

Mobilizing Capital to Resist State Land Grabbing in Persil IV, North Sumatra, Indonesia

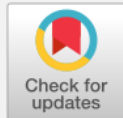
Linda Elida * , Ahmad Sayyidulhaq Arrobbani Lubis , and Ahmad Taufan Damanik 

University of North Sumatra, Medan City, North Sumatra Province, 20154, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author: linda1@usu.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Publication Info:
Research Article



How to cite:

Elida, L., Lubis, A. S. A., & Damanik, A. T. (2025). Mobilizing Capital to Resist State Land Grabbing in Persil IV, North Sumatra, Indonesia. *Society*, 13(3), 1223–1237.

DOI: [10.33019/society.v13i3.964](https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v13i3.964)

Copyright © 2025. Owned by author (s), published by Society.

OPEN  ACCESS



This is an open-access article.
License: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA)

Received: September 2, 2025;
Accepted: November 25, 2025;
Published: December 26, 2025;

ABSTRACT

Agrarian conflicts in Indonesia are shaped by persistent inequalities in land access and control, where the state, through legal frameworks and state-owned enterprises, plays a central role in legitimizing dispossession. This study examines how rural communities mobilize various forms of capital to resist state-led land-grabbing in Persil IV, North Sumatra. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, the analysis focuses on how economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources are strategically deployed to sustain collective resistance. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with community members, local leaders, and activists involved in the conflict, complemented by field observations and analysis of legal and historical documents, and analyzed through an iterative thematic coding process. The study draws on empirical material generated from prolonged engagement in the field to identify three interrelated dynamics of resistance. First, economic capital supports the financing of legal action and collective mobilization, as reflected in community practices of pooling resources and personal asset sacrifice to sustain litigation and reclaiming activities. Second, social capital, expressed through internal solidarity and external alliances, strengthens organizational capacity and expands advocacy networks, including collaborations with student groups and non-governmental organizations. Third, cultural and symbolic capital articulated through historical narratives, legal documents, and moral claims generate legitimacy and reinforce community claims to land, particularly through the continued use of cultivation permits and everyday land occupation practices. However, the findings also show that these forms of capital operate within a structurally unequal field, where legal uncertainty, coercive

pressure, and institutional bias limit their effectiveness. While communities can sustain resistance over time, their capacity to secure definitive land rights remains constrained by the dominance of state and corporate actors. This study contributes to agrarian political economy and rural sociology by providing an empirically grounded account of how capital is mobilized, combined, and constrained in a prolonged agrarian conflict, showing that resistance is sustained not only through material resources but through socially embedded practices shaped by unequal power relations.

Keywords: Agrarian Conflict; Capital Mobilization; Land Grabbing; Legal Contestation; North Sumatra; Rural Resistance; State-Owned Enterprises

1. Introduction

Agrarian transformation in Indonesia reflects enduring structural asymmetries in natural resource governance, where land has been concentrated in the hands of state and corporate actors through legal and institutional mechanisms. Land, as both a productive asset and a source of identity, has long been concentrated in the hands of state and corporate actors. Rather than functioning as a neutral regulator, the state often operates as an agent of accumulation, legitimizing dispossession through development-oriented policies and state-owned enterprises. This dynamic aligns with what Borras and Franco (2013) conceptualize as state-organized land grabbing, in which legal authority becomes a mechanism of dispossession.

In the post-independence period, this pattern has been reinforced through plantation expansion and extractive concessions. Instruments such as Hak Guna Usaha have enabled large-scale transfer of communal land into corporate control, often characterized by opacity, document manipulation, and coercion (Dellah & Salim, 2017). Contemporary land grabbing increasingly operates through legal dispossession, where law itself structures exclusion (Liao and Agrawal, 2024). In this context, rural communities are positioned simultaneously as subjects of regulation and objects of extraction.

These processes have generated sustained agrarian conflicts, particularly in plantation regions such as North Sumatra, where expansion has displaced local livelihoods and reshaped rural economies (Lee, 2023). Beyond material loss, dispossession reconfigures social relations and marginalizes communities resisting land control (Purba, 2015). This condition reflects Harvey's (2005) notion of accumulation by dispossession, where development facilitates capital accumulation while displacing historically rooted land users.

Across the Global South, similar dynamics have produced both dispossession and resistance. Studies show that resistance is sustained through the mobilization of resources, networks, and legitimacy. In Cambodia, resistance depends on access to transnational alliances (Verkoren & Ngin, 2017), while in the Philippines, grassroots organizations rely on collective social solidarity, knowledge exchange, and institutional partnerships (Teodoro & Rayos Co, 2009). In Senegal, Gagné (2019) demonstrates that the interaction between material resources and symbolic narratives shapes resistance outcomes. These studies show that resistance depends not only on legal claims but on the capacity to mobilize multiple forms of resources.

