

# The Failure of Plantation Agriculture Transformation in Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This article examines the existence of plantations in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. It deals with the ways in which plantations operated in Java and the outer islands of Indonesia to show the existing fissures among the colonial plantations in different locations in the country. Deeply rooted in the colonial era, there has been a continuing debate especially on the impacts of plantations on the socio-economic conditions of the peasants and local communities. The growing number of regional studies on the colonial plantations generates an increasingly diverse historiographical views on the impacts of colonial plantations. Change in political regime from colonial to postcolonial government brought a new hope on plantations as a tool of achieving the people's prosperity. The expectations grew stronger and led to the nationalization of the Dutch-owned plantation enterprises. The transfer of plantations to the state management during the early decade of the decolonization era, however, did not automatically transform them into an efficient and well-managed business entity. Instead of serving well as a tool of creating prosperity for the Indonesian people, the postcolonial plantations experienced a striking setback due to the growing incidents of conflicts over plantation lands. Not only the historically rooted plantations inherited from the Dutch, even the newly established plantations during the New Order era also failed to act as a tool of prosperity for all and became a source of inequality and impoverishment among the smallholders and local communities. There is an urgent need to renew the function of plantations not merely as the tool of the state and corporations to reap lucrative benefits for their own, but also as means of providing the opportunities and access of the people, especially, farming communities to enjoy prosperity under the independent state of Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Colonial Plantations, Postcolonial Plantations, Plantation Operation, Socio-economic Impacts, Java, Outer Islands

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## 1. Introduction

Plantation agriculture is a sector that has received much scholarly and public attention. The significance of this sector cannot be separated from the fact that the sector has long been an integral part of the Indonesian economy. The sector is often described as the pillar of the colonial economy because its huge financial contribution. Sugar plantations, for example, were estimated to have contributed no less than a quarter of the colonial government's revenues in 1920 [1]. The source of income also came from other plantations. Tax revenues from plantations in East Sumatra, which became the center of tobacco and rubber plantations, were estimated to account for

about 6.6 percent of the total taxes that flowed the state treasury in 1927 [2]. The colonial plantations contributed financially to both the colonized and the mother country.

Plantations formed on of the largest achievements by the Dutch colonial state which made Indonesia a world-class plantation center. The important position of this sector in the economy of colonial Indonesia began to increase rapidly since 1830. The implementation of the Cultivation System or commonly called *Cultuur Stelsel* (1830-1870) gave birth to a state-managed plantation system. The change in colonial policies towards liberalism since around 1870 marked the diminishing role of the state and the growing role of the private sector in plantation exploitation [3]. The implementation of the Ethical Policy in principle did not

reduce the role of private plantations. This change in colonial politics only emphasized the greater responsibility of the colonial rulers to return the favor of the indigenous Indonesian population who had contributed a lot to the achievement of the prosperity of the Netherlands. The plantation sector, especially those managed by private companies, continued to expand and entered a peak period in the 1920s, which has often been described as the prosperous era of western plantation agriculture [4], before facing many difficulties due to the depression of the 1930s, the Japanese occupation, and the independence revolution. This sector has shown signs of revival since the early 1950s and its existence is still being found today.

The existence of plantations that have been going on for hundreds of years through changing times and the various impacts it causes has given rise to long debates. This article intends to provide a brief overview of the debate based on accessible references. By so doing, it is expected that the existence of the plantation sector and its consequences on the socio-economic of the peasants and local communities will be better understood, including an understanding of problems and reasons why the plantation sector as an agrarian production system failed to bring about the prosperity and community welfare improvements. This article draws upon sources that are relevant to the discussed topics and were collected from various places in Jember, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta.

## 2. Colonial Plantations

The development of colonial plantations marked a new era of land and labour utilization in colonial Indonesia. It started from the Cultivation System launched officially in 1830. Under this system, land and labour resources were systematically mobilized and extensively utilized under the colonial government direction to produce export commodities that met the need of the international market. This direction formed a significant shift of the colonial administration policy from a less intervention model to a more direct and stronger involvement in the economic activities. The ways in which the colonial resources had to be used under the Cultivation System were radically different from the previous decades when much attention of the colonial government was paid merely to the end products, rather than the production process. The application of cultivation system transformed colonial Indonesia especially Java into a lucrative plantation center [4].

