



Why Do Villages Lose Their People? Analysis of Agrarian Structure Change, Rural-Urban Migration, and Political Economy Transformation Driving Depopulation of Indonesian Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

Rural depopulation — the sustained decline of village populations through out-migration — represents one of the most consequential yet underexamined transformations in contemporary Indonesian social geography. While urbanization narratives typically celebrate the movement of rural populations toward cities as a marker of modernization and development, this article argues that the depopulation of Indonesian villages is better understood as a symptom of structural crisis: the disarticulation of agrarian livelihoods, the capture of rural land by capital, and the systematic failure of rural political economy to generate conditions under which village life remains viable and meaningful for younger generations. Drawing on secondary data, existing empirical studies, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks from agrarian political economy and rural sociology, this article analyzes the interacting drivers of rural depopulation in Indonesia — including land tenure insecurity, agricultural commercialization, declining terms of trade for smallholder farmers, the expansion of extractive industries into rural territories, and the pull of urban wage labor markets. The study employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology supplemented by quantitative demographic and land use data. Findings demonstrate that depopulation is not evenly distributed across rural Indonesia but is concentrated in specific agrarian zones defined by plantation dominance, land fragmentation, and limited access to non-farm livelihood diversification. The article concludes that reversing rural depopulation requires structural interventions in agrarian political economy — genuine land reform, investment in rural non-farm economies, and the reconstruction of rural governance — rather than the infrastructure-focused rural development programs that have characterized Indonesian policy in recent decades.

Keywords: rural depopulation, agrarian structure, rural-urban migration, political economy, land reform, smallholder farmers, Indonesia



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INTRODUCTION

"The countryside is being emptied not because the city is so wonderful, but because the village has been made impossible. Land that once fed families has been absorbed into plantations. Young people who once farmed now drive ojek in Medan or work on construction sites in Jakarta. The village does not lack people — it lacks the conditions that make staying worthwhile." — Quoted from a village head (kepala desa) in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, as recorded in field research notes compiled in Nasution & Sinaga (2022)

This testimony, offered by a village administrator watching his community hollow out over two decades of sustained out-migration, articulates with striking clarity the central argument of this article. The depopulation of Indonesian villages is not primarily a story of urban attraction — the magnetic pull of city lights, wages, and modern amenities — though these factors are real and consequential. It is, more fundamentally, a story of rural unviability: the systematic erosion of the material, social, and institutional conditions that make village life a viable and dignified choice. When a kepala desa in North Sumatra tells a researcher that "the village does not lack people — it lacks the conditions that make staying worthwhile," he is offering a diagnosis that is simultaneously personal, political, and structural.

This observation connects directly to one of the most consequential debates in Indonesian rural development: whether village depopulation represents the inevitable and ultimately beneficial working of structural economic transformation — the release of surplus agricultural labor into more productive urban sectors, as classical development economics would predict — or whether it represents the dispossession of rural communities through processes that concentrate land and wealth in the hands of large agricultural and extractive capital while destroying the livelihood foundations of smallholder farmers and rural communities. This article takes the latter position seriously, arguing that the political economy of Indonesian agrarian transformation — characterized by large-scale land acquisition, plantation expansion, commodity price volatility, and the withdrawal of state support from smallholder agriculture — has actively produced the conditions of rural unviability that drive depopulation. To understand why villages lose their people, we must first understand how the structural conditions of village life have been transformed — and by whom, and in whose interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agrarian Political Economy and Rural Transformation

The theoretical foundation of this article is drawn from agrarian political economy — an interdisciplinary tradition that examines how land, labor, and capital relations in rural areas are shaped by historical processes of accumulation, state policy, and class conflict. Bernstein's (2010, cited in Borras et al., 2019) analysis of the "agrarian question" provides a crucial starting point: the question of whether and how smallholder agriculture can survive and develop under capitalist conditions, or whether it is structurally subordinated and eventually destroyed by the expansion of agrarian capital. In the Indonesian context, this question has been answered differently across different historical periods and different agrarian zones, but the broad trajectory of the post-New Order period has been characterized by increasing land concentration, the expansion of large-scale plantation agriculture (primarily oil palm), and the progressive marginalization of smallholder rice and commodity producers (Cramb & McCarthy, 2016; White, 2021).

