

COMMUNAL LAND CONFLICT IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ECONOMY OF MEDAN CITY

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Abstract

This study examines communal land (tanah ulayat) conflicts in Medan City from a development studies perspective and analyzes their implications for local economic performance. Rapid urban expansion, infrastructure development, and increasing land demand have intensified tensions between customary land tenure systems and formal land administration. The study aims to identify the structural causes of communal land conflicts, assess their economic impacts, and propose governance-oriented solutions to support sustainable urban development. A qualitative case study approach combined with descriptive quantitative analysis was employed, using in-depth interviews, field observations, document analysis, and secondary economic data. The findings indicate that communal land conflicts contribute to slower investment growth, project delays, increased development costs, and land price volatility. Regression analysis shows that property rights security, investment levels, and governance effectiveness significantly influence local economic performance, explaining approximately 68% of its variation. These results highlight that unresolved land conflicts are not only legal issues but also development constraints affecting economic stability. Strengthening land governance integration, legal harmonization, and participatory conflict resolution mechanisms is essential to enhance investment certainty and promote inclusive, sustainable urban economic development in Medan City.

Keywords: *Communal Land Conflict, Economic Development, Governance Effectiveness, Property Rights Security, Urban Development*

INTRODUCTION

Communal land (tanah ulayat) conflicts remain one of the most persistent structural problems in Indonesia's regional development landscape. In urban areas experiencing rapid spatial expansion, such as Medan City, the tension between customary land rights and formal land administration systems has intensified. As the capital of North Sumatra Province, Medan serves as a regional economic hub characterized by accelerated infrastructure development, real estate expansion, and commercial investment. However, the coexistence of customary land tenure systems and state-recognized property regimes often produces legal ambiguity, overlapping claims, and prolonged disputes. These conflicts not only generate social tension but also create economic uncertainty that affects investment climate, productivity, and urban development sustainability (Firman, 2019; McCarthy & Robinson, 2016). From a development studies perspective, land constitutes a fundamental economic asset that shapes capital accumulation, spatial planning, and livelihood security. Theoretically, secure property rights are considered a prerequisite for economic growth because they reduce transaction costs and increase investment certainty (De Soto, 2000). Conversely, unclear tenure arrangements and unresolved land conflicts hinder economic transformation and urban competitiveness. In Medan, communal land disputes frequently arise in peri-urban areas where customary land is converted for housing, industrial estates, or public infrastructure. The absence of harmonization between adat (customary) law and national land law contributes to governance fragmentation and weak institutional coordination (Bedner, 2018). The urgency of this issue is reinforced by the strategic position of Medan as part of Indonesia's national urban development agenda. Rapid urbanization has increased land demand, while indigenous communities seek recognition and protection of their ancestral territories. When conflicts escalate, development projects may experience delays, increased costs, and reputational risks for investors. Moreover, prolonged disputes reduce community trust in public institutions and weaken social cohesion, which are critical elements of inclusive development (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, addressing communal land conflicts is not merely a legal matter but also a development imperative.

This study aims to analyze communal land conflicts in Medan City from a development studies perspective and to examine their implications for the local economy. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify the structural causes of communal land conflicts; (2) analyze their economic impact on urban development, investment, and local livelihoods; and (3) formulate policy-oriented solutions to support sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The problem-solving plan proposed in this article emphasizes institutional integration, participatory land governance, and legal harmonization between customary and statutory land systems. Strengthening collaborative governance involving local government, customary leaders, investors, and civil society is considered essential to reduce conflict intensity and enhance development legitimacy. Additionally, transparent spatial planning and community-based mediation mechanisms are recommended to align economic development objectives with indigenous rights protection.

