

Peasant social movements and agrarian reform: McCarthy and Zald's Resource Mobilization Theory in the struggle for land rights in Indonesia

La Basri¹, Uswatul Mardiyah¹, Siti Nurul Nikmatul Ula¹

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong

Correspondence: basrila90@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Indonesian peasant social movements through the analytical lens of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT). Agrarian conflict remained a persistent structural problem in Indonesia: between 2015 and 2023, KPA (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria) documented 2,963 land conflicts covering 5.8 million hectares and displacing 1.75 million farming households. Despite decades of advocacy and the constitutional mandate of UUPA No. 5/1960, agrarian reform remained incomplete. Drawing on documentary analysis, secondary data synthesis, and a systematic literature review, this article applied three core RMT dimensions — resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and framing processes — to analyze the organizational dynamics of key Social Movement Organizations, including SPI, KPA, WALHI, and local peasant federations. The analysis revealed that while Indonesian peasant movements had significantly expanded their organizational capacity since the Reformasi era (1998), persistent structural constraints — including elite capture of land redistribution programs, repression of direct action, and framing contestation from state and corporate actors — limited movement effectiveness. The study contributed to rural sociology by demonstrating how RMT provided a robust explanatory framework for understanding agrarian mobilization in post-colonial societies, while also identifying theoretical limitations that required supplementation from political ecology and postcolonial approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

Land is not merely an economic asset in agrarian societies — it constitutes the material foundation of peasant identity, livelihood, and cultural reproduction. In Indonesia, the question of who owns the land, who controls it, and who is displaced from it has been a central axis of social conflict since the colonial period. Despite the passage of the Basic Agrarian Law (Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria, UUPA, No. 5/1960), which enshrined a constitutional framework for land redistribution and social justice, the fulfillment of agrarian reform has remained elusive. Today, approximately 1% of landowners control 59% of agricultural land in Indonesia, while an estimated 26 million peasant households hold plots smaller than 0.5 hectares (BPS, 2023; KPA, 2023).

The persistence of agrarian inequality has fueled a long history of peasant mobilization. From the land reclamation (gerakan reclaiming) actions of the late 1990s to contemporary campaigns against plantation expansion into indigenous territories in Papua, Indonesian peasant movements have demonstrated remarkable organizational resilience. Yet scholarly understanding of why and how these movements mobilize resources, exploit political opportunities, and construct collective action frames remains underdeveloped in the Indonesian sociological literature. Most existing studies are descriptive or case-bound, lacking theoretical coherence that would enable comparative and generative analysis.

This article addresses this gap by applying McCarthy and Zald's (1977) Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) — one of the most influential frameworks in the sociology of social movements — to the dynamics of Indonesian peasant movements and agrarian reform struggles. Three research questions guide this inquiry: (1) How have Indonesian peasant SMOs mobilized material and human resources to sustain agrarian reform campaigns? (2) What political opportunity structures have facilitated or constrained movement development since the Reformasi era? (3) How have framing processes shaped the collective identity and public resonance of peasant movements?

Resource Mobilization Theory emerged in the 1970s as a critical response to earlier collective behavior approaches that explained social movements primarily as spontaneous, psychologically driven outbursts of mass discontent (Smelser, 1962; Gurr, 1970). McCarthy and Zald (1977) fundamentally reconceptualized social movements as rational, purposive organizations embedded in competitive resource environments. Their framework introduced two foundational concepts: the Social Movement Industry (SMI) and the Social Movement Organization (SMO) — “the specific organizational unit that identifies with the goals of a social movement and attempts to implement those goals” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1218). Edwards and McCarthy (2004) later elaborated a typology distinguishing moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources.