The concept of "adverse incorporation" — developed by du Toit (2004, cited in Ribot & Peluso, 2020) — is particularly useful for understanding how rural communities are integrated into market systems in ways that are formally voluntary but structurally coercive, and that typically result in net disadvantage for the rural poor. Smallholder farmers who sell their land to oil palm companies, or who enter into nucleus-plasma contract farming arrangements, are formally exercising market freedom but are in practice responding to a structural situation in which land fragmentation, credit constraints, and commodity price volatility make independent smallholder farming increasingly unviable. Their "choice" to participate in plantation schemes or to migrate is shaped by a narrowing of alternatives that is itself the product of political economy rather than natural market dynamics.

Rural-Urban Migration: Beyond Push-Pull Models

The dominant theoretical framework for understanding rural-urban migration has historically been the push-pull model, which attributes migration to a combination of push factors in rural areas (poverty, unemployment, land scarcity) and pull factors in urban areas (higher wages, better services, social

mobility) (Harris & Todaro, 1970, cited in Skeldon, 2020). While this framework captures important empirical regularities, it has been extensively criticized for its methodological individualism — its reduction of structural processes to individual decisions — and its failure to account for the political economy dynamics that produce both the rural push and the urban pull in the first place (De Haas, 2021).

A more structurally grounded approach, drawing on world-systems theory and agrarian political economy, situates migration within the broader transformation of rural labor relations under capitalism (Borras et al., 2019; Rigg et al., 2018). From this perspective, rural out-migration is not primarily a rational individual response to wage differentials but a structural outcome of the dispossession of rural communities from land and livelihood assets, combined with the expansion of urban wage labor markets that absorb the displaced rural labor force. This "migration as dispossession" framework — more appropriate to the Indonesian context than classical push-pull models — directs analytical attention toward the political and economic processes that produce rural unviability rather than the individual decisions of migrants.

Land Tenure, Agricultural Commercialization, and Rural Livelihoods

Land tenure insecurity is among the most potent drivers of rural vulnerability and out-migration in Indonesia. The Indonesian Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) of 1960 established a framework for land rights that has been progressively eroded by subsequent legislation — particularly the Forestry Law of 1999, the Plantation Law of 2004, and the Land Acquisition Law of 2012 — which has made it easier for state and corporate actors to acquire rural and customary land for development purposes (Rachman, 2021; Safitri, 2022). The result is a landscape of chronic tenure insecurity in which millions of rural households — particularly in outer islands where customary (adat) land rights are widespread — hold land without formal legal recognition, leaving them permanently vulnerable to dispossession.

The expansion of oil palm plantations — which increased from approximately 3.6 million hectares in 2000 to over 16 million hectares by 2022 — has been the single most transformative force in rural land relations over the past two decades (Direktorat Jenderal Perkebunan, 2022). Research consistently documents the mixed and often negative impacts of oil palm expansion on smallholder livelihoods: while some households benefit from participation in nucleus-plasma schemes or from selling smallholder-produced palm fruit, the majority of land conversion involves the displacement of subsistence and smallholder farming communities from their land, the destruction of forest resources that contributed to livelihood diversification, and the creation of plantation wage labor relationships that offer inferior livelihood security compared to independent farming (Cramb & McCarthy, 2016; White, 2021).

Demographic Dimensions of Rural Depopulation in Indonesia

Indonesian demographic data reveal a consistent pattern of rural population decline across specific agrarian zones, alongside the growth of peri-urban and metropolitan populations. Between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of Indonesia's population living in rural areas declined from 50.2 percent to 43.8 percent — a shift representing tens of millions of people (BPS, 2021). However, national aggregate data obscure important regional and sub-regional variations. Provinces with high concentrations of plantation agriculture — North Sumatra, Riau, Kalimantan Barat, and Kalimantan Timur — have experienced particularly acute rural depopulation in sub-district level data, with many villages in plantation-dominated areas losing 20–40 percent of their populations over a single decade (Rigg et al., 2018; Wahyuningsih et al., 2022).

The age and gender composition of out-migration is equally important. Rural areas experiencing depopulation consistently show disproportionate outflows of young adults aged 15–35, and in many regions, disproportionate female migration driven by the expansion of urban manufacturing and

domestic service employment (Elmhirst, 2020). The resulting demographic structure of depopulated villages — characterized by aging populations, high dependency ratios, and the concentration of women in caretaking roles while younger males also migrate — has profound consequences for agricultural labor supply, community governance, and social reproduction.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology combined with secondary quantitative data analysis. The study draws on a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, government statistical publications, policy documents, and empirical research reports published between 2018 and 2024. Primary quantitative data sources include the National Census of 2020 (BPS), the Agricultural Census of 2023, data from the Directorate General of Plantations (Ditjenbun), and village-level demographic data from the Podes (Village Potential Survey) dataset. Qualitative dimensions of the analysis draw on existing ethnographic and interview-based research on rural communities in North Sumatra, Riau, West Kalimantan, and East Java, as documented in peer-reviewed publications and research reports from institutions including the Sajogyo Institute, the Agrarian Resource Center, and university research centers.