. Sinaga (2022) demonstrates the use of hybrid strategies that combine advocacy, litigation, and cultural mobilization in agrarian movements. However, existing studies tend to treat these resources as separate elements within resistance, rather than examining how they operate as interconnected forms of capital within a structured field of power. As a result, the mechanisms through which different forms of capital are mobilized, combined, and translated into sustained collective action are not systematically explained, particularly in long-term, state-dominated agrarian conflicts.

As a result, there is limited understanding of how resistance is maintained over extended periods under conditions of legal uncertainty, coercion, and institutional asymmetry. This limitation is particularly evident in long-term agrarian conflicts, where communities continue to resist despite persistent structural constraints.

This study addresses this gap by examining how multiple forms of capital are mobilized and interconnected within a prolonged agrarian struggle. It focuses on the community of Persil IV in North Sumatra, which has resisted land appropriation by a state-owned plantation company for more than 5 decades. The conflict originated in the early 1970s and has persisted across different political periods, marked by cycles of repression, legal contestation, and collective reorganization. This case provides a critical setting for understanding how resistance is sustained under conditions of structural inequality.

To analyze this case, the study draws on Bourdieu's (1986) framework of capital, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions, and conceptualizes resistance as a process of capital mobilization within an unequal field of power. This is complemented by Scott's (1985) notion of everyday resistance, which highlights how collective action is embedded in routine practices.

This paper analyzes how the Persil IV community mobilizes and combines different forms of capital to sustain resistance over time. By doing so, the study clarifies the mechanisms through which capital operates in long-term agrarian conflict and contributes to agrarian political economy and rural sociology.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bourdieu's Theory of Capital and Social Practice

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital, field, and habitus provides an analytical framework for examining how communities navigate structural domination. Bourdieu (1986) defines capital as accumulated labor, material, or symbolic resources that enable actors to gain advantage within a structured social space. Beyond economic interpretations, capital is differentiated into economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital, each of which operates relationally and can be converted into other forms under specific conditions (Bourdieu, 1991).

Central to this framework is the concept of field, a structured arena in which actors compete over resources and legitimacy, shaped by unequal distributions of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus, as internalized dispositions formed through historical experience, conditions how actors perceive and respond to these structures. Practice emerges from the interaction between habitus and field, making social action neither fully determined nor entirely voluntary.

In the context of agrarian conflict, this framework highlights that resistance is not solely a material struggle but a relational process in which different forms of capital are mobilized and negotiated within unequal fields of power. Communities draw not only on economic resources but also on social networks, cultural knowledge, and symbolic legitimacy to contest dispossession. The effectiveness of these forms of capital depends on their recognition within the

field, indicating that power is not inherent in resources themselves but emerges through their position within structured relations. However, in many empirical studies of agrarian conflict, these forms of capital are often treated separately, with limited attention to how they interact and are mobilized simultaneously within a structured field of power.

2.2. Capital Mobilization and Resistance in Agrarian Contexts

Empirical studies show that resistance is sustained through the strategic mobilization of multiple forms of capital. Research in Brazil and the Philippines highlights the role of social and symbolic capital in legitimizing grassroots struggles and strengthening collective action (Sauer & Perdigão, 2019; Teodoro & Rayos Co, 2009). Communities often transform moral claims and historical narratives into socially recognized legitimacy, while alliances with NGOs and transnational networks expand their political reach.

In Cambodia, Verkoren and Ngin (2017) show that local movements combine identity-based claims with external advocacy networks to challenge state and corporate land control. Similarly, Gagné (2019) argues that the interaction between material resources and symbolic narratives of justice shapes resistance outcomes in Senegal.

These studies indicate that resistance is not simply determined by resource availability, but by how different forms of capital are mobilized and deployed across contexts. However, they tend to emphasize specific dimensions, such as networks or legitimacy, rather than examining how multiple forms of capital interact within a unified analytical framework.

In the Indonesian context, Sinaga (2022) shows that peasant movements integrate legal advocacy, collective organization, and cultural mobilization to sustain long-term struggles. However, much of the existing literature continues to treat these elements as supporting components rather than as interconnected forms of capital within a structured field of power. As a result, there is a limited explanation of how different forms of capital are mobilized, combined, and translated into sustained collective action in prolonged conflicts. This limitation is particularly evident in local reclaiming movements, where everyday practices, symbolic claims, and social alliances play a critical role in sustaining resistance yet are not systematically analyzed as part of an integrated process of capital mobilization.

2.3. Theorizing Land Grabbing and State-Led Dispossession

Land grabbing refers to large-scale land acquisitions often justified by development or investment agendas that result in the displacement and marginalization of local communities. Borras et al. (2011) frame it as a global political-economic phenomenon linked to food security, energy demands, and speculative investment. In Southeast Asia, land grabbing frequently operates in a state-organized form, in which legal instruments such as concessions, Hak Guna Usaha (HGU), and special economic zones serve as mechanisms of dispossession (Borras & Franco, 2013; Liao & Agrawal, 2024).

