

## Defending Land Rights: A Study of Agrarian Conflict in Pengudang Village, Bintan Regency, Kepulauan Riau Province

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### **Keywords:**

*Land Conflict; Local Community; Land Rights; Pengudang*

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### ABSTRACT

The land conflict between the residents of Pengudang Village and PT Buana Megawisata (BMW) in Bintan Regency dates back to 1993, when the company offered compensation to local residents to relinquish their land at disproportionately low prices, accompanied by promises of residential plots and housing, most of which were never fulfilled. This imbalance triggered mounting tensions and protests from the community, culminating in demonstrations involving university students and resulting in repressive actions by security forces. This study aims to examine the root causes of the conflict in depth and to evaluate the effectiveness of various resolution efforts undertaken, including mediation and direct interventions by relevant stakeholders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants selected via snowball sampling. The findings reveal that this conflict reflects structural tensions between local communities and corporate interests over access to and control of land, with significant social, economic, and environmental repercussions for the affected population. Despite the local government's mediation efforts and land retribution initiatives.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is motivated by concerns over the widespread and ongoing land conflicts in Indonesia, which take various forms and scales. In general, conflict can be understood as a clash between two or more parties with conflicting interests over something deemed valuable, such as land or other natural resources (Puspita et al., 2004; Sudira, 2022). In the agrarian context, such conflicts arise from disparities in land control and use, involving actors such as indigenous communities, small farmers, corporations, and the state (Dona et al., 2025; Al-Aufar et al., 2024; Tyaningrum et al., 2025). These inequalities often lead to the marginalization of vulnerable groups and provoke resistance from communities against the state and corporate power.

In Indonesia, often referred to as an agrarian country, land serves not only as a source of livelihood but also as a source of conflict. Agrarian disputes typically

arise from issues of land ownership, control, and use, especially when the state and private entities allocate community land for investment purposes, such as in plantations, mining, and forestry industries (Arisaputra, 2021). These conflicts have serious social, economic, cultural, and ecological repercussions. When agricultural land is converted into industrial areas, communities not only lose their source of income but also undergo shifts in social structures and power relations.

This situation gives rise to complex forms of conflict, ranging from open protests and demonstrations to more covert forms of resistance, where communities passively resist policies they perceive as unjust. The impacts are not only seen in the changing social status of the community, transforming from landowners to laborers, but also in the degradation of ecological systems, such as the loss of productive rice fields, reduced access to natural resources, and a decline in the quality of life (Rahmawati & Gentini, 2008; Purwandi, 2011). The imbalance in power relations, weak legal certainty, and inadequate protection of indigenous peoples' rights further exacerbate the situation (Dahlan et al., 2025; Bimantara, 2024).

Several studies have examined agrarian conflicts within the context of community-corporate relations, power dynamics, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Kusumoningtyas (2024) investigates the power relations between communities and mining companies in the context of natural resource control, while Sununianti (2024) highlights the role of women in resisting evictions and corporate land claims. Similarly, Rizani et al. (2024) offer significant insights into various conflict resolution strategies, including mediation and both formal legal and customary approaches. Collectively, these studies contribute to a broader understanding of how agrarian conflicts unfold, the actors involved, and the forms of resistance and negotiation that characterize community-corporate relations. However, most of these works have yet to address the persistence of long-term, recurring agrarian conflicts cases in which conflict resolution processes fail to fully mitigate tensions. This gap is critical, as protracted disputes often reflect institutional shortcomings in resolving structural issues such as unequal access to land, inadequate legal protection for local communities, and the absence of corporate accountability mechanisms. Therefore, there is a pressing need for deeper analytical engagement with chronic and unresolved conflicts, particularly those shaped by asymmetrical power relations between communities and corporations.

This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the long-standing, recurring, and unresolved conflict between the community of Pengudang Village and PT. Buana Megawisatama. This conflict began with the community's dissatisfaction with the land sale price set by the company, which led to protests and mediation efforts that failed to provide a satisfactory outcome. This study seeks to delve into the root

causes of the conflict, the resolution efforts undertaken, and the extent to which these efforts have alleviated tensions. Furthermore, the research examines how this conflict has affected the social structure, economic conditions, and environmental well-being of the local community.

The focus of this research is on the residents of Pengudang Village involved in land transactions with PT. Buana Megawisata. The study aims to understand how this conflict has affected their lives comprehensively, including its impact on social solidarity, collective identity, and the sustainability of local resources. By emphasizing the long-term dynamics and power imbalances in the conflict, this research hopes to contribute both theoretically and practically to formulating fair and sustainable conflict resolution strategies, as well as preventing the recurrence of similar conflicts in other regions.

