The Impact of Oil Palm Plantation Expansion on the Economy and Environment of Local Communities in North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi

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Abstract: - This study analyzes the impact of oil palm plantation expansion on the socio-economic and environmental conditions of local communities in North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. Using a critical ethnographic approach with in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis techniques, this research reveals the practices of oil palm plantation corporations that impact deforestation, land grabbing, and structural impoverishment of communities. The findings show that oil palm plantation expansion in North Konawe has caused deforestation of 89,600 hectares with potential reserves reaching 202,000 hectares. Asymmetric plasma partnership practices result in communities receiving only 12-18% of production yields, far below the initial agreement of 40%. Intimidation, land certificate retention, and artificial debt construction have become corporate strategies to control community land. The transformation from subsistence farming to plantation labor has reduced food security and community quality of life. This research contributes to critical agrarian literature by revealing mechanisms of primitive accumulation in the context of oil palm plantations in Indonesia, and provides policy recommendations for the protection of community rights and environmental sustainability.

Key-Words: - oil palm plantation, deforestation, land grabbing, plasma partnership, critical agrarian studies, North Konawe

Received: May 16, 2025. Revised: August 8, 2025. Accepted: November 6, 2025. Published: December 31, 2025.

1 Introduction

The expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia has become one of the most significant economic-political agrarian phenomena in the last three decades. Indonesia, as the world's largest producer of crude palm oil (CPO), contributing up to 58% of total global production [1], [2], has experienced exponential growth in plantation area from 294,560 hectares in 1980 to 14.6 million hectares in 2019 [3]. This expansion has been driven by continuously increasing global demand for vegetable oil for the food, cosmetics, and biofuel industries [4].

In the economic-political agrarian literature, oil palm plantation expansion is understood as part of the process of capital accumulation involving radical transformation of land ownership structures, production systems, and social relations in rural areas [5], [6], [7]. Harvey [8] defines "accumulation by dispossession" as a process involving the commodification and privatization of land, displacement of populations, conversion of various forms of property rights into exclusive ownership rights, and the use of state power to facilitate capital accumulation. In the context of oil palm plantations, this mechanism is manifested through various legal and semi-legal instruments such as HGU (Right to Cultivate), location permits, and asymmetric plasma partnership schemes [9], [10].

Peluso and Lund [11] developed the concept of "new frontiers of land control" to explain how different actors—the state, corporations, and local communities—contest land control in the neoliberal era. In this regard, oil palm plantations become an important arena where various forms of power operate to access and control land. Ribot and Peluso [12] distinguish between "access" (the ability to derive benefits from something) and "rights" (socially legitimized claims), showing that legal ownership does not always guarantee effective access to resources.

The plasma scheme in oil palm plantations, which is formally designed as a mechanism for redistributing benefits to smallholder farmers [13], in practice often becomes an instrument of corporate control over land and farmer labor. Several studies show that plasma schemes produce significant inequality in profit distribution between corporations and farmers [14], [15]. Potter [16] identifies "plasma as a form of hidden proletarianization" where farmers formally own land but do not have effective control over production and marketing processes.

From a political ecology perspective, oil palm plantation expansion has triggered massive deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and ecosystem degradation [17], [18], [19]. Peatlands and primary forests converted into oil palm plantations result in significant carbon emissions, contributing to global climate change [20], [21]. At the local level, deforestation eliminates community access to forest resources that form the basis of their subsistence livelihoods, including timber, rattan, and biodiversity that supports food security [22].

Several studies have explored the impact of oil palm plantations on local communities in Indonesia. Colchester et al. [9] in their study in Sumatra and Kalimantan revealed various human rights violations, including land grabbing without adequate compensation, intimidation, and destruction of indigenous peoples' livelihoods. McCarthy and Cramb [23] examined agrarian transformation in West Kalimantan, showing how oil palm expansion fundamentally changes the ecological and social landscape.

In Sulawesi, several studies have been conducted but with different focuses. Marti [24] analyzed agrarian conflicts in Central Sulawesi, while Li [25] studied agrarian dynamics in the Central Sulawesi highlands focusing on land commodification and impoverishment. However, comprehensive studies on the impact of oil palm plantations in Southeast Sulawesi, particularly in North Konawe Regency, remain very limited.

Julia and White [14] examined plasma schemes in West Kalimantan and found that plasma farmers experience structural debt traps that make them completely dependent on corporations. This study shows that non-transparent cost calculations and exploitative contract systems become corporate mechanisms to extract surplus from farmers. Similar findings were revealed by McCarthy et al. [26] who showed that promises of prosperity from oil palm often do not materialize for local communities.

Studies on the environmental impact of oil palm plantations have been extensively conducted with the main focus on deforestation and biodiversity loss [27], [28]. However, studies that integrate environmental impacts with socio-economic impacts holistically, particularly in specific local contexts, remain limited. Santika et al. [15] in their comprehensive study using national data found that oil palm expansion has a positive impact on poverty reduction at the aggregate level, but with significant environmental trade-offs. However, this study also acknowledges very large variations in impact across locations, showing the importance of contextual studies.

