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Between reciprocity and agrarian transformation: Challenges to land tenancy and labor relations among rice-farming communities in Lahat Regency, South Sumatra Province, Indonesia

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Abstract

Land tenancy and labor relations are two agrarian institutions that shape the organization of agricultural activities at the production level and often influence production performance. This study explores the patterns of land tenancy and labor relations among rice-farming communities in Lahat Regency, South Sumatra, through the lens of the reciprocity economic perspective. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted in four villages across the sub-districts of Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the tenant farmers, landowners, extension officers, and community leaders. Findings reveal two dominant sharecropping systems: an equal 1:1 distribution and a *saseh* system with a 2:1 share. These informal and unwritten arrangements are based on kinship ties, mutual trust, and local norms. They provide stable land access for landless farmers and maintain production continuity, despite limited institutional support. Labor relations are equally embedded in cultural practices such as *gotong royong* (mutual aid), where families and neighbors contribute unpaid or semi-paid labor during peak agricultural periods. Compensation may include food, rice, or low wages, depending on the relationship and labor type. However, they reveal underlying tensions between tradition and social transformation, in which evolving reciprocity practices may increasingly function as mechanisms of surplus accumulation under market penetration. Theoretically, this study contributes to rural sociology by demonstrating how informal systems of tenancy and labor persist as rational and adaptive responses to socio-economic constraints, while also highlighting their potential vulnerability to erosion under agrarian pressures. The findings suggest that development policies should aim to reinforce these community-based systems to improve agricultural sustainability and social equity in rural Indonesia.

Introduction

Indonesia remains a prominent agrarian nation where the agricultural sector plays a fundamental role in the national economy. A large proportion of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods, particularly rice cultivation, which continues to be both a staple food and a critical source of income for rural households. This importance is underscored by the structure of agricultural employment and the contribution of rice to food security and rural stability in many provinces including South Sumatra.

Rice farming in Indonesia, especially in rural regions such as the Lahat Regency in South Sumatra, is not merely an economic activity, but a deeply embedded cultural system. The agricultural landscape of Lahat Regency covers approximately 19,211 ha of rice fields, with the Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan subdistricts contributing significantly to this area. These areas reflect a typical pattern of land fragmentation, where most farmers manage plots between 0.5 to 1 ha, often under non-ownership systems such as tenancy or sharecropping (Kementerian Pertanian Republik Indonesia, 2020).

In these rural contexts, land tenancy plays a crucial role in shaping access to, and control over, agricultural production. Research in Central Java indicates that different tenure statuses –owner, tenant, or sharecropper– have significant effects on farmers' income, with tenants sometimes earning more than owners due to more intensive land use and better market responsiveness (Mulyani & Wijayanti, 2022).

Land tenancy systems are highly contextual and have evolved under socioeconomic pressure. In Indonesia, modern tenancy arrangements coexist with customary systems, particularly in Sumatra and Java, where sharecropping remains a common and often efficient model. A study in West Java show that transaction costs significantly influence land contract choices and that sharecropping remains efficient when such costs are high because of informal labor sharing and embedded social trust that minimizes monitoring needs (Jamal & Mardiharini, 2009). The same results were shown in Novitasari's research, the *bawon* wage system, which pays wages by fairly sharing the harvest among harvest workers, emphasizes community togetherness and upholds tradition, ensuring job security for farm workers and providing mutual benefits (Novitasari, 2021)

In South Sumatra, especially in the Lahat Regency, these sociocultural dynamics are further reinforced by strong kinship networks. Many farmers who do not own land management plots belong to extended family members and are often under unwritten agreements based on reciprocal trust and communal norms. A study by Wati and Chazali (2015) on Indonesian rice-producing villages confirms that these informal systems support equitable access to land despite structural inequalities in formal land ownership.

The structure of labor relations in these systems is also significant. Landless and near-landless farmers often participate in rice production through systems of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), a long-standing cultural practice that serves as a substitute for wage labor and reinforces community solidarity. This aligns with the findings of Tenriawaru et al. (2020), who observed differences in labor use between small and large rice plots in Sulawesi, showing that smaller plots required more labor inputs and encouraged collective farming practices. Furthermore, mapping studies have shown that both owner-managed and sharecropped rice farms remain economically viable. However, owner-managed farms often generate slightly higher profits because of their more secure tenure and easier access to credit and inputs (Munibah et al., 2019).