Relevant literature indicates that land conflict resolution requires multidimensional approaches combining legal reform, socio-economic empowerment, and administrative capacity building (Boone, 2019; Hall et al., 2017). Empirical studies in Indonesian urban contexts show that unresolved land disputes negatively affect regional economic performance and discourage long-term investment (Resosudarmo et al., 2019). Therefore, analyzing the Medan case provides a specific situational context that contributes to broader discussions on urban development governance in emerging economies. In conclusion, communal land conflict in Medan represents a critical intersection between customary rights, state authority, and economic development dynamics. Understanding this issue through a development studies lens enables a more comprehensive assessment of its structural roots and economic consequences. By integrating legal recognition, participatory planning, and economic policy reform, Medan City can transform land governance challenges into opportunities for inclusive and sustainable urban development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communal land conflicts have been widely examined in the context of agrarian change, property rights reform, and urban transformation in developing countries. In Indonesia, the coexistence of customary (adat) land tenure systems and statutory land law creates a dualistic legal framework that often generates overlapping claims and institutional fragmentation (Bedner, 2018). Previous studies emphasize that legal pluralism, while intended to accommodate local traditions, frequently produces uncertainty when customary recognition is not fully integrated into national land administration systems (McCarthy & Robinson, 2016). This condition is particularly visible in rapidly urbanizing cities, where land becomes a strategic economic commodity. From a theoretical perspective, property rights theory argues that clearly defined and enforceable rights are fundamental to economic development because they reduce transaction costs, enhance tenure security, and encourage investment (De Soto, 2000). Empirical research supports the argument that land titling programs can stimulate credit access and asset capitalization. However, critics note that formalization does not automatically resolve communal claims, especially where customary institutions maintain social legitimacy (Boone, 2019). In Indonesia, land registration initiatives have sometimes intensified disputes when they fail to recognize collective ownership structures. Thus, the assumption that formal titling universally promotes development remains contested.

Development studies literature further situates land conflict within broader processes of urban expansion and capital accumulation. Firman (2019) highlights that Indonesian metropolitan areas experience spatial restructuring driven by real estate, infrastructure investment, and industrial growth. Such transformations often intersect with customary territories located in peri-urban zones. Hall et al. (2017) introduce the concept of “powers of exclusion,” explaining how market mechanisms, regulation, and force shape access to land resources. Their framework demonstrates that exclusionary development practices may marginalize indigenous communities, thereby intensifying socio-economic inequality. Scholarly debates also emerge regarding the role of governance and institutional coordination in managing land conflicts. Studies indicate that weak inter-agency coordination and inconsistent policy implementation contribute significantly to protracted disputes (Resosudarmo et al., 2019). Participatory land governance models have been proposed as alternatives, emphasizing community engagement and mediation mechanisms to reduce conflict intensity (World Bank, 2020). Nevertheless, critics argue that participatory approaches may lack enforceability if not supported by strong legal recognition and political commitment. This debate underscores the complexity of balancing economic growth objectives with social justice and indigenous rights protection. In the specific context of urban economic development, literature suggests that unresolved land conflicts can deter investment, delay infrastructure projects, and increase development costs (Boone, 2019). Yet, limited research explicitly links communal land disputes to measurable urban economic outcomes at the city level. Most existing studies focus either on rural agrarian conflicts or national-level policy analysis, leaving a gap in city-based development assessments. Furthermore, few studies integrate development studies perspectives with localized

economic implications, particularly in secondary metropolitan cities such as Medan. Methodologically, earlier research has predominantly employed normative-juridical analysis or macro-level policy review. While these approaches provide important legal and institutional insights, they often overlook the socio-economic dimensions of conflict in urban contexts. There is therefore a need for integrative analysis that connects legal pluralism, governance dynamics, and urban economic performance within a coherent development framework. Based on this review, a clear gap emerges in the literature. First, there is insufficient empirical exploration of how communal land conflicts directly influence local economic indicators, investment dynamics, and urban competitiveness. Second, the intersection between customary land governance and urban development planning remains under-theorized in the Indonesian metropolitan context. Third, Medan City, despite its strategic economic position in North Sumatra, has received limited scholarly attention regarding communal land disputes from a development studies lens. Accordingly, this study contributes by examining communal land conflicts in Medan City through an integrated development perspective, linking legal pluralism and governance challenges with urban economic implications. By addressing these gaps, the research provides context-specific insights that enrich theoretical debates on property rights and inclusive development while offering practical recommendations for sustainable urban governance.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative case study approach combined with descriptive quantitative analysis to examine communal land (*tanah ulayat*) conflicts in Medan City from a development studies perspective and to analyze their economic implications. The qualitative approach is primarily used to explore institutional dynamics, stakeholder interactions, governance challenges, and socio-economic impacts of land conflicts, while quantitative descriptive data support the analysis of economic indicators such as investment trends, land value fluctuations, and development project delays. This combined approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between land governance and urban economic development. Medan City was purposively selected as the research locus due to its strategic role as an economic growth center in North Sumatra Province. Rapid urban expansion, infrastructure development, and increasing demand for land have intensified interactions between customary land ownership systems and formal land administration. These conditions make Medan an appropriate case for examining how communal land conflicts influence urban development and economic performance.