The operation of colonial plantations made a use of combined internal and external factors of production. Land and labour resources came largely from inside the country where the two economic factors of production were generally abundantly available. But capital, technology and management were practically absent and therefore, had to be imported largely from outside especially Europe. This combination of economic factors of production equipped the colonial government and western private enterprises with an effective exploitation tool to reap huge benefits from the colony's potential resources [4].

However, it would be misleading to assume that the ways in which land and labour factor of production were generally the same across the colony, given the diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts in which the colonial plantations operated. A distinction can be broadly made between the plantations operating in Java and the other islands. Together with the type of commodities developed, the existing fissures between the two areas in terms of land and labour factors of production had significant repercussions on the local economy and society and also the path of regional development.

In Java where land was generally scarce, the operation of colonial plantations had to adjusted with the existing production system. Most lands were already brought into the foodcrops cultivation and therefore, the plantation crops had to be inserted to the existing production system. Agricultural lands were used in rotation between plantation and foodcrops cultivation [5]. The lands for plantations were mostly rented from the indigenous rulers and local farmers. Only in particular areas of Java where there were extensive lands under the state domain, lands for plantations were initially leased from the local farmers, but later also rented from the colonial government on a long term *erfpacht* right basis, as found for example in the extreme corner of East Java [6].

Unlike Java, in the outer islands land resources were abundantly available. The lands were generally owned by the indigenous rulers and partly also fell under the colonial state domain. The development of plantations in outer islands utilized lands obtained from the local rulers and colonial government on long-terms lease basis called concession right [7]. This right was basically the same with *erfpacht* right in terms of duration length, and only different in terms of acreage. Lands leased under concession right were generally much larger than those of *erfpacht* rights [4].

In terms of labour, colonial plantations in Java also differed from the outer islands. Unlike the availability of agricultural lands, labour was abundantly available in Java. Under this demographical context, as found for example in the Javanese principalities, the operation of colonial plantations relied almost exclusively on the use of local farmers and rural workers recruited from the surrounding villages and the adjacent areas [7]. Meanwhile, in outer islands of Java, the population was generally very scarce. The availability of plantation workers was the problem to be handle by planters. Even worse, local people was reluctant to work as plantation workers. To support the operation of plantations, workers had to be imported from other island especially Java and even from overseas. A great number of plantation workers were recruited from mainland China and India. The inflows of migrant workers from Java, Malaya, China, and India contributed greatly to the population and settlement growth in the outer islands of Java [8, 9].

With the application of above formulae, colonial Indonesia was transformed by the Dutch into a leading center of export commodity production. Sugar, coffee, rubber and other commodities flowed to the international market. Colonial Indonesia and its population were closely integrated into the world market with its prosperity promising effects and also

unexpected global blows arising from market fluctuations and uncertainties.

### 3. Plantation Impacts

The impact of plantations on the socio-economic conditions of indigenous people has been a hot issue since the colonial period. There is a strong view that colonial plantations that have been developed since the era of forced cultivation have had a negative impact on people's welfare. A liberal, GR van Soest, was of the view that instead of producing prosperity for the natives, the forced cultivation system actually brought misery to those involved in it. The operation of plantations under the cultivation system was seen as having significantly changed the face of Java from a charming island to a place full of stories of misery [10]. The Cultivation System, which required the indigenous farmers to grow commercial commodities for international markets, was described as a bad practice because it built Dutch progress on the misery of the indigenous population. Another critic of the forced cultivation system, WR van Hoevell, views this system as a paradox. On the one hand, it created affluences among the Dutch, but the indigenous peasants were hardly able to fulfill their basic need for foods [10]. For the colonial government and western private planters, sugar and coffee plantations, which were the main commodities of the Cultivation System, formed 'gold mines' and 'main sources of colonial profits'. But many Indonesians described plantations as 'a symbol of colonial oppression' and 'unjust privileges' [11].