RMT was subsequently extended by McAdam’s (1982) concept of political opportunity structure (POS), which identifies the degree of openness of the institutionalized political system, the stability of elite alignments, the presence of elite allies, and the state’s capacity and propensity for repression as key contextual variables shaping movement trajectories. Tarrow (1994) further developed the concept, arguing that cycles of contention are strongly shaped by the expansion and contraction of political opportunities. Snow and Benford’s (1988) elaboration of framing processes added a cultural-interpretive dimension, drawing on Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis. Three framing tasks are identified: diagnostic framing (identifying the problem and attributing blame), prognostic framing (proposing solutions and strategies), and motivational framing (compelling individuals to act).

The sociology of peasant movements has a long theoretical lineage. Wolf’s (1969) comparative study identified the middle peasant as the fulcrum of revolutionary agrarian mobilization. Scott’s (1976) moral economy framework emphasized the centrality of subsistence norms and communal reciprocity in triggering peasant resistance when these were violated by market or state encroachment. Borras (2007) provides the most theoretically sophisticated account of agrarian reform movements in Southeast Asia, arguing that movement success depends on the combination of material resources, political alliances, and ideological coherence.

Indonesian agrarian scholarship has been shaped by three key debates: the interpretation of UUPA 1960 (Wiradi, 2000; Bachriadi, 2011); the relative weight of legal versus direct action strategies (Fauzi, 1999; J.F. McCarthy, 2006); and the role of international NGO networks (Borras & Franco, 2010). These debates provide essential context for applying RMT to the Indonesian case.

Table 1 Theoretical Dimensions of Resource Mobilization Theory Applied to Indonesian Agrarian Movements

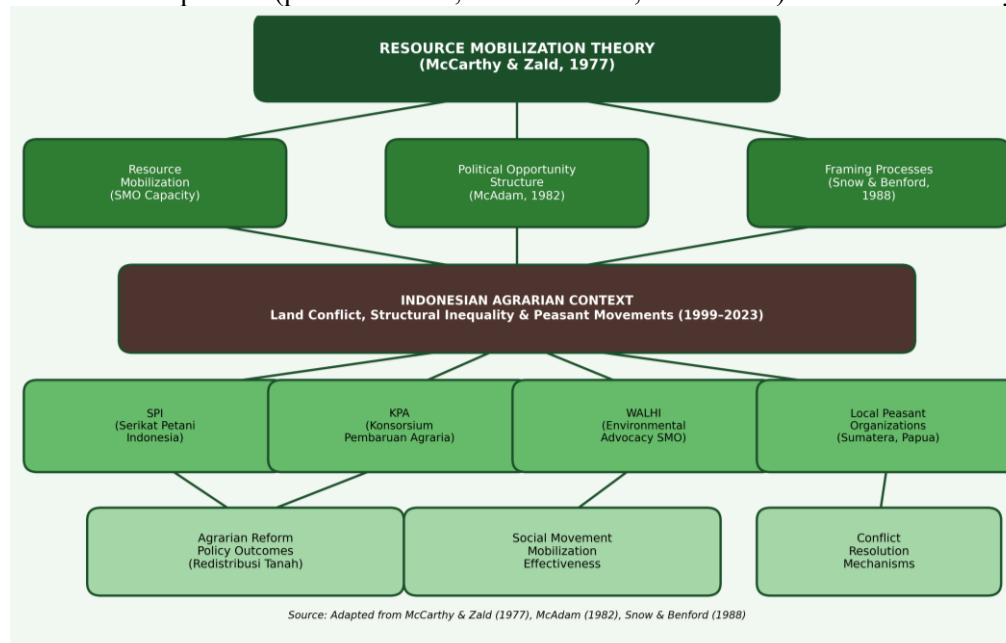
RMT Dimension	Key Concepts	Application to Indonesia	Key Sources
Resource Mobilization	Organizational capacity, funding, networks	SPI membership base; KPA advocacy network; international solidarity funds	McCarthy & Zald (1977); Edwards & McCarthy (2004)
Political Opportunity Structure	Openness of political system; elite alignments; presence of allies	Post-Reformasi democratization; UUPA 1960 reaffirmation; BNPB land redistribution programs	McAdam (1982); Tarrow (1994)
Framing Processes	Collective action frames; diagnostic, prognostic, motivational framing	“Land is life” narrative; agrarian justice as constitutional right; linking to food sovereignty discourse	Snow & Benford (1988); Benford & Snow (2000)
Social Movement Organizations (SMO)	Formal organizations that identify with movement goals	SPI, KPA, WALHI, AGRA, local tani organizations in Sumatera & Papua	Zald & McCarthy (1987); della Porta & Diani (2006)