Recent studies on agrarian change in Southeast Asia highlight that small-scale rice farmers continue to face constraints, such as land fragmentation, insecure tenure, and limited access to mechanization and finance. Nonetheless, traditional systems of land-sharing, family labor, and mutual cooperation have helped sustain rice cultivation, particularly in land-scarce or capital-limited communities (Baird et al., 2022; Promkhambut et al., 2023). In the study area, paddy land tenancy is dominated by familial arrangements, often guided by customary law and strengthened by intergenerational trust. While informal, these systems (*sakap*) offer stability in an otherwise volatile rural economy. However, institutional support remains weak, and access to modern agricultural inputs is often limited to those with stronger land claims or capital reserves.

The relevance of traditional labor structures such as *sakap* is particularly apparent in regions such as Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan. Many rice farmers in these areas do not possess land titles and rely on kinship ties or social networks to secure access to farmland. These arrangements are not simply economic transactions, but reflect long-standing social obligations and practices. Research in similar Indonesian communities has found that sharecropping is often preserved not out of necessity, but because it maintains familial and communal bonds that might otherwise erode in the face of more commercial farming models (Baird et al., 2022).

Although numerous studies have explored sharecropping and land tenure systems, there remains limited empirical analysis of how these systems operate in Sumatra, particularly within the context of the sociocultural setting in Lahat Regency. Existing literature tends to emphasize the economic efficiency of informal tenancy, yet offers little insight into the complex interplay of kinship, customary norms, and labor structures that sustain these arrangements. Moreover, there is a notable gap in understanding how tenant–landowner relationships evolve under informal, legally unprotected agreements in regions with weak institutional support. Therefore, this research seeks to address on how do land tenancy systems and labor relations operate and evolve among

smallholder rice farmers in the sub-districts of Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan South Sumatra Province. By focusing on smallholder rice farmers, many of whom operate under sharecropping or informal tenancy, this study seeks to reveal the mechanisms by which traditional systems adapt to contemporary challenges. It also explores how cultural practices mediate labor access and how tenure status affects farming efficiency and household income.

Land tenancy and labor relations systems in agrarian societies can be understood as expressions of reciprocity within the broader context of rural social transformation. To analyze this phenomenon, this study adopts Polanyi's perspective on the economic organization of pre-modern societies. According to Polanyi (1957), reciprocity is embedded in symmetrical social groupings, such as relationships within families, kinship networks, neighborly ties, and tribal communities. Furthermore, as noted by Sahlins (1974), reciprocity, which is not just an economic transaction, but part of the social and moral structure of society, can take three forms: balanced reciprocity, generalized reciprocity, and negative reciprocity. Acording to Sanderson (2000), reciprocity functions as an adaptive strategy in the production and distribution systems of pre-industrial societies. It not only sustains social bonds but also ensures access to resources in economies that operate without formal markets.

Understanding the complexities of these local dynamics is essential for shaping policies that not only enhance agricultural productivity but also promote social fairness in Indonesia's rural areas. Any successful land reform or rural development initiative must consider these intricate culturally rooted systems, which, despite their informal nature, form the core structure of the nation's rice-farming economy. This research adds to the expanding scholarship that highlights how land and labor arrangements in Indonesia are deeply shaped by local traditions and social contexts. Instead of assuming a uniform transition to market-driven land systems, this study highlights the enduring strength of community-based institutions that uphold the cooperation, mutual support, and livelihood stability among rice farmers.

Method

This research was conducted in July 2018 in Lahat Regency, South Sumatra Province, focusing on two sub-districts: Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan (Figure 1). From each subdistrict, two villages were selected purposively: Ulak Lebar and Sindang Panjang in Tanjung Sakti Pumi, and Banjar Negara and Tanjung Payang in Lahat Selatan. These locations were chosen intentionally because most of the local population relies on wet-rice farming for their livelihoods.