These processes blur the boundary between legality and coercion, producing what Hall (2013) terms powers of exclusion, in which access to land is determined by institutional procedures that privilege capital over citizenship. The consequences are not limited to economic effects but extend to social and ecological transformations. Capitalist expansion transforms subsistence agriculture into export-oriented production systems, displacing local livelihoods and reshaping rural identities (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2011). Empirical evidence from Bangladesh (Khan & Lasslett, 2023) and Malawi (Bae, 2019) demonstrates that dispossession produces long-term social dislocation and cultural loss.

Within Indonesia, these dynamics are closely tied to state power and development ideology. State-owned enterprises, including PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II), operate within legal frameworks that consolidate control over land while marginalizing local claims. As a result, agrarian conflict becomes both a struggle over material resources and a contest over legitimacy, authority, and recognition.

These strands of literature highlight that agrarian resistance unfolds within structurally unequal fields shaped by state power, legal frameworks, and capital accumulation. However, despite acknowledging the role of capital in shaping resistance, these studies offer only a limited explanation of how different forms of capital are mobilized and integrated in sustain long-term struggles. This limitation points to the need for a closer examination of how capital mobilization operates in practice, particularly in prolonged, state-dominated agrarian conflicts such as the Persil IV case.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach to examine the dynamics of agrarian resistance in a real-life context. A case study is particularly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena where the boundaries between social processes and outcomes are not clearly delineated (Yin, 2018).

In line with Creswell and Poth (2018), this approach enables an in-depth understanding of how local actors construct meaning, exercise agency, and mobilize different forms of capital within structurally unequal conditions.

The research was conducted in Sungai Tuan Muda Hilir Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra. The site was purposively selected due to its long-standing agrarian conflict involving the reclamation of Persil IV land from PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II), a state-owned plantation company.

This case represents a prolonged community resistance spanning several decades, making it suitable for analytical generalization rather than statistical inference (Yin, 2018).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis during field engagement in the study area. In-depth interviews were conducted with community members, local leaders, and individuals directly involved in the resistance movement, allowing exploration of lived experiences, strategies, and perceptions of land conflict. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to capture variation in roles, experiences, and positions within the conflict. This approach enabled the inclusion of both core actors involved in organizing resistance and community members affected by land dispossession in different ways. Field observations were conducted to document everyday practices, interactions, and forms of resistance in the contested area, including land cultivation, informal gatherings, and community coordination activities. Document analysis included legal archives, court decisions, land permits, and community petitions, which were used to trace the institutional and historical trajectory of the conflict.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to validate the accuracy of the findings, particularly in relation to contested narratives of land ownership and resistance.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to account for positionality, especially in interpreting data in a politically sensitive, long-standing conflict setting.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving iterative cycles of coding and category development. Initial open coding was used to identify key patterns of capital mobilization, which were then refined through axial coding to examine relationships among economic, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions.

Rather than treating these categories as fixed, the analysis focused on how they emerged from the data and were interconnected in practice. The categories were then interpreted using Bourdieu's (1986) framework of capital and Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance, enabling a theoretically informed analysis of how capital is mobilized and deployed in sustaining collective action.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing sensitive information. Given the ongoing nature of the conflict, particular attention was paid to minimizing potential risks to participants, especially those involved in resistance activities.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of Agrarian Conflict in STM Hilir

The agrarian conflict in Persil IV, STM Hilir Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, is rooted in a long historical process of land allocation and subsequent state intervention. Since 1953, the government had allocated land to local farmers through tanah suguhan and surat izin garap (cultivation permits No.106/1956/2), which, according to archival records and community accounts, formed the basis of community livelihoods and territorial claims. These arrangements were widely recognized by residents as legitimate grounds for land use and shaped the community's social and economic organization over time.

However, in 1972, PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II) asserted ownership over the area as part of a national plantation project, displacing farmers who had cultivated the land for decades.

This shift marked a significant turning point in the conflict, introducing overlapping claims between the state-owned enterprise and the local community. According to interview data, this transition was not accompanied by adequate consultation or compensation, which contributed to the prolonged dispute over land control and access.

During the authoritarian period, resistance was constrained by political repression, as respondents reported. Community members who opposed land appropriation were labeled as affiliated with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), discouraging open resistance and forcing villagers to defend their claims in covert ways.

Despite these constraints, interview data indicate that forms of everyday resistance persisted, including clandestine cultivation, maintenance of ancestral claims, and informal gatherings to preserve the collective memory of land ownership.

Field observations and interview data suggest that resistance did not emerge as a spontaneous reaction but rather as a gradual, adaptive process shaped by historical experience and structural pressure. The persistence of informal and symbolic forms of resistance during periods of repression appears to have laid the groundwork for more organized reclaiming actions in later periods. These practices also contributed to maintaining social cohesion and continuity within the community.