RMT Dimension	Key Concepts	Application to Indonesia	Key Sources
Grievance & Solidarity	Shared injustice frames; group identity; moral outrage	Land dispossession histories; colonial legacies; HGU (plantation concession) conflicts	Gamson (1992); Piven & Cloward (1977)

Source: Adapted from McCarthy & Zald (1977), McAdam (1982), Snow & Benford (1988), and Indonesian agrarian literature

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative documentary research design combined with systematic literature review and secondary data synthesis. The study is explicitly positioned as a theoretical application study: its primary contribution is the systematic application of RMT to Indonesian agrarian movements, generating propositions that can guide future empirical research. Three categories of data were analyzed: (1) organizational documents from KPA, SPI, WALHI, and AGRA (2000–2023); (2) government and legal documents including UUPA 1960, TAP MPR IX/2001, TORA program reports, and BPS agrarian census data; and (3) academic literature from a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, books, and chapters, covering 1970–2024. Database searches were conducted in JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), organized by the three core RMT dimensions: resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and framing processes. The structured analytical protocol enables systematic comparison across time periods (pre-Reformasi, Reformasi era, Jokowi era) and across SMO types.



Picture 1 Conceptual Framework: Resource Mobilization Theory Applied to Indonesian Peasant Movements and Agrarian Reform

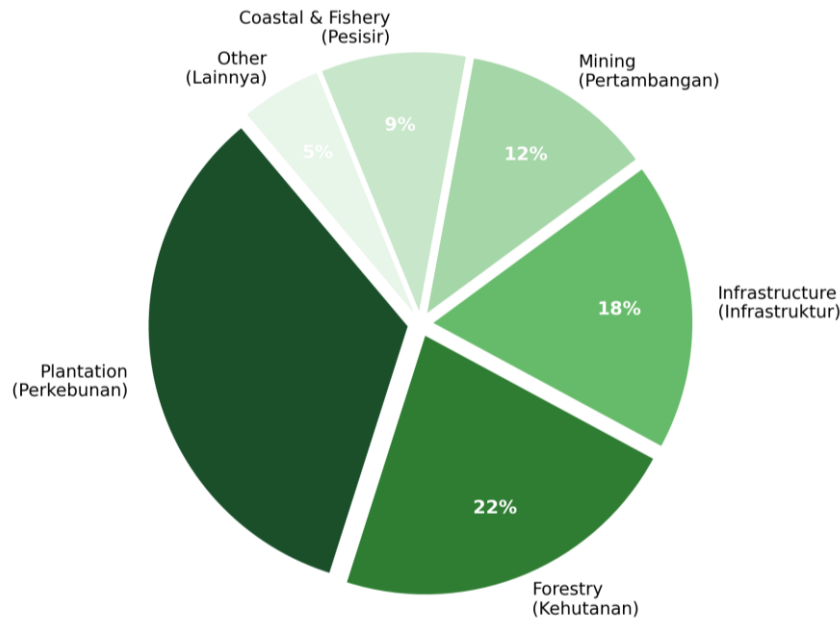
Source: Constructed by author based on McCarthy & Zald (1977); McAdam (1982); Snow & Benford (1988)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before analyzing movement dynamics, it is essential to establish the empirical landscape of agrarian conflict within which SMOs operate. KPA's (2023) longitudinal monitoring data provides the most comprehensive record available: between 2015 and 2023, KPA documented 2,963 agrarian conflict cases, covering approximately 5.8 million hectares and affecting an estimated 1.75 million farming and fishing households across the archipelago.

