Hegemony Analysis of Industrial Agriculture in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Decades of massive and often hegemonic industrial agriculture have taken a toll on the environment. The expansion of food estate projects in Indonesia clearly exemplifies this trend. Drawing on Martin Nonhoff's hegemony analysis, this paper examines a discourse corpus consisting of online media coverage of food estate, alongside social media content from an indigenous food activist. The analysis reveals that industrial agriculture is sustained through a discursive formation that frames these projects as the ultimate solutions for food security and economic welfare. However, this hegemonic project remains contested by civil society organizations. They articulate the discourse of food sovereignty rooted in biodiversity and indigenous knowledge, creating a clear discursive frontier against the state's industrial narrative.

Keywords: discourse, hegemony, industrial agriculture, media, food estate

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has been the priority sector since the New Order Era of Suharto. Along with the country's transition to industrialization in the mid-1980s and market liberalization, the government began to harness the practice of industrial agriculture. However, decades of massive and often hegemonic industrial agriculture have taken a toll on the environment. In the 1990s, President Suharto initiated a food estate which was later referred to as the Mega Rice Project. The Mega Rice Project included the conversion of 1 million hectares of peatlands. However, the project ended up failing. Scientists and experts since then have considered this project as one of the great environmental disasters of the twentieth century as the fires released more carbon than all countries in the European Union combined in a year (Rieley, 2001: McCarthy, 2013). To date, the dried-out wasteland of the Mega Rice Project still experiences extensive annual wildfires (BBC News Indonesia, 2020).

Despite the past failure and the potential environmental degradation of similar projects, the Government of Indonesia under the administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) initiated food estate under the National Strategic Project 2020-2024 in several provinces including similar areas as the Mega Rice Project. The state rushed the project implementation during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (AS, 2020). Under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto, the state then rebranded the food estate with the name Cetak Sawah Rakyat in several provinces which are Central Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, South Sumatera, South Sulawesi, and South Papua (Utama, 2024).

From the brief background above, it is seen that the Government of Indonesia has prioritized industrial agriculture through its economic and political control, influence, and dominance. I argue that industrial agriculture as a hegemonic project is formatted by the constant articulation of the sector as a legitimate solution to "food security" and "economic welfare." Meanwhile, at the same time, the state also constructs what Nonhoff (2019, p. 90) identifies as a "lack that is to be overcome" by framing existing conditions as states of "precarity," "unproductivity," and "inefficiency" to justify the expansion of industrial agriculture. This condition clearly represents what Laclau & Mouffe (2001) termed as "chains of equivalence"–wherein diverse discursive elements are linked by their shared opposition to a common "antagonist" (see the example in Analysis). As these chains are fundamental to the discursive configuration of any hegemonic formation, my research seeks to investigate this process further by asking: *how is industrial agriculture discursively constructed as a hegemonic project?*

As Laclau & Mouffe (2001) argue that all discourses—including hegemonic ones—are fundamentally contingent, they are subject to "contestation and critique, which provides the necessary ground for resistance and social transformation" (Van Den Berg, 2020, p. 20). Hence, the state's effort in sustaining industrial agriculture remains contested. Numerous environmental NGOs challenge industrial agriculture by specifically linking food estate to "environmental degradation" and "social instability," while linking alternative food system with "biodiversity" and "indigenous knowledge." This discursive struggle leads to the second guiding question of this study: *how is industrial agriculture discursively challenged?*

Central to this study is a post-structuralist approach that moves beyond the traditional Gramscian view of hegemony. While Gramsci (1999) originally framed hegemony as a "war of position" led by fundamental social classes anchored in the economy, this paper follows the perspective of Laclau & Mouffe (2001). Laclau & Mouffe (2001) shifted from Gramsci's neo-Marxist tradition by providing an ontological framework that treats hegemony as a purely discursive construct. They argue that political identities are not predetermined by one's economic class but are instead "articulated" through language and narratives (discourses). Building on this post-structuralist shift, Nonhoff (2019) operationalizes these abstract concepts by providing a concrete methodology, namely hegemony analysis, to track how discursive stories are constructed. This allows for an analysis of how hegemonic project successfully "hooks" diverse social demands together to secure power in specific historical contexts. Ultimately, this approach acknowledges that meaning is not inherent but is constructed through processes of articulation, where "linguistic signs are invested with meaning and ordered in relation to one another to temporarily fix the discourse" (Elenius et al., 2016, p. 34).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reconceptualizing Hegemony from Neo-Marxism to Post-Structuralism

Gramsci's (1999) theory of hegemony is conceptualized as a process by which the ruling classes aim to establish social control through the dissemination of ideology and culture, rather than relying on physical enforcement. Bates (1975) further describes hegemony as political leadership because it is not about forced coercion, but rather a leadership that is accepted and adhered to by the people being led. Thus, there is consent of the led, secured through the dissemination of ideology by the ruling power among the masses.

