



Agrarian Conflict between Jambi Transmigrant Farmers and PT. Kaswari Unggul: A Social Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the agrarian conflict between transmigrant farmers in Jambi Province and PT. Kaswari Unggul from a social-historical perspective. The research investigates how the New Order's transmigration policy in the 1980s shaped patterns of land ownership, social change, and agrarian tension in Sukamaju Village, East Tanjung Jabung Regency. Using a critical historical approach combined with qualitative case studies, the data were collected through in-depth interviews, contemporary media analysis, and literature review. The findings reveal that the transmigration program, initially designed to promote equitable population distribution and agricultural productivity, instead generated structural inequalities and land disputes between local communities and private plantation companies. The state's developmental agenda, framed within modernization and economic growth narratives, failed to protect the rights and welfare of transmigrant farmers. The persistence of agrarian conflicts illustrates the long-term social impact of the New Order's policies, which continue to influence rural dynamics and peasant struggles in Jambi today.

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INTRODUCTION

Jambi is a province located in the central region of Sumatra Island. It comprises nine regencies, two cities, 141 districts, and 1,399 villages. The province has a long historical trajectory in the development of civilization, dating back to the era of the Sriwijaya Kingdom—evidenced by the archaeological site of Muaro Temple—up to the final period of the Islamic Kingdom under Sultan Thaha Saifuddin's reign (Mulyana, 2011). During the colonial period, Jambi, like much of Indonesia, endured suffering under both Dutch and Japanese occupation—approximately 36 years and two years respectively—until Indonesia proclaimed its independence in 1945. Following independence, Jambi also experienced the turbulence of the physical revolution period before it was officially designated as a province on August 9, 1957, through a presidential decree issued by President Sukarno in Denpasar, Bali (Lindayanti, 2013).

Entering the New Order era, the Indonesian government launched a transmigration policy aimed at relocating people from densely populated areas to less populated ones, with the goal of achieving a more balanced demographic distribution (Wiradi, 2011). President Soeharto envisioned an even population distribution to reduce congestion on the island of Java while boosting the productivity of rural communities so that they could contribute more effectively to national development. The program primarily targeted farmers with relatively low levels of education and limited economic capacity (Ricklefs, 2019).

The New Order's transmigration policy was gradually implemented beginning in 1980. One of the designated destinations was Suka Maju Village, located in Geragai District, East Tanjung Jabung Regency, Jambi Province. Jambi was chosen for its vast land resources and agricultural potential, deemed suitable for both farming and plantation development. Thousands of residents from Java were relocated with the promise of a better, more prosperous life (Sidel, 2021).

However, upon arrival, the transmigrants' hopes quickly faded. The land allocated to them turned out to be peatland, unfit for cultivation and prone to repeated crop failures. Recognizing this, the New Order government



resource management, as revealed through field research, digital studies, and library analysis. Meanwhile, Julieta ([2022](#)) identified significant obstacles in resolving agrarian conflicts in East Tanjung Jabung Regency, primarily due to difficulties in reconciling disputing parties, with the most influential actors being the Regional Secretary, the Government Affairs Division, and the National Land Agency (BPN).

The novelty of this study lies in its analytical lens, which examines the agrarian conflict between Jambi transmigrant farmers and PT. Kaswari Unggul through a social-historical perspective—a dimension rarely explored in prior research. Whereas earlier studies predominantly focused on agrarian law, government policy, or institutional mediation, this study investigates the historical roots and social dynamics underlying the conflict. By integrating historical and sociological analysis, this research provides new insights into how the New Order's transmigration policy institutionalized agrarian inequality and shaped patterns of peasant resistance against corporate domination. This approach enriches the broader discourse on agrarian studies in Indonesia by situating the power relations between the state, corporations, and transmigrant communities within a more contextual and historically grounded framework.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the historical and social dynamics of the New Order's transmigration policy as it affected Javanese farmers relocated to Jambi, and to examine the emergence of agrarian conflicts between transmigrant farmers in Suka Maju Village and PT. Kaswari Unggul. Furthermore, it seeks to reveal how a policy ostensibly designed to promote population equity and welfare instead generated social inequality, economic exploitation, and agrarian injustice, culminating in structural conflicts between local communities and corporations. Finally, this research explores the forms of collective resistance undertaken by the farmers in defending their rights to land and agrarian resources amid state dominance and corporate power.

