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LAND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED MEDIATION IN RURAL JAVA

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Abstract

Land conflicts remain a persistent source of social tension in Indonesia, particularly in rural Java, where local communities face unequal power relations with economic and bureaucratic actors. This article examines the dynamics of land conflict at the community level, focusing on Kalurahan Bangunjiwo, Bantul Regency, in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The study adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing online news, official government releases, police reports, legal opinions, and audiovisual material from digital media. Its theoretical framework integrates Galtung's concept of structural violence, Fisher and Ury's interest-based negotiation, and Lederach's conflict transformation. The findings indicate that land conflicts involve interconnected administrative, legal, social, and economic dimensions. Information asymmetry, alleged document manipulation, and weak interagency coordination contribute to conflict escalation. Community-based mediation helps reduce social tensions and restore local social relations, but its effectiveness is limited when disputes enter the criminal justice system. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating community-based mediation with formal legal mechanisms to achieve equitable and sustainable land conflict resolution in rural areas.

Keywords: community-based mediation; conflict resolution; conflict transformation; land conflict; rural Java.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inherent feature of social interaction and a recurring phenomenon in agrarian societies, particularly in rural settings, where land serves not only as an economic asset but also as a source of identity, livelihoods, and social continuity (Malkov et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2024). Much of the literature on land conflict emphasizes its multidimensional nature, highlighting the interplay of legal ambiguity, administrative complexity, economic interests, and unequal power relations between local communities and formal institutions (Denchie et al., 2021; Moreda, 2023; Tang et al., 2021; Torabi et al., 2025). In rural Java, land conflicts often escalate because of discrepancies between communities' de facto control of land and the de jure land administration imposed by the state.

Previous studies have examined land conflicts from legal, political-economic, and governance perspectives, identifying institutional fragmentation, weak land administration, and unequal access to information as key drivers of recurring disputes (Charles et al., 2025; de Araujo et al., 2008; Feng et al., 2021; Finnegan, 2016; Kobusingye et al., 2017; Tan, 2025; Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2018; Van Assche et al., 2022). Some studies highlight the dominance of litigation-based mechanisms in resolving land conflicts (Ginting, 2016; Tambunan et al., 2025), whereas others emphasize the limitations of formal legal approaches in addressing the relational and psychosocial dimensions of conflict at the community level (Anundo, 2025; Darmawan et al., 2025).

Although researchers have acknowledged the importance of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, including mediation and negotiation, these approaches are often discussed in abstract or normative terms, without sufficient empirical grounding in rural communities. Moreover, these studies tend to focus on state-led mediation or judicial intervention, leaving community-based practices relatively unexplored and theoretically underdeveloped.

Consequently, the literature on land conflict resolution remains fragmented, with limited integration between conflict resolution theory and empirical studies of community-based mediation in agrarian settings. A central criticism concerns the insufficient attention paid to power imbalances, structural violence, and the long-term transformation of social relations after conflict resolution. Emerging approaches in conflict studies also emphasize

the need to move beyond conflict resolution toward conflict transformation. Drawing on the work of Galtung and Lederach, recent studies highlight how unresolved structural inequalities and institutional biases perpetuate cycles of conflict, particularly in rural land disputes. This perspective suggests that effective conflict resolution requires not only legal certainty but also the restoration of trust, social cohesion, and local legitimacy.

Nevertheless, previous research on land conflict in Indonesia, particularly in rural Java, has tended to prioritize legal and administrative outcomes over social transformation. Community-based mediation is frequently regarded as informal, supplementary, or temporary, rather than as a legitimate and strategic mechanism capable of contributing to sustainable conflict transformation.

Against this background, this study aims to analyze land conflict resolution through community-based mediation in rural Java, with an empirical focus on the land conflict in Bangunjiwo Village, Bantul Regency. It examines how community-based mediation operates within unequal power structures, how it contributes to de-escalation and the restoration of relationships, and where its limitations emerge when a conflict enters formal legal or criminal proceedings. The study seeks to contribute theoretically by integrating structural violence, principled negotiation, and conflict transformation into the analysis of local land conflicts. In practical terms, it aims to inform village governments, community mediators, and land administration institutions in designing more participatory, context-sensitive, and sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms.