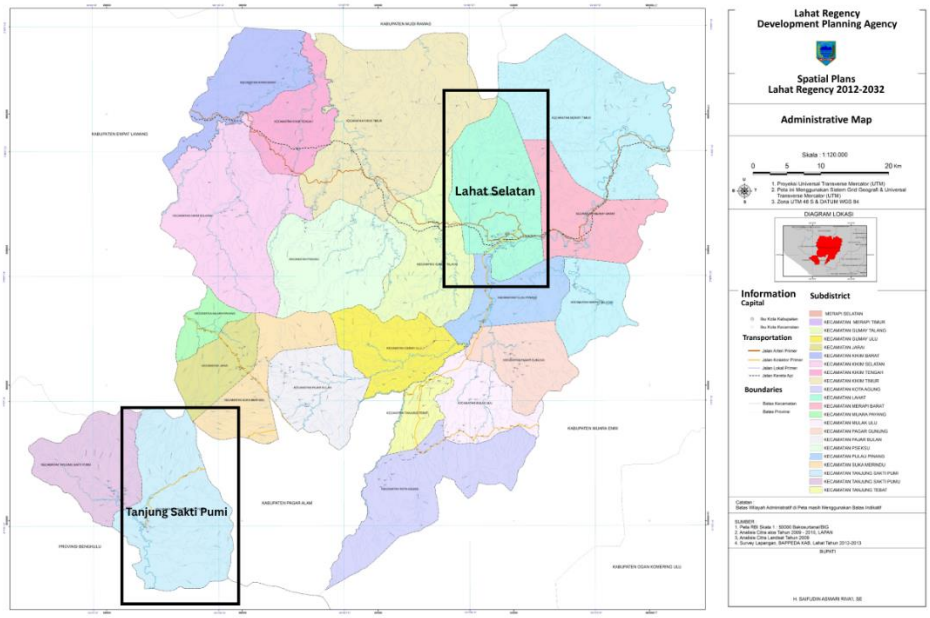

Figure 1. Location study map
Source: (www.data.lahatkab.go.id/geospasial)

This study applied a qualitative case study approach to explore in depth the patterns of land tenancy and labor relations among rice farmers, as this approach is particularly effective in uncovering subtle social practices, cultural norms, and informal agreements that are often overlooked by quantitative methods. The case study

method is widely used in rural research because it allows a detailed investigation of complex social and economic dynamics within real-life contexts (Mtisi, 2022).

Key informants selected purposively included two landowners, two tenant farmers (one renting and one sharecropping), agricultural extension officers from both sub-districts, and respected local leaders. Additionally, four farming households were selected as case study units to gain deeper insight into how land tenure systems operate in everyday agricultural life. Additionally, participants were purposively selected, meaning that respondents were chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the research focus. All key informants and case respondents were interviewed in-depth using short interview guideline to allow participants to explain their experiences with land ownership, land-sharing agreements, and labor cooperation in their own words.

The collected data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three key steps: data reduction (organizing and summarizing), data display (presenting information in a structured format), and conclusion drawing and verification (identifying key findings and patterns). This approach is particularly effective in qualitative research, where continuous interaction between data collection and analysis is necessary (Miles et al., 2014). In descriptive qualitative studies, such as this one, the analysis focuses on interpreting meaning from participant narratives, categorizing themes, and understanding relationships among concepts. The process begins as soon as data are collected and proceeds iteratively, allowing researchers to refine emerging themes and ensure that interpretations remain grounded in the participants lived experiences and the social context being studied. Thematic data grouping was conducted using a deductive coding approach, identifying which elements represent forms of reciprocity in land tenancy and labor relations. Several prominent codes that emerged include sharecropping, rights, obligations, negotiation, compensation, solidarity, and kinship ties.

Results and discussion

Sharecropping as the exist land tenancy system

Sharecropping is a form of cooperation in farm management, where profits and expenses from rice farming are shared between landowners and tenants. There are two systems that apply the most in sharecropping, namely the *saseh* system in Lahat Selatan and for the equal share in Tanjung Sakti Pumi. Although other sharecropping systems exist in these two fields, *saseh* and equal share dominate land management. The emergence of these pattern are influenced by several factors, including land ownership by outsiders, the need for cultivated land, limited availability of labor, unequal land ownership, minimizing risks, and low intensity of farming.

Table 1. Right and obligation of sharecropping system

Sharecropping System	Right		Obligation	
	Landowner	Tenant Farmer	Landowner	Tenant Farmer
Saseh (2:1) This system is common in Lahat Selatan	Receives 1/3 of the harvest (paddy)	Receives 2/3 of the harvest (paddy).	1. Provide land for tenants, according to the agreement, for paddy cultivation. 2. Giving permission for tenants to plant other crops.	1. Tenants cultivate and manage the land until the agreement ends. 2. Provide all production inputs, namely seeds, fertilizers, labor and pesticides.
Equal share (1:1) This system is common in Tanjung Sakti Pumi	1. Receives 50% of the harvest (paddy) 2. Get some other crop products such as vegetables and fruits	1. Receives 50% of the harvest (paddy) 2. It is allowed to grow some other crops such as vegetables and fruits.	1. Providing land for tenants for paddy cultivation. 2. Giving permission to tenants to plant other crops. 3. Provide fertilizer.	1. Cultivate and manage land until the end of the agreement. 2. Providing production inputs, namely seeds, pesticides and labor

Source: (Field data analysis, 2018)

In the Tanjung Sakti Pumi Subdistrict, the sharecropping system used is a 1:1 distribution—each party receives 50% of the harvest. In this system, the landowner provides land and fertilizer, whereas the tenant is responsible for seeds, labor, and pesticides. This is referred to locally as *bagi hasil*. Meanwhile, in the Lahat Selatan Subdistrict, farmers generally use a 2:1 distribution system called *saseh*, where the tenant receives 2/3 and the landowner 1/3 of the harvest. Here, all production inputs are provided by the tenant and the landowner provides only land.