Picture 2 illustrates the sectoral distribution of these conflicts. The plantation sector (perkebunan, 34%) and forestry sector (kehutanan, 22%) together account for more than half of all recorded conflicts, reflecting the structural dominance of agribusiness and state forestry concessions in

Indonesia's political economy of land. Infrastructure projects — including toll roads, dams, and the Nusantara capital relocation project — represent a growing category of conflict (18%), particularly in Java and East Kalimantan.



Source: KPA (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria) Annual Reports 2015–2023, compiled by author

Picture 2 Distribution of Agrarian Land Conflicts by Sector in Indonesia (2015–2023)

Source: KPA Annual Reports 2015–2023, compiled by author

Table 2 Chronology of Key Agrarian Reform Events and Peasant Movement Responses in Indonesia

Year	Event	Description	Sources
1960	UUPA Enacted	Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA No. 5/1960) established legal basis for agrarian reform, limiting land ownership and mandating redistribution.	GOI (1960); Wiradi (2000)
1965 – 1998	New Order Suppression	Suharto regime suspended UUPA, facilitated large-scale plantation concessions (HGU), suppressed peasant organizations. Estimated 10–15 million ha transferred to corporations.	Fauzi (1999); Lucas & Warren (2003)
1998	Reformasi Era	Fall of Suharto opened democratic space. Peasant organizations re-emerged; KPA founded (1991) became central advocacy body. Land reclamation actions (<i>gerakan reclaiming</i>) intensified.	Bachriadi & Wiradi (2011); White (2005)
2001	TAP MPR IX/2001	People's Consultative Assembly issued Decree IX/2001 mandating agrarian reform, affirming UUPA 1960. Partial political opportunity for movements.	Borras (2007); J.F. McCarthy (2006)
2014 – 2019	Jokowi Era – TORA	Tanah Objek Reforma Agraria (TORA) program targeted redistribution of 9 million hectares. Implementation lagged significantly; only ~1.2 million ha redistributed by 2019.	KPA (2019); Tempo (2020)
2015 – 2023	Intensified Conflict	KPA recorded 2,963 agrarian conflicts covering 5.8 million ha, displacing 1.75 million farming households. Plantation and forestry sectors dominant.	KPA (2023); Bachriadi (2021)

Source: Compiled from KPA (2015–2023), Bachriadi & Wiradi (2011), Lucas & Warren (2003), and government documents

In the RMT framework, the organizational capacity of SMOs is the primary explanatory variable. The analysis identifies four major SMO clusters. SPI (Serikat Petani Indonesia), founded in 1998, is Indonesia's largest independent peasant union, claiming approximately 800,000 household members across 24 provinces (SPI, 2022), affiliated with La Via Campesina internationally. KPA (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria), founded in 1991, operates primarily as a professional SMO staffed by paid professionals rather than aggrieved constituents, serving as the authoritative source for Indonesian land conflict statistics. WALHI (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia) occupies a bridging role between agrarian movements and the environmental justice field, bringing landmark environmental and land rights litigation including challenges to the Omnibus Law. Local and regional peasant organizations form a dense ecology across Sumatera, Papua, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, exchanging local legitimacy and conflict documentation for advocacy resources from national SMOs.

