

Peasant Social Movements and Agrarian Reform in North Sumatra: A Resource Mobilization Theory Perspective on the Struggle for Land Rights

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Abstract : Agrarian conflict remains one of the most persistent sources of social tension in North Sumatra, where former plantation concessions, transmigration settlements, and customary (adat) territories continue to generate disputes over land rights. This article examines how peasant communities and their allied organizations mobilize resources to sustain their struggle for agrarian reform in the province. Using Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) as an analytical lens, the study draws on a qualitative literature and documentary review of scholarly publications, policy analyses, and case reports concerning agrarian movements in North Sumatra and comparable regions of Indonesia. The findings show that peasant movements mobilize four interlocking resource types (material, human, moral, and cultural-organizational) channeled through farmer associations, faith-based institutions, non-governmental intermediaries, and broader civil-society coalitions. These movements employ framing strategies, legal advocacy, and contentious collective action to press claims against both state agencies and corporate land users. Structural asymmetries in political and legal resources, however, continue to constrain the movements' bargaining position. The article concludes that sustainable agrarian reform in North Sumatra requires strengthening peasant organizational capacity and more inclusive, multi-stakeholder resource mobilization.

Keywords : Agrarian Reform; Resource Mobilization Theory; Peasant Social Movement; Land Rights; North Sumatra

Abstrak : Konflik agraria masih menjadi salah satu sumber ketegangan sosial yang paling persisten di Sumatera Utara, di mana bekas konsesi perkebunan, permukiman transmigrasi, dan wilayah hukum adat terus memunculkan sengketa atas hak atas tanah. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana komunitas petani beserta organisasi pendukungnya memobilisasi sumber daya untuk mempertahankan perjuangan reforma agraria di provinsi tersebut. Dengan menggunakan Teori Mobilisasi Sumber Daya (Resource Mobilization Theory) sebagai kerangka analisis, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kajian pustaka dan dokumentasi kualitatif atas publikasi ilmiah, analisis kebijakan, dan laporan kasus mengenai gerakan agraria di Sumatera Utara serta wilayah lain di Indonesia sebagai pembandingan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa gerakan petani memobilisasi empat jenis sumber daya yang saling terkait (material, manusia, moral, dan kultural-organisasional) yang disalurkan melalui asosiasi

petani, lembaga keagamaan, perantara nonpemerintah, dan koalisi masyarakat sipil yang lebih luas. Gerakan-gerakan ini menggunakan strategi framing, advokasi hukum, dan aksi kolektif kontesitif untuk menekan klaim terhadap aparat negara maupun korporasi pengguna lahan. Meskipun demikian, ketimpangan struktural dalam sumber daya politik dan hukum tetap membatasi posisi tawar gerakan tersebut. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa reforma agraria yang berkelanjutan di Sumatera Utara memerlukan penguatan kapasitas organisasi petani dan mobilisasi sumber daya multipihak yang lebih inklusif.

Kata Kunci : Reforma Agraria; Teori Mobilisasi Sumber Daya; Gerakan Sosial Petani; Hak Atas Tanah; Sumatera Utara

INTRODUCTION

Land has never been a neutral object in North Sumatra's social history. Since the colonial plantation belt was carved out along the province's east coast, access to land has been entangled with questions of labor, ethnicity, and state authority (Sinurat, 2023). The New Order government's agrarian political framework, anchored in the 1967 Basic Forestry Law and related plantation regulations, reinforced a pattern in which the state and large corporations controlled vast tracts of land while smallholders and former plantation workers were left to negotiate access at the margins (Sinurat, 2023; Wiryani & Najih, 2023). Decades later, this structural legacy still shapes the agrarian landscape of the province: unresolved transmigration land certificates (Medaline & Moertiono, 2023), disputed customary (adat) territories belonging to Batak communities (Simamora et al., 2025), and long-running conflicts between farmers and plantation or tourism concessionaires continue to surface across North Sumatra's regencies.