Shifting from the neo-Marxist ideas of Gramsci (1999), Laclau & Mouffe (2001) argue that hegemony is not just about the ideological domination where one group forces its ideas on another. They also argue that hegemony is not limited to a struggle between social classes. Instead, they emphasize that "discourse" are what actually construct the hegemony. In this view, hegemony does not occur because a ruling class holds power over the masses and controls the discourse. Rather, hegemony is formed when a specific way of thinking becomes dominant through "discursive construction," which utilizes "articulatory practices" to link diverse ideas together (Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023).

Central to Laclau & Mouffe's (2001) framework is the understanding of the articulatory practices, which is termed "chains of equivalence." This concept is also the core of hegemony analysis, the method developed by Nonhoff (2019) to better operationalize Laclau & Mouffe's (2001) concept on hegemony. Nonhoff (2019, p. 71) further notes that "chains of equivalence come into existence not because their elements share an inherent, positive commonality; rather, they are linked by a "negative relation of contrariety" to a common opponent.

It is important to note that hegemony analysis builds directly upon the foundational discourse and hegemony theories of Laclau & Mouffe (1985, 2001), which were later refined by Laclau (1996, 2000, 2005). Consequently, the study of discourse is inseparable from the study of hegemony. "Unlike other forms of discourse analysis that prioritize materiality or meaning formation, hegemony analysis is primarily interested in the "hegemony function" of political discourses" (Nonhoff, 2019, p. 64). Following the post-structuralist view that all social practices are inherently discursive, Nonhoff (2019) rejects the dichotomy between discursive and non-discursive practices. Instead, he treats every human action as a meaning-constituting act. Everything is considered discursive, from communications in a concrete context to non-linguistic acts, objects, and states of affairs. In this framework, discourses are the constitutive forces of hegemony, defined as the "structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice" (Golinczak, 2019, p. 97; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 91).

Hegemony analysis, as articulated by Nonhoff (2019), is an empirical approach to discourseanalysis that prioritizes the understanding of hegemonic function—the discursive process through which a particular world description becomes dominant. Unlike many Foucauldian analyses that proceed inductively, hegemony analysis is primarily deductive. The methodology identifies "demands" as the smallest elements of political discourse, categorizing them into cumulative, subsuming, and encompassing types based on their capacity to represent a "lacking universal" (an imaginary common good that society feels is missing or society feels that it is the solution to address all the demands).

These demands are strategically organized through five discursive relations. Nonhoff (2019, p. 73) categorized them into representation, difference, equivalence, contrariety, and super-difference. These discursive relations serve as the primary tools for analyzing how discursive predominance is achieved and maintained. A successful hegemonic project employs complex arrangements of discursive elements that Nonhoff (2019) termed "strategemes." These includes linking demands into an "antagonistic divide" that positions a particular "encompassing demand" as a representative of a "lacking universal"—often referred to as an "empty signifier." Ultimately, the analysis seeks to identify how these strategies facilitate "discourse coalition" to performatively supports a dominant discursive formation over time.

Industrial Agriculture and Food Estate in Indonesia

The food estate, as an embodiment of the state's practice of industrial agriculture, has become an important program in response to Indonesia's food security strategy. This program reflects the state's logic that priorities large-scale agricultural expansion and technological modernization. Historically, since the New Order Era of President Suharto to the current administration under President Prabowo Subianto, the policy on agriculture has been consistently framed that it is the national interest to ensure the country's food security and reduce import dependency (Supriyanto et al., 2025). Within this discourse, food security is constructed primarily as the main reason to legitimize land expansion for

food estate. The usage of crisis, particularly during COVID-19 pandemic (AS, 2020), have further placed this framing. Food estate is positioned as an urgent and legitimate response to anticipate the food shortages (Marwanto & Pangestu, 2021). Legal-political analysis similarly included food estate within broader state objectives that link food provision to security and national stability (Kristhy et al., 2022).

In spite of the justifications propagated by the state, empirical studies consistently show a gap between policy objectives and outcomes. The reality in the field shows that food estate has a limited impact on productivity while generating significant socio-economic and environmental costs (Supriyanto et al., 2025). A study by Wisnaeni & Najib (2025) provides a critical political ecology analysis of food estate that highlights its impact on the marginalization of indigenous communities and the intensification of land conflicts. Pecamuya (2025) also documents some impacts of food estate in Merauke, South Papua, which causes the disruption of local food system of the Indigenous People. Another study by Gaudart & Pasha (2024) also reveals the actor constellations that surround the food estate. It shows that there is a close alignment between political elites and corporate actors which suggests that the program is embedded within broader configurations of power rather than being a purely technical intervention. A study by Greenpeace Indonesia (2022) and an investigation by Majalah Tempo (Sedayu, 2021) also echo a similar sentiment that the food estate is linked to several private companies owned or related to the state political elites.