These findings further indicate that the conflict reflects not only a struggle over land but also the formation of a collective disposition that enables the mobilization of resources and strategies over time. The historical trajectory of the Persil IV conflict indicates that agrarian resistance is embedded in a field structured by unequal power relations, in which the state operates

simultaneously as a regulator and a dominant actor. This condition creates the structural context in which communities are compelled to mobilize various forms of capital to sustain their claims and resist dispossession.

4.2. Strategies of the State-Owned Plantation in Land Acquisition

The role of the state in the Persil IV conflict is reflected in a pattern of land control exercised through legal and institutional mechanisms, as indicated by document analysis and interview data. The involvement of PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II), a state-owned enterprise, illustrates how state authority is operationalized in the management of plantation land.

This arrangement suggests a dual role of the state as both regulator and economic actor, which shapes the structure of the conflict. In practice, this dual role creates overlapping institutional positions in which regulatory authority and corporate interests intersect. As a result, the community does not experience decision-making processes related to land control as neutral or independent. This institutional configuration forms the broader context within which disputes over land ownership and access are negotiated.

One of the key issues identified in the conflict is the presence of overlapping land claims and administrative ambiguity. Document analysis of land permits, court decisions, and local records indicates inconsistencies in the recognition of land rights between community-held documents and company claims.

Respondents reported that these inconsistencies created uncertainty and weakened local communities' ability to assert their claims. In several cases, differences between historical cultivation permits and later administrative classifications resulted in competing interpretations of ownership. This situation made it difficult for community members to rely on formal documentation as a stable basis for legal recognition. Consequently, legal processes became prolonged and, from the respondents' perspective, did not provide a clear resolution to the dispute.

In addition to formal legal processes, participants reported forms of pressure related to efforts to maintain control over the land. Interview data suggest that community members experienced intimidation and restrictions when attempting to access or cultivate disputed land areas. Several respondents indicated that local authorities and security personnel were perceived to support the company's position in managing the area. These experiences were described as occurring during attempts to re-enter or cultivate land, where access was limited or discouraged. Although the forms of pressure varied, respondents consistently emphasized a sense of unequal treatment in interactions with authorities. Such conditions limited open forms of resistance and shaped how the community navigated the conflict.

These conditions indicate that state power operates not only through formal regulation but also through practices experienced by the community as restrictive and unequal. The combination of legal ambiguity and reported pressure creates a structural environment in which communities face significant barriers in maintaining access to land. In this context, formal legality does not function as a stable mechanism of protection, but as part of a broader institutional arrangement that shapes access and exclusion. The interaction between administrative procedures and everyday experiences of restriction reinforces the asymmetry between the company and the community.

The use of legal institutions also appears to be experienced as uneven by community members, particularly in relation to access to legal recognition and dispute resolution. Court decisions and administrative processes, while formally available, were described by respondents as not fully resolving the dispute or restoring community land claims. This perception is linked

to delays in implementation and the persistence of overlapping claims despite legal rulings. As a result, legal recognition alone was not sufficient to alter control over land in practice. These conditions contributed to declining trust in formal mechanisms among community members.

This condition contributes to the persistence of structural inequality between the state and local communities. It shapes the broader context in which resistance emerges and influences the strategies communities adopt in responding to dispossession. Overall, the findings suggest that land control in STM Hilir is sustained through the interaction of legal processes, administrative practices, and field-level experiences, rather than through formal legality alone.

4.3. Community Strategies for Land Reclamation

In response to land appropriation, the community of Persil IV developed a set of interrelated strategies that mobilize economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources. These forms of capital did not operate independently but were combined in practice to sustain collective resistance under prolonged structural pressure. Interview data indicate that community members did not rely on a single strategy but adapted their actions based on available resources and changing conditions in the field. This combination of strategies allowed the community to maintain continuity in resistance despite legal uncertainty and institutional constraints.

Economic resources were mobilized through collective contributions and individual efforts to support legal action and reclamation activities. Community members pooled financial resources,

in some cases, by reallocating or liquidating personal assets, to fund litigation, transportation, and field operations. For example, a key figure, Haji Sulaiman, was reported to have sold his livestock to finance legal proceedings and collective activities. This example illustrates how financial resources were mobilized at both individual and collective levels to sustain engagement with formal legal processes. Interview accounts suggest that such contributions were not isolated but formed part of a broader pattern of shared financial responsibility within the community.

Social networks played a central role in strengthening both internal cohesion and external engagement. Internally, dense networks of trust and reciprocity were described by respondents as essential in sustaining collective action and maintaining coordination among community members. Externally, the community established alliances with students, peasant organizations, and non-governmental organizations, including KONTRAS Sumatera Utara. These partnerships provided support in the form of legal assistance, advocacy, and access to broader political networks. Respondents indicated that these external connections helped extend the community's claims beyond the local level, particularly in engaging with media and advocacy platforms.

