Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies
53(3)(2026): 610-630
https://doi.org/10.17576/jebat.2026.5303.04

Affirming Dispossession: Governmentality and the Power of Positive Narratives in Indonesia's New Rice Field Project

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Received: 03 January 2026 Accepted: 21 March 2026

Abstract

In 2024, President Prabowo Subianto reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to achieving national food self-sufficiency by continuing large-scale agricultural initiatives, including the establishment of 1 million hectares of new rice fields in Merauke, South Papua. While previous studies have highlighted how food estate programmes are legitimised through narratives of crisis and indigenous incapacity, comparatively little attention has been given to the role of affirmative or positive narratives in facilitating land conversion. This study examines how the new rice field project is implemented and legitimised through the combined operation of regulatory frameworks, security involvement, market incentives, and discursive strategies. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with key government and community stakeholders in June 2025, supplemented by documentary analysis of policy reports and media coverage. Drawing on the concepts of power and exclusion, and of governmentality, the study argues that land dispossession in Merauke is facilitated not only through coercive or institutional mechanisms, but also through affirmative narratives that portray indigenous communities as productive participants in national development. These narratives function as techniques of governance that normalise exclusionary land-access arrangements while encouraging voluntary compliance with state-led agrarian transformation.

Keywords: Rice Field Project; Prabowo; Merauke; Governmentality; Exclusion

Introduction

Indonesia's ambition to achieve national food self-sufficiency has been reinvigorated under President Prabowo Subianto's administration as part of a broader strategy to enhance national resilience amid growing uncertainty in global food supply chains. Central to this ambition is the establishment of approximately one million hectares of new rice fields in Merauke, South Papua Province. Within weeks of his inauguration, President Prabowo personally visited Wanam Village in Ilwayab District to underscore the project's political priority and signal the state's commitment to expanding domestic agricultural production capacity.[1] Framed as a continuation of earlier food estate initiatives implemented under the administrations of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo, the new rice field programme represents the latest iteration of state-led agrarian transformation in eastern Indonesia.[2] More broadly, it reflects a recurring developmental approach that seeks to convert frontier regions into productive agricultural zones capable of supporting national food security objectives.

In contemporary policy discourse, large-scale land-based agricultural projects are frequently justified as necessary responses to anticipated food crises, climate change, population growth, and global market volatility.[3] Such concerns have intensified in recent years due to geopolitical disruptions and fluctuations in international commodity markets, heightening anxieties about long-term food availability.[4] Within this context, Merauke has been constructed as a strategic agricultural frontier whose geographical characteristics such as relatively flat terrain, extensive land cover, and water availability render it suitable for mechanised rice cultivation. Consequently, the new rice field project has been positioned as a rational and forward-looking intervention aimed at strengthening national sovereignty through enhanced domestic food production.

Despite its developmental framing, however, the project has generated considerable debate due to its ecological and socio-political implications. Critics have highlighted the risks of deforestation, the degradation of wetlands and peat ecosystems, and the disruption of biodiversity associated with large-scale land conversion. More importantly, concerns have been raised regarding the marginalisation of indigenous communities from decision-making processes and the potential erosion of customary land rights. In addition, the reported deployment of military and security personnel to support project implementation raises questions regarding the coercive dimensions of ostensibly developmental interventions. These concerns echo earlier critiques of the Merauke Integrated Rice Estate (MIRE) and the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), as well as subsequent food estate programmes, which have been associated with agrarian conflict,[5] ecological disruption,[6] and indigenous dispossession.[7]

Existing scholarship on these earlier programmes has largely examined how narratives of crisis, developmental urgency, and indigenous incapacity have historically been mobilised to justify land conversion in frontier regions. Such studies commonly interpret these initiatives as manifestations of colonial continuity,[8] wherein indigenous territories are incorporated into national development agendas through regulatory frameworks and discursive constructions that portray local populations as economically unproductive or technologically backward.[9] From this perspective, dispossession is facilitated through deficit-based representations of indigenous inferiority that legitimise external intervention and the restructuring of land ownership regimes.

However, this explanatory framework leaves an important empirical and conceptual gap. While previous studies have demonstrated how negative portrayals of indigenous communities function as justificatory mechanisms for land acquisition, comparatively limited attention has been given to the contemporary emergence of affirmative or positive narratives that portray indigenous participation as productive, cooperative, and development-oriented. Rather than relying exclusively on representations of incapacity or resistance, recent policy discourse increasingly emphasises indigenous adaptability, agricultural potential, and willingness to contribute to national development goals. These affirmative representations appear to frame indigenous participation not as a barrier to development, but as an asset to be mobilised in support of state-led agrarian transformation.

This shift raises important analytical questions regarding the mechanisms through which large-scale development projects gain legitimacy in socially and politically contested environments. Specifically, it invites closer examination of how discursive strategies that appear inclusive or empowering may, nonetheless, facilitate exclusionary land-access arrangements. In other words, how do narratives that recognise indigenous productivity and participation operate not as emancipatory tools, but as techniques of governance that normalise dispossession?.

