

# Social and Agrarian Conflict Due to Sago Industrialization

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This study examines the social and agrarian conflicts arising from sago industrialization in South Sorong Regency, with a focus on the relationship between PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya (ANJ) and indigenous communities, particularly the Imeko people. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observation, document analysis, and comparative analysis with Meranti Islands Regency. The findings reveal that sago industrialization has transformed customary communal land governance into concession-based industrial systems, resulting in reduced access to sago forests, increased agrarian conflict, and weakening of indigenous sovereignty. Although industrial expansion creates employment and market opportunities, economic benefits remain unevenly distributed, with corporations and intermediaries capturing most of the value. The study also identifies social fragmentation, gender-based labor displacement, and environmental degradation as major consequences of industrial expansion. Weak implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) further intensifies conflict by limiting meaningful community participation. Comparative findings show that conflict in South Sorong is primarily agrarian and rooted in land dispossession, whereas conflict in Meranti is predominantly market-driven. The study concludes that sustainable sago development requires stronger recognition of customary rights, participatory governance, and community-centered economic models to ensure socially just and ecologically sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: Agrarian conflict; Indigenous communities; Political ecology; Sago industrialization; South Sorong; Sustainable resource governance

**Introduction.** Indonesia's post-reform agricultural policy has increasingly emphasized food diversification as a strategic response to reduce dependency on rice. Within this agenda, sago has emerged as a highly promising commodity, particularly due to its abundant availability in Eastern Indonesia, especially in Papua and Maluku.

Beyond its traditional role as a staple food for indigenous communities, sago has been repositioned by the state as a strategic commodity for national food security, agroindustry, and renewable bioenergy development. Government initiatives such as the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024 and the

SAGUNESIA (Sagu untuk Indonesia) program reflect this transition from subsistence-oriented utilization toward large-scale industrial exploitation.

However, the industrialization of sago has generated complex socio-ecological consequences. While state institutions and private corporations frame sago expansion as a pathway toward modernization, economic growth, and rural development, this process often transforms traditional communal forests into industrial monoculture plantations. Such transformations have intensified contestation over land rights, resource governance, and ecological sustainability. In many cases, industrial expansion has triggered agrarian conflicts involving indigenous communities whose livelihoods, cultural identity, and social organization are deeply rooted in sago ecosystems.

One of the most significant cases can be observed in South Sorong Regency, particularly in the Teminabuan region. This area contains extensive natural sago forests and is inhabited by indigenous groups such as the Imeko, Tehit, and Moi peoples. For these communities, sago is not merely a source of carbohydrates but constitutes the foundation of subsistence, economic exchange, and cultural continuity. Traditional sago management systems are embedded in customary law, intergenerational knowledge, and ecological ethics that regulate harvesting cycles to ensure sustainability. For centuries, this system enabled local communities to maintain food sovereignty while preserving forest ecosystems.

The entry of large-scale corporate actors, particularly PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya (ANJ) and state-owned enterprises such as Perum Perhutani, fundamentally altered this relationship. Through state-sanctioned concession mechanisms, large tracts of customary land were allocated for industrial sago plantations. PT ANJ, through its subsidiary PT ANJ Agri Papua, obtained approximately 40,000 hectares of concession land, while Perhutani manages around 15,000 hectares. These concessions institutionalized a shift from communal resource governance to capital-intensive industrial production. Although promoted under the narrative of national development, this

transformation has often marginalized indigenous land rights and weakened local control over natural resources.

The conflict in South Sorong illustrates what David Harvey conceptualizes as accumulation by dispossession, in which capitalist expansion occurs through privatization and appropriation of communal resources. Industrial sago development has reduced indigenous access to forests, weakened subsistence systems, and generated new forms of dependency on wage labor. Communities that once acted as custodians of sago forests increasingly find themselves excluded from their ancestral lands or incorporated into low-wage labor systems. This transformation not only affects material livelihoods but also erodes cultural values and social cohesion.