Indonesia's agrarian reform program (Reforma Agraria), formalized through Presidential Regulation No. 86 of 2018 on agrarian reform objects, was designed to redress these imbalances by redistributing land and legalizing informal or contested holdings (Sumanto, 2023). Yet implementation research across the country shows that redistribution and asset legalization efforts are frequently slowed by bureaucratic inertia, unresolved historical claims, and asymmetries of power between farmers, government agencies, and private capital (Saimar et al., 2024; Sopyan & Sidipurwanti, 2024; Nuryasinta & Pangestika, 2025). In North Sumatra specifically, the persistence of agrarian conflict has been shown to erode farmers' trust in political institutions (Anshari et al., 2024), while disputes such as the Siraso-Raso inheritance case (Rahman & Winanti, 2025) and the Simardangiang customary-land dispute in Tapanuli Utara (Simamora et al., 2025) illustrate how land conflicts intersect with kinship, inheritance law, and indigenous rights. At a broader analytical level, Sinaga and Fahadayna (2024) frame North Sumatra's protracted land disputes as a case of "illiberal peacebuilding," in which democratic transition has not been accompanied by effective mechanisms for resolving legacies of authoritarian-era land dispossession.

Against this backdrop, peasant communities in North Sumatra have not remained passive. They have organized, petitioned, allied with non-governmental organizations, and, at times, engaged in open contention with state agencies and corporate landholders. Nationally, comparable dynamics have been documented in cases such as the farmer movement in Cisarua, Bogor, whose sustained collective action shaped the trajectory of local agrarian reform implementation (Maulana & Shohibuddin, 2024), and in confrontations between peasant communities, the state, and corporations over land dispossession elsewhere in Indonesia (Totona et al., 2025). Studies of environmental and urban movements, such as WALHI's #SaveMeratus campaign (Riyadi & An'Amta, 2023) and the Bandungbergerak-Dago Elos land-rights advocacy (Maharani et al., 2025), likewise demonstrate how Indonesian civil society mobilizes material, organizational, and symbolic resources to sustain long-term struggles against powerful opponents.

These empirical patterns resonate strongly with Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), a

sociological perspective that shifts the analytical focus away from grievance alone and toward the organizational capacity of movements to marshal resources (money, labor, legitimacy, networks, and framing) in pursuit of collective goals (Asyifani, 2024; Nasrullah, 2025). RMT scholarship on Indonesian social movements has shown that success in contentious politics depends heavily on internal coalition management and external alliance-building (Asyifani, 2024), and that framing strategies borrowed from classical social-movement theorists such as Tilly and Melucci remain analytically productive for understanding how Indonesian movements construct collective identity and public legitimacy (Nasrullah, 2025). However, few studies have applied this framework specifically to the agrarian struggles of North Sumatra, where movements are shaped by a distinctive combination of plantation history, ethnic land tenure systems, church-based civil society, and post-authoritarian land governance.

This article addresses that gap by asking: how do peasant communities and their allied organizations in North Sumatra mobilize resources to sustain their struggle for agrarian reform and land rights, and what factors constrain the effectiveness of that mobilization? Using RMT as an analytical lens, this article synthesizes existing scholarship and documentary evidence to map the resource types, mobilizing structures, and strategic repertoires that characterize North Sumatra's peasant movements, and to identify the structural constraints that continue to limit their bargaining power vis-à-vis the state and corporate actors.

METHODS

This article employs a qualitative research design based on a literature and documentary study (*studi kepustakaan*), which is appropriate for building a theoretically grounded, synthetic analysis of a social phenomenon that has already been documented across multiple independent sources rather than generating new primary field data. The unit of analysis is the peasant social movement and its allied organizations operating in the context of agrarian reform and land-rights struggles in North Sumatra, situated comparatively against similar movements elsewhere in Indonesia.

Data were collected through a systematic search and review of peer-reviewed journal articles, case studies, and policy-oriented publications addressing agrarian conflict, agrarian reform implementation, customary land rights, and social-movement mobilization in Indonesia, with particular attention to sources discussing North Sumatra, Tapanuli Utara, and comparable plantation-belt or transmigration regions. Sources were selected based on thematic relevance to three criteria: (1) empirical or conceptual treatment of agrarian conflict and reform in North Sumatra or structurally similar settings; (2) theoretical or applied engagement with social-movement mobilization, contentious politics, or civil-society advocacy; and (3) recency, prioritizing publications from 2023–2025 to capture the current state of agrarian reform implementation under Presidential Regulation No. 86 of 2018.