To address this question, this study examines the Merauke New Rice Field Project through the combined perspectives of power and governmentality. By integrating Hall et al.'s framework of exclusionary power—comprising regulation, force, the market, and legitimation—with Foucault's concept of governmentality, this article seeks to demonstrate how contemporary food security

initiatives may legitimise land dispossession not only through coercive regulation or economic incentives, but also through affirmative discourses that align indigenous participation with national developmental rationalities. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on the governance of frontier development and the evolving relationship between inclusionary narratives and exclusionary outcomes in state-led agrarian transformation.

Building on this analytical framework, this study aims to examine how the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke is legitimised through a combination of regulatory authority, security involvement, market incentives, and, crucially, affirmative narratives that portray indigenous communities as productive participants in national development. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research question: How do positive narratives regarding indigenous productivity and participation operate as techniques of governmentality that facilitate exclusionary land-access arrangements within Indonesia's contemporary food security agenda?.

By addressing this question, the article seeks to contribute to broader debates on state-led agrarian transformation in frontier regions by demonstrating how dispossession may be normalised not only through coercive measures or deficit-based representations, but also through seemingly inclusive discourses that align local participation with national developmental rationalities.

Literature Review

Large-scale land-based agricultural development projects have increasingly become central instruments within state-led strategies aimed at ensuring food security and economic resilience in the Global South.[10] These initiatives are often framed as necessary responses to global food crises, climate change, demographic pressure, and volatility in international commodity markets. Governments in developing countries have thus pursued expansive programmes to convert so-called "idle" or "underutilised" land into productive agricultural zones capable of supporting national food self-sufficiency objectives.[11] However, a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that such interventions frequently entail complex socio-political consequences, including land dispossession, environmental degradation, and the marginalisation of indigenous communities whose livelihoods are deeply intertwined with customary land systems.

Within Southeast Asia, the expansion of large-scale agricultural estates has been closely associated with the restructuring of land ownership regimes and the integration of frontier regions into national and global capitalist economies.[12] Rather than serving as neutral developmental interventions, these projects often serve as mechanisms for redistributing land access in ways that privilege state and corporate actors over local communities.[13] Scholars have documented how agricultural modernisation initiatives justified in the name of national development frequently result in the displacement of indigenous populations[14] and the erosion of traditional subsistence systems.[15] Such processes are rarely implemented solely through overt coercion; instead, they are facilitated by a combination of legal frameworks, economic incentives, and discursive strategies that render land conversion socially and politically acceptable.[16]

Indonesia's experience with large-scale food estate programmes reflects these broader dynamics. Since the early 2000s, the Indonesian government has promoted various initiatives to transform peripheral regions into centres of agricultural production, reducing reliance on imported staples such as rice. Among the most prominent of these initiatives are the Merauke Integrated Rice Estate (MIRE) and the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), which sought to establish industrial-scale agricultural zones in South Papua Province. These programmes were introduced as part of national efforts to enhance food sovereignty while simultaneously attracting domestic and foreign investment in agribusiness sectors.[17]

Empirical studies examining the implementation of MIRE and MIFEE have consistently highlighted their adverse social and ecological impacts. Research has documented violations of indigenous land rights, disruptions to local food systems, and intensified capital accumulation through industrial agriculture.[18] Indigenous communities in Merauke, particularly the Malind Anim people, have reported restricted access to forests, hunting grounds, and sago groves that form the basis of their subsistence livelihoods.[19] In several accounts, the conversion of forested land into agricultural estates has been linked to biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and the destruction of wetlands and peat ecosystems.[20] Moreover, the integration of local land into national production networks has frequently generated agrarian conflicts between indigenous communities, migrants, corporate actors, and state agencies.[21]

Beyond material impacts, existing scholarship has emphasised the discursive dimensions through which such projects are legitimised. Analysts have argued that the implementation of MIFEE and subsequent food estate programmes has been supported by narratives that portray frontier regions as empty, underdeveloped, or economically unproductive. These representations serve to justify state intervention by framing indigenous land-use practices—such as hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation—as inefficient or backward relative to mechanised agriculture. By positioning local populations as incapable of utilising land productively, policy discourse constructs a moral rationale for transferring land control to actors deemed better equipped to realise its developmental potential.[22]

In this regard, scholars have interpreted the Merauke initiatives as manifestations of colonial continuity within contemporary development policy. From this perspective, state-led agricultural expansion reproduces historical patterns of territorial incorporation in which indigenous lands are reclassified as national assets to be mobilised for economic growth. The deployment of crisis narratives such as impending food shortages or threats to national sovereignty further strengthens the legitimacy of such interventions by framing them as necessary for collective survival. Consequently, dispossession becomes reframed as a developmental imperative rather than a violation of indigenous rights.[23]

While this body of literature provides important insights into the socio-political implications of food estate development, it tends to emphasise the role of negative representations of indigenous communities in legitimising land conversion.[24] In particular, analyses frequently highlight how narratives of inferiority, incapacity, or resistance have been mobilised to justify external intervention in customary territories. These deficit-based portrayals frame indigenous populations as obstacles to modernisation whose land must be repurposed to achieve national development goals.

However, comparatively limited attention has been given to the evolving discursive strategies that accompany more recent phases of agrarian transformation in Indonesia, particularly under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto. In contrast to earlier narratives that emphasised indigenous backwardness, contemporary policy discourse increasingly highlights the productive potential of local communities and their capacity to contribute to national food security efforts. Rather than portraying indigenous participation as a barrier to development, these narratives depict it as an asset to be mobilised through training, mechanisation, and integration into market-oriented production systems.

