

Resolving Community–Corporate Conflicts: Evidence from North Sumatra, Indonesia

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ABSTRAK.

Sengketa antara masyarakat dengan perusahaan di Sumatera Utara merupakan persoalan yang terus berulang dan kompleks, terutama terkait dengan hak atas tanah, hak ulayat, serta penggunaan sumber daya alam. Konflik ini muncul karena adanya tumpang tindih perizinan, lemahnya pengakuan terhadap hak-hak masyarakat adat, serta praktik ekspansi perusahaan yang kerap mengabaikan aspek sosial dan lingkungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji akar permasalahan sengketa tanah di Sumatera Utara, menganalisis pola penyelesaian konflik yang dilakukan baik melalui jalur litigasi maupun non-litigasi, serta menilai dampaknya terhadap kehidupan sosial, ekonomi, dan politik masyarakat. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah studi pustaka dengan menelaah literatur akademik terkini (2016–2025) serta analisis kasus nyata, seperti sengketa di Puncak Siosar, Pandumaan-Sipituhuta, dan wilayah perkebunan BUMN. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa penyelesaian sengketa sering kali tidak tuntas karena adanya ketidakpastian hukum dan minimnya peran negara dalam menjamin keadilan agraria. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan model penyelesaian konflik yang lebih inklusif, partisipatif, dan berkelanjutan dengan mengutamakan perlindungan hak masyarakat lokal.

Kata Kunci: Sumatera Utara, Sengketa Agraria, Perusahaan Perkebunan

ABSTRACT.

Land disputes between local communities and companies in North Sumatra remain a recurring and complex issue, particularly concerning land rights, customary (ulayat) rights, and the utilization of natural resources. These conflicts often arise due to overlapping permits, weak recognition of indigenous communities' rights, and corporate expansion practices that neglect social and environmental aspects. This study aims to examine the root causes of land disputes in North Sumatra, analyze conflict resolution patterns through both litigation and non-litigation approaches, and assess their impacts on the social, economic, and political lives of local communities. The research method employed is a literature review, focusing on recent academic works (2016–2025) and case studies such as the conflicts in Puncak Siosar, Pandumaan–Sipituhuta, and state-owned plantation areas. The findings indicate that dispute resolution is often inconclusive due to legal uncertainty and the limited role of the state in ensuring agrarian justice..

Keywords: : North Sumatera, Agrarian Disputes, Plantation Company

INTRODUCTION

North Sumatra is a province rich in natural resources and agricultural land. The plantation, forestry, and large estate sectors play an important role in the region's economic development. However, behind these economic benefits lies intense land conflict between local or indigenous communities and corporations, particularly concerning land rights (*ulayat*), land use, and cultivation rights.

One concrete case in North Sumatra is the dispute between local communities and the state-owned plantation company, PT Perkebunan Nusantara, involving land cultivators. The settlement of this dispute remains unresolved, creating legal uncertainty and social inequality between the company and the community.

In addition, tenure conflicts have also emerged in Pandumaan–Sipituhuta, Humbang Hasundutan. There, the indigenous people own a “customary forest” that holds significant economic value; however, overlapping land management between the indigenous community and external parties has occurred.

These issues are exacerbated by unclear regulations, overlapping laws, lack of community participation in the licensing process, and limited legal recognition of indigenous peoples' traditional rights. Another example is research on the registration of *ulayat* land belonging to the Batak Toba customary law community in Samosir Island, which found that converting *ulayat* rights into individual ownership is important to prevent future conflicts.

In terms of dispute resolution, communities often use non-litigation approaches such as mediation, negotiation, and conciliation; however, their effectiveness is often questioned, especially in major land disputes involving large corporations or state-owned enterprises.

METHODS

Research Methods

This research uses a literature review method by examining various relevant academic sources, including journal articles, books, and research reports published between 2016 and 2025. The focus of the study is directed toward research discussing land disputes, agrarian conflicts, indigenous *ulayat* rights, and the relationship between communities and companies in the North Sumatra region.

The research stages consist of:

1. Data Collection

Secondary data were collected through searches in scientific databases such as Google Scholar, university repositories (University of North Sumatra, Labuhan Batu University, Jember University), as well as accredited national journals. The keywords used include *agrarian dispute*, *land conflict*, *indigenous community*, *ulayat rights*, *plantation company*, and *North Sumatra*.

2. Literature Selection

The selected literature is limited to publications from 2016 to 2025 that are directly related to issues of conflict between communities and companies in North Sumatra. The selection criteria

include: (a) topic relevance, (b) clarity of research methodology, and (c) availability of empirical data.

3. Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out using the content analysis method, which involves examining the contents of the literature to identify patterns, main themes, and causal factors of disputes. Furthermore, comparisons were made between various cases to identify similarities and differences in both the root causes and the resolution approaches taken.

4. Synthesis of Findings

The results of the literature analysis were synthesized to obtain a comprehensive overview of the characteristics of disputes between communities and companies in North Sumatra, the patterns of resolution, and the social, economic, and political impacts that arise.