Although literature on the impact of oil palm plantations has developed substantially, there are several important gaps that need to be filled: 1) Most research focuses on Sumatra and Kalimantan, while Sulawesi, especially Southeast Sulawesi, has not been extensively studied. North Konawe as one of the significant oil palm expansion locations in Sulawesi has unique socio-ecological characteristics that need to be understood; 2) Many studies rely on quantitative survey data or spatial analysis, while deep understanding of micro-mechanisms of land grabbing, plasma contract dynamics, and community lived experiences requires intensive ethnographic approaches; 3) Previous studies tend to separate analysis of economic and environmental impacts, when these two dimensions are closely interrelated. An analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity of the relationship between ecological transformation and socio-economic change is needed; 4) Most studies were conducted in the early phase of oil palm expansion. Longitudinal or retrospective research examining long-term impacts (10-20 years) remains limited; and 5) The voices and perspectives of local communities, especially women and marginal groups, are often inadequately represented in research. An approach that places community lived experiences at the center of analysis is needed.

Based on the research gaps above, this study aims to: 1) Analyze the process and mechanisms of oil palm plantation expansion in North Konawe Regency, including corporate land acquisition practices; 2) Identify and analyze the impact of deforestation due to forest conversion into oil palm plantations on local community livelihoods; 3) Critically examine plasma partnership practices in oil palm plantations, including contract mechanisms, profit-sharing systems, and farmer debt construction; 4) Analyze the socio-economic transformation of communities from subsistence farming to plantation labor and its implications for household economic and food security; and 5) Reveal the power mechanisms operating in the relationship between corporations, the local state, and communities in the context of oil palm plantation expansion.

This research has several important significances: 1) This research contributes to the development of critical agrarian theory by providing in-depth empirical analysis of primitive accumulation mechanisms in the context of oil palm plantations in Indonesia. This study enriches the literature on the political ecology of plantations by showing how power relations between corporations, the state, and communities are manifested in practices of land grabbing, labor control, and surplus extraction; 2) By using intensive critical ethnographic approaches, this research demonstrates the importance of qualitative methods in revealing micro-mechanisms that are not visible in aggregate quantitative analysis. The retrospective longitudinal approach used provides insights into how the impacts of oil palm plantations develop over time; 3) The findings of this research can inform the formulation of more just and sustainable policies in oil palm plantation development. Analysis of exploitative practices in plasma schemes can become the basis for regulatory reform and strengthening farmer bargaining positions. Documentation of community rights violations can become the basis for advocacy for better protection; and 4) As one of the first comprehensive studies on the impact of oil palm plantations in Southeast Sulawesi, this research fills the knowledge gap about agrarian dynamics in this region. Research findings can become important references for local stakeholders, including local governments, civil society organizations, and the communities themselves.

2 Research Methods

2.1 Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with critical ethnographic methods. Critical ethnography, as developed by Carspecken [29] and Madison [30], not only seeks to understand and describe social phenomena, but also to reveal power structures and injustices that are often hidden. This approach is aligned with the critical paradigm that emphasizes emancipation and social transformation [31].

Ethnographic research in this context involves deep immersion at the research site to understand the lived experiences of communities affected by oil palm plantation expansion. As explained by Spradley [32] and Hammersley and Atkinson [33], ethnography allows researchers to capture complexities and nuances that are not visible in other research methods.

2.2 Research Location and Time

The research was conducted in North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province, focusing on several sub-districts that are oil palm plantation operation locations, namely: Wiwirano Sub-district (PTPN XIV and PT. DJL), Langgikima Sub-district (PT. DJL), Oheo Sub-district (PT. SPL and PT. SAJ), Asera Sub-district (PT. SPL and PT. SAJ), Andowia Sub-district (PT. SPL and PT. SAJ), and Motui, Sawa, Lembo, Lasolo, and Molawe Sub-districts (PT. KPM).

The research was conducted in stages from 2000 to 2021, with initial observations in 2000 and 2005, then intensive research in the 2018-2021 period. This retrospective longitudinal approach allows analysis of changes that occurred along with the development of oil palm plantations in the region.

2.3 Research Informants

Research informants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques [34]. Informant selection criteria included: Community landowners involved in plasma schemes, oil palm plantation workers (male and female), community leaders and former fighters (for historical perspective), village heads and sub-district government officials, plantation company management and staff, North Konawe DPRD members, and NGO activists and civil society organizations. The total number of informants interviewed reached more than 50 people from the various categories above, with several key informants interviewed multiple times for verification and information deepening.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

2.4.1 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides that allow flexibility in exploring issues that emerge during interviews [35]. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and local languages with translator assistance when needed. Each interview lasted between 60-180 minutes, and several informants were interviewed more than once.

Interview topics included: The process of company arrival and operations, mechanisms of land acquisition by companies, experiences in plasma schemes and contracts with companies, changes in household economic conditions, changes in access to land and forest resources, conflicts and community resistance, and the role of local government in mediation.

2.4.2 Participatory Observation

Participatory observation was conducted by spending time in research location villages, observing daily community activities, plantation conditions, and interactions between various actors. Observations included: Conditions of oil palm plantations (both plasma and nucleus), harvesting and transport activities, village infrastructure conditions, community meetings with companies or government, and community demonstrations or protest actions.

2.4.3 Document Analysis

Documents collected and analyzed included: Regent's Decrees on location permits and HGU, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between companies and communities, Land Certificates (SKT) owned by communities, court decisions related to agrarian conflicts, Amdal reports and environmental permit documents, company financial data (taxes, land tax arrears), DPRD meeting minutes and legislative recommendations, and mass media articles about plantation conflicts.