This shift suggests a transformation in the justificatory logic underpinning large-scale land conversion. Instead of relying exclusively on representations of indigenous incapacity, policy discourse now emphasises adaptability, cooperation, and shared developmental aspirations. Indigenous communities are framed not as passive victims or resistant subjects, but as active partners in national development initiatives. Such affirmative narratives appear to align local participation with state objectives, thereby reducing the potential for overt conflict and enhancing the legitimacy

of intervention.[25]

The emergence of these positive representations raises important analytical questions regarding the mechanisms through which land-based development projects gain acceptance in socially contested environments. Specifically, it calls for closer examination of how discursive strategies that appear inclusive or empowering may nonetheless facilitate exclusionary land-access arrangements. Existing scholarship on agrarian change has increasingly recognised that dispossession is rarely achieved solely through coercive measures.[26] Instead, it is mediated by institutional arrangements, market incentives, and normative justifications that render exclusion socially acceptable.

In this context, narratives play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy and consent. Discursive constructions of land as idle, communities as adaptable, or participation as mutually beneficial can normalise the reorganisation of land ownership regimes without overt resistance. Such processes highlight the need for analytical frameworks capable of capturing both material and discursive dimensions of state-led development. In particular, they point to the importance of examining how power operates not only through regulation and force, but also through the production of knowledge and rationalities that guide individual conduct.[27]

Recent studies on land governance in Southeast Asia have emphasised the role of institutional and market mechanisms in facilitating land exclusion.[28] Regulatory frameworks governing land acquisition, environmental permitting, and spatial planning often enable the reclassification of customary territories as state-controlled land suitable for development.[29] At the same time, market incentives such as compensation payments, employment opportunities, or profit-sharing schemes encourage local participation in projects that ultimately restructure land access.[30] These mechanisms operate in tandem with legitimising narratives that frame participation as rational and beneficial, thereby reducing the likelihood of resistance.[31]

Within Indonesia, the designation of certain development initiatives as National Strategic Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional*, *PSN*) has further strengthened the regulatory basis for land acquisition. By prioritising projects deemed essential for national development, PSN status enables the acceleration of permitting processes and the adjustment of spatial planning regulations to accommodate investment.[32] While such measures are justified as necessary to promote economic growth and food security, they may also constrain opportunities for meaningful community participation and oversight.

Taken together, these developments underscore the importance of examining how contemporary food estate initiatives are embedded within broader governance strategies that combine regulatory authority, market incentives, and discursive legitimation. In particular, they highlight the need to move beyond analyses that focus solely on coercion or deficit-based representations of indigenous communities. Instead, attention must be directed toward the subtle forms of power through which participation is encouraged, and exclusion normalised.

By engaging with these debates, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on agrarian transformation and land governance in frontier regions. Specifically, it examines how affirmative narratives that portray indigenous communities as productive participants in national development may function as techniques of governance that facilitate exclusionary land-access arrangements. In doing so, it addresses a key gap in existing scholarship by analysing the role of positive discourses in legitimising large-scale agricultural interventions in Merauke under the Prabowo administration.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Hall et al.'s concept of the *power of exclusion* with Michel Foucault's notion of *governmentality* to analyse how land dispossession within Indonesia's contemporary food security agenda is legitimised and implemented through both material and discursive mechanisms. The concept of power exclusion conceptualises land dispossession not merely as an outcome of physical displacement, but as a process facilitated by four interrelated domains of power: regulation, force, the market, and legitimation. These domains operate simultaneously to structure access to land and to reorganise control over natural resources in ways that privilege certain actors while marginalising others.[33]

Within this framework, the regulatory domain refers to the institutional arrangements through which land access is formalised and authorised. Legal instruments, spatial planning policies, and land acquisition procedures establish the boundaries of ownership and determine who may legitimately utilise specific territories.[34] In the context of state-led development projects, regulatory frameworks often enable the reclassification of customary land as state-controlled property suitable for national development initiatives. Such processes are particularly evident in the designation of certain programmes as National Strategic Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional, PSN*), which accelerate permitting processes and adjust spatial planning regulations to accommodate investment. Through this mechanism, the regulatory authority serves as the initial foundation for restricting indigenous access to land by redefining it as a national asset subject to developmental priorities.

The second domain, force, refers to the capacity to enforce compliance with regulatory arrangements. While exclusion may be legally authorised through policy frameworks, its implementation often relies on the presence of security institutions to ensure adherence.[35] Force may manifest not only through overt coercion, such as eviction or intimidation, but also through the symbolic authority of state institutions whose presence discourages resistance. In large-scale development initiatives, the involvement of military or police personnel frequently signals the state's commitment to project implementation. It reinforces the legitimacy of land conversion in the name of national interest.