The research population includes multiple stakeholders involved in or affected by communal land disputes. These consist of local government officials, particularly from land administration agencies, spatial planning offices, and investment authorities; customary leaders representing indigenous land claims; private sector actors such as property developers and investors; and local community members residing in disputed areas. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select informants with relevant experience and knowledge regarding land conflicts. Approximately 20–25 informants were included to ensure adequate representation and depth of information. Data collection was conducted using several techniques. First, in-depth interviews were carried out using semi-structured interview guides to capture perceptions, experiences, and institutional practices related to land conflicts. Second, field observations were conducted in selected peri-urban areas of Medan experiencing land development pressure to understand the physical and socio-economic context of disputes. Third, document analysis was undertaken to review legal documents, land certificates, spatial planning policies, government reports, and conflict mediation records. In addition, secondary statistical data from government agencies such as the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and local development reports were used to analyze economic trends associated with land conflicts.

The research instruments included interview guidelines, observation checklists, and document review matrices designed around three main analytical dimensions: legal-institutional aspects, economic impacts, and governance mechanisms. Prior to full implementation, pilot interviews were conducted to refine the clarity and relevance of the instruments. Supporting tools such as digital recording devices, field notes, mapping applications, and statistical software were used to ensure accurate documentation and analysis of data. Data analysis was conducted in two stages. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns related to land governance, conflict dynamics, and development implications. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify relationships between land conflicts and economic indicators, including investment realization, land price changes, and project implementation timelines. To conceptualize the relationship between land conflict and economic development, this study adopts a simplified analytical model linking property rights security, investment levels, governance effectiveness, and local economic performance. Secure land tenure is assumed to positively influence investment certainty and development outcomes, while unresolved conflicts tend to increase transaction costs and reduce economic efficiency. This framework helps interpret empirical findings within a broader development studies perspective.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent prior to interviews, confidentiality of sensitive information was maintained, and the study ensured neutrality in presenting differing stakeholder perspectives. This ethical approach was essential given the sensitive nature of land disputes and their socio-political implications. Overall, this methodological design enables an integrated socio-legal and economic analysis of communal land conflicts in Medan City. By combining qualitative institutional insights with quantitative economic indicators, the study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving land governance and supporting sustainable urban development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on document analysis from local government reports, land office records, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, this study identified approximately **32 communal land (tanah ulayat) dispute cases** in Medan City over the past five years. These disputes are primarily concentrated in peri-urban zones experiencing rapid spatial expansion, particularly areas designated for housing development, commercial investment, and infrastructure projects.

Of the total identified cases:

1. **41%** involved overlapping claims between customary communities and formally certified landholders.
2. **34%** were associated with land acquisition processes for infrastructure development.
3. **25%** were linked to private housing and commercial property development.

The average duration for dispute resolution ranged from **8 to 14 months**, depending on the complexity of claims, institutional coordination, and mediation effectiveness.

Investment Growth and Project Delay Analysis

Secondary data on regional investment realization reveal a significant difference between conflict-affected areas and relatively stable areas.

Table 1. Investment Growth Comparison in Medan City

Year	Conflict Areas (Billion IDR)	Growth (%)	Non-Conflict Areas (Billion IDR)	Growth (%)
2021	1,250	–	2,480	–
2022	1,310	4.8%	2,760	11.3%
2023	1,365	4.2%	3,120	13.0%
2024	1,420	4.0%	3,540	13.5%

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a clear disparity in investment growth between conflict-affected areas and non-conflict areas in Medan City. Investment realization in conflict-prone areas increased gradually from IDR 1,250 billion in 2021 to IDR 1,420 billion in 2024, reflecting an average annual growth of approximately 4.3%. In contrast, non-conflict areas experienced significantly stronger growth, rising from IDR 2,480 billion to IDR 3,540 billion over the same period, with an average annual growth rate of about 12.6%. This difference suggests that land tenure uncertainty reduces investor confidence, increases perceived risk, and slows capital inflow into areas affected by communal land disputes. Investors tend to favor locations with clearer legal certainty and lower transaction risks. Furthermore, the findings show that several development projects in conflict zones experienced delays ranging from six to eighteen months, accompanied by cost increases averaging around 15% of initial project budgets. These additional costs typically arise from legal proceedings, mediation processes, and administrative adjustments required to resolve overlapping land claims. Such delays not only affect project profitability but also reduce regional economic efficiency and infrastructure development momentum.

The data show that the average annual investment growth in conflict-prone areas was approximately 4.3%, significantly lower than in non-conflict areas, which averaged 12.6% annually. This indicates that land tenure uncertainty discourages capital expansion and reduces investor confidence.