The agrarian conflict in South Sorong is further intensified by weak recognition of customary land rights, limited community participation in licensing processes, and the frequent absence of meaningful implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). In practice, many indigenous communities report that consultation processes were largely procedural and failed to ensure genuine collective consent. Compensation schemes also tend to individualize land transactions, thereby triggering internal social fragmentation and horizontal conflict among community members. As a result, industrialization not only generates vertical conflict between communities and corporations but also creates tensions within indigenous social structures.

This issue becomes more evident when compared to other major sago-producing regions such as Meranti Islands Regency. Unlike South Sorong, where conflict is predominantly agrarian and centered on land dispossession, conflicts in Meranti are more closely associated with market exploitation, unequal value chains, and environmental degradation. This comparison highlights that conflicts surrounding sago industrialization are not uniform; rather, they are shaped by local histories, social structures, and governance arrangements.

This article examines the social and agrarian conflicts arising from sago industrialization in South

Sorong Regency, with a particular focus on the relationship between PT ANJ and the Imeko indigenous community. It investigates the drivers of conflict, identifies the key actors involved, and analyzes the resulting socio-economic, cultural, and ecological impacts. By comparing South Sorong with the Meranti Islands case, this study aims to provide a broader understanding of how sago commodification generates distinct conflict patterns across Indonesia. Ultimately, the article argues that sago industrialization can only contribute to equitable development if it recognizes indigenous rights, ensures participatory governance, and prioritizes socially just resource management.

## Methods

### Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach to examine the social and agrarian conflicts resulting from sago industrialization in South Sorong Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on understanding complex socio-political processes, power relations, indigenous experiences, and the meanings attached to land and sago within local communities. This approach enables in-depth exploration of conflict dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement alone.

The primary case examined in this study is the conflict between the PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya (ANJ) and the Imeko indigenous community in South Sorong. To enrich the analysis, this case is compared with the sago governance situation in Meranti Islands Regency, where conflict patterns differ significantly. The comparative design allows identification of structural differences in conflict drivers, actor relationships, and socio-economic consequences across two major sago-producing regions in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted between 2023 and 2025 through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observation. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including indigenous leaders (*Ondoafi*), village officials, local government representatives,

community members, women involved in traditional sago processing, and civil society actors. Several important informants included officials from the Village Community Empowerment Office of South Sorong, community leaders from Kampung Kakas and Seremuk District, and indigenous representatives directly affected by sago industrial expansion. These interviews provided firsthand insights into land disputes, livelihood transformation, social tensions, and local resistance strategies.

Secondary data were collected from government publications, including reports from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), agrarian conflict reports published by Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA), company reports, environmental assessments, policy documents, and peer-reviewed journal articles related to agrarian conflict, indigenous rights, and political ecology. These sources were used to contextualize field findings within broader structural and policy dynamics.

The study applies purposive sampling to select informants with direct knowledge and experience related to sago governance and agrarian conflict. This sampling strategy ensures that participants possess relevant expertise or lived experience concerning land ownership, customary governance, industrial expansion, or community resistance. Informants were selected based on their institutional roles, involvement in conflict processes, and ability to provide rich contextual information.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretation. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary evidence were systematically coded to identify recurring themes such as land dispossession, food sovereignty, environmental degradation, indigenous resistance, and state-corporate relations. The analytical framework draws from political ecology and agrarian political economy, particularly the concept of *accumulation by dispossession* proposed by David Harvey. This framework helps explain how industrial expansion restructures access to land, redistributes power, and generates social inequality.

To ensure validity and reliability, this study uses data triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, official statistics, academic literature, and field observations. Triangulation strengthens analytical rigor by minimizing bias and cross-verifying information from multiple perspectives. Additionally, comparative analysis between South Sorong and Meranti helps improve interpretive robustness by highlighting context-specific and structural factors influencing conflict.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and verbal consent was obtained prior to data collection. Sensitive information related to land disputes and community tensions was handled confidentially to protect participants from potential risks. Respect for indigenous customs, local authority structures, and cultural protocols was maintained during field engagement.

Through this methodological framework, the study seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of how sago industrialization reshapes agrarian relations, transforms indigenous livelihoods, and produces varying forms of social conflict in contemporary Indonesia.

