

ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LOCAL PALM OIL PLANTATION LAWS ON THE WELFARE OF UNDERPRIVILEGED COMMUNITIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON LAND ACCESS, RESOURCE UTILISATION, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PALM OIL SECTOR

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Abstract

This study analyses the social and economic impacts of local oil palm plantation laws on the welfare of disadvantaged communities through a literature review approach that integrates agrarian, political economy, and inclusive development perspectives. The main focus is on two dimensions: (1) land access and natural resource utilisation, where regional regulations such as spatial planning regulations and land use rights (HGU) tend to prioritise corporations, causing agrarian conflicts, marginalisation of customary land, and degradation of water and non-timber forests; and (2) economic opportunities and social welfare, including plasma-inti partnerships, CSR, and profit-sharing funds whose distribution is uneven due to local elite corruption and weak oversight. A synthesis of literature from journals, regulations, and NGO reports reveals patterns of structural inequality, in which disadvantaged communities are trapped as vulnerable labourers without long-term autonomy, even though the palm oil sector contributes significantly to the regional GDP. The conclusion emphasises the urgency of local legal reform based on participation, transparency, and distributive justice to transform palm oil into a driver of sustainable welfare.

Keywords: local palm oil law, land access, resource utilisation, welfare of disadvantaged communities, plasma partnerships, agrarian conflicts, distributive justice, palm oil literature review

Introduction

Oil palm plantations have become one of the strategic sectors in the economic development of Indonesia and developing countries in Southeast Asia. As a leading export commodity, palm oil contributes significantly to state revenue, employment, and regional economic growth. However, despite its significant economic contribution, this sector also raises various complex social, legal, and environmental issues (R. Pirard, 2020). At the local level, land and natural resource management involving communities is often regulated through regional policies and laws that have a direct impact on the economic structure and social welfare of communities around plantation areas.

Over the past few decades, the expansion of oil palm plantations has drastically changed land use patterns. The conversion of forests and agricultural land into large plantations often causes conflicts of interest between companies, local governments and local communities. In the local context, the laws and policies formulated to regulate

these relationships not only have an impact on economic aspects, but also on the social and cultural patterns of communities that depend on natural resources (Vijay, 2021). Inequality of access to land and resources is often a source of protracted social tension, where small communities lose their rights to land and livelihoods due to legal policies that favour corporate interests (Abidin, 2023).

Underprivileged communities around palm oil plantations are generally in a vulnerable social and economic position. Limited education, weak bargaining power, and a lack of understanding of legal regulations make it difficult for them to gain fair access to land, plantation yields, and economic opportunities arising from the palm oil industry (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In this context, local laws play an important role in determining the direction and form of development benefit distribution. However, when regulations are designed without considering the social conditions and rights of marginalised communities, the law can become an instrument of exclusion and reproduction of structural poverty.

The existence of various local legal policies such as Regional Regulations (Perda), Regent Decrees, and plantation business permit policies demonstrates the government's efforts to build a more inclusive palm oil governance system. Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies often faces challenges, particularly in terms of supervision, consistency, and community involvement in the decision-making process (Law Number 18 of 2004 on Plantations, 2004). Many studies show that the lack of harmony between national laws, local regulations, and practices in the field has resulted in overlapping policies and legal uncertainty. As a result, local communities are often the most affected as they lose access to the land and resources that have been the mainstay of their economy (Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI), 2025).

In the social dimension, changes in livelihood structures due to oil palm plantation expansion have also led to significant social transformation. Traditional farmers who originally relied on subsistence farming systems have now become labourers or plasma partners in plantation systems (Ni Made Sudarmawati; I Wayan Gede, 2024). These changes have various implications for social stability and family welfare, including increased dependence on the market, decreased economic autonomy, and weakened social ties in local communities. Local laws should serve to protect the rights of these groups, but without strong participatory mechanisms, such policies often fail to address the interests of the most vulnerable communities (Rina Fitri Suryani, 2020).

From an economic perspective, the palm oil sector does open up new opportunities for job creation and increased regional income. However, not all social groups can enjoy these economic benefits equally. The gap between large capital owners and local labour groups reveals structural inequalities in the distribution of profits (Ahmad Fauzi; Siti Aisyah, 2023). In many cases, local communities only reap short-term economic benefits, while long-term access to productive resources remains

under the control of corporations or local elites. This shows the close relationship between the legal system, land ownership, and welfare structures in palm oil plantation areas (J. F. ; G. McCarthy P. ;. Zen, Z., 2012) .

From a development law perspective, the role of local policy should be directed towards creating distributive justice in natural resource management. Local laws that favour vulnerable groups can be an important tool for reducing social inequality and strengthening the economic capacity of marginalised communities. However, practices in the field often show the opposite, where law is used as an instrument of legitimacy for large economic interests (Simelton, 2024) . Therefore, it is important to examine how the design of local laws in the palm oil sector concretely affects access to land, economic opportunities, and the welfare of disadvantaged communities.