Cultural and symbolic resources were mobilized through the articulation of historical narratives and legitimacy claims. Community members consistently invoked surat izin garap and long-standing land-use patterns as evidence of rightful ownership. Everyday practices such as cultivating small plots, collecting firewood, and maintaining a physical presence on the land were described as both subsistence strategies and expressions of continued claims to the land. These practices reinforced collective identity and were repeatedly cited by respondents as justification for reclaiming activities. In this way, historical narratives and daily practices contributed to maintaining a shared sense of legitimacy within the community.

The establishment of Koperasi Juma Tombak reflects the institutionalization of these combined strategies. The cooperative functioned simultaneously as an economic mechanism for resource management, a social platform for coordination, and a symbolic representation of collective autonomy. Through this institutional form, dispersed resources were organized into a more structured and sustained mode of collective action. Interview data suggest that the

cooperative also facilitated coordination among members and provided a formal structure for managing collective activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that resource mobilization in Persil IV operates as a relational and cumulative process. Economic resources enable action, social networks expand capacity, and cultural and symbolic elements support the construction of legitimacy. These dimensions were not mobilized separately, but interacted in ways that reinforced each other over time. The effectiveness of community resistance, therefore, depended on the ability to combine and adapt these forms of capital within an unequal agrarian context shaped by state and corporate dominance.

4.4. Community Habitus in Responding to Land Dispossession

The findings suggest that community responses to land dispossession are shaped by a shared set of dispositions rooted in historical experience and a strong attachment to land. For the residents of Persil IV, land is not merely an economic resource but a fundamental component of identity, dignity, and social continuity. As one farmer expressed, “The land is our dignity. Losing it means losing who we are.” This statement, as reflected in interview data, illustrates how attachment to land is articulated not only in economic terms but also in moral and social terms. Such expressions were consistently reported across interviews, indicating a shared orientation toward land within the community.

These patterns can be understood through the concept of habitus, which refers to durable dispositions that guide perception, judgment, and action (Bourdieu, 1986). In the Persil IV case, these dispositions are shaped by long-term experiences of land cultivation, repeated encounters with dispossession, and the transmission of collective memory across generations. Interview accounts indicate that knowledge about land history and past struggles is continuously shared within families and community gatherings, reinforcing these dispositions over time. These dispositions influence the community’s refusal to accept wage labor within plantation systems, even when such options are available.

This shared orientation is reflected in the persistence of everyday resistance practices. Actions such as land occupation, small-scale cultivation, community gatherings, and collective prayers were described by respondents not only as practical activities but also as expressions of their attachment to the land and their livelihood. Field observations indicate that these practices are carried out routinely and are embedded in daily life rather than organized as isolated acts of protest. The intergenerational transmission of memory through storytelling, routine interaction, and shared experiences reinforces these dispositions and sustains collective identity across time.

These dispositions also play a role in shaping how different forms of capital are mobilized. Respondents described the community’s strong attachment to land and shared sense of injustice as strengthening trust, solidarity, and commitment within the community. At the same time, moral claims rooted in historical experience support the construction of legitimacy by framing the community’s struggle as justified. These processes indicate that dispositions and practices are closely connected in sustaining collective action.

In this sense, habitus does not operate independently, but interacts with other forms of capital in shaping how resistance is maintained. Overall, the Persil IV case suggests that resistance is not only driven by strategic action but also by deeply internalized orientations that structure collective behavior. These orientations provide continuity in community responses, particularly in situations where formal strategies face constraints. Habitus sustains patterns of mobilization over time, enabling the community to maintain resistance despite prolonged structural pressure and uncertainty.

4.5. Role of Local Government and Other Actors

The findings indicate that the Persil IV conflict involves multiple actors with distinct roles, positions, and interests within the agrarian field. These actors include local community members, state-owned enterprises, government authorities, and external organizations such as student groups and non-governmental organizations.

Interview data suggest that each actor contributes differently to the conflict's dynamics, depending on their access to resources and institutional authority. This variation shapes how power is distributed and exercised throughout the conflict.

Within the community, differences can be observed between core actors and other community members. Core actors, such as local leaders and individuals directly involved in organizing resistance, were described by respondents as playing a central role in coordinating collective action and facilitating decision-making. These actors are often responsible for maintaining communication, organizing activities, and representing the community in interactions with external parties. In contrast, other community members participate in different ways depending on their access to resources, time, and personal circumstances. This internal variation reflects differences in capacity rather than a lack of commitment to the collective struggle.

State and corporate actors occupy a dominant position in the conflict due to their control over legal authority and economic resources, as reflected in both documents and respondent accounts. PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II), supported by formal legal frameworks, is described as maintaining control over land allocation and access through formal administrative mechanisms. Government authorities and local institutions are formally positioned as regulators, but respondents frequently perceived them as aligned with corporate interests. This perception is linked to the way regulations are implemented and how disputes are handled at the local level.