The market domain further contributes to exclusion by incentivising participation in land conversion processes. Compensation schemes, employment opportunities, and promises of increased income may encourage local communities to voluntarily relinquish customary land rights. These incentives reframe dispossession as a rational economic choice rather than a coercive imposition, thereby aligning individual interests with broader developmental objectives. Through market mechanisms, participation in development projects becomes associated with opportunities for upward mobility, even as access to land is progressively restricted.[36]

Finally, legitimation provides the normative justification necessary to render exclusion socially acceptable.[37] Discourses emphasising national development, food sovereignty, and economic progress establish a moral basis for the reorganisation of land ownership regimes. By framing land conversion as a collective necessity for achieving food self-sufficiency or national security, policy narratives position participation in development initiatives as a civic responsibility rather than a loss of autonomy.

While the power of exclusion framework provides valuable insights into the institutional and material mechanisms of land dispossession, it offers a limited explanation for how such processes gain voluntary acceptance among affected populations. This limitation highlights the need for an additional analytical perspective capable of capturing the subtle forms of power through which participation is encouraged and resistance minimised. In this regard, Foucault's concept of governmentality offers a complementary lens for examining the discursive rationalities underpinning

state-led development.

Governmentality refers to how governing institutions seek to shape individual conduct through techniques that appear to empower rather than coerce.[38] Rather than relying solely on repression, modern forms of governance produce knowledge, norms, and rationalities that guide behaviour toward desired outcomes.[39] Through discursive practices such as policy communication, public outreach, and developmental narratives, subjects are encouraged to align their conduct voluntarily with policy objectives.

In the context of the Merauke new rice field project, governmentality operates through the production of positive narratives that portray indigenous communities as productive participants in national development. Discourses emphasising indigenous adaptability, agricultural potential, and historical familiarity with rice cultivation construct an image of local communities as capable of contributing to mechanised agriculture. Similarly, representations of Merauke's geographical suitability for rice production reinforce the perception that land conversion is both rational and beneficial. Cultural narratives that frame the state as a paternal authority further encourage compliance by associating participation with collective welfare.

These affirmative representations function as soft instruments of governance by shaping perceptions of legitimacy and consent. Rather than framing indigenous participation as a problem to be overcome, policy discourse increasingly emphasises it as a developmental asset. In doing so, narratives that appear inclusive or empowering may nonetheless facilitate exclusionary land-access arrangements by normalising the transfer of control over customary land to state or corporate actors.

To operationalise these theoretical concepts in the empirical analysis, this study examines how each domain of power's exclusion manifests in the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke. The regulatory domain is analysed through the legal frameworks governing land acquisition and spatial planning under PSN status. The domain of force is examined through the involvement of military and police personnel in project implementation and community engagement activities. Market mechanisms are assessed by analysing compensation schemes, employment opportunities, and economic incentives offered to residents. Legitimation is investigated through policy discourse that frames land conversion as necessary for achieving national food security.

Complementing this analysis, the study applies the concept of governmentality to examine how positive narratives regarding indigenous productivity, geographical suitability, historical continuity, and cultural harmony are disseminated through official communication channels and community outreach programmes. By analysing these discursive practices, the study seeks to demonstrate how participation in the new rice field project is framed as voluntary and mutually beneficial, even as access to customary land is progressively restricted.

Through this combined analytical framework, the study highlights how contemporary food security initiatives may legitimise dispossession not only through regulatory authority or economic incentives, but also through affirmative narratives that align indigenous participation with national developmental rationalities. In doing so, it provides a nuanced understanding of how exclusionary land-access arrangements are normalised within state-led agrarian transformation projects in frontier regions such as Merauke.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how exclusionary land-access arrangements are legitimised and implemented within the new rice field project in Merauke, South Papua Province. Fieldwork was conducted in June 2025 to capture the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation, and contestation of the project. A qualitative

approach was selected due to its suitability for analysing the institutional practices, discursive strategies, and governance rationalities through which large-scale development initiatives gain legitimacy in socially and politically contested environments.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposively selected stakeholders representing diverse institutional positions. These included local government officials responsible for policy implementation, representatives of indigenous institutions, traditional leaders, members of civil society organisations, journalists, and academic experts familiar with agrarian development in Papua. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge regarding the operational dynamics of the new rice field project and its socio-political implications for local communities. This approach enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on how the project is justified, communicated, and received by actors at different levels of governance.

Interview questions were organised around the analytical framework developed in this study, particularly the four domains of the power of exclusion—regulation, force, the market, and legitimation—as well as the role of narrative in shaping perceptions of participation and consent. Participants were asked to reflect on how regulatory frameworks facilitate land acquisition, how security institutions are involved in implementation processes, how economic incentives influence community participation, and how policy narratives regarding indigenous productivity and geographical suitability are disseminated through outreach programmes.

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research setting, all identifying information was anonymised to protect participants from potential repercussions associated with discussing state-led development initiatives. Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process, particularly regarding confidentiality and voluntary participation.

In addition to primary interview data, the study incorporated documentary analysis of academic publications, policy reports, media coverage, and government documents related to the Merauke new rice field project. This secondary data served to triangulate interview findings and to contextualise stakeholder perspectives within broader institutional and policy developments. The integration of multiple data sources enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how exclusionary land-access arrangements are operationalised and legitimised within Indonesia's contemporary food security agenda.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding guided by the study's theoretical framework. Interview transcripts and documentary materials were systematically examined to identify empirical indicators corresponding to each domain of the power of exclusion, as well as discursive elements reflecting governmental rationalities. This analytical procedure enabled the study to trace the interactions among the regulatory authority, security involvement, market incentives, and affirmative narratives in shaping community responses to the new rice field project.