The remainder of this article is organized into four main sections. First, the conceptual framework and literature review discuss land conflict, conflict resolution, community-based mediation, and conflict transformation as the theoretical foundations of the study. Second, the article presents the research design and qualitative methodology, including data sources, collection techniques, and analytical procedures used to examine rural land conflict dynamics. Third, the empirical findings are presented and discussed, with particular attention to conflict dynamics, power relations among actors, and the roles and limitations of community-based mediation. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, discusses the study's theoretical and policy implications, and outlines directions for future research on land conflict resolution and transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a social phenomenon inseparable from human interaction, particularly when resources are contested, interests diverge, or power is distributed unequally (Coser, 1998). In conflict resolution studies, conflict is understood not merely as a disruption to social stability but also as a process that can be managed and transformed to support more equitable and constructive social change. From this perspective, conflict resolution involves not only ending disputes but also restoring social relations and addressing the underlying sources of injustice.

Galtung (1969) provides an important conceptual framework through the conflict triangle, which comprises contradictions, attitudes, and behaviors. Conflict is manifested not only in visible forms of direct violence but also in unjust social and institutional structures. The concept of structural violence explains how policies, administrative systems, and state institutions can systematically reproduce injustice without physical violence. In land conflicts, structural violence is reflected in overlapping regulations, unequal access to land information, and inadequate protection of communities' de facto possession of land.

Land Conflict as Public Conflict

Land conflict is a complex and multidimensional form of public conflict. The agrarian literature indicates that such conflicts are often driven by unequal control over land, weak land administration, and the intervention of economic and political interests (Hall et al., 2015). In Indonesia, land conflict is also inseparable from colonial history, dualism in agrarian law, and tensions between state law and community landholding practices passed down through generations.

Previous research emphasizes that land conflicts rarely remain confined to a single issue. Instead, they can develop from administrative disputes into broader social conflicts when formal resolution mechanisms fail to deliver a sense of justice (Borras & Franco, 2016). The dominant litigation-based approach tends to prioritize legal certainty while giving less attention to the relational and psychosocial dimensions of conflict. Consequently, formal legal proceedings often produce win–lose decisions that deepen polarization and leave unresolved tensions at the community level.

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Mediation and Negotiation in Conflict Resolution

Mediation is a principal non-litigation mechanism for conflict resolution, intended to foster mutual understanding and agreement through dialogue. Through the concept of principled negotiation, Fisher et al. (1981) emphasize that conflict resolution should focus on interests rather than positions. This approach prioritizes rational dialogue, mutually beneficial solutions, and objective criteria. It is considered effective in reducing conflict escalation and creating opportunities for compromise in disputes over public policy and resource management.

However, rational negotiation approaches are often criticized for their limited sensitivity to unequal power relations and local social contexts. In land conflicts, communities frequently have weak bargaining positions because of limited access to information, resources, and legal assistance. The effectiveness of mediation therefore depends not only on negotiation techniques but also on the mediator's legitimacy, power relations among actors, and the structural support needed to enable dialogue on an equal footing.

Community-Based Mediation and Conflict Transformation

In response to the limitations of technocratic and procedural approaches to conflict resolution, Lederach (2003) introduces the concept of conflict transformation. This approach views conflict as a relational phenomenon requiring change at personal, relational, structural, and cultural levels. Conflict resolution should not end with a formal agreement; it should also promote the restoration of social relations and changes to structures that perpetuate injustice.

Within this framework, community-based mediation is relevant because it involves local actors who possess social legitimacy and a contextual understanding of the conflict. Research indicates that community mediators, such as local leaders and village institutions, can build trust, facilitate communication, and create relatively safe spaces for dialogue among disputing parties (Poitras, 2009; Riera Adrover et al., 2020; Stimec & Poitras, 2009). In land conflicts, community-based mediation serves to de-escalate tensions, clarify facts, and restore local social cohesion.

Other studies nevertheless identify limitations to community-based mediation, particularly when conflicts enter the criminal justice system or involve large-scale economic interests (Davronov, 2025; Ramírez, 2013; Tahiraj & Abdyli, 2024). Under these circumstances, community mediation is not intended to replace formal legal proceedings but to complement them by restoring social relations and preventing further conflict. Previous research on land conflict in Indonesia remains dominated by legal and agrarian policy approaches, while studies integrating conflict resolution theory with community-based mediation practices are relatively limited, especially in local case studies.