External actors, including student organizations and advocacy groups, are described as playing a supporting role in strengthening community resistance. These actors provide legal assistance, advocacy, and access to broader networks that extend beyond the local context. Respondents indicated that their involvement helped the community engage more effectively with formal institutions and public discourse. In particular, these connections were seen as important for amplifying community claims and gaining wider attention.

The interaction between these actors indicates that unequal power relations within the agrarian field shape the conflict. While the community mobilizes different forms of capital to sustain resistance, their position remains constrained by structural inequalities associated with institutional authority and resource control. At the same time, the presence of external actors and internal coordination mechanisms enables the community to negotiate these constraints partially. Overall, the findings suggest that resistance emerges not from a single actor, but from the interaction of multiple actors operating within an unequal and dynamic field of power.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that agrarian resistance in Persil IV is shaped by the interaction of multiple forms of capital rather than a single dominant resource. Economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital do not operate as separate categories but function through their dynamic interaction within a structured field. The empirical findings show that these forms of capital are mobilized simultaneously in response to shifting constraints, rather than sequentially or independently. Their effectiveness depends on how they are mobilized, recognized, and sustained over time. This reflects Bourdieu's (1986) argument that capital is not inherently powerful, but becomes effective only within specific configurations of field and legitimacy. At

the same time, the findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that capital conversion is not only relational but also shaped by persistent structural inequalities.

At the same time, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of capital mobilization remains partial and contingent. The dominance of state and corporate actors constrains the extent to which mobilized capital can be converted into meaningful outcomes. Although the community can sustain resistance through multiple forms of capital, this does not necessarily translate into changes in land control or institutional recognition. This highlights a gap between the potential of capital mobilization and its actual capacity to transform power relations in practice. This pattern is consistent with broader agrarian studies that emphasize structural inequality and asymmetrical access to authority (Borras et al., 2011; Borras & Franco, 2013). In this sense, resistance is better understood as a process of negotiation within constraints rather than a pathway to structural transformation.

As summarized in Table 1, the mobilization of capital in Persil IV can be understood through distinct but interconnected mechanisms grounded in empirical observations. Each form of capital contributes differently to sustaining resistance while also facing specific constraints. The findings indicate that resistance is not driven by a single dominant resource but by the cumulative interactions among cultural dispositions, symbolic legitimacy, social networks, and material resources. However, these forms of capital do not reinforce each other linearly or stably. Instead, their interaction produces tensions that shape both the possibilities and limits of resistance. This highlights the importance of examining not only capital availability but also the conditions under which it can be effectively mobilized.

Cultural capital plays a central role in shaping how the community understands land, identity, and justice. The findings show that attachment to land is not only economic but also moral and social. This attachment is rooted in long-term cultivation experiences and intergenerational memory, which produce a shared orientation toward resistance. Such dispositions shape how community members define legitimate livelihoods and acceptable forms of engagement with external actors. This attachment structures a refusal to be incorporated into plantation labor systems, even when alternative sources of income are available. While this strengthens commitment to resistance, it also reduces flexibility in responding to economic change. This tension reflects the dual character of habitus as both enabling and constraining action (Bourdieu, 1991).

The effectiveness of cultural capital depends on its conversion into symbolic capital, yet this process is uneven, contingent, and continuously contested. Historical narratives, surat izin garap, and everyday practices of land occupation are mobilized to construct legitimacy. However, the findings show that legitimacy does not consistently translate into enforceable rights. Legal recognition may be achieved, but implementation remains uncertain. This reflects the broader dynamics of land conflict as a struggle over authority and recognition (Peluso & Lund, 2011). The overturning of court decisions further illustrates that recognition does not guarantee enforcement (Liao & Agrawal, 2024). This disjuncture highlights the fragility of symbolic capital within a field dominated by institutional power.

Social capital serves as a mediating factor between internal cohesion and external engagement. Internally, networks of trust and reciprocity enable sustained collective action and function as a key resource for resilience (Bebbington, 2007). These networks support coordination, information sharing, and collective decision-making over time. Externally, alliances with NGOs, student movements, and advocacy groups extend the reach of resistance into broader arenas, enhancing visibility and access to institutional processes (Putnam, 2000). At the same time, social capital is not uniformly stable or enabling. Instances of internal mistrust,

fragmentation, and contestation indicate that it must be continuously negotiated (Fox, 2014). These dynamics reveal that collective action depends not only on cohesion but also on the ability to manage internal differences. In this sense, social capital operates simultaneously as a resource and a potential source of vulnerability.