Table 3 Repertoire of Contention: Peasant Movement Tactics in Indonesia (1998–2023)

Repertoire Type	Indonesian Term	Specific Tactics	Assessment
Protest & Demonstration	Aksi demonstrasi massal	Occupy plantation lands, march to local parliament, block infrastructure projects	High frequency; 1,200+ events recorded 2015–2023 (KPA, 2023)
Legal Advocacy	Litigasi dan gugatan hukum	File complaints to Ombudsman, National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM), Constitutional Court	Mixed success; few landmark rulings (e.g., MK 35/2012 on customary forest rights)
Coalition Building	Koalisi lintas organisasi	SPI–KPA–WALHI joint campaigns; La Via Campesina international affiliation	Strengthens political leverage; increases media visibility
Framing & Media Work	Kampanye narasi	“Land Grabbing” discourse; Food Sovereignty framing; social media mobilization post-2010	Resonance with urban middle class; influences elite allies
Direct Action / Reclaiming	Gerakan reclaiming tanah	Physical occupation of disputed lands, blocking machinery, replanting crops on contested parcels	High risk; triggers state repression but creates bargaining pressure

Source: Compiled from KPA (2015–2023), SPI Annual Reports (2018–2022), Bachriadi (2021), della Porta & Diani (2006)

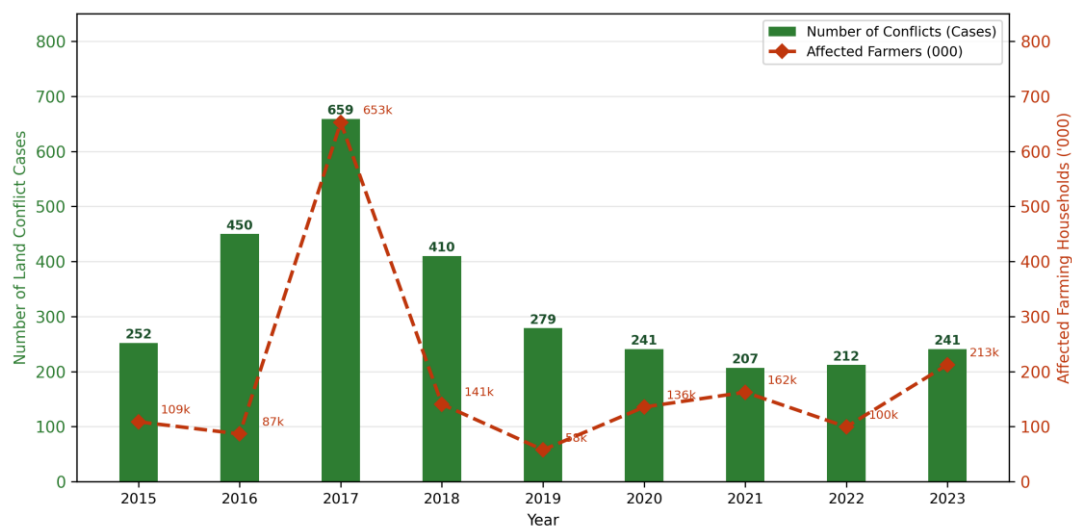
The Reformasi era (post-1998) opened significant political opportunities for peasant movements. The end of New Order authoritarianism eliminated the most severe mechanisms of organizational suppression. TAP MPR IX/2001 provided a formal constitutional mandate for agrarian reform. However, the political opportunity structure has proven partial and contested. Despite TAP MPR IX/2001, implementation has been systematically obstructed by agribusiness interests embedded in legislative and executive branches, institutional fragmentation of land governance, and continuing use of criminal law against peasant activists in land reclamation actions (Bachriadi, 2021; YLBHI, 2022). Between 2015 and 2023, KPA documented over 1,700 cases of criminalization of peasant activists (KPA, 2023). This pattern of selective repression — targeting direct action while tolerating legal advocacy — reflects a partial opening of political opportunity that Tarrow (1994) associates with sustained cycles of contention.

The framing analysis reveals a sophisticated multi-level strategy employed by Indonesian agrarian SMOs. At the diagnostic framing level, KPA and SPI attribute land conflict to colonial land law legacies, the HGU plantation concession system, corruption in land licensing, and the structural failure to implement UUPA 1960. At the prognostic framing level, movements promote comprehensive agrarian reform including redistribution of state and plantation land, legal recognition of customary (adat) land rights, HGU concession law reform, and an independent agrarian reform commission. The Constitutional Court decision MK 35/2012 represents a significant framing victory. Motivational

framing draws on the nationalist-constitutionalist frame and the food sovereignty frame imported from La Via Campesina's international discourse (Borras, 2010).