The analytical framework integrates agrarian political economy theory — specifically Bernstein's agrarian question, Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, and the adverse incorporation framework — with migration theory drawing on De Haas's (2021) structuralist-constructivist synthesis and Rigg et al.'s (2018) analysis of "changing rural livelihoods" in Southeast Asia. Findings are organized thematically around three analytical axes: (1) structural transformation of agrarian relations and its effects on rural livelihoods, (2) demographic patterns and spatial differentiation of rural depopulation, and (3) political economy implications and policy responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agrarian Structure Change: Land Concentration, Plantation Expansion, and Smallholder Marginalization

The transformation of Indonesian agrarian structure since the fall of the New Order in 1998 has been characterized by accelerating land concentration and the expansion of large-scale commercial agriculture, particularly oil palm, into previously smallholder-dominated and subsistence farming territories. Table 1 below illustrates the trajectory of oil palm plantation expansion and its relationship to smallholder agricultural land across key producing provinces.

Table 1. Oil Palm Plantation Expansion and Smallholder Land Area in Selected Indonesian Provinces (2010–2022)

Province	Total Oil Palm Area 2010 (000 ha)	Total Oil Palm Area 2022 (000 ha)	Change (%)	Smallholder Share 2022 (%)	Avg. Farm Size Smallholder (ha)
Riau	2,103	3,381	+60.8	41.2	1.8
North Sumatra	1,124	1,643	+46.2	38.7	1.6
West Kalimantan	891	1,912	+114.6	29.4	1.4
Central Kalimantan	743	1,687	+127.1	26.8	1.3
South Sumatra	812	1,354	+66.7	44.1	1.9

Source: Direktorat Jenderal Perkebunan (2022); BPS Agricultural Census (2023)

The data in Table 1 reveal a striking pattern: in provinces where oil palm expansion has been most rapid — particularly West and Central Kalimantan — the smallholder share of total plantation area is

lowest, indicating that expansion has been dominated by large corporate estates rather than by the growth of independent smallholder production. Moreover, average smallholder farm sizes across all provinces remain well below the threshold — estimated at 2–3 hectares for oil palm — necessary for a household to achieve livelihood security from palm cultivation alone (Cramb & McCarthy, 2016). This sub-viable farm size structure reflects the cumulative effects of land fragmentation through inheritance, land loss through debt and distress sales, and the initial allocation of land in nucleus-plasma schemes that systematically assigned the most marginal and smallest plots to smallholder participants.

The consequence for rural livelihoods is a structural condition of what Bernstein (2010, cited in Borras et al., 2019) calls "classes of labour" — rural households that are too land-poor to subsist from farming alone, yet insufficiently integrated into wage labor markets to achieve stable employment income, leaving them in a condition of permanent livelihood precarity that makes migration an increasingly rational response to household survival needs.

Demographic Patterns of Rural Depopulation: Spatial Differentiation and Age-Gender Dynamics

Analysis of sub-district and village-level demographic data reveals that rural depopulation in Indonesia is spatially concentrated rather than evenly distributed. Figure 1 below schematizes the relationship between agrarian structure type and depopulation intensity, drawing on the empirical literature.

Figure 1. Relationship Between Agrarian Structure Type and Rural Depopulation Intensity in Indonesia

HIGH DEPOPULATION INTENSITY

- Plantation-dominated zones (oil palm, rubber)
- Mining/extractive industry hinterlands
- Remote upland/forest margin communities
- Dryland farming areas with land fragmentation

- Nucleus-plasma smallholder zones
- Mixed farming/non-farm economy zones

- Irrigated rice cultivation areas (Java/Bali)
- Peri-urban agricultural zones

LOW DEPOPULATION INTENSITY

Horizontal axis: Distance from urban/market centers (Near ↔ Far)

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Rigg et al. (2018); Wahyuningsih et al. (2022); BPS Podes (2021)

This schematic captures a key finding from the empirical literature: depopulation intensity is highest in plantation-dominated, remote, and extractive industry hinterland zones — precisely the areas where agrarian structure change has been most acute and where non-farm livelihood diversification options are most limited. In contrast, peri-urban agricultural zones and irrigated rice cultivation areas in Java and Bali show lower depopulation rates, reflecting the proximity to urban labor markets that allows rural households to combine farm and off-farm income without permanent migration, and the relative stability of wet rice cultivation systems compared to cash crop monocultures subject to commodity price cycles.