Data analysis followed a qualitative content-analysis procedure consisting of three stages: (1) categorization of sources according to the type of resource or mobilizing structure they illustrate (material, human, moral, or cultural-organizational, following the classic resource typology as applied and discussed in the Indonesian social-movement literature; see Riyadi & An'Amta, 2023; Asyifani, 2024); (2) thematic synthesis, comparing patterns of mobilization across cases within and beyond North Sumatra to identify recurring strategies and constraints; and (3) interpretation through the RMT framework to explain how resource availability and organizational capacity shape movement outcomes. Because this study relies entirely on secondary, previously published documentary evidence rather than newly collected interview or survey data, its conclusions should be read as an analytical synthesis rather than as an ethnographic account of any single, currently active movement organization.

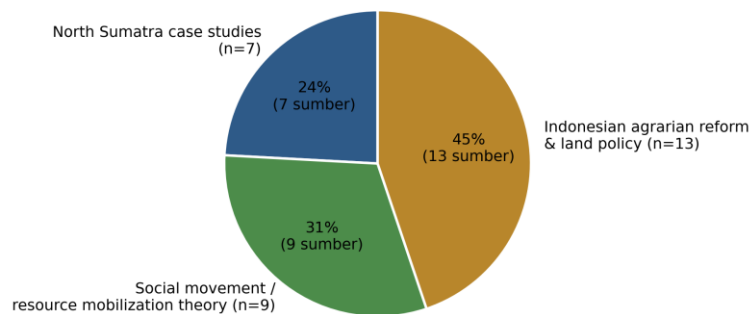
Distribution of Reviewed Literature by Thematic Category (N = 29)

Figure 1. Distribution of the 29 reviewed sources by thematic category. Source: authors' classification of the documentary corpus used in this study.

RESULT AND DISSCOSION

Structural Roots of Agrarian Conflict in North Sumatra

North Sumatra's agrarian conflicts are rooted in overlapping and often unresolved land-tenure regimes. Three structural conditions stand out. First, large areas of former colonial plantation land were converted into state-owned or corporate concessions under the New Order, without fully settling the customary and occupancy rights of surrounding communities (Sinurat, 2023; Wiryani & Najih, 2023). Second, the transmigration program placed hundreds of thousands of settlers on land whose administrative status was frequently left uncertified; Medaline and Moertiono (2023) document that, as of 2019, more than five thousand transmigration land parcels across six regencies in North Sumatra remained without formal certification, a backlog that directly undermines the state's own agrarian reform agenda. Third, indigenous Batak communities continue to press claims over ulayat (customary) land that overlaps with state forest areas or private concessions, as illustrated by the dispute in Simardangiang village, Tapanuli Utara, where the Batak Toba community's customary rights have not been adequately recognized in formal land administration (Simamora et al., 2025).

These structural conditions are compounded by the political economy of land governance more broadly. Hamdhani and Hadiyantina (2025) argue that agrarian reform policy under recent administrations has been shaped by a "neoliberal legal" logic that treats land primarily as an investment asset, a dynamic that tends to privilege large-scale market actors over smallholder claims. Nationally comparable studies confirm that inequality in land tenure has persisted despite decades of formal reform (Umar et al., 2023), and that human-rights-based critiques of reform implementation point to continuing disparities in who ultimately benefits from land legalization and redistribution programs (Earlene & Djaja, 2023). Sinaga and Fahadayna (2024) situate North Sumatra's land disputes within this wider pattern, describing the province's unresolved land conflicts as a symptom of "illiberal peacebuilding": Indonesia's transition from authoritarian rule opened political space for competing economic and political interests to contest land without producing correspondingly robust mechanisms for adjudicating those claims.