Findings: The Operation of Exclusion in the New Rice Field Project

This section presents the study's empirical findings by examining how the four domains of power—regulation, force, the market, and legitimation—operate in the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke. Drawing on interview data and documentary analysis, the findings demonstrate that land-access restrictions associated with the project are not produced through a singular coercive mechanism, but rather through the interaction of institutional arrangements, economic incentives, security involvement, and discursive rationalities that collectively enable the reorganisation of customary land control. In this context, exclusion should be understood not as an immediate

displacement of indigenous communities, but as a gradual process through which their access to land is redefined, restricted, and ultimately subordinated to national development objectives.

Regulatory Domain

The regulatory domain constitutes the primary mechanism through which exclusionary land-access arrangements are institutionalised within the new rice field project. The designation of the project as part of Indonesia's National Strategic Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional, PSN*) provides the legal basis for accelerating land acquisition and development processes in the name of national interest. Under this framework, spatial planning regulations and environmental permitting requirements may be adjusted to facilitate project implementation, thereby prioritising developmental objectives over existing regional land-use plans.

Interviewees from local government agencies indicated that the PSN status effectively centralises decision-making authority at the national level. In cases where designated project areas overlap with customary land or zones not originally intended for agricultural use, regional planning frameworks must be revised to accommodate national policy directives.[40] This process enables land previously governed through customary tenure systems to be reclassified as state-controlled territory suitable for mechanised rice cultivation. The redefinition of land status in regulatory terms thus establishes the legal authority necessary to restrict indigenous access to land while simultaneously legitimising its conversion for national food security purposes.

Furthermore, regulatory provisions associated with PSN implementation facilitate the issuance of permits and spatial utilisation approvals through centralised digital platforms, reducing local authorities' capacity to contest or delay project approvals.[41] As a result, regional governments are often positioned as implementers rather than decision-makers, limiting opportunities for meaningful consultation with indigenous communities. This regulatory restructuring effectively transforms land that has long been utilised for subsistence activities into a developmental asset subject to state planning priorities.

Domain of Force

While regulatory frameworks provide the legal foundation for land conversion, their implementation is reinforced through the domain of force. The involvement of military and police personnel in supporting the new rice field project reflects the state's commitment to ensuring compliance with developmental objectives.[42] Security institutions are engaged not only in logistical support, such as infrastructure development and land preparation, but also in community outreach and socialisation activities intended to promote acceptance of the project among residents.

Interviewees from the police institution said that door-to-door visits conducted by security personnel were used to communicate the anticipated benefits of participation in the project, including potential increases in income and employment opportunities.[43] Although these interactions were presented as informational rather than coercive, the presence of uniformed personnel nonetheless prompted community members to feel obligated to support the initiative. In this context, force operates less through overt repression than through the symbolic authority of state institutions, whose involvement discourages resistance and reinforces the legitimacy of land conversion.[44]

Several interviewees noted that community members were reluctant to openly oppose the project due to concerns about being perceived as obstructing national development goals.[45] The association of the new rice field project with national food security and sovereignty further contributed to the perception that resistance would be interpreted as opposition to state interests.[46]

Consequently, the domain of force functions not solely through direct coercion, but through the subtle production of compliance within a securitised implementation environment.

Market Domain

Market mechanisms further contribute to exclusion by incentivising voluntary participation in land conversion. Compensation schemes, promises of employment, and expectations of increased agricultural productivity are presented as opportunities for economic advancement. Residents are encouraged to engage in mechanised rice cultivation through the provision of seeds, equipment, and technical training, thereby aligning individual livelihood strategies with national development goals.

These incentives reframe the relinquishment of customary land rights as a rational economic decision rather than a coerced outcome. By associating participation with potential financial gain, policy discourse positions land conversion as mutually beneficial for both the state and local communities. However, this integration into market-oriented production systems may simultaneously reduce community control over land use and increase dependence on external inputs and institutional support.

Interviewees observed that expectations of financial compensation or future income from rice cultivation influenced community willingness to participate in the project, even when concerns regarding environmental sustainability or cultural loss were present.[47] In some cases, compensation arrangements generated divisions within indigenous communities, particularly between those who accepted land-use agreements and those who sought to retain customary access.[48] Such dynamics illustrate how market incentives may indirectly facilitate exclusion by reshaping internal community relations and encouraging the commodification of land previously governed by collective norms.

Legitimation Domain

The domain of legitimation plays a critical role in rendering exclusionary practices socially acceptable by providing a normative justification for land conversion. Discourses emphasising national food security, economic development, and collective welfare provide a moral basis for implementing the new rice field project. Interview data suggest that narratives portraying Merauke as geographically suited to mechanised agriculture and its indigenous population as adaptable and cooperative are frequently used to justify transforming customary land into productive rice fields.[49]

Such representations frame participation in the project as a civic responsibility aligned with national interests. By associating land conversion with the broader goal of achieving food self-sufficiency, policy narratives encourage local communities to view their involvement as contributing to collective prosperity rather than as a means of relinquishing customary rights.[50] In doing so, legitimation reinforces the regulatory, coercive, and market mechanisms through which access to land is progressively reorganised.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke is facilitated through the coordinated operation of multiple domains of exclusion. Regulatory authority establishes the legal basis for land acquisition, security involvement reinforces compliance, market incentives encourage participation, and legitimising narratives normalise the restructuring of land ownership. The interaction of these mechanisms enables the state to secure access to land for agricultural development while minimising overt resistance among affected communities.