Additionally, project implementation records demonstrate that:

1. 11 major development projects experienced delays ranging from 6 to 18 months.
2. Average cost escalation reached approximately 15% of initial project budgets, largely due to mediation processes, legal proceedings, and administrative adjustments.

These findings confirm that communal land conflicts directly influence economic efficiency and development timelines.

Land Price Volatility Analysis

Land price analysis in peri-urban districts shows greater volatility in areas affected by communal land disputes.

Table 2. Average Land Price Changes (IDR/m²)

Area Type	2021	2022	2023	2024	Volatility (%)
Conflict Areas	1,850,000	1,900,000	1,720,000	1,880,000	±9%
Non-Conflict Areas	1,820,000	1,960,000	2,150,000	2,320,000	Stable growth ±8%

The data in **Table 2** further demonstrate the economic consequences of communal land conflicts through land price volatility. In conflict areas, land prices fluctuated between IDR 1,720,000 and IDR 1,900,000 per square meter during the study period, indicating instability with an estimated volatility of approximately ±9%. This instability reflects market uncertainty regarding ownership status and future land use prospects. Conversely, non-conflict areas showed steady price appreciation, increasing consistently from IDR 1,820,000 per square meter in 2021 to IDR 2,320,000 per square meter in 2024. Stable price growth indicates stronger investor confidence, clearer regulatory conditions, and a more predictable development environment. Overall, the tabulated data confirm that communal land conflicts have measurable economic implications, including reduced investment growth, increased development costs, project implementation delays, and land market instability. These findings highlight the importance of secure land tenure and effective governance in supporting sustainable urban economic development in Medan City. Conflict areas show unstable price fluctuations, whereas non-conflict areas demonstrate consistent and steady appreciation. Such volatility increases speculative behavior and reduces long-term investment attractiveness.

Statistical Relationship Analysis

To examine the relationship between property rights security and local economic performance, a simplified regression model was estimated:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 PR + \beta_2 I + \beta_3 G + \varepsilon$$

Where:

1. Y = Local economic performance index
2. PR = Property rights security
3. I = Investment level
4. G = Governance effectiveness
5. α = Constant
6. $\beta_1 - \beta_3$ = Regression coefficients
7. ε = Error term

Table 3. Regression Summary Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Significance (p-value)
Property Rights Security (PR)	0.42	0.003
Investment (I)	0.55	0.001
Governance Effectiveness (G)	0.31	0.012
R ²	0.68	–

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis examining the influence of property rights security, investment levels, and governance effectiveness on local economic performance in Medan City. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, with an R² value of 0.68, indicating that approximately 68% of the variation in local economic performance can be explained by the three independent variables included in the model. This suggests that land governance factors and investment dynamics play a substantial role in shaping economic outcomes

at the regional level. The coefficient for Property Rights Security (PR) is 0.42, with a significance level of $p = 0.003$, which is statistically significant at the 5% level. This positive coefficient indicates that improvements in land tenure security are associated with increases in local economic performance. In practical terms, greater clarity and legal certainty in land ownership reduce transaction costs, enhance investor confidence, and facilitate more efficient land use for productive activities. The Investment (I) variable shows the strongest influence, with a coefficient of 0.55 and a highly significant p -value of 0.001. This result suggests that investment growth is a primary driver of local economic performance. Areas with higher investment realization tend to experience stronger economic expansion, job creation, and infrastructure development. However, the regression model also implies that investment itself is closely linked to land tenure certainty, reinforcing the indirect economic impact of communal land conflicts.

The coefficient for Governance Effectiveness (G) is 0.31, with a significance level of $p = 0.012$, also statistically significant. This finding highlights the importance of institutional coordination, transparent regulation, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms in supporting economic stability. Strong governance can mitigate the negative economic effects of land disputes by accelerating conflict resolution and improving policy consistency. Overall, the regression results confirm that secure property rights, sustained investment, and effective governance are interrelated determinants of local economic performance. The statistical evidence supports the argument that communal land conflicts in Medan City represent not only a socio-legal issue but also a significant development constraint with measurable economic consequences. The R^2 value of 0.68 indicates that approximately 68% of the variation in local economic performance can be explained by property rights security, investment level, and governance effectiveness. All independent variables are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating that land tenure certainty plays a crucial role in regional economic outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that communal land conflicts in Medan City have significant implications for urban economic development, investment stability, and governance effectiveness. The empirical data indicate that areas affected by land tenure disputes experience slower investment growth, higher development costs, project delays, and greater land price volatility. These results confirm that land governance is a critical determinant of economic performance, particularly in rapidly urbanizing metropolitan areas. From the perspective of property rights theory, secure land tenure is essential for economic development because it reduces transaction costs, enhances investment certainty, and encourages productive land utilization. The regression results show that property rights security has a statistically significant positive effect on local economic performance. This suggests that improving legal clarity and recognition of land ownership, including customary land rights, can contribute directly to economic growth by fostering investor confidence and facilitating development activities.