This gap indicates a need for research that examines land conflict through the concepts of structural violence, principled negotiation, and conflict transformation simultaneously. This study addresses that gap by analyzing local land conflict as a multidimensional phenomenon and evaluating the role of community-based mediation from the perspectives of conflict resolution and transformation.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach to analyze land conflict dynamics. The approach was used to examine the construction of conflict narratives, developments in the case, the actors involved, and institutional responses as represented in media reports and public documents (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). Media content analysis was selected because the land conflict under investigation had not been fully documented in academic publications but had received extensive coverage in national and local print and online media. This approach therefore enabled the researchers to bridge the gap between the academic literature and the empirical realities of agrarian conflict in Indonesia.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data were drawn from online media documents and official statements issued by public institutions concerning the land conflict under investigation. Sources were selected according to three main criteria: (1) direct relevance to the land conflict in Bangunjiwo, Bantul; (2) chronological coverage sufficient to trace developments in the case; and (3) the credibility of the media outlet or issuing institution.

The data sources comprised the following:

1. The official website of the Bantul Regency Government, which reported the local government's position and measures for addressing the land conflict, including legal assistance and preparations for police case review proceedings.

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2. Official releases from the Yogyakarta Special Region Police (Polda DIY) and media reports covering the investigation, the naming of suspects, and the alleged methods used by land mafia actors.
3. Reports from national media outlets, including Detik Jogja and Kompas, detailing the chronology of the case, witness examinations, applicable legal provisions, and developments in case handling.
4. Public statements from the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN) explaining the classification of the case and the position of land administration institutions in the conflict.

Source selection was limited to documents and news reports that explicitly discussed the land conflict in Bangunjiwo. Non-news sources, such as archived videos from digital platforms including YouTube, were used selectively as supporting material to strengthen the chronology and triangulate narratives, rather than as primary sources of statistical data.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded through the following stages:

5. Initial identification of data sources through searches using relevant keywords, including "konflik pertanahan Bantul" (Bantul land conflict), "mafia tanah" (land mafia), "Bangunjiwo," and "Polda DIY."
6. Downloading and archiving relevant news reports and official statements, while recording publication dates, sources, and principal content to establish a textual research database.
7. Classifying documents by key themes, including the chronology of the conflict, the actors and interests involved, the alleged modus operandi, public institutions' responses, and the conflict's social impacts.
8. Triangulating data by comparing information from multiple sources, including local and national media, law enforcement agencies, and land administration institutions, to establish consistency and reliability.

Data Analysis

A thematic narrative approach was used to identify patterns, dynamics, and power relations in the land conflict. The analysis involved the following stages:

9. Tracing the chronology of the conflict, from the emergence of the dispute to the latest developments in its legal status.
10. Identifying the actors and power relations involved, including the roles of affected communities, law enforcement agencies, local government, and land administration institutions.
11. Examining the alleged modus operandi underlying the transfer of land rights that gave rise to the conflict.
12. Analyzing public institutions' responses to the conflict, including policies, assistance, and law enforcement processes.
13. Assessing the social impacts of the conflict, particularly on victims' psychological well-being, continuity of land possession, and social dynamics at the community level.

Through these analytical stages, the study sought to understand the land conflict not merely as a legal dispute but also as a social conflict shaped by power structures, institutional practices, and local social relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the land conflict in Kalurahan Bangunjiwo, Bantul Regency, is a multidimensional public conflict characterized by unequal power relations. It concerns not only administrative disputes over land status and the transfer of land rights but also a broader social conflict affecting victims' psychological well-being, community cohesion, and trust in state institutions.

Chronologically, the conflict originated during the 2022–2024 period, when irregular transfers of land ownership were followed by the use of land certificates as collateral for bank loans. These developments illustrate how an administrative dispute can become a criminal case when alleged document manipulation and abuse of authority are identified. The shift from administrative to criminal proceedings also marks an escalation of the conflict resulting from the failure of initial mechanisms intended to protect vulnerable residents.

Structural Violence in Land Conflict

Viewed through Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, the land conflict in Bangunjiwo reflects a systemic failure to protect the rights and interests of local communities. Unequal access to land information, limited legal literacy, and the dominance of actors with institutional resources suggest that social suffering arises not from direct violence but from unequal administrative and legal structures. A land administration system intended to provide certainty and protection instead becomes a setting in which injustice is reproduced, leaving residents in the most vulnerable position.

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The mapping of actors in this conflict reinforces these findings. Actors with formal authority, such as notaries/land deed officials (PPAT), banking institutions, and law enforcement agencies, exercise considerable influence over the course of the conflict. By contrast, affected communities have a strong stake in its outcome but limited bargaining power. These relationships demonstrate that land conflict cannot be understood solely as an individual dispute; it also represents structural inequality in agrarian governance.