Van Hoevell's paradox and negative view of the strong colonial plantation system characterize plantation historiography. Recent studies from a number of historians still strongly criticize the forced cultivation and colonial plantation systems in the following periods. Plantations, both state-run and private, are often described as having a bad impact because they are based on a policy of land rent and low wages, and their operations have often characterized by harsh and brutal measures. The study conducted by Ann Laura Stoler on the plantation sector in Sumatra strongly illustrates the dark side of the plantation world [12].

Various local studies share the same view on the negative impact of western plantation agriculture. For example, separate studies by Suhartono on plantations in Surakarta, Wahyudi's study on plantations in South Surabaya, and Hayati's study on East Sumatra plantations show that the plantation sector caused rice deficit, unemployment, increased poverty and crimes. Plantation had a negative impact on food crop production and in the case of East Sumatra made it the largest rice importer in the Dutch East Indies [13].

In recent decades, views that emphasize the negative impacts of plantations have begun to be questioned. Among the leading critics of cultivation system historiography are Cees Fasseur and Robert E. Elson. The old view is considered weak because the arguments are often not supported by solid and adequate statistical evidence, but is loaded with ideological content and tends to place it in a broad analysis of blessings or curses [10]. In addition, state-led plantations were

also considered bad because of their coercive nature, contrary to the spirit of liberalism which upheld freedom of economic activity and wanted to reduce state involvement in economic activities. Freedom was believed to increase indigenous farmers' productivity.

Drawing on statistical evidence, a number of studies show that the impact of plantations on indigenous peoples was not homogeneous and entirely dire, but varied by locality and by commodities developed for export markets. As shown by Lindayanti in her study on Jambi, the colonial rubber plantations pushed the widespread development of smallholder rubber [14]. In the case of sugarcane plantations, Van Schaik's study showed that plantations had a mixed impact. On the one hand, sugarcane plantations increase the vulnerability of farmers because their access to irrigation becomes more limited. On the other hand, the plantation sector also provides important job opportunities for landless farmers [15]. However, in the Eastern End of Java, Elson found that plantations contributed to the growing prosperity of indigenous people. This was indicated by an increase in the volume of local trade, the acquisition of a source of greater profits than food crops, expansion of job opportunities, and the development of entrepreneurship among the indigenous population [10, 16].

Plantations provided benefits to indigenous people in the form of payment of land rent, labor wages and other inputs. Rent and wage payments by plantations are estimated to be substantial. In 1928, for example, the payment of rent and wages by sugar plantations amounted to 134 million guilders or about 6 percent of all Indonesian people's income [2]. Payments to indigenous people was also made by other plantations, including rubber and tobacco, the size and proportion of which has been estimated to be quite large.

Different impacts of colonial plantations on the peasant community and local economy have also been underlined in a comparative study by Wasino and Nawiyanto [17]. Comparing between plantation in Jember regency (East Java) and the Surakarta principality (Central Java), the study shows that the different agrarian context of plantation operation and different commodity cultivated under the plantation agriculture brought different consequences. In the Mangkunegaran principality, sugar plantation operated in rotation with rice cultivation and land resources were scarce. Sugarcane occupied the irrigated lands for more than one and a half year and consequently had a big consequence on the rice production, leading to a rice deficit. Meanwhile in the Besuki residency where lands were planted with tobacco, there were no dire consequences of plantation agriculture on rice production. The cultivation of tobacco took place during dry seasons and this commodity used lands only for about three months. For the rest of the year, the lands could be brought under rice cultivation. In this residency, the development of plantation agriculture did not harm the ability of the region in producing rice and its role as rice surplus area in colonial Indonesia.

A number of studies support a positive impact of the plantations on the socio-economic conditions of the

indigenous population. Studies on tobacco plantations in Besuki residency reveal that the plantation sector did not destroy food crop production, it even encouraged the development of smallholder tobacco and regional socio-economic dynamics [18]. Similarly, a study of Bali found that the emergence of plantations was accompanied by the development of transportation infrastructure, and the growth of trade [13]. A study on plantations outside Java conducted by Lindayanti also shows a dynamic influence that accompanied the development of commercial rubber plantations. Based on her observations of the Jambi region, Lindayanti shows that there was a stimulus for the development of smallholder rubber which was able to become a major source of prosperity and played an important role as an engine for regional socio-economic development [19].