## Results and Discussion

### Profile of Informants and Data Sources

This study collected empirical evidence through interviews with key stakeholders directly involved in or affected by sago industrialization in South Sorong Regency. Informants were selected purposively based on their institutional roles, community positions, and involvement in sago governance, customary land management, and agrarian conflicts. The fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2025, complemented by direct observation of sago-processing activities and document analysis from government and civil society reports.

Table 1. Profile of Key Informants

| Informant          | Position                         | Institution/Community                   | Main Contribution                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Franki M. Susim    | Secretary of Village Development | South Sorong Village Empowerment Office | Policy and development perspective |
| Hanok Adiolo       | Village Head                     | Kampung Kakas                           | Community livelihood               |
| Diana M. Ajollo    | Community Representative         | Kakas Indigenous Community              | Gender and cultural values         |
| Telly Rumpaidus    | Village Development Expert       | South Sorong                            | Social and economic impacts        |
| Ondoafi Simon Sera | Indigenous Leader                | Sorong Selatan                          | Customary land governance          |

The collected data revealed four dominant themes from thematic coding: land dispossession, socio-economic transformation, environmental degradation, and indigenous resistance.

### Land Dispossession and Changes in Sago Governance

The findings show that the most significant consequence of sago industrialization is the transformation of land governance. Prior to industrial expansion, sago forests were managed through collective customary systems under *bak*

*ulayat*. Indigenous communities controlled access, harvesting cycles, and ecological conservation through traditional authority structures led by *Ondoafi*.

The entry of PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya (ANJ) and Perum Perhutani altered this structure dramatically. Large concession areas institutionalized state-corporate control over previously communal forests. Interview findings indicate that consultation mechanisms were perceived as limited and often failed to fully implement FPIC principles. Several community

members reported unclear communication regarding concession boundaries and compensation mechanisms.

One indigenous respondent explained:

*“The company came with promises of development, but many people did not fully understand what was being agreed upon. The land is not just land it belongs to our ancestors.”*  
Ondoafi Simon Sera, Interview (2024)

These findings suggest that industrial expansion has effectively reduced community control over customary forests, creating conditions consistent with agrarian dispossession.

**Socio-Economic Transformation of Indigenous Livelihoods**

The results indicate that industrialization has generated both economic opportunities and vulnerabilities. The emergence of plantation and processing facilities created wage labor opportunities in harvesting, transportation, and factory operations.

However, these benefits were distributed unevenly.

Document analysis shows that although sago contributes significantly to regional agricultural output, poverty remains high in South Sorong. Economic growth at the macro level has not translated into equitable welfare improvements for indigenous households.

Table 2. Major Socio-Economic Changes after Industrialization

| Aspect               | Before Industrialization    | After Industrialization        |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Main livelihood      | Subsistence sago harvesting | Wage labor + market dependence |
| Food security        | High (forest access)        | Declining                      |
| Income pattern       | Relatively equal            | Unequal                        |
| Market participation | Limited                     | High                           |

According to Franki M. Susim:

*“People in South Sorong live not only from sago, but also from rivers fish, shrimp, and clean water are essential. When large-scale plantations expand, rivers become vulnerable too.”*  
Franki M. Susim, Interview, August 24, 2024

This finding indicates that industrialization has transformed a subsistence economy into a market-oriented economy, increasing household dependence on cash income and exposing communities to market volatility.

**Emerging Social Inequality and Community Fragmentation**

Thematic analysis reveals growing social fragmentation within indigenous communities. Before industrialization, benefits from sago forests were distributed relatively equally under kinship and customary systems.

After industrial expansion, compensation payments and wage labor introduced new forms of inequality.

Households receiving compensation or employment were perceived as advantaged compared to those excluded from corporate benefits. This triggered horizontal tensions among clans and families.