Discussion: Governmentality and Positive Narratives in the New Rice Field Project

While the preceding findings illustrate how exclusionary land-access arrangements are facilitated through regulatory authority, security involvement, and market incentives, the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke cannot be fully understood through institutional mechanisms alone. The effectiveness of these mechanisms in securing access to land depends significantly on the production of discursive rationalities that render participation socially acceptable and desirable. In this regard, Foucault's concept of governmentality provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how contemporary forms of governance operate through techniques that appear to empower rather than coerce.

Governmentality refers to how governing institutions seek to shape individual conduct by producing norms, knowledge, and rationalities that guide behaviour toward desired policy outcomes. Rather than relying solely on repression, modern governance increasingly operates through the cultivation of voluntary compliance, encouraging subjects to internalise policy objectives as consistent with their own interests. In the context of state-led development initiatives, this involves deploying narratives that align local aspirations with national priorities, thereby reducing the likelihood of resistance.

In the case of the Merauke new rice field project, such governmental rationalities are evident in the dissemination of positive narratives that portray indigenous communities as productive participants in national development. Policy communication frequently emphasises the adaptability of indigenous populations, their historical familiarity with agricultural practices, and the potential economic benefits of integrating into mechanised rice cultivation systems. These representations contrast with earlier narratives that framed indigenous communities as economically unproductive or resistant to modernisation. Instead of depicting local populations as obstacles to development, contemporary discourse positions them as partners whose participation is essential for achieving national food self-sufficiency.

This shift in narrative strategy is significant because it alters the justificatory logic underpinning land conversion. Rather than legitimising intervention through representations of indigenous incapacity, policy discourse increasingly emphasises their capacity for adaptation and cooperation. By portraying participation in the new rice field project as an opportunity for empowerment, such narratives encourage communities to view land conversion as beneficial rather than dispossessive. In this sense, affirmative representations function as soft instruments of governance, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and consent.

Several interviewees noted that outreach programmes conducted by government agencies and security personnel often highlighted the economic and developmental benefits of participation in mechanised agriculture. These communications emphasised the potential for increased income, improved infrastructure, and enhanced access to state resources.[51] By framing the project as a pathway to economic advancement, policy narratives align individual livelihood strategies with national development goals. Participation becomes associated with rational self-interest, thereby transforming compliance into a voluntary choice rather than an externally imposed obligation.

Governmentality also operates through geographical narratives that construct Merauke as uniquely suited for agricultural development. Discourses emphasising the region's flat terrain, water availability, and expansive land cover reinforce the perception that rice cultivation represents an efficient and appropriate use of local resources.[52] Such representations obscure the ecological complexities associated with wetland and peat ecosystems, while simultaneously legitimising the reclassification of customary land as suitable for mechanised agriculture. In doing so, geographical narratives contribute to the normalisation of land conversion by framing it as a rational response to

environmental conditions.

Historical narratives further reinforce this process by situating contemporary development initiatives within a longer trajectory of agricultural modernisation. References to previous rice cultivation programmes introduced during the colonial and post-independence periods construct an image of continuity between past and present development efforts. This framing suggests that the integration of Merauke into national food production networks represents an extension of established practices rather than a disruptive transformation of local land-use systems.[53] By embedding the new rice field project within a broader developmental narrative, policy discourse reduces the perception of novelty and potential risk associated with large-scale land conversion.

Cultural narratives also shape community responses to the project. Representations of the state as a paternal authority responsible for ensuring collective welfare encourage compliance by associating participation with moral obligation.[54] In this context, support for the new rice field project may be interpreted as an expression of loyalty to national development objectives rather than a relinquishment of customary rights. Such narratives contribute to the internalisation of policy rationalities, enabling communities to perceive participation as aligned with their own interests and values.

Taken together, these discursive strategies illustrate how legitimation operates as a governmental technique that complements regulatory, coercive, and market mechanisms of exclusion. Positive narratives that appear inclusive or empowering may nonetheless facilitate the reorganisation of land ownership regimes by normalising the transfer of control over customary land to state or corporate actors. Participation in the new rice field project becomes framed not as a loss of autonomy, but as a contribution to national prosperity.

From this perspective, exclusionary land-access arrangements are not imposed solely through legal authority or economic incentives, but are produced through the alignment of local aspirations with national developmental rationalities. Governmentality thus functions as a mode of power that encourages voluntary acceptance of dispossession by reshaping perceptions of legitimacy and participation. In doing so, it minimises overt conflict and enhances the social acceptability of state-led agrarian transformation.

These findings suggest that contemporary food security initiatives may legitimise land conversion not only through coercive measures or deficit-based representations, but also through affirmative discourses that frame indigenous participation as empowerment. By integrating concepts of power and exclusion with those of governmentality, this study highlights the importance of examining how seemingly inclusive narratives may function as governance techniques that facilitate exclusionary outcomes in frontier development contexts such as Merauke.

