Abandoned land: Legal aspects and utilization in Indonesia

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One of the fundamental problems in the land sector in Indonesia is inequality in the distribution pattern of land ownership, control, use, and utilization. This situation is further exacerbated by the large amount of land abandoned by land rights owners, which covers millions of hectares. This article digs deeper into the significance of controlling abandoned land in efforts to realize agrarian reform that prioritizes a more equitable distribution of land ownership and use. The Indonesian Constitution (Undang-Undang Dasar 1945) and the Basic Agrarian Law (Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria, UUPA) establish a relationship between the state and citizens regarding land and natural resources. Abandoned land refers to land that is not utilized and does not provide benefits to the community, which, as a result, becomes land that is directly controlled by the state. Control of abandoned land is key to addressing the unequal concentration of land ownership, encouraging social and economic balance, and increasing food and energy security. Nevertheless, the process of controlling abandoned land addresses a number of challenges, including enforcing complex laws, resistance from rights holders, and errors in implementation procedures. The success of agrarian reform depends on factors such as strong government support, the presence of empowered farmer and community organizations, the availability of accurate data, and adequate budget allocation.

Keywords: abandoned land, access reform, agrarian reform, customary law, land rights, land redistribution, state control, state land.

1. Introduction

Current socio-economic and political changes have led to a reduction in the area of agricultural land in various regions of the world, making agricultural activities less profitable (Kuemmerle et al. 2008). On the other hand, there is mounting evidence that agricultural land is being abandoned at an alarming rate. Land abandonment is a complex process involving factors such as urbanization, migration, environmental degradation, and changes in agricultural technology (Prishchepov, Schierhorn, Löw 2021). The increasing abandonment of agricultural land is resulting in decreased agricultural production and serious impacts on the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers in villages (Raj Khanal, Watanabe 2006). Therefore, there is a need for strategic planning and legal support for sustainable rural development, which involves a shift from a sectoral to a spatial approach. In addition, a systematic and comprehensive legal approach is needed for sustainable rural development (Voronina, Milovidova 2021).

Land abandonment has occurred in various places and in various contexts. Some estimates suggest that abandoned land is expected to increase by 4,8 million hectares in the EU

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for the period 2015–2030 (Perpiña Castillo et al. 2021), while in post-Soviet Russia, more than 40 million hectares of arable land will be abandoned within 20 years. Estimates for Latin America also show a reforestation-related neglect of 36 million hectares (Munroe et al. 2013). Several studies have highlighted the positive aspects of land abandonment, potentially contributing to vegetation restoration and conservation (Fayet et al. 2022), land restoration and reforestation, and being complained of as a loss of unique landscape management (Bell et al. 2009). Changes to land or land systems also increase the risk of soil erosion and forest fires (Benayas et al. 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen forestry regulations to protect against fires, control reforestation, and solve problems of sustainable socio-economic development for the country. Other studies have confirmed that the main reasons for abandoning agricultural land include land owners living outside the area and owning land far from where they live, perceptions of greater future value from other types of land use, environmental and biophysical characteristics of the land, policy constraints, behavioral social constraints, and financial and economic constraints (Abolina, Luzadis 2014).

Land abandonment is not only a phenomenon observed in other countries but also occurs in Indonesia. Various types of land rights have been granted to landowners, yet many remain underutilized. There are at least three motives behind the importance of controlling these abandoned lands. First, the underlying principle of justice, in which many abandoned lands are outside the country's economic and political system but have been controlled by certain parties so that they cannot be utilized by society and the state, Second, based on the constitutional mandate, Art. 27, 37 and 40 of Law No. 5 of 1960 concerning Basic Agrarian Regulations (Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria, UUPA) emphasized the state's obligation to take over these abandoned lands. Third, abandoned land is often a source of conflict (Winoto 2010). Abandonment of land is caused by several factors, such as the inability to use it both financially and non-financially, speculation from landowners who do not have a clear picture of its use, and deliberate abandonment by using land certificates as collateral to obtain loans.