Table 2 below presents village-level depopulation data from selected districts in North Sumatra — a province that combines high plantation concentration with significant rural out-migration — illustrating the demographic consequences of agrarian structure change at the local scale.

Table 2. Village Demographic Change in Selected Plantation-Dominated Districts, North Sumatra (2010–2020)

District	Village Category	Population Change 2010–2020 (%)	Youth (15–30) Share Change (%)	Female Population Change (%)	Agricultural HH Share Change (%)
Langkat	Plantation border villages	–18.3	–24.6	–21.1	–31.4
Asahan	Oil palm smallholder zones	–12.7	–19.8	–14.3	–27.6
Labuhan Batu	Corporate estate hinterland	–22.4	–28.9	–25.7	–38.2
Simalungun	Mixed plantation/smallholder	–9.4	–14.2	–11.8	–22.3
Tapanuli Selatan	Upland dryland farming	–14.8	–21.3	–17.6	–29.1

Source: BPS North Sumatra (2021); Podes Village Potential Survey (2021); Nasution & Sinaga (2022)

The data presented in Table 2 confirm the theoretical proposition that depopulation is most acute in plantation-dominated and corporate estate hinterland zones, with Labuhan Batu district's corporate estate hinterland villages losing over 22 percent of their total population in a single decade, including nearly 29 percent of their youth population. The disproportionate loss of agricultural households — between 22 and 38 percent across the sampled districts — indicates that it is specifically the farming population, rather than the village population in general, that is most intensively displaced, suggesting that the primary driver is the destruction of agricultural livelihoods rather than a generalized preference for urban amenities.

The gender dimension of this data is equally significant. Female population loss is consistently high across all district categories, reflecting the documented pattern of female-led migration toward urban manufacturing, domestic service, and informal sector employment in metropolitan areas (Elmhirst, 2020). In some North Sumatran villages, the combination of male labor migration to plantation wage work and female migration to urban areas has produced a demographic structure in which the remaining permanent population consists primarily of elderly residents and children in the care of grandparents — a "skipped generation" household structure with profound implications for community social reproduction and agricultural labor supply.

Political Economy Drivers: The State, Capital, and the Making of Rural Unviability

A comprehensive analysis of rural depopulation in Indonesia cannot be limited to demographic description but must interrogate the political economy processes that have produced the conditions of rural unviability driving out-migration. Three interconnected processes emerge from the literature as centrally important: the restructuring of agricultural support systems, the legal facilitation of large-scale land acquisition, and the incorporation of rural areas into commodity chains on terms unfavorable to smallholder producers.

The withdrawal of state support from smallholder agriculture — including subsidized credit, input subsidies, extension services, and price support mechanisms — accelerated following the structural adjustment conditionalities of the IMF-supported post-1998 economic recovery program, and has not been substantially reversed in subsequent policy periods despite rhetorical commitments to rural development (Rachman, 2021). The Jokowi administration's rural development program — primarily implemented through the Village Fund (Dana Desa), which has distributed significant resources to

villages since 2015 — has had measurable positive impacts on village infrastructure but has been criticized for failing to address the structural agrarian conditions that drive depopulation (Antlöv et al., 2020; Safitri, 2022). Villages can have better roads and community halls while still losing their people, because the structural conditions that make staying viable — access to sufficient land, remunerative agricultural prices, non-farm employment, and functioning local governance — remain unaddressed.

The legal framework for land acquisition, particularly as strengthened by the Land Acquisition Law of 2012 and the Job Creation Law (Omnibus Law) of 2020, has substantially reduced procedural protections for rural communities facing land acquisition for plantation, infrastructure, and industrial development purposes (Rachman, 2021; Safitri, 2022). The Omnibus Law in particular has been widely criticized by agrarian reform advocates and rural civil society organizations for weakening environmental impact assessment requirements and community consent procedures in ways that facilitate the expansion of extractive and plantation capital into rural territories at the expense of community land rights.

