



The Psychological and Social Trauma of the Children in the Agrarian Conflict in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Land conflicts are still a major problem in Indonesia. The study on this paper examined the impact of agrarian conflicts through the children in Indonesia. Agrarian conflicts were not only impact to the landowners, but also have a significant impact on the children who were living in conflict areas. The study attempted the answer how children are involved in agrarian conflicts by highlighting the field context in agrarian conflicts, including psychological, social, and economic impacts? The methodology applied in this study was the qualitative method, with a literature review or desk review approaches and uses the conflict data collection system developed by the HuMa NGO, <https://humawin.huma.or.id>. This study found the trauma in psychological and social trauma to the children in agrarian conflict areas. This study provided comprehensive recommendations to protect and support children affected by agrarian conflicts in Indonesia with the meaningful participation of all multi-stakeholders or parties in the agrarian conflict.

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Introduction

Indonesian government claimed that Indonesia is an agricultural country with most of the population working in the agricultural sector (Setkab, 16/09/2022). However, Conflict over the land and natural resources issues are often found among various factors. They may include members of households, families, clans or ethnic groups, community, governments, and investors or corporations (UNDP, 2012). Natural resource and agrarian conflicts are complex and persistent issues in Indonesia. The root of these conflicts often lies in the inequality in land and natural resource ownership. This inequality is caused by the usurpation of land and natural resource ownership rights. One dominant party seeks to control the land and its wealth, while another party is eroded by the power imbalance, leading to intense conflicts (Huma, 2013).

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Agrarian conflicts go beyond mere land disputes. A conflict is broader than a dispute, which typically refers to a clear legal disagreement between parties that is usually resolved through legal channels. Conflict, however, refers to the perceived differences or opposition between parties. A dispute arises when disagreements escalate into legal rights issues, whereas conflict occurs as soon as differences or opposition emerge, without waiting for them to become legal issues. Conflicts are not necessarily about legal or rights issues but can also involve values, political interests, and moral questions. Therefore, the term 'conflict' will be used in this study (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria, 2022).

It is important to note that conflicts can be latent, meaning that they involve underlying pressures that are not fully developed or surfaced. Conflicts can also be emerging, where the conflicting parties can be identified and acknowledge the existence of the conflict, but the resolution process has not yet developed. Lastly, there are open (manifest) conflicts where the parties are actively involved, possibly entering negotiations to resolve the conflict, but tensions remain high. Agrarian conflicts must be prevented and managed because they impact all aspects of life, including children.

President Joko Widodo's promise to reform agrarian policies to resolve long-standing agrarian conflicts has yet to be fulfilled. This is evident in the increasing number of agrarian conflicts during President Joko Widodo's leadership (2014–2022), as recorded by the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA), with 2,701 conflicts resulting in 814 citizens being abused, 78 shot, 1,934 criminalized, and 69 killed (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria, 2022). Furthermore, KPA data from 2022 shows that these conflicts affected 346,000 families in 33 provinces across Indonesia. So, in this situation, the research questions implied on this condition, how does the children have affected in the agrarian conflict situation? Assuming each family has two children, this means that as many as 692,000 children could be victims of agrarian conflicts. Imagine the trauma of children witnessing their parents, relatives, and neighbors being abused, criminalized, and even killed. These children may become neglected, and their education may be abandoned, leading them to harbor resentment and learn violence from their experiences (KPA, 2022).

According to the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) 2015, states that Indonesia needs to have a conflict resolution, in resolving land conflicts between local communities and companies. Therefore, the business development that utilizes the large land plantations has great potential overlap to the residents and forest area (Widiyanto, 2012). However, there is gap in order land and agrarian conflicts, children are often the forgotten as the victims. They suffer serious impacts, both directly and indirectly, due to the tension and violence surrounding them. Furthermore, this study will examine how is the agrarian conflict impacted in children by using literature reviews that relevant to this issue such as: Ecological Development Theory by Bronfenbrenner, Psychosocial Theory by Erik Erikson, and Child Trauma which marked by having symptom as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Ecological Development Theory

The ecological development theory used in this study is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1989), which explains that human development, starting from childhood, is influenced by the surrounding environment (Crawford, 2020). Bronfenbrenner identifies several layers as environmental structures:

- a. **Microsystem:** This layer is closest to the child and involves direct interaction with the child. It includes relationships and interactions between the child and their immediate surroundings, such as family, neighbors, and childcare environments (Berk, 2000).
- b. **Mesosystem:** This layer emphasizes the connections between structures within the child's microsystem, such as the relationship between parents and teachers, or between places of worship and the home environment (Berk, 2000).
- c. **Exosystem:** This layer defines larger social systems where the child does not directly function but still interacts with the microsystem (Berk, 2000). As an

example: parental work schedules or community-based family resources (Crawford, 2020).