METHOD

The method employed in this research is the historical method, which aims to reconstruct past events systematically, chronologically, and scientifically to comprehend the dynamics of agrarian conflict between transmigrant farmers in Jambi and PT. Kaswari Unggul. This method encompasses four principal stages—heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, [1985](#); Kuntowijoyo, [2013](#)). In the heuristic stage, the researcher collected a variety of primary and secondary sources, including government archives, transmigration policy documents, decrees, farmers' organization reports, and field photographs depicting the conditions of the disputed areas. Field data were also gathered through in-depth interviews with historical actors such as transmigrant farmers, community leaders, and members of the Indonesian Peasants Union (SPI). These interviews were then transcribed and critically analyzed to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information. Furthermore, official government documents—such as Government Regulation No. 42 of 1973 concerning the Implementation of Transmigration—were interpreted textually to trace how the policy was applied and its social implications for transmigrant communities (Miles et al., [2014](#)).

The study adopts a qualitative approach with critical analysis, seeking to explore the interplay between state power, corporate economic interests, and community resistance within the framework of social history (Sugiyono, [2017](#)). This approach enables the researcher to interpret historical facts not merely as a chronological sequence of events but as manifestations of the underlying social and political structures (Burke, [2005](#)). Data analysis was conducted through processes of data reduction, thematic categorization, and narrative interpretation to identify causal relationships among the New Order's transmigration policy, the socioeconomic transformations of farmers, and the emergence of agrarian conflict. The final outcome is presented in the form of analytical historiography, which not only describes historical events but also constructs scholarly arguments regarding structural inequality and agrarian struggle in Indonesia (Kuntowijoyo, [2014](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The New Order Transmigration Policy and Its Implications for the Social Structure of Peasants

The New Order regime was characterized by a militaristic and authoritarian style of governance. President Soeharto positioned himself as a "Javanese king," whose policies were to be accepted without question or resistance. This highly centralized leadership pattern produced a series of strategic policies with far-reaching consequences for Indonesian society, one of the most prominent being the Transmigration Policy of 1969. Although the idea had been initiated during Sukarno's era, it was only under Soeharto that the program was implemented on a massive scale, supported by stronger political stability and economic capacity.

The transmigration program became part of the First Five-Year Development Plan (Pelita I), with the primary goal of redistributing the population from Java to other islands such as Kalimantan, Sulawesi, South Sumatra, and Jambi. According to Government Regulation No. 42 of 1973, there were two types of transmigration: *General Transmigration*, fully funded by the government, and *Self-Initiated Transmigration*, financed by participants themselves or third parties. Although normatively framed as a development initiative, the policy reflected a reductionist and technocratic approach that treated the lower classes as mere objects of state development. In practice, transmigration functioned not only as a means of population redistribution but also as an instrument of social control over specific segments of society (Said, 2016).

Politically, the New Order's transmigration policy was designed to reshape the social structure by making peasants the primary target group. Several strategic considerations informed this decision. First, historically, peasants had long occupied a subordinate social position, making them easily controlled by the ruling power. Second, the regime associated peasants with the mass base of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which it regarded as a latent threat to national stability. Third, peasants were perceived as highly adaptable to new environments and lacking the political power to resist state policies (Hasibuan & Sabrina, 2024).

Based on these considerations, the government systematically directed peasants from Central Java to participate in transmigration to Jambi—specifically to Sukamaju Village, Geragai District, East Tanjung Jabung Regency. The first groups departed in December 1982 and arrived in January 1983. Prior to their departure, Soeharto personally addressed the transmigrants, emphasizing the role of peasants in achieving national food self-sufficiency and equitable development. However, the promised utopia of prosperity never materialized. Many peasants accepted the policy not out of conviction, but due to political pressure and fear of state reprisal.