Table 1. Mapping of Actors and Power Relations in the Bangunjiwo Land Conflict

Actor	Primary interest	Level of influence	Strategy / role
Affected communities	Restoration of land rights	Low	Reliance on community assistance and legal proceedings
Local community	Social cohesion	Moderate	Informal mediation and social stabilization
Rogue intermediaries	Economic gain	High	Exploitation of information asymmetry
Notaries / PPAT	Legality of documents	High	Preparation of deeds transferring land rights
Banking institutions	Security of collateral	High	Document-based lending
Local government and ATR/BPN	Legal certainty	High	Data validation and institutional coordination
Media and NGOs	Transparency	Moderate	Advocacy and public pressure
Law enforcement agencies	Law enforcement	Very high	Investigation and prosecution

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis of media reports and public documents.

Interest-Based Negotiation and Its Limitations

From the perspective of interest-based negotiation (Fisher et al., 1981), this conflict reveals limited opportunities for dialogue on an equal footing. In principle, conflict resolution should focus on the parties' interests, including the restoration of rights, economic security, and social stability, rather than solely on formal legal positions. However, the findings indicate that unequal power relations and information asymmetry obstruct fair negotiation. Under these conditions, affected communities lack the capacity to negotiate with formal actors on equal terms. Mediation should therefore be understood not merely as a communication technique but as a process requiring structural support, socially legitimate mediators, and a commitment to protecting vulnerable groups. These findings reinforce criticisms of rational negotiation approaches that overlook the power dynamics of community-level conflicts.

Community-Based Mediation and Conflict Transformation

The significance of community-based mediation in this case becomes apparent when examined through the conflict transformation framework (Lederach, 1999). Community mediation is not intended to replace formal legal proceedings; rather, it provides a mechanism for transforming social relations. Through the involvement of local leaders, village government, and community advocates, mediation helps reduce social tensions, clarify information, and rebuild trust among local actors.

Within the conflict transformation framework, the success of mediation is measured not only by the achievement of formal agreements but also by its ability to restore social relations, reduce polarization, and prevent further conflict. The findings indicate that, even while criminal proceedings continue, community mediation plays an important role in maintaining social cohesion and preventing conflict among community members.

Integrating Approaches to Land Conflict Resolution

By integrating Galtung's structural violence, Fisher and Ury's interest-based negotiation, and Lederach's conflict transformation, this study indicates that land conflict resolution in rural Java requires a hybrid approach. Formal law enforcement is necessary to address criminal conduct and actors who wield substantial power, while community-based mediation supports social recovery and the transformation of conflictual relationships.

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Integrating these three approaches underscores that legal certainty alone is insufficient to resolve land conflicts. Resolution also requires systematic efforts to address structural inequalities, create more equitable spaces for dialogue, and rebuild fair and sustainable social relations.

CONCLUSION

The land conflict in Kalurahan Bangunjiwo, Bantul, demonstrates that land disputes cannot be understood solely as legal and administrative problems. They are also social conflicts rooted in structural inequalities and unequal power relations. The findings indicate that conflict escalation is driven by limited land-related literacy, restricted access to information, and inadequate institutional protection for vulnerable groups, particularly older adults and residents with limited formal education.

From Galtung's structural violence perspective, this conflict reflects the failure of land administration and legal systems to provide equitable protection for local communities. Unequal access to information and legal mechanisms strengthens actors with institutional resources while weakening affected residents. These conditions obstruct the equitable negotiation envisaged in Fisher and Ury's interest-based approach, as power imbalances limit communities' ability to pursue their interests on fair terms.

Community-based mediation has demonstrated an important role in reducing social tensions, creating space for dialogue, and restoring social relations among victims, communities, and public institutions. Nevertheless, its effectiveness is limited when conflicts enter the criminal justice system and involve organized criminal practices such as land mafia activities. In this context, community mediation cannot replace formal legal proceedings; instead, it serves as a complementary mechanism oriented toward social recovery and substantive justice. Consistent with Lederach's conflict transformation approach, its principal functions are to restore social relations, reduce polarization, and prevent further conflict at the local level.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the relevance of integrating structural violence, interest-based negotiation, and conflict transformation to understand land conflict as a multidimensional phenomenon. Practically, it emphasizes the urgent need to develop a hybrid approach that integrates community-based mediation with formal legal mechanisms to achieve more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable governance of land conflicts.

Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening the capacity of community mediators, developing and standardizing village-level mediation procedures, integrating land data through digital systems and improving its transparency, and enhancing communities' legal and land-related literacy. These preventive measures are intended to minimize the escalation of land conflicts in rural areas.

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