Existing research so far has provided sufficient understanding of the decline in agricultural land, but there are still deficiencies in research regarding the legal aspects of land abandonment and abandoned land use. Therefore, this new study will focus on the legal aspects related to land abandonment and abandoned land use in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, the issue of abandoned land is a very crucial one because it involves a significant area and the urgency of its utilization. One issue in the spotlight is the inequality of land tenure in the country, where a few people own most of the land while the majority own only a small amount of land. This phenomenon creates injustice in the ownership of land assets and has an impact on the inability of most holders of land rights to manage them properly. Overall, this study will make an important contribution to filling the knowledge gap about abandoned land and abandoned land use, especially in the legal context of Indonesia.

2. Basic research

2.1. Understanding the concept of abandoned lands

The constitution is the highest basic norm in a country that can describe the legal, political, economic, and social system of a country. In the constitution, it also regulates relations between state institutions, government structures, and relations between the state

and citizens. In Indonesia, the constitution is known as the 1945 Constitution, which also includes the Agrarian Constitution, which contains the basis for the relationship between the state and citizens towards land and other natural resources. The agrarian constitution is further regulated in Art. 2 para. (1) of Law No. 5 of 1960 concerning the Basic Regulations on Agrarian Principles (UUPA), which states that "Earth, water, and space, including natural wealth in them, are at the highest level controlled by the state as the organization of the power of all the people".

On the basis of the state's right to control, various kinds of rights are determined on the surface of the earth, called land, which can be given to and owned by people, either alone or together with other people and legal entities. Taking care of the land is the responsibility of every individual, legal entity, or institution that has a legal relationship with the land. This means that any grant of rights by the state to individuals or legal entities must be accompanied by obligations that must be fulfilled by the right holders in accordance with the terms and conditions set out in the decision to grant these rights. The legal consequences of holders of land rights who do not carry out their obligations and do not use the land according to their circumstances and the nature of their rights, so that they do not provide benefits and happiness for the community and the state, when viewed from the perspective of national land law, are categorized as abandoned land and confirmed as land that has been controlled directly by the state.

The term abandoned land comes from the Dutch word *de woeste gronden*, which means "wild lands" or lands not cultivated, as opposed to *de bouwvelden*, which means agricultural lands that have been cultivated (Vollenhoven, Soewargono 1975). Abandoned land is a legal event due to human actions, so land rights are null and void. The abolition of land rights must be stated in a decree by an authorized official as a sanction against non-fulfillment by rights holders who have certain obligations or violate certain prohibitions. In addition, according to Parlindungan, the concept of abandoned land also refers to customary law, where if the physical condition of the land has changed within a certain period of time, the right to the land is nullified and the land returns to customary or *ulayat* ownership (Parlindungan 1990). Abandoned land occurs when the right holder intentionally does not use the land in accordance with the terms, purpose, designation, or natural capacity of the land.

Abandoned land in the context of customary law has a long history, including difficulties surrounding the terms "land of liars" or "vacant land" with "domein verklaring" (state declaration of land ownership). The principle states that "landdomein is alle grond, waarop niet door anderen recht van eigendom wordt bewezen" (state land is all land on which no other party can prove ownership rights). With this legitimacy, the existence of customary rights or indigenous rights is set aside, and capital interests are included as desired. The impact of this declaration of the domain verklaring is that land owned by the people through customary property rights is considered state property. In the context of land administration, customary land rights are known as "onvrij lands domain" (non-free state land), which means that the state is not free to give away the land because there are rights attached to the people.

After independence, the domain principle was abolished in accordance with Art. 33, para. 3, of the 1945 Constitution, and Art. 2 of the UUPA changed the statement of state ownership rights to state control rights. UUPA, as a new agrarian law, recognizes adat as a source of law and opposes land abandonment (leaving land empty). This is due to the

broad acceptance of customary law in Indonesian society, so customary law has a special position in the formation of agrarian law. The existence of indigenous peoples is recognized constitutionally as stipulated in the 1945 Constitution Art. 18B para. (2), which confirms that: "The state recognizes and respects the units of indigenous peoples and their traditional rights as long as they are still alive and in accordance with the development of society and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia which are regulated in law".