2.4.4 Spatial Analysis

Map analysis was conducted using Google Maps and satellite imagery data to: Identify land cover changes from forest to plantation, calculate deforestation area, verify community claims about plantation expansion, and map conflict locations.

2.5 Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods as developed by Braun and Clarke [36] with the following stages: 1) Interview transcripts were read repeatedly, field notes were reviewed, and documents were studied to obtain holistic understanding; 2) Identification of meaning units in data and coding. Emerging codes included: "intimidation," "inadequate compensation," "certificate retention," "artificial debt," "non-transparent profit sharing," "proletarianization," "deforestation," etc.; 3) Identified codes were grouped into broader themes. For example, codes about intimidation, local elite manipulation, and use of forest area status were grouped into the theme "mechanisms of land grabbing"; 4) Identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and fit with the overall dataset; 5) Each theme was clearly defined and given a name that reflects its essence; and 6) Themes were integrated into a coherent analytical narrative with support from direct informant quotes and theoretical references.

Data analysis also involved triangulation from various sources to increase the validity of findings [37]. Information from interviews was verified with official documents, field observations, and comparisons between informants.

2.6 Research Ethics

This research followed principles of social research ethics [38]: 1) All informants were given information about research objectives and gave consent to participate; 2) The identity of informants requesting confidentiality was protected using pseudonyms; 3) Researchers ensured that participation in research did not bring risks to informants, especially in the context of the political sensitivity of agrarian conflicts; and 4) Researchers provided contributions to communities in the form of knowledge sharing and advocacy for their rights.

3 Research Findings

3.1 Oil Palm Plantation Expansion in North Konawe

3.1.1 General Overview

As of 2020, six oil palm plantation companies were recorded as actively operating in North Konawe Regency with total licensed area reaching 89,600 hectares. The six companies are: (1) PTPN XIV with location permit of 6,500 hectares, (2) PT. Damai Jaya Lestari (PT. DJL) with permit of 6,000 hectares and illegal opening of 6,726 hectares, (3) PT. Sultra Prima Lestari (PT. SPL) with HGU of 20,000 hectares, (4) PT. Celebes Agro Lestari (PT. CAL) with principle permit of 20,000 hectares, (5) PT. Konawe Prima Mandiri (PT. KPM) with total location permit of 17,100 hectares, and (6) PT. Selaras Andalan Jaya (PT. SAJ) with location permit of 20,000 hectares.

In addition to the six active companies, there are several other companies that have obtained location reservation permits but are not actively operating, namely: PT. Agro Tama Makmur Abadi (20,000 ha), PT. Mitra Bhakti Agro (40,000 ha), PT. Duta Sulawesi (20,000 ha), and PT. Konawe Agro Palm (20,000 ha). Thus, the total land reserved for oil palm plantations in North Konawe reaches 202,000 hectares.

3.1.2 Deforestation and Landscape Transformation

Land cover change analysis shows that oil palm plantation expansion has caused massive deforestation in North Konawe. For example, PTPN XIV operating in Wiwirano Sub-district has converted approximately 6,217.06 hectares of forest cover into oil palm plantations. Satellite imagery analysis confirms community testimony that before the company's presence, the area was a wilderness forest that was a source of livelihood for communities to collect timber, rattan, and other forest products.

Abdul Gani, a community leader and former DI/TII combatant in Tetewatu Village, provides historical perspective: "In the past, before our village became an oil palm plantation, it was wilderness forest where we collected timber, rattan, and all other village residents' needs. From Tetewatu to Pondoa up to beyond the Tetewatu River in the west and from Tetewatu to Lamonae to Padalere which is now filled with oil palm plantations owned by PTPN, it used to be wilderness forest."

This deforestation not only impacts the loss of primary forest cover, but also eliminates community access to forest resources that form the basis of their subsistence economy. Communities who previously had free access to timber for building materials, rattan to sell, and biodiversity for consumption, lost that access when forest areas were converted into oil palm plantations strictly guarded by companies.

The forest area status that became plantation locations is mostly production forest and limited production forest that has not been released by the Ministry of Forestry. In fact, until 2021, both company nucleus plantations and community plasma plantations were still within forest areas because there had been no official area release. This condition creates legal uncertainty for plasma landowner communities.

3.2 Land Acquisition Mechanisms by Corporations

3.2.1 Intimidation and Exploitation of New Order Political Context

The process of land acquisition by oil palm plantation companies in North Konawe involved various forms of intimidation and exploitation of New Order power structures. The case of PTPN XIV in Wiwirano Sub-district shows this pattern clearly.

Although the sub-district government had issued Land Certificates (SKT) in the names of communities in Tetewatu and surrounding areas, PTPN XIV conducted land clearance without providing adequate compensation. Communities felt intimidated and did not dare to resist due to the repressive New Order political context. As conveyed by an informant: "At that time it was often conveyed to the community that this PTPN is a state company owned by the government, owned by Soeharto, whoever opposes will face the military."

The threat of criminalization was also used to suppress community resistance. Because the land claimed by communities was legally forest area, resistance to the company could be constructed as a violation of forestry law. This kind of legal intimidation made communities resign to surrendering their land without proper compensation.

3.2.2 Cooptation of Local Elites

Another strategy used was cooptation of local elites, particularly village heads. PTPN XIV approached them by promising certain positions in plasma plantations to village heads. This strategy was effective in suppressing community resistance. Mustaman [39] noted that when unrest began to occur in communities rejecting the company's presence, the unrest could be extinguished after local elites turned to support the company.