## **METHODS**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection conducted through in-depth interviews. Interviews were chosen as the primary method because they allow the researcher to build a more comprehensive understanding of the topic through direct interaction with informants. This method is particularly useful in gathering in-depth information, especially in the initial stages, to identify the root causes of the issue and clarify the dynamics occurring in the field. The data obtained were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, which involves organizing and interpreting the information based on the narratives of the informants' experiences in a chronologically and contextually.

This research aims to depict the complex social situation, including relationships, perceptions, and the impacts felt by the community due to agrarian conflicts. The informants in this study were selected using snowball sampling, starting with a few key informants who then recommended other relevant individuals to be interviewed. This technique was used because the social networks in the field are often closed, and access to information frequently depends on trust between individuals. This approach allows the researcher to gather a broader and richer set of data from interconnected perspectives.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Initial Dynamics of the Conflict and the Imbalance of Power Relations**

The land conflict between the community of Pengudang Village and PT Buana Mega Wisata (BMW) began in 1993 when the company initiated its approach to the local residents by offering compensation for land that was set to be repurposed. The company proposed a very low price around Rp200 per square meter, along with the

promise of providing land certificates for plots and homes with keys as proof of ownership. This scheme was designed to encourage community participation in the land transfer. Initially, only one person accepted the offer, but participation grew as the company promised private housing.

However, the transaction was marked by significant imbalances. The compensation received by the residents varied greatly; some were paid Rp3,000 per square meter, while others received only Rp200. This disparity caused dissatisfaction and distrust toward PT BMW. The inequitable compensation became the primary source of social tension, especially since it lacked transparency or an accountable mechanism. As the land, which had been the community's source of livelihood, was transferred unequally, the power imbalance between the large corporation and the rural community became evident.

The community's response to this injustice resulted in collective resistance. The residents of Pengudang Village, supported by students from Jakarta, organized a demonstration in the Lagoi area to oppose the company's unfair treatment. The protest was dispersed by security forces using leaflets dropped from helicopters. However, the community remained steadfast, and a confrontation with the authorities ensued, resulting in one resident being shot in the leg. The victim, a woman, became a symbol of the community's struggle to defend their land rights.

The involvement of women in this social movement reflected their crucial role as custodians of the community's living space. They were not only victims of the conflict but also active agents in demanding justice. Women often have strong emotional, ecological, and social ties to the land, both as living spaces and as sources of livelihood (Niko et al., 2024; Niko & Atem, 2020). Their participation in the agrarian movement not only defended collective rights but also raised awareness within the community about the importance of land justice and control over local resources. Women frequently bridged the communication between indigenous or local communities and non-governmental organizations, the media, and even international networks (Herdiyanti, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2022).

The conflict escalated when security forces resorted to repressive actions by surrounding the protest site and firing tear gas. The community scattered to nearby areas like Teluk Sebong, Sebong Pereh, and Sri Bintan. Yet, at that point, PT BMW had not responded with any resolution. The company's reluctance to negotiate and its reliance on security forces indicated the absence of a fair and transparent mediation space.

From a legal standpoint, the presence of Government Regulation No. 20/2021 on the Control of Abandoned Land should have served as a basis for evaluating corporate land use (Fahira & Ferdiansyah, 2021; Kartiwi, 2024). This regulation

stipulates that land left unused for a certain period can be categorized as abandoned. PT BMW was known to have left much of its land vacant for years. To avoid the status of "idle land," the company planted coconut trees as a minimal activity, which appeared to be a mere formality.

However, in practice, the residents of Pengudang Village living around this land were prohibited from using their former land. This restriction included activities such as farming, cutting trees, or picking fruit from the trees growing on the land. Any violations were met with penalties and legal threats from PT BMW. A large sign was posted as a marker of the ban on local activities, even for mere entry onto the land.

One of the affected areas was Batu Junjung Beach, which had previously been a local tourist destination for the Pengudang community. Now, the beach was part of the area claimed by PT BMW. The local community could no longer access the beach without official permission from the village government. Even if permitted, the activities of the residents were closely monitored by the company, creating a sense of intimidation and alienation in their land. This practice indicates a concentration of spatial power by the corporate actor, further eroding the living space of indigenous or local communities.



*Figure 1. Prohibition Sign Owned by PT. Buana Megawisatama (Source: Field Data Documentation)*

Mediation efforts were made by the local government through the allocation of new land to the community. Original residents were given plots of 30x30 square meters, while migrants were allocated 15x20 square meters. However, these lands

were subject to strict conditions permanent construction was prohibited, and the company could reclaim the land at any time if it was to be used. This scheme reflected a minimal compensation logic, rather than offering a comprehensive solution to the long-standing land ownership conflict.

This situation created two different social responses within the community. Some residents chose to accept the conditions and live with the uncertainty of their rights, while others continued to fight for the unfulfilled promise of agrarian justice. The conflict, which has lasted for more than two decades, shows that the root problem remains unresolved structurally. Land, which should be a source of identity, economic well-being, and community sustainability, has become a source of collective trauma and uncertainty (Rais et al., 2024).