- d. **Macrosystem:** This outer layer consists of cultural values, customs, laws, and norms that influence all other layers (Berk, 2000). For example, in a culture where parents are solely responsible for raising children, there may be little societal support for them, impacting the child's microsystem. Cultural and also societal influences play important roles in childrens' development such as laws, values, and also ideologies (Crawford, 2020).
- e. **Chronosystem:** This layer encompasses all systems and affects the child's behavior over time (Purnama, 2016, in Yuliawan & Taryatman, 2020), this includes changes in family structure (divorce), parental employment status, conflicts, wars, and the technological era (gadgets, IoT, etc.).

This theory helps explain how a child's development and behavior are influenced when they live amid agrarian conflicts. It also highlights the potential impacts if a child grows up in a conflict zone, including agrarian conflicts, despite laws like the Child Protection Law No. 23 of 2003 then updated with Law No. 35 of 2014 (Indonesia regulation, 2014).

Psychosocial Theory by Erik Erikson (1968)

Erikson's psychosocial theory outlines stages that every human must go through from birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. If an individual encounters failure at any stage, it can lead to ongoing issues in subsequent stages. There are eight stages: Trust vs. Mistrust (0–18 months); Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months–3 years); Initiative vs. Guilt (3–5 years); Industry vs. Inferiority (6–11 years); Identity vs. Role Confusion (12–18 years); Intimacy vs. Isolation (18–40 years); Generativity vs. Stagnation (40–65 years); and Ego Integrity vs. Despair (>65 years). The early stages are crucial, as they form the foundation for a human being's life. For instance, from birth to 18 months, a person begins to develop trust in their surroundings. If the immediate environment fails to provide this, the individual may grow up with suspicion and fear of the future, impacting subsequent stages (E. Erikson, 1968; E. H. Erikson & Erikson, 1997).

Child Trauma in Conflict

Every conflict, especially those involving violence, impacts children. If the psychosocial effects on children have been discussed above, this section will address how trauma in conflict environments can cause trauma-related impacts. Various studies have documented the impact of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) on children who live or are directly involved in violent conflicts in their environment. M. J. D. Jordans and W.A Tol (2018) stated that children who have faced specific conflict-related events is justified, or whether the scarce resources for mental health should be spent on the development of services for children more broadly in low- and middle-income countries (where most contemporary armed conflicts are taking place). during traumatic events, the emotional and perceptual features of the situation become 'burned' into memory, forming the core of a neural network associated with the traumatic event. This memory becomes linked to similar elements, such as rapid heartbeats, excessive sweating, feelings of helplessness, cognitive fears like feeling powerless, and sensory triggers like seeing people in uniform or weapons. This network connection strengthens over time, leading to fragmented autobiographical memories.

Numerous studies link trauma spectrum disorders (particularly PTSD) to increased somatic complaints, such as cardiovascular, pulmonary, neurological, and gastrointestinal complaints; various types of somatic pain; vulnerability to infectious diseases, hypertension, and heart disease; thyroid dysfunction and other hormonal disorders; cancer risk; susceptibility to infections and autoimmune disorders; and problems with pain perception, pain tolerance, and chronic pain (de Young et al., 2011;

Fernandez et al., 2024; Gkena et al., 2023; Matson et al., 2024; Meiser-Stedman et al., 2017; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Sultana et al., 2024).

During childhood and the transition to adulthood, stress can significantly affect cognitive and emotional development. High and significant stress exposure during these sensitive developmental periods causes the child's brain to develop in response to stress, making them more likely to quickly shift to anger, aggression, or avoidance when threatened.

From the above explanation, it can be concluded that stress due to a conflict environment causes mental vulnerability, particularly during childhood and adolescence, leading to long-term physical and mental impacts. Physically, children may experience health problems such as pain, infectious diseases, heart disorders, hypertension, etc. Mentally, they may suffer from nightmares, aggression, quick anger, avoidance when problems arise, etc. In severe cases, they may become prone to violence and criminal behavior as adults.