The consequences of this unresolved structural conflict are tangible at the community level. Anshari et al. (2024) find that prolonged agrarian conflict measurably erodes farmers' trust in political institutions in North Sumatra, suggesting that unresolved land disputes carry costs not only for household welfare but for the broader legitimacy of local governance. Similarly, disputes such as the Siraso-Raso inheritance case (Rahman & Winanti, 2025) show how land conflict becomes

entangled with family inheritance law, adding further legal complexity to an already contested terrain. Comparable dynamics elsewhere in Indonesia, including land redistribution struggles in Pasaman (Saimar et al., 2024), asset-legalization efforts in Bangka Tengah (Sopyan & Sidipurwanti, 2024), and conflict resolution attempts in Jember (Hastuti & Jabar, 2023), indicate that these structural tensions are not unique to North Sumatra but represent a broader pattern in the implementation of Indonesia's agrarian reform program (see also Bora et al., 2025; Pratama et al., 2025; Nuryasinta & Pangestika, 2025; Earlene & Sitabuana, 2024).

Table 1. Periodization of Agrarian Conflict and Reform in North Sumatra

Period	Key Characteristics	Key Sources
Colonial Plantation Era (pre-1945)	Establishment of the East Sumatra plantation belt; expropriation of communal land for tobacco, rubber, and palm oil concessions under colonial land law.	Sinurat (2023)
New Order Agrarian Politics (1966-1998)	State consolidation of land under the 1967 Basic Forestry Law and plantation regulation; transmigration settlement expands without complete land certification; customary claims subordinated to state development priorities.	Sinurat (2023); Wiryani & Najih (2023)
Post-Reformasi Transition (1998-2014)	Democratization opens political space for land claims to resurface; civil-society and adat advocacy expand, but formal adjudication mechanisms for authoritarian-era disputes remain weak ("illiberal peacebuilding").	Sinaga & Fahadayna (2024)
Contemporary Agrarian Reform Era (2015-present)	Presidential Regulation No. 86/2018 formalizes TORA (Tanah Objek Reforma Agraria); redistribution and certification programs proceed unevenly; peasant movements mobilize resources through farmer groups, churches, and NGO intermediaries.	Sumanto (2023); Medaline & Moertiono (2023); Anshari et al. (2024); Simamora et al. (2025)

Source: synthesized by the author from the reviewed literature.

Resource Mobilization Theory as an Analytical Framework

Resource Mobilization Theory reorients the study of social movements away from the assumption that grievance alone explains mobilization, arguing instead that movements emerge and persist to the extent that aggrieved groups can access and organize resources (material, human, moral, and cultural-organizational) in pursuit of collective goals. Within Indonesian social-movement scholarship, this framework has been applied to explain how environmental and urban-advocacy movements sustain long campaigns against powerful opponents. Riyadi and An'Amta (2023), analyzing the WALHI-led #SaveMeratus campaign, show how the movement combined material resources (funding, legal expertise), human resources (volunteers, activists), moral resources (public sympathy, media coverage), and organizational resources (WALHI's national network) to pressure government decision-makers over mining concessions in a protected karst landscape. Asyifani (2024) extends this analysis by examining how internal coalition management and external alliance-building strategies determine the success of contentious political mobilization, while Nasrullah (2025) demonstrates that classical social-movement concepts, including Tilly's repertoires of contention, Melucci's collective identity, and framing theory more broadly, remain analytically useful tools for interpreting the discursive strategies of Indonesian social movements.

Case studies of localized resistance further illustrate how these resource types operate in practice. Wiranata (2023) shows that disability-rights activism in Bali depends heavily on the phenomenological, identity-based moral resources that individual activists bring to a movement, underscoring that not all resources are organizational or financial in nature. Azis and Sayful (2025), studying community resistance to eviction in Bara-Baraya, Makassar, show how symbolic and confrontational tactics, including forms of vandalism as a repertoire of contention, emerge when conventional advocacy channels are perceived as closed. Youth-movement studies from the reform era (Hadi et al., 2025) similarly show that generational identity and moral resources can

substitute for material resources in mobilizing large-scale participation. These cases collectively demonstrate that RMT is not a rigid checklist but a flexible framework capable of accommodating the diverse organizational forms through which Indonesian civil society pursues collective claims, an insight directly applicable to the study of North Sumatra's peasant movements.