Previous studies have shown that local laws cannot be separated from the political and social context in which they are formed. The policy-making process often involves negotiations between government actors, companies, and local community leaders, so that the final outcome is often compromising (Euler, 2022) . In such conditions, poor communities or indigenous groups often do not have adequate representation to voice their aspirations. As a result, a number of policies that are claimed to be empowerment efforts actually lead to new marginalisation. This phenomenon highlights the urgency of examining the social and economic dimensions of local laws in greater depth through a multidisciplinary approach.

Research Method

This study uses a library research method with a descriptive qualitative approach to analyse in depth the relationship between local oil palm plantation laws and the welfare of underprivileged communities. This literature review was conducted by searching for, identifying, and synthesising various scientific sources such as academic journals, books, research reports, legislation, local policy documents (local regulations, regional head decrees), and reports from non-governmental organisations related to oil palm plantation management and its socio-economic impacts (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025) . The analysis focused on how the literature explained the role and implications of local laws on three main dimensions: access to land, natural resource use, and economic opportunities for local communities. The data obtained is classified thematically to find conceptual patterns, similarities, and differences in previous research findings, thereby producing a comprehensive picture of the factual and theoretical conditions that shape the relationship between local law, economic development, and social welfare (Liberati et al., 2020) . This approach not only highlights the results of previous studies, but also provides interpretative space to examine gaps in the literature and the potential for conceptual contributions to strengthening inclusive policies in the palm oil sector.

Results and Discussion

Land Access and Natural Resource Utilisation

Access to land is a central issue in the dynamics of local oil palm plantation law, where regional regulations often determine patterns of land ownership and use. Local regulations (Perda) on spatial planning and plantation business permits usually prioritise the allocation of large areas of land to palm oil companies through Cultivation Rights (HGU) or Location Permits, resulting in the conversion of forest and agricultural land into oil palm monocultures (Bekti Suryani, 2022). This creates structural tensions between large-scale economic interests and the rights of local communities, especially disadvantaged groups who depend on land for subsistence farming and non-timber forest product collection.

Local laws in many palm oil-producing districts, such as in Sumatra and Kalimantan, tend to reinforce corporate dominance through fast-track licensing mechanisms with minimal community participation. Literature studies show that the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) process is often merely a formality, resulting in indigenous communities and smallholders losing their voice in land access negotiations. Consequently, customary land, which has long been a source of livelihood, is gradually disappearing, worsening the economic conditions of marginalised communities who lack alternative productive land (Rivaldo, 2014).

Agrarian conflicts are a direct manifestation of this injustice in land access, with thousands of cases recorded in palm oil plantation areas. Weak local laws on conflict mediation often favour HGU holders, while local communities face forced evictions or inadequate compensation. Agrarian legal literature highlights that regional regulations rarely integrate the principle of land rights based on the 1960 Basic Agrarian Law, thereby weakening the bargaining position of poor communities in defending their access (Brandstetter et al., 2018).

The use of natural resources such as water, protected forests and biodiversity is also affected by local laws that facilitate palm oil expansion. Local regulations on water resource management often allow palm oil companies to build dams or irrigation canals without considering the needs of local communities for rice field irrigation or river fisheries. This results in water quality degradation and the loss of access to vital resources for disadvantaged communities, which in turn suppresses the productivity of their traditional agriculture (Cramb, 2016).

In the context of forest utilisation, local laws often ignore buffer zones or customary forest areas around plantations. Environmental literature shows that oil palm conversion causes the loss of non-timber forest products such as rattan, honey and spices, which provide additional income for disadvantaged communities. Lax regional regulations on illegal logging or land burning exacerbate ecosystem damage, causing local communities to lose sustainable natural resources that support their welfare (Bakhtary et al., 2021).

The role of local elites in shaping regional laws also influences access to land and resources, with regents or members of the Regional Representative Council often involved in networks of interests with palm oil companies. Political economy studies reveal that land allocation benefits influential groups, while disadvantaged communities are left with marginal land or uncompetitive plasma programmes. This phenomenon creates a cycle of economic dependence that weakens the community's autonomy in independently utilising natural resources (Emilda Rahmi, 2024).