This cooptation of local elites created fragmentation within communities between those who supported and those who rejected the company's presence, thus weakening communities' collective capacity to conduct effective resistance.

3.2.3 Manipulation of Forest Area Status and SKT

PT. DJL used more sophisticated strategies in controlling community land. The company asked village heads to measure all forest areas within their village territory and make SKTs, then the SKTs were collected by the company under the pretext of being used as the basis for partnership cooperation.

Samir, a North Konawe DPRD member from Lamonae, explained PT. DJL's strategy: "This DJL is very clever. They told village heads in villages to measure all forest areas within their village territory then make SKTs. After there are SKTs then they cooperate with DJL. They took all those SKTs, not even photocopies were given to the community. So if there are legal problems with Forestry later, DJL is safe and what's bound are village heads with their residents."

This strategy greatly benefits companies because: (1) companies can claim they partner with legal landowner communities (having SKT), (2) companies are protected from legal risks related to forest area encroachment because SKT is in the community's name, and (3) communities and village heads potentially face legal problems if there are charges from forestry authorities.

Similar practices also occurred in Tobimeita Village, Langgikima Sub-district, where PT. DJL opened an oil palm plantation covering 6,726 hectares on transmigration II land which is forest area without release permit from the Ministry of Forestry. This land clearing was done by exploiting SKTs made for transmigrant communities.

In 2011, PT. DJL submitted an application for forest area release to the Ministry of Forestry, but was rejected on the grounds that land clearing had already been done before there was a release application. After the rejection, PT. DJL never reapplied, so until now PT. DJL's plantation operations in Langgikima do not have a Plantation Business Cultivation Permit (IUP-B).

3.2.4 Unilateral Claims on Customary Land

PT. SPL faced fierce resistance from Sambandete and Landawe communities regarding the taking of walaka land (customary land) without the knowledge and consent of heir communities. The company unilaterally made walaka a nursery area for oil palm, triggering a conflict that lasted for years.

The Sambandete community, led by Mrs. Mimi, Idris, and Saniasa, conducted repeated protest actions to the Regent's Office (March 2008 and August 2009) and direct action at the PT. SPL office attended by about 1,000 people in August 2009. This action successfully forced the company to leave walaka at the end of 2009.

However, community resistance received repressive response. In 2010, Mrs. Mimi was reported to the police on charges of provocation to destroy oil palm plants. Unaaha District Court Decision No. 12/Pdt.G/2010/PN.Unh dated July 1, 2011 favored PT. CAL and required Mrs. Mimi to pay compensation of Rp. 500 million. Mrs. Mimi appealed and won her case through Kendari High Court Decision No. 75/PDT/2011/PT.SULTRA dated January 26, 2012.

This case shows the use of legal instruments by corporations to criminalize community resistance defending their customary land.

3.3 Exploitative Practices in Plasma Schemes

3.3.1 Non-transparency of Contracts and MoUs

One of the critical findings in this research is the non-transparency in making and implementing Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between companies and plasma landowner communities. The case of PT. DJL in Langgikima shows a worrying pattern.

Since PT. DJL began operations in 2006 until the first harvest in early 2011, communities never received or heard the contents of the MoU made with the company. Andrias, one of the landowner residents, said: "Imagine, we never knew what the contents of that agreement were, and it was made by them themselves. We the community don't know what's in it, because we were not allowed to read it."

This non-transparency allows companies to arrange terms that are very beneficial to them without fair negotiation with communities. Even worse, companies then added new clauses to the MoU without the knowledge and consent of communities, which is a violation of Article 1320 Paragraph (1) of the Civil Code regarding the validity of agreements.

3.3.2 Manipulation of Profit-Sharing System

The MoU between PT. DJL and the Langgikima community formally mentions a 60:40 profit sharing, with the company getting 60% and the community 40%. However, in practice, the calculation system used is very detrimental to the community.

From the community's 40% share, it must be deducted again for the company's share of 70%, so the community only receives 30% of 40%, or 12% of the total net proceeds. While the company obtains 88% of the total proceeds. This highly exploitative profit-sharing system was never transparently explained to the community from the beginning.

A similar pattern occurred at PT. SPL, where the 60:40 profit-sharing system in practice produces a real distribution of 82:18, with the company getting 82% and the community only 18%. From the 40% share that should be the community's right, it is cut again by about 70% for transportation costs and harvesting wages.

This manipulation of the profit-sharing system results in landowner communities receiving very small compensation. Amir, a resident who owns 1.5 hectares of land at PT. SPL, only receives Rp. 220,000 per three months, or about Rp. 73,000 per month. This amount is far from the welfare hopes promised by the company.

3.3.3 Construction of Artificial Debt

The most sophisticated control mechanism is the construction of artificial debt that traps communities in long-term debt bondage to companies. PT. DJL imposes two types of debt: exploitation debt and investment debt.

Alimuddin, a landowner resident in Langgikima, stated that he and other residents have debts to PT. DJL of 17 billion rupiah collectively. If averaged per hectare, each hectare of land is burdened with exploitation debt of Rp. 6,470,000. In addition, there is also investment debt which was initially stated as Rp. 24 million per hectare, but then unilaterally raised by the company to Rp. 40 million per hectare.