Problem Statement and Methodology

This paper aimed to examine the main research question, how agrarian conflicts impact children in Indonesia? According to Indonesian law the children should be protected by the state from conflicts through legislation, such as Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection, which was later updated with Law No. 35 of 2014 on Amendments to Law No. 23 of 2002 (Indonesia Regulation, 2022), emphasizing in Article 15 that children have the right to protection from involvement in armed conflicts, social unrest, and violent events, the reality is that children still fall victim to and are impacted by agrarian conflicts.

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative, with a literature review or desk review approach. Qualitative method is the main method in this research which used to carry out and analyze the data. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials case study, personal experience, observation and describes the problematic moments, (Denzim, 2020).

The resources of agrarian conflict were conducted by HuMa, the NGO has been actively documenting natural resource conflicts in Indonesia. HuMa's documentation tool known as HuMaWin is available in a web-based version of <https://humawin.huma.or.id> to make it easier for users to view the processed conflict data. This web-based version of Humawin helps users to quickly identify the processed results in terms of quantity. The form of a report on the number of conflict typologies, disputing parties, conflict areas, distribution, perpetrators, and violated rights can be easily accessed in this system. The conflict data documented by HuMa is in the form of primary and secondary data collected by 6 HuMa partners and the HuMa network spread across many places in Indonesia such as Aceh, West Sumatera, Papua, West Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, Central Java. The raw data is then processed in conflict indicators categories in HuMaWin (Huma, 2024).

The research analysis conducted is included the category of library research. Moreover, the data collection technique used by collecting various journal articles, documents, books that related to agrarian conflict over natural resources between community and company. It is useful to examine the ownership over the land, reflects an attempt to secure an in depth understanding of the land tenure phenomenon in question, (Flick, 2002). Data collection was conducted by gathering information from secondary sources, including published and unpublished written works (Kisworo & Sofana, 2017). This paper compiled various literature sources related to agrarian conflicts, child victims of agrarian conflicts, and trauma in children.

Results

Children in Agrarian Conflicts

Indonesia has many agrarian conflicts. According to data from HuMa (2024), there are 574 agrarian conflict cases in 30 provinces across Indonesia.



Figure 1. Conflict Distribution Map by Humawin (2024) can access <https://humawin.huma.or.id>

The most cases were recorded in East Java Province, with 79 cases, while some provinces have no recorded cases, including Riau Islands Province, West Sulawesi, North Maluku, and Gorontalo. However, it is important to remember that this number only represents conflicts that have been identified or surfaced. There may be many more agrarian conflicts that are hidden or yet to be identified.

This data aligns with records from the Agrarian Reform Consortium and the Asia NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, which note that Indonesia has the highest number of agrarian conflicts in Southeast Asia, with 241 conflicts seizing 638,188 hectares of agricultural land, customary areas, fishing grounds, and settlements from 135,608 households. Of these conflicts, 94% of the victims were individuals, and 84% of the affected households were families. These numbers have increased and align with previous data indicating that these figures only represent identified or reported conflicts, making the data indicative (HuMa, 2013).

The strategic national program (PSN) acceleration and expansion of Indonesia's economic development (KPA, 2024) assert that, the economic corridors designed to produce a specific global commodity. Forestry and mining became the main establishment of the three fundamental problems that is the damage of the environment, the distribution of land tenure and natural resources are lame. The cause of agrarian conflicts, there are some differences of the actors before and after reformation era that involved in agrarian conflict as described below:

Actors	Agrarian Conflict	
	Before Reformation Era	Reformation Era
The actors who involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central Government - National Cooperation - Military - Community - NGO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central Government and local government - Military - National Cooperation - Community - NGO - International Agency
Pattern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centralistic, Central government as absolute controller 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spread and central government and local government as facilitators

Table The Actors of Agrarian Conflict (Huma, 2024)

The entry of large-scale companies has been shown since 1967, the first time, Indonesia invite foreign investors to start exploiting global scale of agrarian resources that exist in Indonesia (Mulyani, 2014). The corporation of palm oil plantation, mining, and timber pulp and paper concession had increased the conflict zone area. For instance, Kalimantan Island, the expansion of palm oil plantation even in peat lands area is conduct with large scale company and tends to be uncontrolled by the government. In the social perspective, Central Kalimantan has turned into a potential agrarian conflict region, such as the conflict with plantation corporations (HuMa, 2013). The consequence of the palm oil expansion is the increasing the agrarian conflict over natural resources.