The New Order regime embedded a doctrine of obedience to the state so deeply that any rejection of the transmigration policy was viewed as an act of political subversion. Such defiance often led to intimidation, detention, or even enforced disappearance of civilians deemed to oppose the government (Pelzer, 2016). Thus, the transmigration policy served not merely as an economic development project, but as a political instrument of state domination, extending government control over rural communities and agrarian resources across Indonesia.

The Utopia of Transmigrant Farmers' Welfare in Sukamaju Village

In mid-January 1983, farmers from Central Java arrived in Jambi Province, specifically in Sukamaju Village, Geragai District, East Tanjung Jabung Regency. The local government had prepared housing for the transmigrants and guided them to their new settlement. At the time, Sukamaju Village was sparsely populated, with houses far apart and the area surrounded by dense forests on peatland that was difficult to cultivate. The region's geography and environment were far from what the transmigrants had envisioned when they left their homeland in search of a better life.

Several individuals—such as Sunardi, Solekan, Rujianto, and Heru Nanggo—confessed to feeling alienated and disillusioned, as the reality they encountered did not match the promises made by the government. They had hoped for greater prosperity in their new land compared to their previous lives in Central Java. Instead, they found themselves in a remote, silent area surrounded by thick forests—an environment that many even considered mystical. This became the beginning of a long journey of struggle, as the transmigrant farmers faced a harsh reality that fell far short of the government's promised vision of welfare.



Figure 2. Frame Structure of a Transmigrant Farmer's House
Source: Processed from the Archives of DPW SPI Jambi

After the basic infrastructure was completed, the New Order government provided a *subsistence allowance (Jadup)* to help the farmers survive. However, the government failed to provide essential farming tools, even though most participants were farmers by profession. As a result, the promised prosperity turned out to be nothing more than an illusion—a utopian dream. The *Jadup* was distributed for 30 months (2.5 years), as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Types of Subsistence Allowances (Jadup) Received by Transmigrant Farmers

No.	Type of Allowance	Quantity
1.	Rice	32 kg
2.	Cooking oil	5 kg
3.	Kerosene	10 liters
4.	Sugar	5 kg
5.	Salt	3 kg
6.	Dried fish	10 kg

Source: Compiled from interviews with informants

The *Jadup* was distributed monthly through sub-district and village officials. However, not all of the aid reached the transmigrant farmers in full. Field findings indicate that some local officials engaged in corrupt practices, taking a portion of the aid under the pretext of compensating for their role in its distribution. As a result, the farmers faced economic hardship and lived under severe limitations. For nearly the first three months, they were unable to farm due to a lack of tools and continued to wait for official instructions. Fear of being accused of violating state regulations made them passive and entirely dependent on the New Order government’s directives.

When their patience ran out, farmers such as Sunardi, Solekan, Rujianto, and Heru Nanggo decided to act. They pooled their modest resources to buy hoes, machetes, plows, planting sticks, and seeds. Clearing the peat forests required immense effort; many men left their families for weeks to work in the fields, earning the village the nickname “Widows’ Village” because so many wives were left behind. Once the land was cleared, they began planting rice, secondary crops, vegetables, and other plants they believed could survive on peat soil.

During the first planting season, the farmers suffered a total crop failure due to severe flooding that swept away their plants. The water level rose to an adult’s neck, forcing them to prioritize their safety over their harvest (Interview with Sunardi, July 20, 2025). The second planting season brought similar misfortune, as floods again destroyed their crops. Despair began to set in, especially as their *Jadup* supplies dwindled. However, during the third planting season, they finally managed to achieve their first successful harvest. This marked a turning point—proof that even peatlands, long considered barren and unproductive, could yield crops when cultivated through traditional techniques and simple tools (Interview with Heru Nanggo, July 25, 2025).