This debt construction is highly problematic because: 1) Communities never borrowed money from the company; 2) The debt is claimed as the cost of land clearing and infrastructure development which should be the company's responsibility; 3) Debt calculation is not transparent and cannot be verified by the community; and 4) Debt is used as a pretext to retain community land certificates.

With this artificial debt mechanism, PT. DJL successfully controls 6,700 hectares of community land in Langgikima without having to buy or rent at reasonable prices. The company also does not bear any exploitation and investment costs because all are charged to landowner communities.

3.3.4 Retention of Land Certificates

Another control strategy used by PT. DJL is the retention of community-owned land certificates under the pretext of debt collateral. A total of 6,700 hectares of community land in Langgikima Sub-district have their certificates held by the company. Communities repeatedly requested the return of certificates because they were worried their land would be sold by the company, but these requests were always rejected.

This certificate retention creates tenurial insecurity for communities. They are formally still recorded as landowners, but do not have physical or legal control over that land. This condition places communities in a very vulnerable position to further exploitation.

On March 30, 2017, there was a meeting between the community and PT. DJL with an agreement: (1) the company pays land rent of Rp. 500,000 per hectare, (2) returns community certificates, and (3) eliminates investment costs that form the basis of debt calculation. However, until 2021, none of these agreements were realized.

3.4 Community Socio-Economic Transformation

3.4.1 From Subsistence Farmers to Plantation Workers

Oil palm plantation expansion has transformed the economic structure of local communities from a diversified subsistence farming system to dependence on wages as plantation workers. The case of Mrs. Soti and Hartati at PT. SPL clearly illustrates this proletarianization process.

Mrs. Soti (46 years old) previously owned 2 hectares of rice fields that had been cultivated for a long time and formed the basis of her household economy. The rice fields had to be surrendered to PT. SPL to be planted with oil palm. Although she did not agree, she felt she could not refuse. After losing her rice fields, Mrs. Soti was forced to become a laborer on the plantation that had seized her rights. Ironically, she works on land that used to be her own rice field. "What else can I do, the rice field is gone. Working as a plantation laborer has some benefits, you can quickly get cash, but... here our life is difficult."

Hartati (35 years old), a mother of three children, experienced a similar fate. After her 2 hectares of rice fields were taken by PT. SPL, she and her husband worked as laborers at the company. Although both husband and wife work, their income does not adequately meet household needs due to low wages and unclear profit sharing. "If we don't work we don't get money, but when we farmed rice we didn't lack rice."

This testimony reveals the paradox of economic transformation: although communities now have access to cash income, their food security and welfare have actually declined due to the loss of their subsistence production base.

3.4.2 Low Wages and Work Insecurity

Labor conditions in oil palm plantations are characterized by very low wages, far below the Regional Minimum Wage (UMR) and Regency Minimum Wage (UMK). In 2000, workers at PTPN XIV only received wages of Rp. 2,500 per day. Although low, for some communities this was better than waiting for results from collecting rattan or farming which takes a long time.

Mustaring (27 years old), a young man in Wawontoaho, said: "Although our salary working at PTPN at that time was very low, it was better than working with rattan. If we work at PTPN we get money quickly, while if we work with rattan or work on the farm, we can't receive the money immediately."

Wage conditions at PT. SPL are even worse. The wages paid are only Rp. 492,800 per month, far below the North Konawe UMK which in 2019 was Rp. 3,583,312, in 2020 was Rp. 3,871,052, and in 2021 was Rp. 4,200,479. Wage payments are also always delayed, done after passing the following month.

PT. DJL also stumbled on labor issues. Hundreds of employees, mostly from NTT, were unilaterally dismissed without severance pay and overtime wages for six years. Workers also reported that their salaries were deducted Rp. 45,000 for BPJS Employment cards and Rp. 60,000 for BPJS Health per month, so the net salary received was insufficient for family living costs.

3.4.3 Decline in Food Security

The transformation from a subsistence economy based on rice fields, gardens, and access to forest resources to dependence on cash wages has reduced community food security. As expressed by Hartati, "When we farmed rice we didn't lack rice," indicates that the rice farming system guaranteed household food availability.

Boma, a plantation foreman at PT. SPL, noted that in his work area there were 21.5 hectares of rice field area converted into oil palm plantations. This conversion eliminated the local food production base and made communities dependent on buying rice from the market with inadequate wages.

In addition, deforestation eliminated community access to alternative food sources from forests such as game animals, wild vegetables, fruits, and other non-timber forest products that previously complemented the community diet and functioned as a safety net during lean times.

3.4.4 Minimal Profit Sharing for Plasma Farmers

For communities involved in plasma schemes, hopes of obtaining better income from oil palm were not realized. In the July-December 2020 period, plantation profit sharing conducted by PT. DJL to plasma farmers was mostly nil or even negative.

Daris, a plasma farmer who is also the Head of Wawoheo Village, stated: "So far, plasma farmer communities have received profit sharing varying from Rp. 200 thousand, Rp. 300 thousand to Rp. 350 thousand, depending on the plantation production for a month. But this has entered 2021, not just nil but negative."

Daris accused PT. DJL management of deliberately letting several oil palm afdelings go untended so there would be no results to share with plasma farmers. This practice shows the company's lack of good faith in running the partnership.