Customary law varies in terms and criteria for abandoned land depending on the area of origin. In South Sulawesi, abandoned land is called *Tona Kabu or Tona Kallanggelung Amo*, with the criteria of abandoned paddy fields for 10 years or more, missing hills, and missing signs. In Bengkulu, it is called *Sakueh* land, while in Dajurawi, it is called agricultural land that remains after harvest. In Jambi, it is called *Balukar Toewo*, referring to the agricultural land that changes from forest to swamp after 3 years. In North Sumatra, it is called *Worter Grounden*, *Soppalan*, or *Telum* and refers to abandoned land overgrown with weeds, fields, livestock grazing, and open land. In Aceh, if there is no activity for 3 months, land use rights return to customary rights. In Maluku, land is declared abandoned if it is not used within 10–15 years, and in South Kalimantan (Banjar), former agricultural land left unattended for 2 or more seasons will return to plains or uncultivated land (Suhariningsih 2009).

Customary law defines abandoned land as land that the cultivator or owner has deliberately left uncultivated for a certain period of time so that it becomes a bush. The status of abandoned land is determined by the physical condition of the land, which is muddy and not suitable for replanting. The authority to designate land as abandoned is not clear, and land is usually reverted to customary rights or indigenous peoples. The deadline for paying for abandoned land ranges from 3 to 30 years. Abandoned land in the customary law system is land that is left uncultivated for a certain period of time, becomes shrubbery, and does not provide benefits to the community. This obligatory land is taken and reoccupied by a legal alliance for its next planned use.

Officially controlling abandoned land began in 1998 with the issuance of Government Regulation No. 36 of 1998 concerning the ordering and Utilization of Abandoned Land. Previously, regulations regarding the control of abandoned land had not been regulated in detail. The criteria used as a reference for determining whether a piece of land can be classified as abandoned land are still abstract. The absence of clear rules regarding the distinction of abandoned land, causative factors, enforcement procedures, sanctions that can be imposed, land rights that can be designated as abandoned land, the mechanism for settlement of abandoned land, the party responsible for determining the status of abandoned land, and the time period before the land is declared abandoned certain rights can be submitted as abandoned land, which has hampered efforts to control abandoned land.

There is a weakness in this government regulation regarding compensation provisions after the land is declared abandoned. Former right-holders are entitled to compensation in the amount of the acquisition price that can be proven by them with the usual calculations. Determining the price of this compensation is a sanction for the rightful owner or party who has obtained the basis of control over the land. However, the cost of compensation is borne by the next beneficiary, namely the community as the beneficiary of the land, who often refuses this. In other words, compensation is considered a purchase of land, but there are still no rules governing the source of funding for this compensation. Facing

complications related to compensation and other problems, Government Regulation No. 36 of 1998 was later repealed and replaced by Government Regulation No. 11 of 2010, in which the compensation provisions were abolished. Instead, after the land was declared abandoned, it was immediately controlled by the state and distributed for agrarian reform.

2.2. The urgency of controlling abandoned lands

Land abandonment and concentration of land tenure are the main factors causing agrarian inequality. This is revealed in the data, where only 0,2 % of the population controls 56 % of the total national assets. Furthermore, there is a concentration of assets of 62 to 87 % in the form of land, such as ponds, mines, property, and gardens. In 2013, there was a significant imbalance of land ownership with a Gini index of 0,68, indicating that only 1 % of Indonesia's population controlled 68 % of land resources. In 2019, the Gini index to the land ratio fell to 0,59, which means that 1 % of the population owns 59 % of the land. Meanwhile, the other 99 % of the population only controls 41 % of the available land (Sidipurwanty et al. 2019).

One of the solutions to overcome the concentration of assets is through the control of abandoned land to change the unbalanced structure, especially in terms of land ownership and use. In this context, rearrangement becomes important in order to realize land as a source of welfare, create a more just life, support social and national systems, and strengthen social peace. In addition, optimizing the exploitation and use of land will improve environmental quality, reduce poverty levels, create jobs, and increase food and energy security.