The temporal trend (Picture 3) reveals a notable spike in 2017 (659 cases; 652,700 households affected), which KPA links to accelerated land clearing for palm oil expansion under the early Jokowi administration. Cases began rising again in 2022–2023, correlating with renewed plantation expansion and mining licensing under the Omnibus Law on Job Creation (Law No. 11/2020), which critics argue significantly weakens environmental and community land protections (WALHI, 2021).

Figure 3. Trend of Land Conflict Cases and Affected Farming Households in Indonesia (2015–2023)



Source: KPA Annual Reports (2015–2023); BPS Agrarian Statistics (2023)

Picture 3 Trend of Land Conflict Cases and Affected Farming Households in Indonesia (2015–2023)

Source: KPA Annual Reports 2015–2023; BPS Agrarian Statistics 2023

The application of RMT to Indonesian peasant movements reveals the theory's considerable analytical utility. It explains why peasant movements gained organizational coherence only after Reformasi — when the destruction of the New Order's organizational suppression mechanisms released the mobilization potential that grievances alone could not activate. The contrast between the pre-1998 period — characterized by intense but diffuse land grievances with no organizational expression — and the post-1998 period of SMO proliferation is precisely what RMT would predict. RMT's emphasis on the professional SMO also helps explain KPA's disproportionate policy influence relative to its small staff size; its investment in data production constitutes cultural resource accumulation that generates agenda-setting power beyond what member numbers could provide.

However, RMT also encounters limitations when applied to the Indonesian agrarian case. First, RMT undertheorizes structural power asymmetries: the asymmetric resource relationship between peasant SMOs and agribusiness corporations cannot be adequately captured within RMT's market-metaphor framework. Bernstein's (2010) political economy approach provides a necessary supplementary lens. Second, RMT insufficiently addresses colonial and postcolonial dimensions; Indonesian land conflicts are rooted in colonial land law architectures that UUPA 1960 only partially dismantled, requiring a postcolonial political ecology approach (Li, 2007; Peluso & Lund, 2011). Third, the emotional, identity-based, and spiritually grounded dimensions of peasant land attachment — captured by Scott's (1976) moral economy framework — remain inadequately theorized within RMT's organizational rationalism.

The findings carry concrete implications for movement strategy and agrarian policy. For peasant SMOs, coalition diversification — expanding beyond the SPI–KPA–WALHI core to include urban consumer movements, academic allies, and religious organizations — remains the most effective

strategy for compensating for resource limitations. For policymakers, the TORA experience demonstrates that legal institutional reform alone is insufficient when enforcement mechanisms are absent and elite resistance is organized.

CONCLUSION

This study has systematically applied McCarthy and Zald's (1977) Resource Mobilization Theory to Indonesian peasant movements and agrarian reform struggles, with three principal findings. First, RMT provides a powerful explanatory framework for the organizational dynamics of Indonesian agrarian movements, accurately predicting the post-Reformasi explosion of SMO activity as a function of expanded resource availability and reduced political repression. Second, political opportunity structure analysis reveals a structurally partial opening since 1998, sufficient to enable organizational development but consistently constrained by agribusiness capture of institutions and selective criminalization of direct action. Third, framing analysis demonstrates the sophisticated multi-level narrative strategy of Indonesian agrarian SMOs, though a significant gap persists between discursive victories and material agrarian reform outcomes. The study's theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating both the utility and the limits of RMT for agrarian sociology, which must be complemented by postcolonial political ecology and structural political economy analysis. Future research should pursue comparative studies across Southeast Asian agrarian movements to develop mid-range theory about conditions under which SMO resource mobilization translates into durable agrarian reform outcomes.

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