Economic capital functions as a material enabling condition for resistance. The financing of litigation, logistical coordination, and subsistence activities indicates that resistance is materially demanding. Without sustained financial resources, engagement with formal legal processes would not be possible. However, the uneven distribution of economic resources introduces internal differentiation, where the capacity to contribute materially may influence participation and decision-making. This creates variations in influence within the movement, even as collective goals are shared. This suggests that capital mobilization is not neutral but may reproduce inequalities within the community.

The findings suggest that capital mobilization operates through a process of cumulative interaction and selective conversion. Cultural capital generates dispositions, symbolic capital produces legitimacy, social capital organizes action, and economic capital sustains implementation.

However, each form of capital is constrained by both internal tensions and external structural limitations. These constraints shape not only the effectiveness of resistance, but also its long-term sustainability. This extends Bourdieu's relational perspective by showing that capital conversion is not only relational but also structurally limited (Hall et al., 2011).

This perspective also invites a reconsideration of Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance. The findings indicate that everyday practices initially functioned as survival strategies under repression, but later evolved into more organized forms of resistance. This shift reflects changes in both resource availability and political opportunity. Rather than a fixed category, everyday resistance can be understood as a continuum in which forms of action change in response to shifting conditions (Scott, 1985). This perspective highlights the dynamic and adaptive nature of resistance practices over time.

Despite the community's ability to mobilize multiple forms of capital, the findings consistently point to structural limits. Legal recognition does not ensure implementation, symbolic legitimacy does not guarantee redistribution, and social alliances cannot fully overcome institutional asymmetry. These limitations indicate that outcomes are shaped not only by community strategies but also by broader configurations of state power. This reinforces the argument that agrarian conflict is embedded within power structures that privilege capital accumulation over social justice (Borras et al., 2011; Borras & Franco, 2013).

Ultimately, the Persil IV case suggests that agrarian resistance is both enabled and constrained by capital mobilization. While the integration of multiple forms of capital allows communities to sustain long-term struggle, it does not necessarily lead to structural transformation. Instead, resistance enables communities to persist within unequal conditions while continuously negotiating access, recognition, and legitimacy. This highlights resistance as an ongoing and adaptive process rather than a definitive pathway to change.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how rural communities mobilize different forms of capital to resist state-led land grabbing in Persil IV, North Sumatra, and found that agrarian resistance is sustained not by a single dominant resource but through the relational and cumulative mobilization of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. These forms of capital operate in combination, allowing the community to sustain collective action over time despite structural

inequality, highlighting that resistance depends on the capacity to combine and adapt resources under constraint rather than on resource availability alone. Rather than merely facilitating resistance, capital mobilization shapes how resistance is practiced, sustained, and constrained: cultural capital anchors resistance in identity and historical continuity; its conversion into symbolic capital supports claims of legitimacy; social capital enables coordination and external engagement; and economic capital allows participation in formal institutional processes. These forms of capital constitute a mechanism that enables communities to persist in the face of prolonged dispossession, yet the findings also indicate that such mobilization does not fundamentally alter the structure of agrarian inequality. The dominance of state and corporate actors limits the conversion of capital into enforceable rights, resulting in a persistent gap between legitimacy and authority, where legal recognition remains uncertain, symbolic claims remain vulnerable to reversal, and social alliances are insufficient to overcome institutional asymmetry. This study contributes to agrarian political economy by situating capital mobilization within a relational framework of habitus and field, shifting the analytical focus from resistance as an outcome to resistance as a structured and ongoing process, showing that communities actively construct conditions for endurance rather than oppose dispossession. This reframes resistance not as a guaranteed pathway to transformation, but as a practice of persistence within enduring inequality, and suggests that without changes in the broader configuration of state power and institutional authority, capital mobilization will likely remain a mechanism of survival rather than a driver of redistribution, highlighting the need to connect micro-level resistance with broader structural transformation.

7. Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank all parties who have contributed to this research. The support and cooperation provided during the research process are highly appreciated. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the authors.

8. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest regarding this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