> *"Ame hak-hak petani njawat atau pemilik lahan ye same-same dapat hasil panen padi tu. Tergantung enjak di die buat perjanjian, ade ye buat perjanjian same-same dapat setengah-setengah hasil, ade ye lebih besak nek pemilik lahan. Tergantung petani ye begawe tulah. Kite sebagai petani nek njawat pacak-pacak berunding lah mangke dide rugi mangke hasil panen kite dapat same rate"*
> (For the rights of farmers or landowners to both obtain rice harvests. Depending on who makes the agreement, there are those who make agreements that both get half the results; there are landowners who get more. It depends on the farmer who works. As cultivating farmers must be able to negotiate so as not to lose, the rights to the crops we obtain will be equal. Informant: RW, 52 years old, Lahat Selatan, 17 July 2018)

In Tanjung Sakti Pumi, tenant farmers are allowed to grow other crops such as vegetables or fruits during the off-season, and both parties share the rice harvest equally. In Lahat Selatan, tenants receive 2/3 of the rice harvest, but usually do not grow other crops, even though the landowners permit it. This is because rice is planted twice a year, and the risk of planting other crops is considered high owing to unpredictable weather.

> *"Kami ame dide nanam padi atau memang bukan waktunye, kebanyakan jeme sini nanam tanaman lain ye pacak nambahi pendapatan. Misal e kami nanam kepang, jagung, kacang kuning, dan sayur-sayuran lain e ye dapat dijual atau kendek kami makan sendewekan. Ame dijual untung e nek kami, ame sawah tu bukan nek kami, kami numpang nga jeme tuan sawah. Ame diajung, asil e kami ngenjuk sebagian nga jeme tuan sawah sebagai tande terime kasih."*
> (If we are not planting rice or it is not the time, most of the resident plant other crops that can help with income. Suppose that we grow cucumbers, corn, soybeans, and other vegetables that can be sold or for us to eat ourselves. If it is sold, we will make a profit, but we who are not landowners first ask permission from the landowner so that we are allowed to plant other plants. If possible, we give some of the proceeds to the landowner as a sign of gratitude. Informant: SW, 58 years old, Tanjung Sakti Pumi, 16 July 2018)

In Tanjung Sakti Pumi, landowners must provide land and fertilizer, and allow other crops to be planted. Tenants must cultivate and maintain land, purchase inputs, and supply labor. In Lahat Selatan, landowners only provide land, whereas tenants take full responsibility for cultivation and production.

Tenants are typically selected based on family ties, village residency, or extended kinship. Landowners prefer tenants from their own families because of the ease of communication, trust, and mutual assistance. In both subdistricts, farm sizes range from 0.25 to 2.0 hectares. Most landowners inherit their own land. Many farmers in Lahat Selatan have already held legal land certificates. However, in Tanjung Sakti Pumi, most households lacked formal land ownership documents.

The study identifies two dominant sharecropping arrangements in Lahat Regency: an equal 1:1 distribution system and a *saseh* system, in which the tenant receives two-thirds of the harvest while the landowner receives one-third. These systems are influenced not only by access to land and labor capacity, but also by deeply rooted cultural norms, kinship relations, and mutual trust between parties. These informal arrangements remain effective even without formal contracts or legal documentation. To start a cooperation in cultivating rice fields, tenant farmers will talk verbally or face-to-face with the landowners so that they can be granted permission to cultivate their rice fields along with the profit-sharing system. No down payment is required to indicate that they will be managed on land.

Recent research by Zakaria et al. (2023) confirmed that similar sharecropping systems are widely practiced in rice-producing areas across Indonesia. They distinguish two primary models: one in which the landowner contributes only land (2:1 in favor of the tenant), and another in which both parties share production inputs (1:1 distribution). While the equal-sharing model can generate higher profits, it also entails higher risks for both parties because of the greater input investment. Despite these challenges, both models persist because they align with local customs and emphasize socially embedded cooperation.

In Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan, landowners commonly select tenant farmers from within their extended families or the local community. This preference reflects a broader national pattern in which kinship-

based tenancy arrangements offer practical advantages: ease of communication, mutual understanding, and reduced risk of disputes. These social ties reinforce accountability, and contribute to the longevity of farming partnerships.