Based on inventory data, there are abandoned lands with a total area of 4 880 598,3049 hectares. Types of abandoned land rights include Cultivation Rights with an area of 1 034 090,4361 hectares, Building Use Rights with an area of 57713,7789 hectares, Usage Rights with an area of 5612,3920 hectares, Management Rights with an area of 204510,7950 hectares, and Location permits with an area of 3 578 670,9029 hectares. Part of the land, which is 51 679 7038 hectares, is currently in the process of litigation at the State Administrative Court, involving 3066 holders of land rights (Luthfi 2018).

Ordering abandoned land with millions of hectares and trillions of rupiah in state losses is a complex challenge. State Administrative Court cases often face challenges such as lawsuits, resistance from rights holders, and a lack of sectoral support. Decisions often cancel or revoke land use for the benefit of society and the state, including agrarian reform and state strategic programs. Likewise, abandoned land, which has been decided by courts and won by the government, faces challenges in distribution due to bureaucratic processes and conflicting rights among communities. Issues arise from imperfect regulations, self-interest, right-holders refusing to enforce the law, and empowering communities to control access to resources and organize themselves for optimal control.

The procedural aspect of controlling abandoned land is very important because it becomes a crucial point when there is a lawsuit against the determination of abandoned land. In many cases, lawsuits filed related to procedural aspects are often related to stages that are not complied with, which in the end can lead to the cancellation or revocation of the decision letter determining abandoned land. If there are juridical defects in the procedural aspect, the court tends not to consider the substance of the abandoned land determination and considers it to violate the general principles of good governance.

State Administrative Court decisions that test the legitimacy or legality of a state administrative official's decision, such as decisions in the form of *beschikking*, must frequently strike a balance between legal certainty, benefits, and justice. When scrutinizing a decision against its fundamental standards, the primary focus is on the formal aspect and the procedure for determining it, as opposed to challenging the substance of justice contained in the legal regulation. Consequently, in legal considerations of State Administrative Decisions, legal certainty trumps considerations of expediency and justice.

In the case of a dispute over a decision letter regarding abandoned land, there was a predominance of procedural errors in the decision. What's more, during a field inspection, the Judge realized that the land was completely abandoned. However, because several stages in controlling abandoned land were not fully implemented, the Judge still decided that the decision letter for determining abandoned land had a juridical disability from a procedural point of view. Therefore, testing in terms of substance is no longer approved. For example, the stages of control were not carried out sequentially; there were administrative errors or correspondence that did not comply with the specified format; errors in the date of the letters; and one or two stages that were not carried out. Even though in substance there is no urgency, such as the absence of a written report or the discrepancy between the official carrying out the task and the assignment letter.

In cases like this, judges should adopt a progressive mindset that can tolerate procedural violations as long as they do not violate the substance of justice or expediency. In other words, substantive justice does not mean that judges must always ignore regulatory norms; with substantive justice, judges can ignore regulations that do not provide a sense of justice while still complying with formal-procedural regulations that have provided a sense of justice while maintaining legal certainty. Judges tend to apply legal norms in a normative-procedural manner, deciding only on the basis of regulations (the law in the book). The judge should decide based on the law that lives in society (living law). Judges are not only tasked with enforcing regulations or laws but also with upholding justice. Judges are not just mouthpieces for laws. This means that judges are expected to have the courage to make decisions in accordance with the elements of law enforcement, namely legal certainty, expediency, and justice. Therefore, it is often difficult to achieve substantial justice through court decisions because judges and court institutions tend to provide formal justice.

In order to defeat substantive justice, it is necessary to give priority to physical conditions that indicate that the land is indeed abandoned. The judge must refer to the examination of the local trial, which is a direct examination by the judge at the place requested. The purpose of this local inspection is to find out clearly and with certainty about the location, area, and boundaries of the object of abandoned land that is being disputed. The trial was witnessed by the parties concerned and witnesses. The results of local examinations are facts found by the judge in court, which have binding power for the judge and can be used as a basis for granting or canceling charges. If the arguments in the plaintiff's application regarding the status of abandoned land are refuted, but the local inspection proves that the land is indeed abandoned, then the results of the local inspection can become the basis for the judge to cancel the lawsuit. In an effort to realize substantive justice, the active role of judges is needed to seek material truth, not just formal truth. This requires a change in the perspective and thinking of judges as well as improvements in judges' decision-making, which previously focused on formal procedures, by directing substantive justice.