Figure 3. Crops Grown by Transmigrant Farmers

Source: Processed from the Archives of DPW SPI Jambi

The prosperity promised by the New Order government turned out to be mere developmental rhetoric without tangible realization. Transmigrant farmers were ultimately left to survive independently under conditions far more difficult than those in their original villages. Yet their resilience and optimism never waned. The once-untouched wilderness was gradually transformed into productive farmland capable of sustaining their families. Over time, the transmigrant farmers demonstrated extraordinary adaptability, turning peatland into a sustainable source of livelihood.

However, in 1987, the New Order government discontinued the *Jadup* program in Sukamaju Village. From that point on, the farmers had to rely entirely on their own efforts, without state assistance. Even by the Reform Era, the welfare level of transmigrant farmers in this area remained far from ideal. They continued to face limited access to clean water, unequal distribution of productive land, and a lack of supportive post-transmigration policies (Interviews with Heru Nanggo, July 25, 2025; Solekan, August 2, 2025). Living on their own land has not guaranteed the fulfillment of their basic rights—an irony in a nation where farmers are supposed to be the backbone of the economy and the foundation of food sovereignty in the Republic of Indonesia.

The Dynamics of Agrarian Conflict between Transmigrant Farmers and PT. Kaswari Unggul

The gradual cultivation of peatlands by transmigrant farmers in Sukamaju Village transformed what was once deemed unproductive terrain into their primary source of livelihood. From these lands, farmers met their subsistence needs, financed their children's education, and sustained local agricultural productivity. Initially, farming activities proceeded smoothly without major obstacles until the arrival of PT. Kaswari Unggul, a plantation company whose operations disrupted this stability and triggered escalating tensions that culminated in open conflict between the transmigrant farmers and the corporation (Interview with Solekan, August 2, 2025).

PT. Kaswari Unggul is a regional enterprise engaged in oil palm plantation and crude palm oil (CPO) processing industries. The company was officially established on October 7, 1995, in Jambi City. In its operations, PT. Kaswari Unggul claimed to apply a partnership model known as PIR-Koperasi or the "*Nucleus-Plasma*" scheme, often referred to as a "*Foster Father*" model, purportedly designed to empower local farmers (Interview with Sunardi, July 20, 2025). However, in practice, this concept became a corporate expansion mechanism that disadvantaged and marginalized the transmigrant community.

When it was first established, PT. Kaswari Unggul controlled only about 600 hectares of land. Within six years, however, its area expanded dramatically to 13,000 hectares, consisting of 8,000 hectares of core plantation and 5,000 hectares of plasma fields. Around 1995, the company began claiming lands owned by transmigrant farmers in East Tanjung Jabung based on the Decree of the Minister of Forestry and Plantations No. 181 of 2000, which granted a plantation business permit covering 12,553.40 hectares to PT. Kaswari Unggul. In contrast, the farmers had already possessed legal documentation for their lands, including *pancung alas* (initial land-clearing proof) dating back to 1974 and *Land Ownership Certificates (SKT)* issued in 1995 (Interview with Agung Slamet Pribadi, July 23, 2025).

The dispute was inevitable. PT. Kaswari Unggul used formal legal legitimacy to justify its claims, while the transmigrant farmers defended their land rights—fruits of decades of labor and sacrifice. Despite the unequal balance of power and resources, the farmers chose to resist. For them, the land was not merely an economic asset but the embodiment of their struggle and identity (Interview with Rujianto, August 11, 2025).

The conflict reached its peak when transmigrant farmers united in a large-scale demonstration demanding justice from PT. Kaswari Unggul. Instead of pursuing legal or customary resolution, the company deployed security forces to suppress the protesters. Repressive acts—including beatings and physical violence—occurred on the ground. Both local and provincial governments remained silent, taking no meaningful action to mediate the dispute. Ironically, this complex agrarian conflict was dismissed by authorities as a "*minor friction*" that would "*resolve itself over time*" (Interview with Sunardi, July 20, 2025).

In many instances, security personnel acted as corporate enforcers, safeguarding lands seized by PT. Kaswari Unggul and ensuring that no farmers could enter. They also criminalized several transmigrant farmers, accusing them of disturbing public order and committing acts of anarchy. Some were even imprisoned on charges of causing financial losses to the company (Interview with Solekan, August 2, 2025).