Comparisons between regions show variations in the effectiveness of local laws; for example, several districts in Riau have implemented more inclusive plasma partnership local regulations, but their implementation remains hampered by corruption and lack of oversight. Empirical literature emphasises that fair access to land requires the integration of customary rights into regional regulations, which rarely occurs due to conflicts with national investment interests. As a result, disadvantaged communities are often trapped in tenant or daily labourer status without long-term ownership rights (Ni Made Sudarmawati, 2024). The social impacts of restricted access to resources include increased poverty and forced migration, with smallholder families leaving villages due to the loss of subsistence land. Local laws that do not provide mechanisms for land redistribution after HGU fail to prevent this marginalisation, as documented in NGO reports on palm oil conflicts. Dependence on fluctuating palm oil wages further exacerbates the economic vulnerability of disadvantaged communities (Dodi J. Santoso; Rina Permata, 2023).

The exploitation of natural resources also involves issues of waste and pollution from oil palm plantations, which are poorly regulated by local laws. Empty fruit bunch waste (EFBW) and wastewater from oil palm processing often pollute rivers and agricultural land in surrounding communities, reducing the fertility of their land. Public health literature highlights an increase in disease cases due to contamination, which burdens the living costs of disadvantaged groups without adequate compensation from local regulations (R.; R. Pirard C.; Lawry, L., 2019). Local laws based on community participation, such as village deliberations on spatial planning, have the potential to improve land access but are rarely implemented substantially. Anthropological studies show that without strong representation, the voices of indigenous peoples are marginalised, so that resource use remains dominated by corporate economic logic (J. F.; C. McCarthy R., 2020). This reinforces the need for local legal reform that prioritises agrarian justice.

From a sustainability perspective, limited access to natural resources hinders economic diversification among underdeveloped communities, which are trapped in oil palm monoculture. Sustainable development literature recommends the integration of agroforestry into local regulations, but its practice is minimal due to production target pressures (Rina Fitri; Budi Santoso, 2021). As a result, food security and the local economy are weakened, deepening social inequality in plantation areas. Horizontal

conflicts between local communities also arise due to competition for land access triggered by ambiguous regional laws. Transmigrant farmers and indigenous communities compete for residual land, while companies exploit regulatory loopholes for expansion (Budi Santoso; Eko Supriyanto, 2022) . Sociological studies of conflict show that without clarification of land rights through local regulations, these social tensions have the potential to erupt and hinder collective welfare.

Remediation efforts through palm oil companies' CSR programmes often fail to replace original land access, as they are temporary and not legally binding. Local laws requiring the allocation of plasma land (20% of HGU) are rarely monitored, so the benefits are not evenly distributed to disadvantaged communities. Agrarian economic literature emphasises the need to strengthen administrative sanctions to ensure inclusive resource utilisation (Yudi Kurniawan; Rina Permata, 2023) .

Overall, local oil palm plantation laws tend to reinforce inequalities in access to land and natural resources, with long-term implications for the welfare of disadvantaged communities. A synthesis of the literature underlines the urgency of regional regulatory reform oriented towards distributive justice, substantive participation, and strict oversight. This approach is necessary to transform the palm oil sector from a source of conflict into a driver of sustainable inclusive development.

Economic Opportunities and Social Welfare

Economic opportunities from the oil palm plantation sector are regulated by local laws through a plasma-core partnership mechanism, whereby companies are required to provide plasma land (20% of the HGU) to be managed by local communities. Regional regulations such as the palm oil partnership regional regulation aim to open up economic access for smallholders, but their implementation is often hampered by the uneven distribution of plasma land and the dominance of companies in management. As a result, disadvantaged communities are more likely to become daily labourers with minimum wages than independent partners, so long-term economic opportunities remain limited (Yudi Kurniawan; Rina Permata, 2023) .

CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programmes mandated by local law are the primary instruments for improving social welfare, encompassing infrastructure development, educational scholarships, and skills training. However, literature indicates that CSR fund allocation is often paternalistic and unsustainable, prioritising projects that benefit companies, such as plantation access roads, over community economic empowerment. This results in the structural dependence of disadvantaged communities on corporate assistance without increasing their independent capacity (Santika, 2024) .

Participation in the palm oil value chain, such as the processing of fresh fruit bunches (FFB) or downstream agro-industries, is regulated by local policies that encourage farmer cooperatives. Empirical studies reveal that local laws rarely provide

fiscal incentives for small businesses , making it difficult for local communities to compete with company-owned factories. These opportunities are mostly enjoyed by local elites or strategic partners, while disadvantaged groups are marginalised from higher economic value-added (Feintrenie, 2015) .

The impact of local laws on job creation can be seen in the provisions on sectoral minimum wages and priority for local labour, which in theory increase household income. However, fluctuations in global CPO prices and seasonal harvests cause wage instability, with palm oil workers often receiving wages below the living wage standard. The labour economics literature highlights that without strict labour protection regulations, these employment opportunities actually exacerbate the social exploitation of disadvantaged communities (Jelsma, 2017) .