Counter-Narratives and Their Limits

The preceding discussion has demonstrated how affirmative narratives concerning indigenous productivity, geographical suitability, and cultural cooperation function as governmental techniques that facilitate the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke. However, it is important to recognise that these official narratives do not go uncontested. Alternative discourses articulated by indigenous communities, civil society organisations, academics, and journalists challenge the assumptions underlying state-led agrarian transformation and seek to reframe the project as dispossession rather than development. These counter-narratives represent attempts to resist the reorganisation of customary land ownership by exposing the socio-cultural and ecological implications of large-scale land conversion.

One of the most prominent counter-narratives concerns the identity of the indigenous population in Merauke. While official discourse frequently portrays local communities as inherently suited to agricultural production, several interviewees emphasised that the Marind people have historically relied on hunting and gathering as primary subsistence strategies.[55] From this perspective, characterising indigenous communities as farmers reflects an externally imposed developmental logic rather than a locally grounded livelihood system. The introduction of mechanised rice cultivation is thus perceived not as an extension of existing practices, but as a transformation that disrupts established relationships between communities and their environment.

Similarly, narratives depicting Merauke as possessing vast tracts of idle land are contested by indigenous groups, who emphasise the cultural and ecological significance of forests and wetlands.[56] Land that appears unproductive from a market-oriented perspective may serve as a vital source of food, medicine, and spiritual identity within customary subsistence systems.[57] Hunting grounds, sago groves, and sacred sites constitute integral components of indigenous livelihoods that cannot be readily translated into conventional measures of economic productivity. Consequently, the classification of such territories as available for development is interpreted as a misrecognition of their value within local socio-cultural contexts.

Environmental concerns also form a central component of counter-narratives opposing the new rice field project. Critics have highlighted the ecological risks associated with converting wetlands and peatlands into agricultural estates, including increased flooding susceptibility, soil acidification, and biodiversity loss.[58] These challenges raise questions regarding the long-term sustainability of mechanised rice cultivation in the region. By drawing attention to the environmental limitations of large-scale agricultural development, counter-narratives seek to undermine the assumption that land conversion represents a rational or beneficial use of local resources.

Despite the articulation of these alternative perspectives, the capacity of counter-narratives to influence policy outcomes remains limited. One factor contributing to this constraint is the institutional asymmetry between state actors and local communities in shaping public discourse. Official narratives are disseminated through formal communication channels, including government outreach programmes, policy briefings, and media engagement, thereby reaching a broad audience and reinforcing perceptions of legitimacy. In contrast, counter-narratives often circulate within fragmented civil society networks and may lack the institutional support necessary to achieve widespread visibility.

The securitised implementation environment associated with the new rice field project further constrains the development of organised resistance. As indicated in the findings, the involvement of military and police personnel in project implementation generates a context in which open opposition may be perceived as politically risky. Interviewees noted that community members were reluctant to participate in protests or advocacy initiatives due to concerns about being labelled as obstructive to national development goals.[59] This dynamic illustrates how the domain of force operates not only through direct coercion but also through the production of anticipatory compliance that discourages collective action.

Moreover, the market incentives associated with participation in the project may weaken the cohesion of counter-narratives by introducing divergent interests within indigenous communities.[60] Compensation schemes and employment promises create incentives for some community members to support land conversion, even when concerns about environmental sustainability or cultural loss are present.[61] These arrangements can generate internal divisions between those who accept development agreements and those who seek to retain customary access to land. Such fragmentation reduces the capacity of counter-narratives to mobilise collective resistance and undermines efforts to present a unified opposition to the project.

From the perspective of governmentality, the limited influence of counter-narratives reflects the effectiveness of affirmative discourses in aligning local aspirations with national development objectives. By framing participation in mechanised agriculture as a pathway to economic advancement, official narratives encourage communities to interpret land conversion as an opportunity rather than a threat. The internalisation of these rationalities reduces the perceived legitimacy of alternative perspectives that emphasise environmental or cultural concerns. Resistance becomes framed as irrational or counterproductive to collective welfare, thereby diminishing its potential to shape policy outcomes.[62]

In addition, the translation of counter-narratives into formal institutional arenas remains constrained by regulatory frameworks that prioritise national strategic projects over local consultation processes. While indigenous communities may articulate their concerns through public demonstrations or advocacy campaigns, the absence of effective mechanisms to incorporate these perspectives into policy decision-making limits their impact.[63] As a result, counter-narratives often remain confined to symbolic expressions of dissent rather than contributing to substantive changes in land governance practices.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the coordinated operation of regulatory authority, security involvement, market incentives, and legitimising discourse shapes not only the implementation of development projects, but also the discursive environment within which resistance emerges. Counter-narratives that challenge the assumptions underlying land conversion may exist, but their capacity to influence policy outcomes is mediated by institutional asymmetries and the securitised context of implementation.