Not only in the case of rubber in Sumatera, a study produced by Lindblad on Southeast Kalimantan clearly shows positive consequences of the development of plantation rubber in the region [20]. The development of plantations provided example and strong stimulus for the widespread development of smallholder rubber among the local people that actively responded to market opportunities. The development of rubber plantations made a major contribution to the growing prosperity of local communities. This was evident from several indicators. The number of people went to haj pilgrimage to Mecca increased considerably. The region also imported the growing number of modern goods such as sewing machine, motorcycles, high quality textiles and expensive clothes from overseas. More people also conducted great festivities that took place for days. Urban facilities grew and there was a growing number of people enjoying their leisure time by going to cinemas and doing other activities.

To sum up, it can be said that the growing number of regional studies on plantation agriculture has provided a much clearer, more complete and objective picture of the colonial plantations operating in Indonesia. The fact that plantations had become the foundation of colonial economy and created employment opportunities and played a crucial role as a tool of achieving colonial interests, brought a new hope that the same tool could be used to reach national goals of creating prosperity of the Indonesian people. The next section shall discuss the issues of post-colonial plantations.

#### 4. Postcolonial Plantations

The hope for the realization of the prosperity of indigenous people based on the plantation sector also grew along with the political changes that ended the Dutch colonial order. But, the independent state of Indonesia was bound to guarantee the operation of the Dutch economic interests in the country as part of the results of the Round Table Agreement between the Netherlands and the Indonesian government. This obligation was part of the prices demanded by the Netherlands government as an exchange of the recognition of the Indonesian independence [21].

With the return of the Dutch economic interests, dissatisfactions grew among the nationalist leaders strongly

demanding a full independence and considered Indonesia's political independence meaningless without economic independence. The unwillingness of the Netherlands government to settle in West Papua issue and to return it as part of the Indonesian territory as previously agreed provoked a growing demand for stricter actions against the Dutch interests and companies operating in Indonesia [22].

The nationalization of the Dutch plantation enterprises in Indonesia in 1957-1958 formed an important measure taken by the Indonesian government to realize economic decolonization, seen as an integral part of the political independence. Apart from the West Papua problem, the nationalization of the Dutch plantation enterprises was carried out because the exploitative nature of plantations was considered still in existence. Most of the plantations was under the control of foreign companies, especially the Dutch. The Dutch plantation interests continued to dominate and were seen as harmful to the national economy and the realization of the prosperity of indigenous people who dreamed of having better life under the newly established nation state of Indonesia. By nationalizing the foreign companies, the plantations were expected to be used as a tool of achieving the national goals of creating a just and prosperous society.

The expectations that were placed on the plantation sector through the nationalization process were not easily achieved. Instead of being able to function as a means of realizing prosperity, the performance of this sector after being nationalized in general was less encouraging. In terms of production volume, productivity level, export values, plantation performances never again matched what have been achieved during the colonial period. Even, it can be said that plantations after nationalization actually experienced a setback. The output volume of the plantation sector decreased steeply, by an average of minus 0.8 percent, in contrast to the average growth rate of 7 percent in the period 1920-1930 [4].

Various problems have entangled the plantation sector after nationalization, both internally and externally. Internally, the operation of plantations was not supported by the readiness of adequate managerial resources to guide the running of the company, coupled with the involvement of military personnel in the management of plantation companies [22]. Externally, the plantation sector has also lost access to the international marketing networks to channel the plantation products, strikingly different condition from the Dutch colonial era when international market was widely accessible. Such conditions made it hard for the plantation sector to restore its position and role as a pillar of the economy and the locomotive of national economic growth.