Mobilizing Structures and Resource Types in North Sumatra's Peasant Movements

Applying this framework to North Sumatra reveals a layered ecology of mobilizing structures rather than a single, unified peasant movement organization. Four resource types can be identified as operating in combination.

Material resources in North Sumatra's agrarian struggles are comparatively scarce relative to the state agencies and plantation corporations that peasant movements confront. Farmer groups typically lack the financial capacity to sustain protracted legal battles, which pushes them toward partnerships with better-resourced intermediaries. Pribadi et al. (2025) document the emergence of non-governmental intermediary institutions designed specifically to bridge farmers and government agencies, functioning as an institutional innovation that channels technical, legal, and administrative resources that individual farmer groups cannot generate on their own. This intermediary model parallels the national pattern identified by Maulana and Shohibuddin (2024), in which sustained peasant collective action in Bogor's Cisarua village shaped the trajectory of local agrarian reform precisely because farmers secured external allies capable of supplying advocacy expertise.

Human resources, the labor, participation, and leadership capacity of farmers themselves, are the most immediately available resource for peasant movements, but their effectiveness depends on organization. Where farmer groups in North Sumatra remain fragmented across village or ethnic lines, mobilization tends to be episodic and localized, mirroring similar patterns identified in redistribution struggles in Pasaman (Saimar et al., 2024) and Bangka Tengah (Sopyan & Sidipurwanti, 2024), where sustained community engagement, rather than one-off protest, proved decisive for asset-legalization outcomes.

Moral and cultural resources occupy a distinctive place in North Sumatra given the province's strong tradition of church-based civil society and customary (adat) identity. Kudadiri et al. (2024) show that Protestant church institutions in North Sumatra have historically played an active role in social-justice advocacy, framing land and economic disputes in theological as well as political terms, a moral resource that can lend legitimacy to peasant claims well beyond what secular advocacy alone could achieve. Similarly, Batak customary institutions supply a cultural resource of long-standing territorial claims that movements can invoke when framing disputes such as the Simardangiang case as matters of indigenous rights rather than purely administrative land disputes (Simamora et al., 2025). This is consistent with Nasrullah's (2025) argument that framing rooted in shared identity and moral narrative substantially strengthens a movement's public legitimacy.

Organizational and network resources* determine whether the material, human, and moral resources described above can be coordinated into sustained collective action. Comparative cases such as the Bandungbergerak-Dago Elos land-rights campaign (Maharani et al., 2025) show how the involvement of civil-society networks and independent media platforms can transform an isolated community dispute into a matter of broader public concern, generating pressure that individual communities could not produce alone. In North Sumatra, similar network effects are visible where farmer disputes intersect with the advocacy agendas of national environmental and human-rights networks, though the scale and continuity of these networks remain more limited than in the higher-profile cases documented in Java.

Table 2. Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) Framework Applied to North Sumatra's Peasant Movements

Resource Type	Description	Illustrative Manifestation in North Sumatra	Key Sources
Material	Funding, legal and technical expertise, logistical support for sustained advocacy or litigation.	Non-governmental intermediary institutions bridging farmers and government agencies.	Pribadi et al. (2025); Maulana & Shohibuddin (2024)

Resource Type	Description	Illustrative Manifestation in North Sumatra	Key Sources
Human	Labor, participation, and leadership capacity supplied by farmers and community members themselves.	Farmer group membership and village-level leadership sustaining land-redistribution claims.	Saimar et al. (2024); Sopyan & Sidipurwenty (2024)
Moral / Cultural	Legitimacy, shared identity, and normative framing drawn from religious or customary (adat) sources.	Protestant church advocacy for social justice; Batak Toba adat claims over ulayat land.	Kudadiri et al. (2024); Simamora et al. (2025); Nasrullah (2025)
Organizational / Network	Coalition-building, media platforms, and linkages to national or international civil-society networks.	WALHI-style national campaigns; Bandungbergerak-Dago Elos civil-society coalition model.	Riyadi & An'Amta (2023); Maharani et al. (2025)

Source: synthesized by the author based on McCarthy and Zald's resource typology as applied in the reviewed Indonesian social-movement literature.