At PT. SPL, Wahab, one of the landowners, admitted that until the research was conducted, he had not received profit sharing as promised in the MoU. He repeatedly visited the company's public relations department to ask for clarification, but never got a satisfactory response. Wahab also stated that the community did not know at all the basis for calculating profit distribution and how much the actual sales value of oil palm from their land was. This information is very closed and has never been answered by the company despite being repeatedly questioned.

3.5 Community Resistance and State Response

3.5.1 Collective Community Action

Communities in various locations conducted various forms of resistance against exploitative company practices. In Sambandete, resistance was led by Mrs. Mimi, Idris, and Saniasa, who conducted protest actions to the North Konawe Regent's Office twice (March 2008 and August 2009). In August 2009, about 1,000 people conducted direct action at the PT. SPL office and successfully forced the company to leave walaka land at the end of 2009.

The resistance of the Sambandete community was inspired by the presence of the grave of Kapita Larambe, one of the noble fighters of the Konawe Kingdom. They gathered at the grave to raise determination and heroic resistance spirit, connecting their contemporary struggle with the historical narrative of local resistance.

The Langgikima community also conducted demonstrations to the North Konawe DPRD with demands: (1) return of land certificates held by PT. DJL, (2) increase land rent at high prices, and (3) transparency in profit sharing which has been unclear. This demonstration reflects community awareness of their rights being violated by the company.

On October 26, 2021, the Alliance of Oil Palm Landowner Communities of Sambandete Village again conducted a demonstration to the North Konawe DPRD, demanding PT. SAJ return land that was encroached because the company was deemed to be in breach of contract regarding opening employment and business profit sharing of 20% for landowners.

3.5.2 Absence of Protection from Local State

Although communities have been struggling since 2011 and submitted demands up to the provincial level, the response from local governments has been very weak in protecting community rights. Samir, a North Konawe DPRD member, acknowledged that the community's struggle so far has yielded nil results.

In 2016, hope briefly emerged when the Ruksamin-Raup pair were inaugurated as Regent and Vice Regent with a 100-day program that included resolving land certificate issues and agreements with PT. DJL. However, until the end of their administration, the program was not realized.

The North Konawe DPRD in 2020 issued recommendations to PT. DJL: (1) cancel the partnership agreement with landowners, (2) return community land and eliminate receivables, and (3) request the North Konawe Police to take action on illegal activities in forest areas. However, until 2021, not a single point of the recommendation was implemented.

North Konawe Regent Ruksamin once gave a warning to PT. SPL to stop activities if it could not provide welfare to the community. The local government also sent meeting invitations for clarification several times, but PT. SPL always defaulted.

The lack of enforcement from local government on recommendations and regulations reflects weak political will to protect communities from corporate exploitation. This raises questions about the relationship between local government and plantation corporations, and whether there is.

3.5.3 Criminalization of Resistance

Community resistance often receives repressive response in the form of criminalization. The case of Mrs. Mimi who was reported to the police on charges of provocation to destroy PT. SPL/CAL oil palm plants shows the use of legal instruments to suppress community resistance. Although Mrs. Mimi eventually won the case at the appeal level, the legal process she went through has created a chilling effect for other communities who want to resist.

The threat of criminalization is also used to intimidate communities. By using the argument that land claimed by communities is state forest area, companies and authorities can threaten communities with charges of forest encroachment or destruction of company assets if they resist.

3.6 Corporate Non-Compliance with Financial Obligations

In addition to exploitation of communities, oil palm plantation companies in North Konawe also do not comply with their financial obligations to local governments, particularly payment of Land and Building Tax (PBB) and Value Added Tax (PPN).

PTPN XIV, as a state company, has the largest PBB arrears of Rp. 843,000,000 recorded from 2011 until 2021. Adding the 2021 PBB obligation of Rp. 139,114,836.78 and PPN of Rp. 371,752,473.60, PTPN XIV's total financial obligations to the region reach Rp. 1,353,867,310.

PT. DJL also has PBB arrears of Rp. 542,000,000 until 2021. Adding the 2021 potential tax revenue of PBB of Rp. 412,996,551.95 and PPN of Rp. 5,180,733,781.18, the total tax to be paid reaches Rp. 6,135,730,333.13.

PT. SPL in 2021 must pay PBB of Rp. 454,156,677 and PPN of Rp. 5,521,172,737, totaling Rp. 5,975,329,414. In addition, this company also does not have Building Construction Permits (IMB) for factories, offices, and basecamps, does not have location permits for building construction, and does not have waste disposal permits. This non-compliance with permits is also related to tax evasion and retribution for various facilities and infrastructure that have been built.

Corporate non-compliance with financial obligations shows a comprehensive pattern of exploitation: not only communities who are harmed, but also local governments who lose potential local revenue that should be used for development and public services.

4 Discussion

4.1 Oil Palm Expansion as Accumulation by Dispossession

The findings of this research confirm and extend the theory of accumulation by dispossession developed by Harvey [8] in the specific context of oil palm plantations in Indonesia. The process occurring in North Konawe shows how capital accumulation in

the oil palm plantation sector involves various sophisticated and layered dispossession mechanisms.
First, the use of legal and semi-legal instruments such as HGU, location permits, and SKT manipulation shows the state's role in facilitating corporate capital accumulation. As explained by McCarthy [10], the post-New Order Indonesian state continues to play a central role in facilitating corporate access to land, albeit with more decentralized mechanisms. In North Konawe, the local government through Regent's Decrees granted very extensive location permits (total 202,000 hectares reserved) to companies, often without adequate consultation with communities who would be affected.