Table 3. Major Themes from Interview Coding

| Theme         | Key Findings                        | Supporting Evidence     |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Land conflict | Reduced access to customary forests | Interviews              |
| Economy       | Unequal income distribution         | Interviews + statistics |
| Gender        | Women lost traditional roles        | Observation             |
| Environment   | River degradation                   | Observation             |
| Resistance    | Rituals and collective protests     | Interviews              |

Field observations showed increasing division between pro-investment and anti-investment groups. These divisions weakened traditional solidarity and altered local power structures.

### Gendered Impacts of Sago Industrialization

The findings demonstrate strong gendered impacts of industrial transformation. Traditionally, women played central roles in sago processing, including washing, starch extraction, drying, and food preparation.

Field observations in Kampung Kakas confirmed that women remain essential in preserving traditional processing knowledge. However, industrial mechanization reduced their economic roles.

Diana M. Ajollo explained:

*“Sago is not only food. It is our ancestral story. Women have always processed sago for the family. Even with machines, women still protect the tradition.”*  
— Diana M. Ajollo, Interview, August 25, 2024

Industrial processing centralized production in factories and shifted labor demand toward male-dominated machine operations and logistics.

This created a dual process:

Economic marginalization of women in formal industrial production

Continued importance of women as custodians of cultural knowledge

### Environmental Degradation and Ecological Pressure

Observation and documentary analysis indicate growing ecological pressure associated with industrial expansion. Natural sago forests in South Sorong function as integrated socio-ecological systems supporting biodiversity, freshwater supply, and fisheries.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted concerns over declining river quality and reduced fish populations.

Hanok Adiolo stated:

*“Sago is life for Kakas people. Clean river water is necessary for washing sago before it becomes starch. If rivers are damaged, our livelihood is threatened.”*  
— Hanok Adiolo, Interview, August 25, 2024

Field observation confirmed that river systems play essential roles in traditional processing.

Industrial expansion into monoculture landscapes reduces ecological diversity and weakens ecosystem resilience.

Table 4. Observed Environmental Changes

| Indicator         | Condition Before          | Condition After |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Forest cover      | Dense natural sago forest | Reduced         |
| Water quality     | Clean                     | Declining       |
| Fish availability | High                      | Reduced         |
| Biodiversity      | High                      | Lower           |

Environmental degradation thus intensifies social conflict because communities experience simultaneous loss of land, food, and cultural space.

### Indigenous Resistance and Adaptive Strategies

The study found that indigenous resistance occurs in both overt and covert forms. Open resistance includes protests, collective meetings, rejection of compensation agreements, and legal advocacy.

Subtle resistance includes customary rituals to symbolically “lock” forests from external exploitation.

Telly Rumpaidus emphasized:

*“For indigenous women, the forest is identity, garden, and pharmacy. Losing the forest means losing life itself.”* — Telly Rumpaidus, Interview, August 25, 2024

Communities also strengthened solidarity networks and collaborated with NGOs to document grievances and raise public awareness. These findings suggest that indigenous communities remain active political actors despite structural power imbalances.

### Comparative Findings: South Sorong vs. Meranti Islands

Comparative analysis shows significant differences in conflict patterns between South Sorong Regency and Meranti Islands Regency.

In South Sorong, conflict is primarily agrarian and centers on customary land dispossession. In Meranti, conflict is largely economic, involving price control, debt dependency, and market exploitation.

Table 5. Comparative Conflict Patterns

| Aspect        | South Sorong                 | Meranti            |
|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Main conflict | Agrarian                     | Market             |
| Core issue    | Land dispossession           | Price exploitation |
| Main actors   | Indigenous vs corporation    | Farmers vs traders |
| Resistance    | Active collective resistance | Mostly passive     |

These differences demonstrate that sago industrialization produces context-specific conflict patterns shaped by history, land tenure systems, and governance structures.

### Discussion

The findings indicate that sago industrialization in South Sorong Regency represents more than a process of agricultural modernization; it reflects a fundamental restructuring of land control and resource governance. The transition from customary communal management toward concession-based industrial systems controlled by actors such as PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya and Perum Perhutani strongly aligns with David Harvey's concept of *accumulation by dispossession*, whereby capital expands through the privatization of communal resources. In this case, dispossession is not limited to physical land transfer but also includes the erosion of indigenous sovereignty over sago forests that function simultaneously as economic assets, ecological systems, and sacred cultural spaces. This suggests that industrial expansion in Papua produces multidimensional dispossession affecting material livelihoods as well as cultural continuity.