2.3. Utilization of abandoned land for agrarian reform

In Indonesian history, agrarian reform was carried out through three periods, which included Landreform (1963–1965), the National Agrarian Reform Program (2007–2014), and Agrarian Reform (2017–2023). During these three periods, beneficiaries from the grassroots, especially the poor, showed variations in terms of ownership of the land that was the object of the agrarian reform and its supporting programs. Agrarian reform aims to rearrange the structure of tenure, ownership, use, and utilization of land in a more just manner by regulating assets and access to achieve people's prosperity. The arrangement of assets is carried out through the redistribution of agricultural and non-agricultural land, while the legalization of assets is carried out through the process of land certification.

The implementation of agrarian reform faces obstacles due to sectoralization and overlapping arrangements, which can hinder progress. Sumardjono, reviewed 12 sectoral laws in the agrarian sector, revealing that they overlap and conflict with normative and empirical impacts. UUPA is people-oriented, while sectoral law is pro-capital, emphasizing the need for maintenance and preservation of land. Sectoral laws also deny the rights of indigenous peoples to their land, which are recognized by the UUPA. In addition to regulatory aspects, the key factors for the success of land reform include government support, strong farmer and community organizations, the availability of accurate data, and adequate budgets (Sumardjono 2009).

The basic principle that is clear is that the Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) is the basic rule of law in encouraging equity and the distribution of ownership structures of agrarian rights for the benefit of all people. UUPA stipulates the state's obligation to regulate land ownership and supervise its use so that all land can be utilized as much as possible for the prosperity of the people. UUPA also regulates the prohibition of land ownership that exceeds the specified limit, requires every individual and legal entity that has rights over agricultural land to actively cultivate and manage it by preventing extortion practices, and sets limits on the maximum and/or minimum area of land that can be owned by individuals or legal entities with certain rights.

One of the government's nine priority agendas is pushing for agrarian reform and a 9 million-hectare land ownership program. The aim of this program is to provide an opportunity for every citizen to own land, both as a place to live and as a decent source of livelihood. Priority programs in the implementation of agrarian reform are carried out by various related Ministries and Government Agencies. The program covers approximately 9 million hectares of land and consists of two main components. First, asset legalization covers 4,5 million hectares for transmigrant lands that do not yet have certificates of 0,6 million hectares and 3,9 million hectares for asset legalization. Second, land redistribution involves 4,5 million hectares of Cultivation Rights and 0,6 million hectares of abandoned land, as well as 4,1 million hectares of forest area release.

Specifically, the achievement of controlling abandoned land for agrarian reform is quite low, which is caused by various obstacles that affect efforts to resolve it. Common obstacles that often arise include the difficulty of accurately identifying and mapping derelict land, overlapping land tenure, legal and administrative issues, conflicting interests and conflicts, limited resources, and resistance from disadvantaged parties. Solutions to overcome these obstacles include comprehensive land mapping using technology, careful analysis of ownership claims, reforming policies and strengthening administrative

systems, involving all relevant parties in decision-making, allocating adequate resources, carrying out intensive outreach to the community, and ensuring community participation in the decision-making process.

Another problem is that the recipient of the object of agrarian reform has become a habit in land redistribution to the community, where there is an unofficial practice of selling or transferring land redistribution, even though the certificate is not allowed to be transferred either in part or in whole for 10 years, where this practice was carried out before the division certificates for various reasons, such as the long distance between the land being distributed and the place where the owner lives, being sold to meet daily needs, not having the capital to develop the land, the area of land received is not sufficient for needs, the land is infertile and cannot be planted, as well as the lack of public awareness of the objectives of the land reform program. The lack of follow-up programs (access reform) and planning maturity on the part of the land redistribution activity organizers are additional causes of this.