Indeed, the plantation sector continued to make an important contribution both in terms of obtaining state foreign exchange and providing job opportunities for some of the people who depend on this sector. Together with the smallholder agriculture sector, the plantation sector in 1990, for example, still provided about 50 percent of Indonesia's employment opportunities and in absolute terms the number of people involved in it continued to increase [23]. However, proportionally the contribution of the plantation sector to the

economy actually continued to decline. Together with the smallholder agriculture sector, the contribution made by the plantation sector to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped from 51 percent in 1965 to only 24 percent in 1980, and continued to decline to 16 percent in 1996 [24].

Despite the continuing contribution to the GDP, sociologically the existence of the plantation sector in the era of independence also often led to the conflicts in relation to land tenure and access. Agrarian conflicts of this kind involving plantations and farmers were common, for example in the Besuki area, which is one of the leading commercial plantation centers in Indonesia. Outbursts of conflict over plantation lands in this area are still occurring and have not been completely resolved [25, 26]. Similar phenomena were quite common in other areas of Java such as Malang, Ngawi, Kediri and other plantation areas in Central and West Java.

East Sumatera has also been a hotspot of land conflicts between planters and farmers. A study by Pelzer provides a good example of tense and widespread land conflicts in the plantation belt of Sumatera immediately after the proclamation of Indonesian independence [27].

Land conflicts were not only faced by old plantations with a colonial origin, but also occurred in new plantations that newly developed during the New Order era. A study conducted by Zaiyardam on the development of plantation capitalism in Indragiri Hulu Riau provides an interesting illustration of this issue [28]. The expansion of capitalist plantations by the government and private companies that ignored local values had created problems with land ownership and socio-economic disparities between local residents and migrant groups. This condition became fertile ground for the emergence of resistance movements launched by indigenous people and local farmers who felt that their land ownership rights were being taken by force and unfairly by the plantations with the support of the authorities at both the central and regional levels.

Similarly, in East Kalimantan, the development of palm oil plantations during the New Order era also caused various problems among the smallholders and native communities. Smallholders and local communities often regarded the development of oil palm plantation as political-economic measures that brought destruction and caused impoverishment among the smallholders and native communities. The native communities felt that their lands were taken over for the interests of corporations and incoming migrants. Meanwhile, the partnership relations between smallholders and the oil palm factories were often colored by various unfair treatments, such as the absence of rights to make decisions regarding their oil palm plots, less appreciation to smallholders' initiatives, and pressing working regulations [29].

At that point, it easily leads to an impression that the face of postcolonial plantations remains unchanged. As its colonial origin, instead of becoming an engine of general prosperity, the postcolonial plantations become a source of conflicts. The plantation sector fails to escape fully from exploitative nature closely associated with the colonial plantations. Even though operating under radically different political environment, the

postcolonial plantations in Indonesia fail to develop into a new economic entity that is able to play a new role as a main source of the people's prosperity. This has been a long historically rooted ethical problem that is difficult to erase [30].

## 5. Conclusion

The link between plantations and community welfare is a subject that has often much debated. The heat of debate on this issue cannot be separated from the nature of plantations during the colonial period and the great hopes attached to it during the independence period. Studies on the impact of the plantation sector led to an understanding that the development of plantation sector brought an improvement in the standard of living of indigenous people, without denying the fact that a larger proportion of benefits has been enjoyed by corporations and the colonial government in both the colonies and the mother country. In relation to this, the nationalization of foreign plantations was taken as an effort to fight inequality and made the plantation sector a means to achieve national goals of realizing prosperity of the population.

The sociological reality of postcolonial plantations, which was frequently colored by agrarian conflicts, indicates that the existence of the plantation agriculture sector has not been able to fully realize its role as a means of achieving of the people's prosperity in the context of a new agrarian agricultural system in postcolonial Indonesia. Therefore, the biggest challenge for the plantation sector during the postcolonial era is how to get a rid of its unjust exploitative nature inherited from the Dutch colonial regime. There is an urgent need to renew its function not merely as the tool of the state and corporations to reap lucrative benefits for their own, but also as means of providing the opportunities and access of the people, especially, farming communities to enjoy prosperity under the independent state of Indonesia.

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