These figures do not include the child and female victims who are most affected by agrarian conflicts. So far, there is no exact data on the number of children and women involved in or affected by agrarian conflicts, but the Agrarian Reform Consortium (KPA) estimates that 135,608 households are affected, meaning that if each household has two to four children, there could be between 271,216 and 542,432 child victims of agrarian conflicts (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria, 2022). The lack of exact data on children affected or involved in agrarian conflicts shows that they are often neglected and forgotten.

Children's rights, which should be the responsibility of the state and society, are not fulfilled due to conflicts. One example is what happened in Kabuyu Village, Pasangkayu Regency, West Sulawesi. Kabuyu Village has been dominated by the private company PT Astra Agro Lestari (AAL), which seized the land that the community used for farming and cultivation. When PT AAL took over the land for oil palm plantations, the community was forced to find alternative livelihoods, such as working in factories or doing odd jobs. Children were also forced to help make a living by collecting fallen oil palm fruit to sell.

Collecting oil palm fruit is relatively easy but requires entering company-owned plantation land, so they are often chased away by security officers if caught. These children are considered thieves, and the security officers often resort to vigilantism rather than applying 'restorative justice.' Restorative justice is a reconciliation process for resolving conflicts. This approach values the victim's recovery more than punishing the perpetrator, known as restrictive justice (Johnstone & Ness, 2007; Malik, 2017)

The reality of child labor as one of the impact of agrarian conflict was also confirmed by Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO). In 2018, FAO also reported that child laborers in agriculture has increased significantly from 98 million to 108 million in 6 years due to prolonged conflicts and also climate disasters (FAO, 2018). This data is also being ignored for a long time. It is not only happened in Indonesia but in

the whole world such as in Lebanon and Uganda. In agrarian conflicts, victims are often forgotten, especially children. Children are considered not yet mature, so their voices are ignored, but on the other hand, they are required to fulfill adult responsibilities, such as helping to earn a living.

Impact of Agrarian Conflict on Children

The agrarian conflicts in some area affect the psychological and social trauma to children. There are at list four impact in children: *first*, emotional and psychological disturbances. Children may experience various issues, such as anxiety, depression, and stress due to the conflict. Children exposed to violence and traumatic events repeatedly without intervention or recovery will suffer from severe emotional and psychological disturbances. This aligns with ecological development theory, which states that a child's environment significantly impacts their growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). In this theory, the child's microsystem and mesosystem are the most influential because they directly relate to the child's growth. The microsystem, such as parents and family, impacts the child if they are involved in or affected by the conflict (Morris et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the mesosystem is often overlooked because it requires environments such as schools, which may be unavailable or missed due to the conflict. *Second*, limited rights and access to basic needs to children. A conflict environment makes it difficult for children to obtain their basic rights, such as security, education, health, and play. When conflict occurs, schools are often closed due to the unavailability of safe and conducive conditions. In some cases, children may lose their lives or their right to live. Furthermore, limited access to healthcare and malnutrition can also affect a child's growth and development, leading to unmet needs.

Third, family instability. Agrarian conflicts can emotionally and economically impact families, as they lose their livelihoods due to the seizure of their agricultural land, which is then converted into oil palm plantations owned by large companies. Several studies have shown that economic pressure can affect a child's social-emotional development. Simons et al., (1991) emphasized that adolescents who grow up in families under economic pressure are at risk of being raised in an environment of violence, affecting their social-emotional development. Weiss (2009) also stressed that the relationship between parents and children in economically troubled families tends to be less sensitive and difficult to respond to the child's needs, resulting in cold, negative attitudes and rejection. Children then imitate how their parents behave towards family members and peers, from childhood to adolescence and even adulthood. Children also eventually help to earn a living, as seen in the agrarian conflict in Kabuyu Village, Pasangkayu Regency, West Sulawesi, where children also help earn a living by collecting leftover oil palm fruit (brondolan) and risk being caught by the company's security officers. When caught, they are often beaten and judged by the security officers, as recounted by Mawan in Mongabay (2023). *Fourth*, child involvement in conflict. In many conflict cases, children are often directly or indirectly involved, either as victims or perpetrators (Murphy et al., 2017). This involvement is often unnoticed by adults, resulting in the child's rights being ignored, and, worse, it can lead to criminality. However, child protection is clearly regulated in Law No. 23 of 2002, Article 15, which states that every child has the right to protection from involvement in armed conflict, social unrest, violence, and war (Indonesia, 2002).