The literature review method was chosen because it allows for a deep conceptual and contextual understanding without the need for direct field research, making it suitable for summarizing complex and multidimensional agrarian issues.

Based on the literature review of dispute cases between communities and companies in North Sumatra, it can be concluded that agrarian conflicts in this region exhibit nearly similar patterns: overlapping land ownership issues, weak protection of *ulayat* (customary) rights, and settlement mechanisms that do not fairly address the interests of local communities. The following section presents the discussion of each case.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Result

Table 1 (Case Decision Results)

CASE	CONFLICT	DECISION
Pandumaan-Sipituhuta vs PT. Toba Pulp Lestari	The Pandumaan–Sipituhuta conflict arose due to the logging of frankincense forests by PT. Toba Pulp Lestari without the consent of the indigenous community. The frankincense forest holds both economic and cultural value for the Batak people. The community resisted through demonstrations, lawsuits, and support from civil society organizations. Important decisions were made in 2016 and 2019 when the government officially designated part of the Pandumaan–Sipituhuta customary forest as <i>hutan adat</i> (customary forest). This indicated state recognition of	The government recognized part of the Pandumaan–Sipituhuta customary forest in 2016 and 2019 but has not fully restored the community’s rights.

	indigenous rights, although it did not fully restore the community's economic losses. These findings align with Sinurat (2019), who emphasized the role of indigenous movements in fighting for <i>ulayat</i> land recognition	
Puncak Siosar Case (Sinabung Relocation)	The relocation of communities affected by the Mount Sinabung eruption to Puncak Siosar in 2016 created new conflicts. Problems arose because the land certificates promised by the government to the evacuees remained unclear, and part of the land was allocated to external parties. This situation caused injustice and disappointment among the displaced people who had lost their homes. Lumbanraja (2019) noted that the land certification issue in Puncak Siosar reflects weak bureaucratic governance in the disaster rehabilitation program. The government's decision to grant only limited land rights (not full ownership) placed the community in a vulnerable position to future conflicts.	The government granted only limited land rights (not full ownership). The land certification conflict remains unresolved.
PTPN II Plantation vs Land Cultivators	The conflict between PTPN II and land cultivators occurred on former HGU (Right of Cultivation) land whose permit had expired. Instead of being returned to the state and distributed fairly, most of the land remained under company control or was transferred to third parties. Kusbianto (2020) explained that the conflict has lasted a long time due to weak land redistribution policies and major economic interests behind plantation concessions. Court rulings often favored the company, emphasizing the formal legality of HGU without considering the social and economic aspects of the cultivators.	The court tended to favor the company's formal legal standing. The conflict continues without fair land redistribution.

Pangkalan Susu Coal-Fired Power Plant (PLTU) Case	The Pangkalan Susu PLTU case reflects the environmental dimension of conflict. Local communities opposed the construction of the power plant due to its impact on health, the sea, and fishermen's livelihoods. Research by Simanjuntak et al. (2024/2025) revealed that air and seawater pollution from the plant had reduced residents' quality of life. Although the company promised compensation, implementation was minimal and failed to address the root causes. The government continued the project, citing national energy needs, making the community feel their right to a healthy environment was ignored. This case highlights the imbalance between development interests and community rights protection.	The government continued the project in the name of national energy needs. Compensation was minimal and failed to resolve the issue.
Customary Forest Dispute around Lake Toba	Around Lake Toba, indigenous communities continue to seek formal recognition of customary forests that have long been their living space. Conflicts arise due to overlapping interests between local communities, tourism companies, and forestry authorities. Naibaho & Su (2025) found that the government has not yet provided strong protection for indigenous rights, despite advocacy from civil society groups. Most conflicts are addressed through local mediation but have yet to produce a binding final decision. The uniqueness of this case lies in its connection to the Lake Toba area, a national super-priority tourism destination, which often places indigenous communities in a weak position compared to tourism industry interests.	No final decision yet. Recognition of indigenous rights remains limited, and the conflict continues through local mediation.

CONCLUSION

The cases of disputes between communities and companies in North Sumatra indicate that agrarian conflicts and natural resource management remain complex structural issues. The Pandumaan–Sipituhuta conflict with PT. Toba Pulp Lestari, the Puncak Siosar relocation due to the Mount Sinabung eruption, disputes over former HGU land of PTPN II, community opposition to the Pangkalan Susu Coal-Fired Power Plant (PLTU), and claims over customary forests around Lake Toba all show similar patterns: weak recognition of indigenous and local community rights, unfair land distribution, and the dominance of corporate and state interests.

Decisions taken by the government or courts often emphasize legal-formal aspects and development interests, while social, cultural, and environmental sustainability aspects are insufficiently considered. Although some progress has been made, such as the recognition of part of the customary forest, most conflicts remain unresolved and even give rise to new grievances.

From these findings, it can be concluded that the resolution of agrarian disputes in North Sumatra requires a more comprehensive approach that prioritizes social justice, recognition of indigenous rights, and sustainable development principles. Moreover, community involvement in decision-making and transparency in resource management must be strengthened to prevent conflicts from recurring in the future.

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