Second, exploitation of the repressive New Order political context and threats of criminalization show the dimension of violence (both direct and structural) in the accumulation process. Peluso and Watts [40] emphasize that control over natural resources often involves various forms of violence. In North Konawe, intimidation using the narrative "company owned by government, owned by Soeharto" and threats of facing the military created an atmosphere of fear that made communities not dare to resist their land being grabbed.

Third, PT. DJL's strategy of asking village heads to make SKTs for forest areas shows sophistication in transferring legal risk from corporations to communities. This is a new form of what Li [25] calls the paradoxical "will to improve"—where instruments that should protect community rights (SKT) are instead manipulated into instruments of corporate control and community exposure to legal risk.

4.2 Plasma Scheme as Surplus Extraction Mechanism

Findings about exploitative practices in plasma schemes contribute to critical literature on contract farming and agrarian partnerships. Julia and White [14] in their study in West Kalimantan identified plasma schemes as a form of "adverse incorporation" where farmers are incorporated into global commodity value chains with very unfavorable terms. This research strengthens and extends those findings by showing specific mechanisms of surplus extraction in the North Konawe context.

The contract non-transparency found in this research, where communities never read or understood the contents of MoUs, violates the basic principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) guaranteed in various international and national legal instruments. Bernstein [41] emphasizes the importance of the question "who gets what?" in agrarian political economy. In the North Konawe case, contract non-transparency ensures that surplus distribution is very unequally in favor of corporations.

Manipulation of the profit-sharing system where the real distribution becomes 88:12 (PT. DJL) or 82:18 (PT. SPL) when the MoU states 60:40, shows how corporations use calculation complexity to hide excessive surplus extraction. This is in line with Potter's [16] findings about plasma as a form of "hidden proletarianization" where farmers are formally still landowners but in practice have lost control over production and marketing processes.

The artificial debt construction found in this research is a very important finding. By imposing "exploitation debt" and "investment debt" on landowner communities, PT. DJL successfully transferred all land clearing costs, infrastructure development, and operations to communities, while the company controls 88% of production proceeds. This is an extreme form of what Marx called "primitive accumulation"—where capitalists not only take means of production (land) but also make producers bear the costs of that accumulation itself.

Ribot and Peluso [12] distinguish between property (legal rights) and access (actual ability to derive benefits). Plasma communities in North Konawe have property rights to their land (they are still recorded as owners in certificates), but have lost access in the sense of effective control and ability to derive reasonable benefits from that land. Certificate retention by PT. DJL even threatens community property rights, creating total tenurial insecurity.

4.3 Incomplete Proletarianization and Livelihood Fragmentation

The transformation of communities from subsistence farmers to plantation workers found in this research shows a more complex pattern than classical proletarianization. Li [42] uses the term "incomplete proletarianization" to explain the situation where Indonesian rural communities lose their subsistence production base but are not fully absorbed as wage laborers in the formal sector.

The case of Mrs. Soti and Hartati who lost their rice fields and became laborers on land that used to be their own shows the tragic irony of this process. Although they now have access to cash income, their food security and welfare have actually declined. This confirms the critique of modernization assumptions that view the transition from subsistence to monetary economy as linear progress toward welfare.

Hartati's testimony saying "When we farmed rice we didn't lack rice" shows the important function of subsistence farming as a safety net and food security base. Rice field conversion to oil palm plantations eliminates this security base, making communities completely dependent on low and unstable cash wages to buy food needs.

Bernstein [41] identifies "classes of labour" in contemporary agrarian capitalism that includes not only wage laborers but also smallholder farmers with fragmented livelihood strategies. In North Konawe, communities must combine various strategies: as plantation workers with low wages, as plasma farmers with minimal profit sharing, and seeking additional income from other informal economic activities. This livelihood fragmentation creates economic instability and high vulnerability.

4.4 Deforestation and Loss of the Commons

Findings about massive deforestation (89,600 hectares with potential reaching 202,000 hectares) in North Konawe confirm various studies on the environmental impact of oil palm plantations [17], [18], [19]. However, this research adds an important dimension about the social impact of deforestation, particularly the loss of community access to forest resources as commons.

Abdul Gani's testimony about forests that used to be sources of timber, rattan, and various village residents' needs shows the function of forests as common pool resources supporting local community livelihoods. Ostrom [43] in her study on governing the commons shows that local communities often have sustainable common resource management systems. Forest conversion to oil palm plantations destroys this commons system and transfers it into corporate private property.

Peluso and Lund [11] analyze how "new frontiers of land control" in the neoliberal era involve privatization and commodification of resources that were previously commons. In North Konawe, this process is facilitated by manipulation of forest area status and use of SKTs to legitimize corporate claims over land that de facto is local community commons.

Loss of access to forests impacts not only the economy but also socio-cultural dimensions. Forests in many indigenous communities are an integral part of their identity and cosmology. The conflict in Sambandete regarding walaka land shows the importance of this cultural dimension. The resistance of the Sambandete community inspired by Kapita Larambe shows how collective memory and historical resistance narratives are mobilized in contemporary agrarian contestation.

4.5 Weak Governance and Capture of the Local State

Findings about the ineffectiveness of local government response to community demands and corporate non-compliance show serious governance problems. Although the North Konawe DPRD issued recommendations in 2020 to cancel PT. DJL's partnership agreement, return community land, and take legal action, not a single recommendation was implemented until 2021.