Kinships become even more crucial during periods of crop failure. In situations where yields are insufficient to meet daily needs, tenant farmers who have invested in labor and capital suffer the greatest losses. In such cases, a customary negotiation process, known locally as *a berasan*, is often initiated when crop yields are very low and households face difficulties meeting their basic needs. Through the *berasan*, tenant farmers informally requested a greater share of the remaining harvest from the landowners. This practice exemplifies how local norms provide flexibility within rigid sharecropping frameworks and ensure social fairness during hardship.

The following are cases of the sharecropping system practiced by Mr. RM (68), Mr. SA (43) in Lahat Selatan, and Mr. HD (44) in Tanjung Sakti Pumi. (In-depth interview on 16–19 July 2018).

Case 1:

Mr. RM, a 68-year-old farmer, shared his experiences as a tenant cultivator in his village. He currently works on approximately 0.75 ha of land that belongs to another farmer. The location of the field is quite convenient, just a 10-minute walk from his home, so he does not need to use a motorcycle or any other transportation to get to the paddy field.

Under his sharecropping arrangement, Pak RM received two-thirds of the total harvest, while one-third was allocated to the landowner. “For example,” he explained, “if the harvest yields 30 sacks of rice, 10 sacks go to the landowner and I keep 20 sacks.” In this arrangement, all production inputs (e.g., fertilizers, pesticides, and even tractor rental) are provided entirely by the owner, whereas the landowner contributes only to the land.

He recalled a particularly difficult season when the rice crop failed due to a severe pest infestation. Despite heavy investment in production inputs, the yield was minimal. “I only harvested around 16 sacks of rice that time,” he said, “and still gave 10 sacks to the landowner.” Consequently, his share dropped significantly. “When that happens, my family has to cut back on our daily needs. However, since I still had enough to meet my basic food needs, I didn’t negotiate with the landowner to reduce the share of the harvest I was required to give,” he added.

Under normal conditions, any surplus from the harvest would be stored for emergencies, while the rest would be used to meet his family’s daily food needs. But in times of crop failure, even this basic plan becomes difficult to maintain.

Case 2:

Mr. SA, a 43-year-old tenant rice farmer, has worked as a sharecropper for many years. Reflecting on his experiences, he described how crop failure has always been the most discouraging part of the job, particularly when it comes to dividing harvests. “When the harvest fails,” he explained, “the share I receive feels completely unfair, considering all the work I’ve done and the money I’ve spent.”

During one difficult season, Mr. SA invested heavily in farming inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, and labor) while working tirelessly under the scorching sun. But despite his efforts, the harvest was poor, and the portion left for him after sharing with the landowner was barely enough to feed his family. “The rice I received wasn’t even sufficient for our daily meals,” he said.

What helped him get through such a situation was the practice of *berasan.* Fortunately, the landowner understood and did not insist on taking their full share. “Whatever I was able to give, the landowner accepted,” Mr. SA recalled. This gesture of flexibility and mutual understanding provided some relief during times of severe hardship.

Case 3:

Mr. HD, a 44-year-old tenant farmer, cultivates rice fields under a sharecropping agreement with his father-in-law, who is also the landowner. According to Mr. HD, they follow an equal distribution system, where the rice harvest is split 50:50 between the cultivator and the landowner. In their arrangement, all production inputs, such as seeds, pesticides, and labor, are provided by Mr. HD, while his father-in-law contributes to the land and fertilizer.

> "If the harvest is successful and we get, say, 20 sacks of rice, each weighing 75 kilograms," Mr. HD explained, "then I take 10 sacks, and 10 go to the landowner." However, in the event of crop failure, this equal division may still apply, even though the yield is much smaller. "If the failure is severe, I may only get a few sacks, and in that case, I would probably ask for a renegotiation, or *berasan,* so I wouldn't end up with too little," he added.
>
> Fortunately, his father-in-law was supportive and allowed him to grow additional crops on the same land. When these crops, such as vegetables or fruits, are harvested, Mr. HD voluntarily shares a small portion of the produce with the landowner in a gesture of respect and gratitude.

Similar dynamics have been observed in rural Indonesia. For instance, tenancy arrangements are often embedded in political and social relationships in Java. A study on *Tanah Bengkok* (village land) revealed that land access is not solely based on market mechanisms, but is also shaped by trust networks and local governance. Village leaders often allocate farming rights to family members or trusted individuals to maintain social balance and political loyalty (Kurosaki et al., 2020, 2024).