Adding to the complexity, some local residents employed by PT. Kaswari Unggul supported the company's actions, arguing that their livelihoods depended on it. This reveals how economic dependency can erode social justice, leading some to justify the injustices inflicted upon the transmigrant farmers (Interview with Sunardi, July 20, 2025).

The farmers' resistance, however, did not stop at the local level. In the early 2000s, they consolidated their struggle by joining the Indonesian Peasants Union (SPI), which strengthened and systematized their movement. In Sukamaju Village, they established five Local Farmers' Organizations (OTL)—Sinar Harapan Maju, Bunga Raya, Mukti

Tani, Karya Mukti, and Suka Maju. These groups became part of the Jambi Farmers' Association (Pertajam), which is affiliated with the Federation of Indonesian Peasant Unions (FSPI) at the national level (Koyagi, [2013](#)).

As previously mentioned, farmers' frustration was also rooted in the company's opportunistic behavior. No one had shown interest in the land when it was still dense forest, but once the transmigrants had cleared and cultivated it into productive farmland, corporate claims suddenly emerged. PT. Kaswari Unggul was among the most aggressive actors, exploiting formal legitimacy to reinforce its control (Interview with Solekan, 2025).

Recognizing the importance of collective resistance, the farmers organized a mass demonstration in Jambi City, the provincial capital. Led by Sarwadi, the protest involved hundreds of farmers from East Tanjung Jabung and Muara Jambi regencies. They conducted a long march across Jambi City—from the governor's office and prosecutor's office to the Sultan Thaha Monument. The demonstration drew significant public attention and forced local authorities to reopen negotiations with the company. The talks were held on October 24, 2002, about a month after the farmers had officially submitted their demands (Interview with Solekan, August 2, 2025).



Figure 4. Irrigation System in Sukamaju Village

Source: Processed from the Archives of DPW SPI Jambi

By 2007, according to village secretary Sinaga, the disputed land remained in a status quo condition. However, for the farmers, the land had already become theirs both morally and socially, as they had cultivated and lived off it productively for decades. The area—spanning approximately 400 hectares—is now inhabited by about 200 farming families, with the population continuing to grow naturally and through new migration.

Although the ownership dispute has somewhat subsided, fundamental issues persist, particularly regarding access to clean water. Since their arrival in the 1980s, transmigrant farmers have struggled to obtain potable water. Despite repeated appeals to local and provincial governments, their requests have gone unanswered. To this day, the farmers' struggle to secure this basic human right continues, as clean water remains a constitutional entitlement for every citizen (Interview with Sunardi, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The New Order's transmigration policy toward farmers produced a complex domino effect—both socially and economically. Under the pretext of equitable development and population redistribution, the policy instead generated new forms of inequality in destination areas such as Sukamaju Village, East Tanjung Jabung Regency, Jambi Province. After the government discontinued the *subsistence allowance (Jadup)*, transmigrant farmers struggled to survive by cultivating peatlands despite recurring crop failures and limited resources. When the land finally became productive, a new agrarian conflict emerged following the unilateral land claims made by PT. Kaswari Unggul, which seized the very soil that farmers had painstakingly worked for years. What began as spontaneous resistance evolved into an organized movement through the Indonesian Peasants Union (SPI), which fought for land rights and the dignity of farmers against the intertwined powers of the state and capital. This situation reveals that a policy originally designed to promote welfare paradoxically paved the way for the marginalization, criminalization, and structural subjugation of farmers.

This study underscores the crucial role of the state in guaranteeing agrarian justice for transmigrant communities. The government must not only intervene after conflicts erupt but also take proactive measures in prevention, rights

protection, and economic empowerment of farmers. Local bureaucratic institutions should ensure that land and plantation policies do not overlap with the legitimate rights of transmigrant citizens. Future research should conduct comparative analyses of other transmigration regions experiencing similar conflicts to identify recurring structural patterns, policy responses, and sustainable solutions that genuinely uphold the welfare of farmers as the foundational pillar of an agrarian nation.

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