Strategies and Structural Constraints

North Sumatra's peasant movements deploy a recognizable repertoire of RMT-consistent strategies. Framing is used to connect localized land disputes to broader narratives of injustice, historical dispossession, or indigenous rights, following the pattern identified by Nasrullah (2025) and echoed in the customary-rights framing used in the Simardangiang dispute (Simamora et al., 2025). Legal advocacy, pursued both independently and through non-governmental intermediaries (Pribadi et al., 2025), remains a core strategy, particularly given that many disputes, such as the Siraso-Raso case, are ultimately adjudicated through formal inheritance or land-registration law (Rahman & Winanti, 2025). Contentious collective action, ranging from organized protest to more confrontational repertoires, is deployed selectively, often when formal channels are perceived as exhausted, mirroring the eviction-resistance dynamics documented in Makassar (Azis & Sayful, 2025) and the coalition-based contentious politics described by Asyifani (2024).

Nonetheless, several structural constraints limit the effectiveness of this mobilization. First, the asymmetry of material and legal resources between farmer communities and state or corporate actors remains substantial; as Hamdhani and Hadiyantina (2025) argue, when land governance is oriented toward investment and market logic, peasant claims are structurally disadvantaged regardless of the sophistication of their mobilization strategy. Second, the persistence of unresolved historical claims, particularly the transmigration certification backlog documented by Medaline and Moertiono (2023), means that movements are frequently mobilizing against a moving and highly bureaucratic target, which dilutes the impact of sustained collective action. Third, Sinaga and Fahadayna's (2024) "illiberal peacebuilding" framing suggests a deeper institutional constraint: without stronger formal mechanisms for adjudicating authoritarian-era land claims, even well-resourced peasant mobilization may achieve only partial or temporary redress. Finally, the erosion of political trust documented by Anshari et al. (2024) raises the risk of a self-reinforcing cycle, in which disillusionment with formal political channels pushes movements toward more contentious repertoires, which in turn may invite state or corporate resistance rather than negotiated settlement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that North Sumatra's peasant movements are best understood not as a single organizational entity but as a shifting configuration of resource-mobilizing actors, including farmer groups, churches, adat institutions, non-governmental intermediaries, and occasional national civil-society allies, whose collective effectiveness depends on how well these resource streams can be coordinated at critical moments of contention. This configuration is broadly consistent with RMT's core proposition that movement outcomes depend less on the intensity of underlying grievance than on the availability and strategic coordination of resources (Riyadi & An'Amta, 2023; Asyifani, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the agrarian reform struggle in North Sumatra through the lens of

Resource Mobilization Theory, showing that peasant communities do not mobilize on the basis of grievance alone but through the strategic combination of material, human, moral, and organizational resources channeled through farmer groups, faith-based institutions, adat structures, and non-governmental intermediaries. The province's agrarian conflicts are structurally rooted in unresolved plantation-era land tenure, an unfinished transmigration-land certification process, and contested customary claims, all of which are compounded by a land-governance regime that tends to privilege investment interests over smallholder claims. Peasant movements respond through framing, legal advocacy, and selective contentious action, yet their bargaining position remains constrained by persistent asymmetries in material and legal resources vis-à-vis state agencies and corporate landholders.

These findings carry several practical implications. First, strengthening the organizational capacity of farmer groups, through federation across village and ethnic lines, would allow human and moral resources to be coordinated more effectively into sustained collective action, rather than dissipating into episodic and localized protest. Second, expanding the role of non-governmental intermediary institutions, following the model documented by Pribadi et al. (2025), could help address the material and technical resource gap that currently limits farmers' capacity to pursue protracted legal claims. Third, government agencies responsible for implementing agrarian reform in North Sumatra should prioritize resolving the transmigration-certification backlog and clarifying the legal status of adat land, since these unresolved administrative conditions continue to generate new grievances faster than existing reform mechanisms can address them. Because this study is based on a synthesis of secondary literature rather than new field data, future research would benefit from in-depth case studies and interviews with specific farmer organizations in North Sumatra to test and refine the resource-mobilization patterns identified here, and to examine how movement strategies evolve in response to changes in national agrarian policy.

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