In Central Java, Pitono et al. (2024) found that villagers typically prefer leasing land to relatives or in-laws rather than outsiders. These kinship-based arrangements are viewed as more equitable and culturally appropriate, particularly in contexts in which formal enforcement mechanisms are weak or absent.

Furthermore, the reluctance of tenant farmers in Lahat Selatan to engage in crop diversification, even when permitted, is shaped by seasonal and ecological limitations. The region's double-cropping schedule for rice leaves little time for alternative crops and increases vulnerability to weather-related losses. Similar constraints have been documented in other Indonesian regions. In the Komering irrigation area, farmers maintain rice monoculture due to irrigation reliability and market-related risks (Jahroh & Fujimoto, 2010). In Indramayu, attempts to integrate cattle or vegetables into rice systems have been hampered by labor shortages and narrow planting windows (Ambarsari et al., 2024). Likewise, in Southeast Sulawesi, climate variability, limited capital, and cultural dependence on rice have prevented diversification despite ongoing adaptation initiatives (Saediman et al., 2021).

Another important issue is legal land tenure. In villages such as Ulak Lebar and Sindang Panjang (Tanjung Sakti Pumi Sub-district), the absence of formal land certificates poses significant risks to land security and access to government support. By contrast, Banjar Negara (Lahat Selatan Sub-district), where many farmers possess certified land, demonstrates higher levels of investment in inputs and farm improvement. This observation aligns with national studies showing a positive correlation between formal land titles and agricultural productivity, access to credit, and government assistance (Baird et al., 2022).

In sum, sharecropping in the Lahat Regency functions as both an economic strategy and social institution. It allows landless farmers to maintain their livelihoods, supports absentee landowners in sustaining production, and strengthens rural cohesion through culturally embedded practices. These findings highlight the resilience and adaptability of informal land tenancy systems rooted in trust, reciprocity, and kinship, particularly in resource-constrained rural environments.

Reciprocal labor relation based on kinship and neighborhood

In the sub-districts of Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan, labor relations among rice farming households remain strongly influenced by familial bonds and traditional cooperation practices. Tenant farmers primarily manage all aspects of agricultural labor themselves. Landowners, in most cases, do not participate in day-to-day fieldwork; instead, all labor responsibilities, from land preparation and planting to pest control and harvesting, are borne by tenant farmers.

Farmers utilize a mix of family and non-family labor, depending on the scale and stage of activity. Men are typically involved in land preparation, often aided by mechanized tools such as tractors, whereas both men and women participate during transplanting and harvesting periods. Labor is often handled by farming couples in pest and weed control. During peak periods, such as planting and harvesting, farmers frequently request help from nearby relatives and neighbors.

> *"Jeme dusun ni ame nak upahan, biasenye nyakae ye masih dekberadek sendighi. Misal e anak sendghi atau dekberadek lah, ame dide nyakae jeme dusun sinilah. Kalu ade tuape-tuape mudah dan dide merepotkah nian ame masalah kerjesame iluk itu masalah benih nga pupuk"*
> (The villagers here if they want to find wage workers usually look for those who are still in their own families. For example, your own children or siblings, if you are not looking for someone who lives close

here, one village. Thus, if there is anything easy and not very troublesome if it is a matter of cooperation, both from the problem of seeds and fertilizers. Informant: EW, 48 years old; Tanjung Sakti Pumi, July 19, 2018).

This support often takes the form of mutual aid, in which family members and neighbors assist without expecting wages. In such cases, helpers are compensated for meals, snacks, cigarettes, or drinks. However, when hiring laborers from outside the family network, farmers typically pay a daily wage of IDR 30,000–40,000, or provide 3–4 kg of rice per day. Labor use also depends on land area: for 1.0 hectare plot, up to 20 workers may be needed for a full day during planting or harvest.

Cultural obligations and social events occasionally disrupt labor routines. As one farmer, Mrs. MA (38), described: "We don't have official holidays like government employees. We only stopped working on urgent family matters, ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, or illnesses. If we don't work, we don't earn." For harvesting itself, if the weather is good, it will be done in a day, but if the weather is bad, the harvest will take more than a day. The length of work carried out by farmers takes approximately 8 hours every day.

Similarly, Mr. SP (61) noted that while he relied on family labor for land preparation and planting, he depended on broader kin and community networks during harvest. This blend of reciprocal and paid labor reflects the flexible strategies farmers adopt in resource-limited settings. Another farmer, Mr. JA (58), explained how he reaches out to extended families and neighbors ahead of harvest, combining paid labor (only 2–3 individuals) with a larger group of volunteers.