Ultimately, the persistence of the new rice field project despite ongoing criticism suggests that the legitimacy of state-led agrarian transformation is sustained not only through material mechanisms of exclusion but also through the marginalisation of alternative perspectives. By aligning local participation with national developmental rationalities, affirmative narratives contribute to the normalisation of land conversion while limiting the effectiveness of discursive resistance. In this sense, the interaction between governmental rationalities and institutional power structures shapes both the implementation of development initiatives and the scope of contestation surrounding them.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the implementation of the new rice field project in Merauke under President Prabowo Subianto's administration is facilitated through a combination of institutional mechanisms and discursive strategies that collectively reorganise access to land. By analysing the project through the integrated perspectives of power and exclusion, and of governmentality, the findings demonstrate that exclusionary land-access arrangements are not produced solely through overt coercion or regulatory authority, but also through affirmative narratives that render participation socially acceptable and desirable.

From the perspective of power's exclusionary capacity, the implementation of the new rice field project reflects the coordinated operation of four interrelated domains: regulation, force, the market, and legitimation. Regulatory frameworks associated with National Strategic Project (PSN) status provide the legal basis for reclassifying customary land as suitable for agricultural development, thereby facilitating accelerated land acquisition processes. The involvement of military and police personnel in project implementation reinforces compliance by signalling the state's commitment to achieving national food security objectives. Market incentives, including compensation schemes and employment promises, encourage voluntary participation in mechanised rice cultivation by aligning individual livelihood strategies with broader developmental goals. Finally, legitimising discourses that

emphasise national development and collective welfare establish a moral basis for land conversion.

However, while these mechanisms explain how land-access restrictions are institutionalised, they do not fully account for the relative absence of sustained resistance among affected communities. In this regard, Foucault's concept of governmentality provides a critical lens for understanding how contemporary governance operates through the cultivation of voluntary compliance. The findings indicate that affirmative narratives portraying indigenous communities as adaptable, cooperative, and capable of contributing to national development function as techniques of governance that shape perceptions of legitimacy and consent.

Rather than relying exclusively on deficit-based representations of indigenous incapacity, policy discourse surrounding the new rice field project increasingly emphasises the productive potential of local communities and their willingness to participate in mechanised agriculture. Geographical narratives that frame Merauke as uniquely suited for rice cultivation, historical narratives that situate contemporary development within a longer trajectory of agricultural modernisation, and cultural narratives that associate participation with collective welfare all contribute to the internalisation of policy rationalities among local populations. Participation in land conversion is thus reframed as an opportunity for empowerment rather than a relinquishment of customary rights.

This shift in narrative strategy is significant because it alters the justificatory logic underpinning land dispossession. While earlier food estate initiatives have been criticised for mobilising representations of indigenous inferiority to legitimise external intervention, the contemporary phase of agrarian transformation in Merauke appears to rely increasingly on affirmative discourses that align local aspirations with national development objectives. In doing so, dispossession becomes normalised not only through coercion, but also through the alignment of individual conduct with state-defined rationalities.

At the same time, the study has highlighted counter-narratives articulated by indigenous communities, civil society organisations, and academic observers that challenge the assumptions underlying land conversion. These alternative perspectives emphasise the cultural significance of forests and wetlands, the ecological risks associated with mechanised agriculture, and the limitations of portraying indigenous communities as inherently suited to rice cultivation. However, the influence of such counter-narratives remains constrained by institutional asymmetries and the securitised context of project implementation.

The involvement of security institutions in outreach and socialisation activities creates an environment in which open opposition may be perceived as politically risky, thereby discouraging collective resistance. Moreover, market incentives associated with participation in the project may fragment community responses by introducing divergent interests between those who accept development agreements and those who seek to retain customary land access. As a result, counter-narratives often remain confined to symbolic expressions of dissent rather than contributing to substantive changes in policy direction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that contemporary food security initiatives may legitimise land dispossession not only through regulatory authority or economic incentives, but also through inclusive narratives that frame participation as empowerment. By integrating concepts of power and exclusion with those of governmentality, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how exclusionary outcomes may be produced through seemingly participatory forms of governance.

From a policy perspective, these insights underscore the importance of ensuring that development initiatives aimed at achieving national food self-sufficiency incorporate meaningful mechanisms for indigenous participation and consent. Development strategies that rely primarily on affirmative narratives without substantive protection of customary land rights risk reproducing

patterns of dispossession under the guise of empowerment. Future policy interventions should therefore prioritise transparency, adherence to principles of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), and the safeguarding of spaces for dissenting voices within decision-making processes.

Ultimately, the case of the Merauke new rice field project illustrates how state-led agrarian transformation in frontier regions may be sustained through the interaction of institutional authority and discursive governance. By normalising land conversion through narratives that align local participation with national developmental rationalities, contemporary food security initiatives may achieve compliance while simultaneously restructuring land access. Recognising the role of affirmative discourses in facilitating exclusion is therefore essential for critically assessing the social and environmental implications of large-scale agricultural development programmes in Indonesia and beyond.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. Some of the data in this article can be found in the reference below. However, some data consist of confidential interviews and field notes involving human participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the information and to protect participant anonymity, these data cannot be shared publicly. Data is available only in a summarised or anonymised form within the article.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to the Editor-in-Chief of JEBAT and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable insights and constructive critiques of the earlier version of the paper. Their comments have been tremendously helpful in improving the hypothetical inquiry, the thematic analysis, the research gap, and the findings.

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