Welfare indicators such as per capita income show an increase in palm oil plantation areas, but the Gini gap remains high due to uneven local laws on regional royalty redistribution. The Palm Oil Revenue Sharing Fund (DBHS) allocated through the regional budget (APBD) is often misdirected, flowing more into urban infrastructure than into village empowerment programmes. As a result, disadvantaged communities experience relatively slow growth compared to middle-income groups (Eko Supriyanto; Dewi Sartika, 2020) .

Economic diversification through local regulations that encourage intercropping or agroforestry on potential plasma land increases community economic resilience. However, agronomic studies show that local laws tend to maximise monoculture oil palm production, making it difficult for plasma farmers to adopt high-value crops such as cocoa or coffee. This limits sustainable economic opportunities and perpetuates dependence on a single commodity (Obidzinski, 2012) .

The social welfare aspect includes access to education and health, where local laws require companies to provide social facilities around plantations. Public health literature notes an increase in immunisation coverage and primary schools, but the quality of services is low due to a lack of regional supervision. Underprivileged communities continue to face transportation costs and access discrimination, so that social benefits are not optimal (Waldani, 2025) .

Women's empowerment through economic opportunities in palm oil is regulated by gender policies in local laws, such as plasma quotas for women's groups. However, gender studies show that women's roles are limited to low-paid harvesters or fresh fruit bunch collectors, without access to credit or managerial training. This gender inequality weakens the overall welfare of households among disadvantaged communities (Colchester, 2011) .

Social investment through village funds from palm oil royalties can create opportunities for local MSMEs, such as transportation services or plantation worker canteens. Good local regulations facilitate this through local priority tenders, but corruption in fund management often reduces the impact. The village development

literature emphasises the need for legal transparency to ensure that benefits flow to poor groups (Yupa Historical Studies Journal Team, 2022).

The long-term impact on social welfare is evident in forced urbanisation due to the loss of subsistence land, where migration to cities creates hidden unemployment problems. Local laws that do not anticipate economic transition fail to provide vocational training, leaving disadvantaged communities trapped in urban poverty. Migration studies highlight the urgency of social adaptation regulations in palm oil development (Muhardi Juliansyah, 2024).

Comparisons between regions show that districts with strong plasma regulations, such as in North Sumatra, produce better welfare through farmer dividends. However, in Kalimantan, weak law enforcement has led to plasma crop failures and internal conflicts. A synthesis of the literature underlines the role of independent oversight in maximising the economic opportunities of local regulations. Social welfare is also affected by social conflicts resulting from unequal distribution of opportunities, where village elites control plasma quotas (Rina Fitriana, 2022). Local laws that do not regulate transparency in allocation exacerbate community fragmentation. Agrarian sociology studies recommend inclusive deliberation to build social cohesion amid oil palm economic expansion (Galudra, 2013).

Sustainable certification programmes such as RSPO integrated into local laws have the potential to increase fresh fruit bunch (FFB) premiums for plasma farmers, thereby improving their income. However, high certification costs make it difficult for disadvantaged communities to participate, except through rare local subsidies. Global supply chain literature emphasises regulatory reform for premium market access for marginalised groups (Krishna, 2021).

Overall, local laws open up economic opportunities in palm oil for disadvantaged communities but often fail to translate these into sustainable social welfare due to distributional injustice and weak oversight. A synthesis of the literature reveals a structural pattern in which economic benefits are concentrated among the elite, while vulnerable groups receive only crumbs. Regional legal reforms focused on inclusion, transparency, and diversification are needed to achieve socially equitable palm oil development.

Conclusion

Local palm oil plantation laws generally reinforce structural inequalities in the welfare of disadvantaged communities, particularly in terms of land access and natural resource use. Regional regulations such as spatial planning regulations and HGU tend to prioritise corporate expansion, causing agrarian conflicts, marginalisation of customary land, and degradation of vital resources such as water and non-timber forests. Despite inclusive efforts through plasma and CSR, weak implementation due to

corruption on of local elites and minimal participation traps disadvantaged communities as vulnerable labourers without long-term economic autonomy.

In terms of economic opportunities and social welfare, local laws open up employment and profit-sharing opportunities, but distribution is uneven, with high Gini coefficients and dependence on CPO price fluctuations. Plasma-core programmes and social investments rarely reach marginalised groups due to lax oversight, while economic diversification is hampered by oil palm monoculture. A synthesis of the literature confirms that without distributive justice-oriented legal reform, the palm oil sector actually reproduces structural poverty among disadvantaged communities.

Overall, this analysis highlights the urgency of strengthening local laws through the integration of customary rights, transparency in allocation, and independent oversight to transform socio-economic impacts into drivers of inclusive development. This literature review provides a conceptual basis for responsive regional policies, with key recommendations including participatory local regulations, strict sanctions for agrarian violations, and independent plasma-based empowerment programmes to achieve sustainable welfare in the palm oil sector.

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