The above findings illustrate how informal labor networks, particularly those based on kinship and neighborhood reciprocity, are essential in sustaining rice farming operations among smallholders. These patterns are not merely economic decisions; they are embedded in the long-standing cultural practices of gotong royong (mutual cooperation), which remain strong in South Sumatra's agrarian communities.

Similar dynamics have been observed in other Indonesian regions. In East Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, the tradition of *Mekambare* plays a comparable role in maintaining social solidarity and ensuring labor availability during peak agricultural periods. This system enables communities to coordinate labor exchanges while also facilitating knowledge transfer and mutual support (Jers et al., 2023). Moreover, a study from Tambaan Village, East Java, highlights the tension between modernization and mutual aid systems. While mechanization is increasingly adopted, many farmers still retain cooperative harvesting practices to maintain social cohesion and reduce dependence on paid labor (Rizqiyah & Abdullah, 2024).

Labor allocation is also influenced by gender and household structure. Research from Central Java found that both male and female labor contribute significantly to rice production, and that household size and education levels affect labor productivity (Ani et al., 2024). In line with this, the present study shows that even smallholders with limited land still require intensive labor, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons.

Importantly, flexibility in labor compensation, whether through in-kind payments, reciprocal exchanges, or partial wages, demonstrates a highly adaptive labor system that accommodates economic constraints. This mirrors the findings from Pasuruan, East Java, where labor costs dominate the land preparation and planting phases, encouraging farmers to adopt combinations of technology and cooperative labor strategies (Khoiriyah et al., 2023).

Taken together, these patterns affirm that, while rural labor structures in Indonesia are undergoing gradual shifts due to mechanization, migration, and shifting values, traditional cooperation systems continue to serve as local social security. These systems not only reduce production costs and ensure task completion during peak periods but also reinforce social bonds and community resilience.

The tension between reciprocity and social transformation

The land tenancy and labor arrangements observed in Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan reflect a rural agrarian society navigating the tension between enduring customary practices and the pressures of socio-economic transformation. In these regions, sharecropping systems, often based on kinship ties, continue to function effectively without formal legal contracts. Tenancy agreements such as *saseh* or equal sharing are not merely transactional; they are embedded in the webs of social obligation, moral norms, and mutual dependence. This aligns with Polanyi's view that in traditional economies, economic life is inseparable from the social fabric governing it (Polanyi, 1957).

Reciprocity here is not a residual tradition but a living social principle. Sharecropping relationships, labor exchange, and the practice of *berasan* demonstrate how rural actors continue to prioritize fairness, compassion, and trust over fixed contractual logic.

Sahlins's classification of reciprocity (Sahlins, 1974) helps explain the variation in exchange behaviors within the land tenancy and labor systems: generalized reciprocity occurs within families, such as when a landowner allows a relative to farm their land without formal expectations of return, or when family labor supports farming activities with little or no compensation. Balanced reciprocity is seen in tenant-landowner relationships, where agreed-upon shares (e.g., 1:1 or 2:1) structure the exchange, yet flexibility exists during economic hardship. Negative reciprocity, although less visible, may emerge in disputes over harvest distribution when trust or kinship is weak. This typology shows that the nature of the relationship (kin vs. non-kin) shapes the moral framework of exchange. The stronger the social bond, the more flexible and generous the arrangement. A study in Central Java found similar dynamics, where symmetrical and generalized reciprocity was sustained by strong kinship or long-term social ties, whereas asymmetric exchanges emerged in more commodified, distant relations (Santosa et al., 2019).

As Sahlins suggested, different forms of reciprocity—generalized among kin, balanced among neighbors, and occasionally asymmetric—exist along a continuum shaped by the closeness of social ties. These reciprocal norms are particularly vital in an environment where institutional support is weak and market mechanisms alone cannot secure livelihood sustainability. This echoes the findings from Ghana, where declining reciprocity in agricultural labor was associated with socioeconomic changes, such as rising opportunity costs of family labor due to schooling and increasing monetization of rural work arrangements (Dzanku & Tsikata, 2022).

However, these social forms of cooperation are not immune to broader structural changes. The increasing use of agricultural technologies, such as tractors, chemical inputs, and improved seed varieties, reflects the gradual commercialization of farming. Similarly, growing access to markets—both for purchasing inputs and selling outputs—has begun to alter traditional labor arrangements. When extended kin groups and neighbors routinely participate in unpaid mutual labor (e.g., during planting and harvesting), there is now a discernible shift toward monetized labor exchanges, especially among younger farmers or households with more capital. Even in communities that value *gotong royong*, the need for efficient and timely labor—particularly in double-cropping rice systems—can lead to greater dependence on hired workers. These changes resonate with research in rural Zimbabwe, which also documented a shift from kin-based labor to hired labor due to commercialization, shrinking landholdings, and increasing demands for productivity (Chambati, 2011).