Migration Dynamics: Circuits of Labor, Remittances, and the Ambivalence of Mobility

Rural-urban migration in Indonesia is not a one-way flow but operates through complex circuits of circular, seasonal, and permanent mobility that interact with village economies in ways that are simultaneously stabilizing and destabilizing. Remittances from urban migrants constitute an increasingly important component of rural household income in depopulating villages, providing a financial lifeline that partly compensates for declining agricultural incomes and that funds consumption, education, and small business investment (Skeldon, 2020; Wahyuningsih et al., 2022). In this sense, migration functions as a household livelihood diversification strategy that allows some rural households to remain in villages while supplementing farm income with urban wages.

However, this stabilizing function of remittances coexists with the destabilizing effects of sustained young adult out-migration on agricultural labor supply, community governance, and the intergenerational transmission of agricultural knowledge and land management practices. As the farming population ages and young people lose attachment to agricultural livelihoods, the long-term viability of smallholder farming systems is further eroded, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of agricultural decline and out-migration (Rigg et al., 2018; De Haas, 2021). The village does not simply lose people — it loses the demographic and cultural conditions necessary for agricultural systems to reproduce themselves across generations.

Toward Rural Revitalization: Policy Implications and Structural Reform Requirements

Reversing rural depopulation — or, more realistically, creating conditions under which village life becomes a genuinely viable choice rather than a condition of last resort — requires structural interventions that go considerably beyond the infrastructure-focused rural development programs that have characterized Indonesian policy in recent decades. Three reform areas emerge from the analysis as foundational.

First, genuine agrarian reform — including the redistribution of plantation concession land to landless and land-poor rural households, the recognition and legal protection of customary land rights, and the enforcement of land use regulations that prevent continued concentration of agricultural land in corporate hands — is a structural prerequisite for restoring the material foundation of rural livelihoods. The Agrarian Reform program announced by the Jokowi administration in 2016, targeting 9 million hectares of land redistribution, has delivered results dramatically below target due to resistance from plantation interests and weak implementation capacity (Rachman, 2021).

Second, investment in rural non-farm economic development — including rural industrialization, agro-processing, rural tourism, and digital economy integration — is essential for creating the

livelihood diversification that makes villages viable for younger generations who are unlikely to subsist from farming alone. This requires not merely infrastructure investment but the development of rural financial systems, technical education, and market linkages that enable rural entrepreneurs and workers to participate in non-farm value chains.

Third, rural governance reform — including genuine community participation in village development planning, transparent and accountable management of the Village Fund, and the strengthening of local customary institutions (*lembaga adat*) as legitimate governance actors — is necessary to ensure that development resources respond to community priorities rather than to the preferences of local political elites or external capital interests. Without governance reform, even well-resourced rural development programs risk reproducing the conditions of elite capture and community marginalization that have historically characterized Indonesian rural policy.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the depopulation of Indonesian villages is not a natural or inevitable consequence of modernization but a structurally produced outcome of agrarian political economy transformation — specifically, the concentration of agricultural land in plantation and corporate hands, the erosion of smallholder livelihood viability, and the systematic failure of rural development policy to address the structural conditions that make village life sustainable. Drawing on agrarian political economy theory, demographic analysis, and the empirical literature on Indonesian rural transformation, the study has demonstrated that depopulation is spatially concentrated in plantation-dominated and extractive industry hinterland zones, that it disproportionately affects the young adult and female population, and that it is driven by the destruction of agricultural livelihoods rather than by a straightforward preference for urban amenities.

The evidence presented challenges the dominant narrative that frames rural out-migration as a sign of successful development — the release of surplus labor from agriculture into more productive urban sectors. While some individuals and households undoubtedly benefit from migration, the aggregate effect of sustained rural depopulation is the hollowing out of village communities, the erosion of agricultural knowledge and practice, and the destruction of the social and institutional fabric that makes rural governance and social reproduction possible. Villages do not lose their people because urban life is irresistible; they lose them because the conditions that make rural life viable — access to sufficient land, remunerative livelihoods, functioning communities, and capable local governance — have been systematically undermined by political economy dynamics that have concentrated rural wealth and power in the hands of a small number of corporate and political actors.

Reversing this trajectory requires not infrastructure investment alone but structural reform: genuine land redistribution, legal protection of community land rights, investment in rural non-farm economies, and the reconstruction of rural governance on a participatory and accountable basis. The future of Indonesian villages depends not on their ability to compete with cities for the affections of young people, but on whether the political will exists to address the structural injustices that have made staying in the village a sacrifice rather than a choice.

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