### **Conflict Characteristics: Vertical, Ongoing, and Systemic**

From the perspective of its actors, the agrarian conflict between the community of Pengudang Village and PT Buana Megawisatama is a vertical conflict. Vertical conflicts occur when there is a structural disparity between the two parties involved here, between the local community, which is socially and economically subordinate, and the large corporation that has access to state power, economic strength, and legal support. This conflict does not unfold between two equals but reflects an imbalanced power dynamic.

In the structure of vertical conflict, the company uses its strong position to shape the narrative and policies surrounding the contested land (Ritonga et al., 2022). On the other hand, the community struggles to break through this dominance with their limited resources. The company's interventions include repressive approaches, exclusive bureaucracy, and restrictions on access to information and resources. Often, the company collaborates with security forces, transforming the agrarian conflict from merely an economic dispute into a political power struggle.

This conflict is also characterized as ongoing. Since 1993, there has been no comprehensive or participatory resolution mechanism. Efforts by the local government to mediate have generally been superficial and have not addressed the root issues land rights, unfair compensation, and the criminalization of community members attempting to defend their living space. Ongoing conflicts like this tend to produce deep social wounds, further widening the gap of distrust between the community, the state, and corporations.

In this context, the persistence of the conflict highlights the weakness of state institutions in resolving agrarian disputes fairly and transparently. The state often takes an ambiguous stance, acting as a facilitator on one hand while protecting

corporate interests on the other. This reflects a state-corporation relationship that risks negating the fundamental rights of communities to land and living spaces.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that most of the community lacks formal legal documents proving ownership of the land they have occupied for generations. The absence of formal documentation is used by the company as justification for claiming the land as its own. However, socially and historically, this land has been an integral part of the lives of the Pengudang Village community. The difference between legality and legitimacy is often a key source of agrarian conflict in many areas of Indonesia.

The agrarian conflict in Pengudang Village exemplifies the broader characteristics of agrarian conflicts in coastal regions of Indonesia, where the appropriation of local communities' living spaces is carried out systematically with the support of power and law. This structural inequality not only results in the loss of land but also strips the community of their rights to identity, culture, and the sustainability of their lives. Moreover, the conflict causes significant psychosocial impacts. The community lives in constant uncertainty, traumatized by state violence, restricted access to resources, and the threat of eviction at any time. Meanwhile, the company continues to consolidate control over space and designs a development narrative that excludes the community in any meaningful way. As a result, the community becomes increasingly marginalized from the development process itself.

Addressing such a conflict requires an approach that goes beyond formal legal aspects. Redistributive policies are needed that recognize the rights of indigenous and local communities, independent mediation mechanisms that prioritize substantive justice, and political commitment to limit corporate expansion that harms local communities. Without these, agrarian conflicts will continue to be a ticking time bomb, ready to erupt at any moment.

The agrarian conflict in Pengudang Village is not merely a matter of compensation or land administration but a reflection of the structural conflict between marginalized groups and capitalist forces protected by the state. Therefore, its resolution cannot be achieved solely through the provision of substitute land or normative appeals but must involve true agrarian reform that favours the people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The agrarian conflict between the community of Pengudang Village and PT Buana Mega Wisata is not merely a dispute over land ownership, but rather a manifestation of the unequal power dynamics between the local community and capitalist forces facilitated by the state. Originating from a non-transparent and unjust land acquisition process since 1993, this conflict has evolved into a structural issue that touches various aspects of the community's life, including economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The uneven compensation prices, unfulfilled promises of adequate housing, and the prohibition on the community's access to land and beaches that were once integral to their daily lives highlight the systematic and structured appropriation of their living space.

This conflict reveals how land, which should serve as a foundation for identity, livelihood, and social continuity, has transformed into a corporate expansion asset. When the community loses its land, it does not merely lose an economic resource, but also its right to determine its future. The imbalance in the distribution of resources and access to living spaces is exacerbated by repressive actions from security forces, as well as the absence of fair and participatory resolution mechanisms from the state.

From a sociological perspective, this conflict exhibits characteristics of a vertical and ongoing conflict, driven by the inequality in social, economic, and political positions between the disputing parties. The state has not acted as a neutral mediator but more often positions itself as a protector of investment and corporate interests. As a result, the community of Pengudang Village is forced to live in uncertainty, trauma, and alienation on land that they have historically inhabited for generations.

From the dynamics that have unfolded over more than two decades, it can be concluded that resolving agrarian conflicts cannot be achieved through merely administrative or technocratic approaches. A structural approach is needed, one that acknowledges the community's historical rights, reconsiders corporate permits that infringe upon the residents' living space, and opens up equal and participatory dialogue spaces. Without structural transformation and a genuine commitment to agrarian justice, such conflicts will continue to recur, creating latent social tensions and undermining the foundation of a fair and sustainable national life.

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