scale. Following long-term land leasing, subsistence production spaces have contracted sharply. Food crops that once constituted the primary source of household consumption can no longer be freely cultivated. In an indirect interview, an informant identified as L.M. stated that household food needs are now largely met through market purchases, an uncommon practice before plantation expansion. This shift demonstrates that economic dependency extends beyond labor relations to encompass heightened reliance on markets for basic needs.

The agrarian control that enables the production of such dependency operates through mechanisms that appear consensual and legally sanctioned. Land lease agreements between the company and local communities are legitimized through village administrative procedures and the recognition of customary institutions. Village governments play a pivotal role as intermediaries linking corporate interests and community consent. Village officials facilitate meetings, explain cooperation schemes, and frame agreements as collective development initiatives. As recounted by an informant identified as H.K., the presence of the village head's signature and the approval of customary leaders reassured community members that the agreement did not violate local norms. Yet this legitimacy simultaneously

obscures unequal power relations, as agreements that appear equitable in form effectively constrain community control over agrarian resources in practice.

Customary institutions also play a critical role in normalizing corporate agrarian control. Recognition of customary rights and the involvement of *soa* (customary kinship groups) in decision-making processes create the impression that plantation expansion reflects collective consent. However, field observations indicate that deliberative spaces within the community are not equally accessible. Decisions are often made by a small group of customary and village elites who possess greater access to information and power networks. This finding aligns with the concept of the institutional embeddedness of corporate control, wherein corporate power becomes deeply rooted in local institutions and social structures, making it difficult to disentangle (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2023).

In this context, agrarian control can be understood as a form of hidden agrarian power. Power is not exercised through physical coercion or overt conflict but through rule-setting, the framing of development discourse, and the use of local institutions as intermediaries. Communities are not forced to relinquish their land; rather, they are encouraged to accept arrangements that gradually erode their autonomy. An informant identified as R.S. noted that land lease agreements were initially perceived as opportunities, but over time, the space to reclaim and manage land independently has become increasingly limited. This experience illustrates how power operates incrementally and covertly.

The production of dependency also has broader social implications at the community level. When the majority of households depend on a single corporate actor, the capacity for collective negotiation weakens. Fear of job loss discourages workers from voicing criticism or demanding improvements in working conditions. Field observations reveal a lack of open forums addressing the long-term impacts of plantation expansion. Issues such as environmental sustainability, labor security, and land futures are rarely discussed critically in public village spaces. This situation demonstrates how economic dependency intertwines with subtle yet effective forms of social control.

Conceptually, these findings reinforce the argument that contemporary agrarian transformation cannot be understood solely through formal changes in land ownership. Modern agrarian control operates through networks of institutional and economic relations that produce dependency and structurally constrain community choices. Studies have emphasized that corporate power in rural contexts often becomes more entrenched when it operates through existing local institutions and social norms rather than against them (Fu & Niu, 2023; White & Wijaya, 2022). Evidence from Kawa Village illustrates how these mechanisms function within an island context, where limited economic alternatives further deepen community dependency on a single dominant actor.

### **Island Context and Agrarian Vulnerability in Eastern Indonesia**

The Maluku archipelagic context constitutes an inseparable backdrop to the ways agrarian transformation unfolds and is experienced by rural households in Kawa Village and surrounding areas. Unlike continental regions with expansive land availability and relatively diverse production alternatives, island regions are characterized by spatial constraints,



geographic fragmentation, and a high degree of dependence on locally available resources. Under such conditions, any change in land control and use exerts faster, more direct, and more profound impacts on community livelihoods. Agrarian transformation driven by the expansion of abaca banana plantations has not only altered village economic structures but has also intensified agrarian vulnerability that is inherently embedded within island settings.

Field observations indicate that the physical living space of Kawa Village is relatively narrow and fragmented. Settlements are situated between hilly terrains, garden plots, and coastal areas, with limited infrastructural access. Productive land suitable for intensive cultivation is scarce, while soil quality and water availability are highly seasonal. Within this context, the previously practiced multicropping system functioned as an ecological and social adaptation mechanism to mitigate risks of crop failure and income instability. When large portions of productive land were converted into corporate plantations, household adaptive capacity declined sharply.