McCarthy and Zen [13] analyze how post-reform decentralization in Indonesia created new arenas for agrarian contestation, where local governments have greater authority but are also more vulnerable to capture by business interests. The ineffectiveness of regulation and recommendation enforcement in North Konawe raises questions about the relationship between local political elites and plantation corporations.

The finding that PT. SPL always defaults on local government meeting invitations without any sanctions shows the weak bargaining position of the local state vis-à-vis corporations. This is paradoxical given that local governments have authority to revoke permits or provide administrative sanctions to non-cooperative companies.

Corporate non-compliance with financial obligations (PBB and PPN) with total arrears of hundreds of millions to billions of rupiah without firm action from local governments also shows weak governance. PTPN XIV as a state company with arrears of Rp. 843 million since 2011 should be a serious government concern, but there is no effective enforcement.

This research shows the need for further study on the political economy of relationships between local governments and plantation corporations in the regional autonomy era. Questions that need to be answered include: is there.

4.6 Community Resistance in the Context of Power Asymmetry

Despite facing enormous power asymmetry, communities in North Konawe showed various forms of resistance, from organized collective action to "everyday forms of resistance" [44]. Mass actions organized by the Sambandete community that successfully forced PT. SPL to leave walaka land in 2009 show the potential of collective action when communities can mobilize symbolic (memory of Kapita Larambe) and material (number of masses) resources.

However, community resistance often faces repressive response in the form of criminalization.

The case of Mrs. Mimi who was reported to the police and sentenced to pay compensation of Rp. 500 million (although later won at the appeal level) shows the use of legal instruments to suppress resistance. This is in line with Peluso and Lund's [11] analysis of how law is used as a "weapon" in agrarian contestation.

The demands of the Langgikima community for return of certificates, increase in land rent, and profit-sharing transparency show community awareness of the injustice they experience. However, the weak response of local government makes community struggle very long and exhausting without significant results.

This research shows the importance of external support (NGOs, academics, media) to strengthen community capacity in advocacy. However, in North Konawe, such external support appears still limited, so communities struggle in relative isolation.

4.7 Theoretical Implications and Contribution to Literature

This research contributes to critical agrarian literature and political ecology in several ways: First, it enriches understanding of primitive accumulation mechanisms in the specific Indonesian context by showing how legal instruments (HGU, SKT), semi-legal (manipulation of area status), and contractual (plasma MoU) are combined to facilitate land grabbing and surplus extraction.

Second, it develops analysis of plasma schemes as sophisticated control mechanisms, where artificial debt construction and certificate retention are used to control community land without having to buy or rent at market prices.Third, it shows the complexity of proletarianization processes in rural Indonesia that do not follow classical patterns but involve livelihood fragmentation and welfare decline despite access to cash income.

Fourth, it integrates analysis of environmental impacts (deforestation) with socio-economic impacts (loss of commons, decline in food security) within a holistic political ecology framework.Fifth, it provides empirical evidence of weak governance at the local level in the context of regional autonomy, where local governments fail to protect community rights and enforce regulations against corporations.

5 Conclusion

This research has comprehensively analyzed the impact of oil palm plantation expansion on the economy and environment of local communities in North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. Based on findings and discussion, several important conclusions can be drawn: First, oil palm plantation expansion in North Konawe is a manifestation of accumulation by dispossession involving combinations of legal, semi-legal, and extra-legal mechanisms. Use of state permit instruments, manipulation of forest area status, intimidation in the New Order political context, and cooptation of local elites became corporate strategies to access and control community land. Total licensed area granted reached 89,600 hectares with reserve potential of 202,000 hectares, showing massive expansion scale.

[1] Second, massive deforestation has occurred due to forest conversion to oil palm plantations, with PTPN XIV alone converting 6,217.06 hectares of forest cover. This deforestation impacts not only the environment globally (carbon emissions, loss of biodiversity), but also eliminates local community access to forest resources as commons that form the basis of their subsistence livelihoods. Third, plasma schemes in practice function as highly exploitative surplus extraction mechanisms rather than benefit redistribution instruments. Contract non-transparency, profit-sharing system manipulation (real 88:12 or 82:18 when MoU states 60:40), artificial debt construction, and land certificate retention are corporate strategies to control community land and extract surplus maximally with minimal investment.

[2] Fourth, transformation from subsistence farmers to plantation workers has reduced community economic and food security. Although having access to cash, communities lost their food production base (rice fields) and access to forest resources. Very low wages (far below UMR/UMK) and minimal plasma profit sharing (even nil or negative) cause communities to experience structural impoverishment. Fifth, community resistance to corporate exploitation did not receive adequate support from local government. Although DPRD issued recommendations and the Regent gave warnings, there was no effective enforcement. Corporate non-compliance with financial obligations (PBB arrears of hundreds of millions to billions of rupiah) and permits also did not receive firm sanctions, showing weak governance and the possibility of capture of the local state by business interests.

[3] Sixth, promises of prosperity from oil palm plantations were not realized for local

communities. Instead, communities experienced land grabbing, loss of food security, low wages, minimal profit sharing, and artificial debt traps. Meanwhile, corporations accumulated large surplus by transferring legal risk and operational costs to communities.

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Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

The authors contributed in the present research, at all stages from the formulation of the problem to the final findings and solution.

Sources of Funding for Research Presented in a Scientific Article or Scientific Article Itself

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.