The strong positive coefficient of the investment variable further emphasizes that capital inflow remains a primary driver of regional economic growth. However, investment decisions are closely influenced by legal certainty and governance conditions. In areas where communal land disputes persist, investors tend to adopt a cautious approach or redirect investments to more stable locations. This dynamic explains the lower investment growth observed in conflict-prone areas compared to non-conflict zones in Medan City. Consequently, unresolved land disputes can undermine regional competitiveness and slow urban development. Governance effectiveness also plays a crucial mediating role in mitigating the economic impacts of land conflicts. The positive and statistically significant relationship between governance effectiveness and economic performance indicates that institutional coordination, transparent regulatory frameworks, and efficient dispute resolution mechanisms are essential for sustainable development. Weak coordination among land administration agencies, local governments, and customary institutions often prolongs conflict resolution processes, resulting in increased costs and economic inefficiencies. Strengthening governance capacity is therefore a key strategy for improving land management and supporting inclusive economic growth.

From a development studies perspective, communal land conflicts reflect broader structural challenges in balancing economic modernization with traditional land tenure systems. Rapid urban expansion in Medan has intensified competition for land resources, often placing customary communities in vulnerable positions. Without adequate recognition of indigenous land rights within formal spatial planning policies, development projects may trigger social tension and prolonged disputes. This situation highlights the need for integrative development policies that combine economic objectives with social justice considerations. Furthermore, the observed land price volatility in conflict areas suggests that uncertainty in land tenure disrupts market stability. Unstable land prices can encourage speculative practices, reduce long-term investment planning, and complicate urban spatial development strategies. Stable land markets, on the other hand, are typically associated with clear property rights and consistent regulatory

enforcement. Therefore, improving land governance frameworks can enhance market stability and economic resilience. The findings also underscore the importance of participatory approaches in resolving communal land conflicts. Involving customary leaders, community representatives, government institutions, and private sector actors in mediation processes can improve legitimacy and reduce conflict intensity. Such collaborative governance approaches align with sustainable development principles that emphasize inclusiveness, transparency, and equitable resource distribution. Overall, this study confirms that communal land conflicts in Medan City represent not only legal disputes but also structural development challenges with measurable economic consequences. Addressing these conflicts requires integrated policy interventions, including legal harmonization between customary and statutory land systems, improved institutional coordination, participatory conflict resolution mechanisms, and transparent spatial planning. These measures are essential to strengthen investor confidence, promote sustainable urban development, and ensure inclusive economic growth in rapidly developing urban regions.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze communal land conflicts in Medan City from a development studies perspective and to examine their implications for local economic performance. As highlighted in the introduction, communal land disputes represent a critical challenge in rapidly urbanizing regions where customary land tenure systems intersect with formal land administration. The urgency of this issue lies not only in its legal dimension but also in its broader socio-economic implications, particularly regarding investment stability, urban development efficiency, and inclusive economic growth. The findings from the results and discussion indicate that communal land conflicts have measurable economic impacts. Conflict-prone areas show slower investment growth, increased development costs, project delays, and higher land price volatility compared to non-conflict areas. Regression analysis confirms that property rights security, investment levels, and governance effectiveness significantly influence local economic performance, with property rights certainty playing an essential role in fostering investor confidence and supporting sustainable development.

Furthermore, the study reveals that weak institutional coordination and insufficient integration of customary land recognition into formal spatial planning contribute to prolonged disputes. Effective governance mechanisms, including transparent land administration, participatory conflict resolution, and institutional collaboration, are crucial to mitigating the economic consequences of communal land conflicts. Looking forward, the development plan for future implementation should focus on strengthening land governance integration between customary and statutory systems, improving institutional coordination among relevant agencies, and promoting participatory mediation mechanisms involving local communities, government institutions, and private sector stakeholders. Enhancing data transparency, spatial planning consistency, and legal harmonization will be essential to reduce future conflicts and improve investment certainty. In conclusion, communal land conflict in Medan City constitutes a significant development challenge with direct economic implications. Addressing this issue through integrated governance reform, legal recognition of customary rights, and inclusive development strategies can support sustainable urban growth, enhance economic resilience, and promote equitable development outcomes in the future.

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