Spatial isolation further amplifies the effects of agrarian transformation. Access to markets, public services, and alternative livelihood opportunities beyond agriculture is limited and often costly. Travel between villages or to the district center requires significant time and financial resources. An informant identified as S.A. explained that employment options outside agriculture are extremely limited; consequently, when land can no longer be freely cultivated, plantation wage labor becomes the only realistic option. This statement reflects how island contexts narrow economic choices and heighten vulnerability to agrarian restructuring.

High dependence on local resources also means that agrarian change in island regions produces layered social consequences. Land is not merely an economic asset but also a social, cultural, and identity-bearing space, closely tied to family histories, customary relations, and soa-based land governance systems. When functional control over land shifts to corporate actors, what is eroded is not only household productive capacity but also the social relations that have historically sustained community solidarity. In an indirect interview, an informant identified as M.L. noted that the decline in shared gardening activities has reduced inter-family interactions, as most daily time is now spent at plantation sites under company-determined work rhythms.

Agrarian transformation in island regions also demonstrates how vulnerability accumulates more rapidly than in continental settings. In larger land-based regions, farming households may still have opportunities to open new land, relocate, or diversify livelihoods. In Kawa Village and surrounding areas, such options are severely constrained. When the primary resource, land, is functionally appropriated by corporate actors, cascading effects are immediately felt in food consumption, income stability, and household social security. Field observations indicate increased reliance on externally sourced food, the prices of which fluctuate and are highly sensitive to maritime transport conditions.

From an agrarian sociology perspective, this condition can be conceptualized as island agrarian vulnerability, wherein archipelagic geographical characteristics intensify the impacts of unequal agrarian relations. Much of the agrarian change literature has focused on

continental regions, implicitly assuming greater spatial availability and mobility. However, as demonstrated by recent studies, geographic context fundamentally shapes how agrarian power operates and is experienced (Anggraini et al., 2025; Leiwakabessy, 2024). In island regions, control over land and resources exerts a more immediate influence on survival due to the absence of adequate ecological and economic buffers.

Field findings further indicate that agrarian vulnerability in island contexts is multidimensional. Beyond economic vulnerability, there is ecological vulnerability resulting from landscape simplification. Monoculture abaca plantations have altered land cover patterns and reduced local biodiversity that previously functioned as ecological buffers for village ecosystems. Observations reveal declining diversity of food crops and fruit trees around plantation areas, accompanied by increasing dependence on external inputs. These conditions reinforce political ecology arguments that plantation expansion in vulnerable regions not only generates economic gains but also displaces ecological and social risks onto local communities.

The island context also shapes how communities respond to agrarian change. Open resistance to corporate expansion is relatively rare, not necessarily due to full acceptance, but because of limited alternatives and fears of losing the only available source of income. An informant identified as J.R. suggested that despite growing anxieties about land futures and younger generations, communities choose to endure existing conditions because no viable alternatives are perceived. This stance reflects what Perrotta and Raeymaekers (2023) describe as coping rather than transforming: a survival-oriented strategy within conditions of structural vulnerability.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the study's objective to examine how corporate plantation expansion reconfigures agrarian structures and rural household livelihood strategies in archipelagic contexts, this research demonstrates that agrarian change in Kawa Village and its surrounding areas unfolds through mechanisms that are largely non-confrontational yet structurally consequential. Corporate presence does not entail the formal dispossession of smallholders' land; instead, it effectively transfers functional control over land use through long-term leasing arrangements that are legitimized by village administrations and customary institutions. This process reproduces asymmetric agrarian relations, weakens farmers' bargaining positions, and drives a transformation of production practices from subsistence-oriented multicropping systems toward market-oriented monoculture regimes. Under conditions of land scarcity and spatial isolation characteristic of island regions, these agrarian shifts exert immediate effects on the reconfiguration of rural household livelihood strategies. Livelihoods increasingly rely on wage labor and residual economic activities as forms of defensive adaptation aimed at sustaining everyday survival rather than enabling long-term accumulation or socioeconomic mobility. These findings underscore that contemporary agrarian change does not necessarily operate through formal land ownership transfers but rather through functional land control that produces covert agrarian domination and new

forms of economic dependency. By situating these dynamics within an archipelagic setting, this study contributes to agrarian sociology by highlighting islands as critical analytical spaces for understanding how agrarian restructuring, power relations, and livelihood sustainability intersect under conditions of structural constraint.

### ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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