References

- Bae, Y. J. (2019). A displaced community's perspective on land-grabbing in Africa: The case of the Kalimkhola community in Dwangwa, Malawi. *Land*, 8(12), 187. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land8120187>
- Bavinck, M., Berkes, F., Charles, A., Dias, A. C. E., Doubleday, N., Nayak, P., & Sowman, M. (2017). The impact of coastal grabbing on community conservation: A global reconnaissance. *Maritime Studies*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40152-017-0062-8>
- Borras, S. M., & Franco, J. C. (2013). Global land grabbing and political reactions from below. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(9), 1723–1747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.843845>
- Borras, S. M., Hall, R., Scoones, I., White, B., & Wolford, W. (2011). Towards a better understanding of global land grabbing: An editorial introduction. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(2), 209–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.559005>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., & Ferguson, P. P. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dellah, R. R., & Salim, M. N. (2017). Akuisisi tanah-tanah rakyat: Problem HGU PT BMS di Rejang Lebong dan jalan penyelesaiannya. *Bhumi: Jurnal Agraria dan Pertanahan*, 3(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.31292/jb.v3i1.224>
- Gagné, M. (2019). Resistance against land grabs in Senegal: Factors of success and partial failure of an emergent social movement. *Research in Political Sociology*, 173–203. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0895-993520190000026012>
- Giguère, B., Lalonde, R. N., & Jonsson, K. (2012). The influence of traditions on motivated collective actions: A focus on native land reclamation. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 44(3), 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028597>
- Khan, A., & Lasslett, K. (2023). We will give our blood, but not our land: Repertoires of resistance and state-organized land grabbing at a Bangladeshi tea plantation. *State Crime*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.13169/statecrime.12.1.0068>
- Kumi, E., & Arhin, A. (2022). Surreptitious symbiosis in promoting advocacy: Collaboration among non-governmental organizations, social movements, and activists in West Africa. In *Routledge handbook* (pp. 162–176). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003241003-14>
- Lee, Z. Y. (2023). Plantation life: Corporate occupation in Indonesia's oil palm zone. *Agricultural History*, 97(4), 710–712. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00021482-10796116>
- Liao, C., & Agrawal, A. (2024). Towards a science of land grabbing. *Land Use Policy*, 137, 107002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2023.107002>
- Luna, P. F. (2022). De l'usurpation coloniale au landgrabbing. *Le Mouvement Social*, 277(4), 83–98. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lms1.277.0083>
- Manar, P. A., Nurlidha, F. A. H., & Zuhud, E. A. M. (2024). History of land status and land use of large-scale oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 1407(1), 012005. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1407/1/012005>
- Moghadam, V. M. (2022). Advocacy, activism and resistance. In *Routledge handbook* (pp. 77–93). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036432-9>
- Petras, J., & Veltmeyer, H. (2011). Dynamics of agrarian transformation and resistance. In *Palgrave Macmillan eBooks* (pp. 53–78). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117075_4
- Pichler, M. (2015). Legal dispossession: State strategies and selectivities in the expansion of Indonesian palm oil production. *Development and Change*, 46(3), 508–533. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12162>
- Purba, H. (2015). *Reformasi agraria dan tanah untuk rakyat: Sengketa petani vs perkebunan*. Perpustakaan Universitas Katolik Parahyangan.
- Rudina-Ladyzhets, E. (2022). Communities as a driver of territorial development. In *Positive changes* (pp. 48–59). <https://doi.org/10.55140/2782-5817-2022-2-s2-48-59>

- Sauer, S., & Perdigão, F. (2019). Land and territory. In *Routledge handbook* (pp. 113–130). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315621463-7>
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Sinaga, R. P. K. (2022). Peasants' social action strategies in agrarian conflict. *Journal of Peasants' Rights*, 1(1), 20–29. <https://doi.org/10.32734/jpr.v1i1.8192>
- Stanley, E., & McCulloch, J. (2012). *State crime and resistance*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203101063>
- Teodoro, J. I. E., & Rayos Co, J. C. (2009). Community-driven land tenure strategies. *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(2), 415–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809344362>
- Verkoren, W., & Ngin, C. (2017). Organizing against land grabbing in Cambodia. *Development and Change*, 48(6), 1336–1361. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12346>
- Viegas, M. E. F. da S. (2021). Narrativas savantes construindo os territórios. *PerCursos*, 22(48), 128–153. <https://doi.org/10.5965/1984724622482021128>
- Wedig, J. C., & Ramos, J. D. D. (2023). Resistências de povos e comunidades tradicionais. *SER Social*, 25(53). https://doi.org/10.26512/ser_social.v25i53.46324
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Zeka, S. (2013). *Land restitution and conservation: Social capital in the Mkambati community* (Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal).

About the Authors

- 1) **Linda Elida** obtained her Master's degree (S2) from the University of North Sumatra, Indonesia, in 2000, and completed her Doctoral degree (S3) at the same institution in 2025. She is currently a lecturer in the Sociology Study Program at the University of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Her academic interests include agrarian conflict, social capital, community development, and rural sociology.
Email: linda1@usu.ac.id
- 2) **Ahmad Sayyidulhaq Arrobbani** Lubis is currently pursuing his Master's degree (S2) in Sociology at the University of North Sumatra, Indonesia, where he enrolled in 2024. His academic interests include agrarian studies, social movements, and rural community dynamics.
Email: ahmadsayyidulhaq@gmail.com
- 3) **Ahmad Taufan Damanik** obtained his Master's degree (MA) in Social and Political Sciences and currently serves as a lecturer in the Political Science Study Program at the University of North Sumatra, Indonesia. His academic interests include political sociology, agrarian politics, democracy, and clientelism. He has been actively involved in research and publications on electoral dynamics, political identity, and state–society relations in Indonesia.
Email: taufandamanik@usu.ac.id