The 10-year restriction on not buying and selling land in redistribution serves several purposes. First, the aim is that the land distributed to the beneficiary farmers is not resold to third parties, so as to prevent re-concentration of land ownership. Second, by not guaranteeing land to financial institutions such as banks, potential defaults among farmers are avoided, which can end in the confiscation of assets in the form of land. Third, in the absence of an option to sell or guarantee land from redistribution, the land will be managed independently by the recipient community of land redistribution and not transferred to other parties who are not recipients of redistribution. Fourth, the land that has produced for the needs of farmers will still be maintained and managed by the farmers themselves, because in addition to meeting their needs, there is also a spiritual bond between farmers as land managers and the land they work on.

The utilization of abandoned land is commonly done through land redistribution, where ownership certificates are issued in the names of individuals. However, the tradeability of these property rights poses a disadvantage as it can lead to the loss of land ownership and hinder the prosperity of farmers. Additionally, the absence of governing regulations may prevent the sale of land resulting from the redistribution of abandoned land. Several alternative approaches for utilizing abandoned land through land redistribution are available. Firstly, issuing property rights certificates provides legal certainty and prevents land disputes, allowing the land to be used as collateral for loans. However, the drawback remains that property rights can be easily traded. Secondly, granting ownership rights to Agricultural Cooperatives offers advantages such as non-tradability of certificates and the possibility of using them as loan collateral. Cooperatives can also empower farmers through training activities and assist in marketing agricultural products. Lastly, joint ownership can be considered by dividing the land among a group of individuals, typically 10 to 30 people depending on the land area. Farmer organizations can also be formed to collectively own and manage the redistributed abandoned land.

3. Conclusions

The Indonesian constitution, known as the 1945 Constitution, plays a crucial role in defining the legal, political, economic, and social systems of the country. It also governs the relationships between state institutions, government structures, and the state and its

citizens. The Agrarian Constitution, a part of the 1945 Constitution, specifically addresses the relationship between the state and its citizens regarding land and natural resources. The concept of abandoned land, rooted in both national land law and customary law, refers to land that is intentionally left uncultivated or unused, leading to the nullification of land rights. Abandoned land is a legal event with significant consequences, as it results in the direct control of the land by the state. Customary law further defines abandoned land based on specific criteria and determines the rights and obligations associated with it. The control of abandoned land was officially initiated in 1998, but challenges remain, such as the lack of clear regulations, compensation issues, and the distribution of abandoned land for agrarian reform.

The control and utilization of abandoned land play a significant role in addressing agrarian inequality and promoting social justice in Indonesia. The constitution, including the 1945 Constitution and the Agrarian Constitution, provides the legal framework for land ownership and utilization. Abandoned land, which is land that has not been used according to its purpose or natural capacity, can be controlled by the state to ensure its proper use for the benefit of society. However, the process of controlling abandoned land faces challenges, including legal disputes, bureaucratic processes, and conflicting rights. Procedural aspects are crucial in determining abandoned land, and any procedural errors can lead to the cancellation of decisions. Judges need to strike a balance between legal certainty and substantive justice when deciding on abandoned land cases, considering both formal-procedural regulations and the principles of justice. Achieving substantial justice and addressing agrarian inequality require a comprehensive approach that involves improving regulations, empowering communities, and optimizing land utilization for the welfare of the people and the nation.

Agrarian reform is a vital process aimed at ensuring a fair distribution of land ownership and enhancing societal welfare. It encompasses the restructuring, legalization, and redistribution of both agricultural and non-agricultural land. However, its implementation is often hindered by challenges such as sectoral fragmentation, overlapping regulations, and competing interests. The success of land reform depends on several factors, including political will, strong farmer and community organizations, accurate land data, and sufficient funding. The Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) serves as the principal legal foundation for promoting equity and regulating land ownership. As part of its priority agenda, the government has introduced a 9-million-hectare land distribution program to meet citizens' residential and livelihood needs. Addressing issues related to abandoned land requires comprehensive mapping, policy reforms, stakeholder collaboration, adequate resource allocation, and active community participation. Various strategies can be employed to optimize the use of abandoned land, including issuing property rights certificates, granting ownership to agricultural cooperatives, and implementing joint ownership schemes to ensure sustainable land utilization.

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