Conclusion

The study on children amid of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia reveals the profound and often overlooked impacts these conflicts have on the youngest and most vulnerable members of society. Agrarian conflicts, which stem from deep-rooted issues of land and resource inequality, do not merely involve landowners and adults but extend their detrimental effects to children who live in the conflict zones.

Children are subjected to a range of adverse consequences, including emotional and psychological disturbances, disruption of their basic rights and access to necessities such as education and healthcare, and destabilization of their family environments. The exposure to violence and trauma during their formative years can lead to long-term mental and physical health issues, including conditions like PTSD, anxiety, depression, and a predisposition to aggressive behaviors.

The current legislative framework in Indonesia, while aiming to protect children from such conflicts, is insufficiently enforced, leading to children being drawn into conflicts as both victims and, in some cases, participants. Despite the presence of laws designed to shield children from these adverse experiences, the reality on the ground shows a significant gap in protection and advocacy.

The study underscores the necessity of holistic and multi-faceted approaches to mitigate the impact of agrarian conflicts on children. Key recommendations include stronger advocacy for children's rights, effective psychosocial interventions to address trauma, community empowerment to prevent conflicts, and education to raise awareness about the impact of conflicts on children. Furthermore, addressing the economic roots of these conflicts through local economic development is essential to reduce violence and create a more stable environment for children.

Ultimately, the study calls for a concerted effort from the government, law enforcement, communities, and civil society to prioritize the protection of children in conflict areas and to implement strategies that will ensure their safety, well-being, and future development.

Recommendations

When making recommendations, it is important to note that ceasefires, stopping violence, and efforts to intervene in conflicts are the primary priorities. If violence and conflict can be stopped, recommendations can be implemented. However, some of the recommendations below can also be used as preventive measures and advocacy to ensure that children do not become involved in violence. The recommendations include:

- a. **Advocacy for Child Protection Rights:** Children, who are most vulnerable in conflicts, have become a special focus, leading to the establishment of regulations such as the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts in 2000. In Indonesia, Law No. 23 of 2002 (Indonesia, 2002) on Child Protection was enacted. While the Optional Protocol covers child protection in armed conflicts, Law No. 23 of 2002 is expected to provide broader child protection. Article 15 states that every child has the right to protection from involvement in war, social unrest, armed conflicts, and other forms of violence. Despite being written in law, campaigns and advocacy for child protection are still far from optimal. Therefore, cooperation is needed among ministries, agencies, and related stakeholders to collectively advocate the importance of child protection as a preventive measure, especially in conflict areas. The government and law enforcement must be firm in punishing those who use children in conflicts, directly or indirectly.
- b. **Psychosocial Intervention:** While advocacy focuses more on preventing children's involvement in conflicts, psychosocial intervention is a type of assistance that can be provided if children experience psychological trauma due to agrarian conflicts. Psychosocial intervention involves using various strategies to restructure a child's living environment, create or find sources of support, train children in coping mechanisms, process emotions, express themselves differently, build trust with family and surroundings, and develop a positive self-image from the environment (Irwanto & Hani Kumala, 2020). The key to psychosocial

intervention is the surrounding environment, particularly family and trust. Therefore, it is crucial for families and communities to understand the importance of their role in the process of recovering children's trauma through psychosocial intervention.

- c. **Community Empowerment:** Resolving agrarian conflicts should involve local communities. As previously explained, agrarian conflicts occur due to the seizure of land or territory between groups or companies and local communities that have long inhabited the area. Local communities have relied on these areas for daily life, and in many cases, are highly dependent on them. To stabilize and secure the community environment for children, resolving the conflict requires empowering local communities.
- d. **Education on Conflict and Its Impact:** Educating the public about agrarian conflicts and their impact on children living in conflict-affected areas can raise awareness and prevent violent conflicts. This recommendation can also be included in the previous recommendation on child rights advocacy. Campaigning about the impact of conflict on children is expected to minimize and prevent conflicts.
- e. **Local Economic Development:** The root of conflict and violence often lies in economic problems. For example, in agrarian conflicts, communities that once farmed the land suddenly lose it to palm oil plantations owned by companies or single parties, causing families to lose their livelihoods and suffer a drastic decline in economic stability. In such conditions, violence can occur within families and communities. The central government, in collaboration with local governments, must develop the local economy by creating new jobs and building the region, which will reduce the impact of conflict on children.

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