Although industrial sago development is promoted through narratives of economic growth, employment creation, and food security, the study reveals a significant gap between these promises and actual welfare outcomes. While some indigenous households gained access to wage labor and market participation, economic benefits were distributed unevenly, with corporations and intermediaries

capturing most of the value generated in the supply chain. Local communities were largely incorporated as low-wage laborers or raw material suppliers rather than as beneficiaries of higher-value processing and distribution activities. This pattern reflects broader agrarian political economy findings that capitalist agricultural expansion often produces selective inclusion, where communities participate in markets but remain structurally disadvantaged within unequal production systems.

A key factor intensifying conflict is the weak implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Interview findings suggest that consultation processes were often procedural rather than substantive, shaped by informational asymmetry, language barriers, and unequal bargaining power between corporations and indigenous communities. As a result, many communities lacked sufficient understanding of the long-term implications of concession agreements. This governance deficit helps explain why industrial projects frequently trigger prolonged social conflict. When participation exists only formally, without meaningful consent, development initiatives lose legitimacy and become sources of contestation rather than collective progress.

The study also reveals that industrialization has restructured indigenous social relations by generating internal inequality and social fragmentation. Compensation schemes, wage hierarchies, and differential access to corporate networks have created new divisions within communities, weakening traditional solidarity based

on kinship and customary reciprocity. These transformations disproportionately affect women, whose traditional roles in sago processing have been reduced by mechanized production. At the same time, women remain central to preserving cultural knowledge and food traditions. Environmental degradation further deepens social injustice, as declining river quality, biodiversity loss, and reduced access to forests impose disproportionate burdens on communities whose livelihoods depend directly on ecological stability.

The comparative analysis with Meranti Islands Regency demonstrates that sago-related conflicts are highly context-specific. In South Sorong, conflict is primarily agrarian and rooted in land dispossession and indigenous rights, whereas in Meranti conflict is largely economic, driven by unequal market structures and price exploitation. This comparison highlights that a uniform national sago policy is insufficient. Sustainable sago development requires governance that recognizes customary land rights, ensures meaningful FPIC implementation, and prioritizes community-based value creation. Without such reforms, sago industrialization risks reproducing the inequalities observed in other plantation sectors; however, with inclusive governance, sago holds significant potential to support equitable development, ecological sustainability, and indigenous sovereignty.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sago industrialization in South Sorong Regency has generated complex socio-economic, cultural, and ecological consequences for indigenous communities, particularly the Imeko people. Although industrial expansion has been promoted under the narratives of food security, economic development, and

employment creation, the findings reveal that its benefits are distributed unevenly. The transition from customary communal governance toward concession-based industrial management has reduced indigenous access to sago forests and intensified agrarian tensions. As a result, industrialization has shifted communities from autonomous resource management toward increasing dependence on wage labor and market systems.

The study also finds that sago industrialization has contributed to social fragmentation, widening inequality, gender-based economic marginalization, and environmental degradation, particularly through declining river quality and reduced ecological resilience. Weak implementation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) further exacerbates conflict by limiting meaningful community participation in decision-making processes. Comparative analysis with Meranti Islands Regency shows that conflict patterns vary depending on local land tenure systems, historical market integration, and the socio-cultural significance of sago.

Theoretically, this study contributes to agrarian political ecology by demonstrating how sago industrialization operates as a form of accumulation by dispossession, affecting not only land ownership but also cultural sovereignty and indigenous identity. Practically, the findings suggest the need for stronger recognition of customary land rights, inclusive governance mechanisms, and community-based value creation to ensure equitable benefit-sharing. This study is limited by its focus on selected case-study locations and qualitative evidence. Future research may expand to longitudinal and quantitative assessments of sago industrialization across multiple regions in Indonesia.

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