From Sanderson's evolutionary-materialist perspective (Sanderson, 2000), this shift represents an adaptive response: as rural households face increased economic pressure, higher productivity demands, and shrinking access to land, traditional norms of reciprocity are selectively retained, modified, or even replaced. The endurance of kin-based tenancy in these communities is not merely a cultural remnant but a flexible institutional arrangement that continues to serve real material needs under conditions of capital scarcity, insecure tenure, and fluctuating market prices. These systems persist because they allow households to share production risks, smooth consumption, and maintain social solidarity, particularly in times of hardship such as crop failure.

At the same time, the social meanings of land and labor are evolving. For many farmers, land is no longer only a site of collective heritage but also a productive asset subject to economic calculations. Labor, too, is shifting from being primarily embedded in familial obligations to being treated as a cost within a broader economic rationality. Nevertheless, the persistence of *berasan*, the selective use of family labor, and the preference for kin-based land transfers suggest that traditional reciprocal norms still provide moral grounding to navigate this agrarian transformation.

However, Sanderson's evolutionary-materialist perspective encourages a more critical reading of this system. As landowners increasingly limit their role to providing land, while tenant farmers shoulder all production risks, a gradual shift occurs from mutual reciprocity toward surplus extraction. This is particularly evident when landowners continue to claim a fixed share of the harvest, regardless of production failure, indicating a growing asymmetry in risk sharing. Research on Java confirms that the profit-sharing system still exists and even evolves, as it provides a way for landowners to obtain surpluses without the need to be directly involved in production. Although farmers are aware of the exploitative potential of this system, they still accept it as part of their survival strategy under conditions of limited land access and employment (Wijaya & White, 2024). Thus, surplus tends to accumulate on the side of those with secure land control and minimal involvement in labor, subtly transforming what appears to be reciprocal exchange into a mechanism of surplus transfer.

This pattern becomes more pronounced in the context of the agrarian transition, where technological interventions and market-oriented agriculture begin to alter traditional labor structures. Mechanization, although still limited, reduces reliance on mutual labor exchange, while the monetization of labor undermines *gotong royong* practices. As community obligations give way to wage-based relations, the cultural logic of reciprocity weakens and the informal security provided by kin-based networks diminishes. Tenant farmers, especially those without formal land rights or capital access, have become increasingly vulnerable to market volatility and ecological risks.

In sum, while the land tenancy and labor relations observed in the Lahat Regency appear to be grounded in reciprocal social norms, they also reveal emerging tensions between tradition and transformation. Reciprocity remains a meaningful framework for understanding how cooperation is organized in rural agrarian life, but its persistence is contingent on the balance of power and access to resources. As the rural economy becomes more commercialized and technologically mediated, these social contracts may be stretched to their limits, potentially exacerbating inequality and eroding the long-standing mechanisms of communal solidarity.

Conclusion

This study reveals that land tenancy and labor relations among rice farmers in Tanjung Sakti Pumi and Lahat Selatan are shaped by strong kinship ties, informal agreements, and deeply rooted local norms. Two sharecropping models prevail: equal sharing and the *saseh* system (2:1 split favoring tenants). These informal arrangements provide access to land for landless farmers and maintain production stability through trust-based, family oriented agreements.

Labor organizations are similarly embedded in community values. Farmers rely on a mix of family labor, neighborhood help, and limited paid labor. Practices such as *gotong royong* and *berasan* serve not only economic functions but also reinforce social solidarity, especially in times of hardship or crop failure.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to rural sociology by illustrating how customary institutions such as sharecropping and reciprocal labor persist as rational, adaptive systems in contemporary agrarian life. Moreover, they reveal underlying tensions between tradition and social transformation, where evolving reciprocity practices—shaped by agrarian pressures—may increasingly function as mechanisms for surplus accumulation rather than mutual support. Practically, they underscore the need for development policies that recognize and support these local mechanisms in any agricultural development programs to protect the landless. This includes adapting agricultural credits schemes and access to production equipments to align with existing local arrangements. In addition, ensuring equitable access to land and labor requires tenure reform that acknowledges the realities of agrarian transition within specific local contexts. Strengthening such community-based systems can enhance agricultural resilience and social equity in Indonesia's rural areas.

Statement of originality and plagiarism-free

We inform that this article is original article and free of plagiarism.

Competing interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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