The dominance of industrial agriculture, particularly focuses on food estate, is also a subject to a challenge. Communities in Indonesia have long challenged the state's view on industrial agriculture by promoting food sovereignty. By emphasizing local control, ecological sustainability, and the rights of smallholder farmers, these perspectives challenge the dominant industrial agriculture paradigm. In a study by Siborutorop (2023), food sovereignty critiques argue that the food estate undermines the ability of local communities, thus the state choses to prioritize industrial agriculture over community-based systems. Empirical studies of local food movements further reveal the existence of counter-discourses that promote diversified and culturally embedded food systems. A local food movement in Flores Timur, East Nusa Tenggara, engages in "everyday politics" to resist the hegemony of the state by reintroducing local food sources like sorghum and dryland rice (Gaudart & Pasha, 2024). A grassroots movement led by the Mollo Indigenous People also actively promote food sovereignty by championing local staple foods (Ariestanty, 2022).

While existing studies reveal the tensions of two different narratives towards industrial agriculture, they often hit a theoretical limit. Hegemony, as a concept, provides a useful lens to address this limitation. It provides a critical lens for examining why sustainable alternatives to industrial agriculture remain marginalized. Drawing from a traditional Gramscian analysis on hegemony, a study by Chiengkul (2017) and Mujib (2020) argue that the dominance of the agri-food system is sustained through a "triple alignment" of material interests, institutional arrangements, and ruling ideologies. A study by Viveropol (2017) also shows that discourse-oriented approaches emphasize how dominant narratives like the framing of food as commodity shape policy preferences and marginalize the alternatives. However, I argue that these analysis often separate hegemony and

discourse, putting the latter only as a tool of preexisting ruling class to assert their power, rather than the force that constitutes the power itself.

I therefore argue that the gap of understanding hegemony using Gramsci's framework can be addressed by implementing, following Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Nonhoff's (2019) approach on hegemony analysis. Gramsci's framework is often limited to "social class" and lacks a specific method to analyze texts to unpack "hegemonic function." Nonhoff's (2019) hegemony analysis thus moves beyond this economic determinism. This method moves the focus from "who" holds power to "how" the power is performatively constructed through "chains of equivalence"—linking diverse demands into a unified "common sense" against a shared opponent.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative literature review. The methodology involved in the data collection systematically includes reading, researching, analyzing, evaluating, and summarizing various scholarly literature from online databases and academic journals such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and researchrabbit.ai to provide the historical background of industrial agriculture. In addition, main unit of analysis for this study derives from articles from online media that are tracked by Google News and social media content. The news from online media focus on food estate from the year 2023 to 2025. Meanwhile, the social media content focus on Dicky Senda's content, an activist that champion decentralized food sovereignty. Using a semi-systematic or narrative review approach, the review tries to pinpoint the historical background of industrial agriculture hegemony in Indonesia.

Table 1. List of the discourse corpus as the unit of analysis

Topic	Name of Media
Food estate under the administration of President Joko Widodo	Tempo (Sedayu, 2024), ANTARA (Hidayat, 2023), The Jakarta Post (Belinda, 2023), Tribunnews Makassar (Tribunnews Makassar, 2023), Kaltengdaily (Kaltengdaily, 2023)
Cetak Sawah Rakyat	ANTARA (Ikhwan, 2025), Radio Rakyat Indonesia (Antonia, 2025), Tempo (Putra, 2025), VOA (Sucahyo, 2024), Mongabay Indonesia (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024)
Local culinary practices of Mollo Indigenous people	Instagram @dickysenda (*Instagram*, n.d.)
Traditional food cultivation methods by Mollo Indigenous People	Instagram @dickysenda (*Instagram*, n.d.)
A critique to the government's colonial approach to food politics	Instagram @dickysenda (*Instagram*, n.d.)

The selection of discourse corpus in this study is based on the purpose to capture both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses surrounding industrial agriculture in Indonesia. Online media coverages on food estate are chosen as the primary unit of analysis because this program represent the most prominent, long-standing, and contemporary

state-led initiatives that articulate industrial agriculture as a solution to food security, economic welfare, and agricultural modernization. These cases alone provide rich empirical material to unpack how dominant discourses are constructed, institutionalized, and reproduces through media narratives that follow state policies and interests.

On the contrary, there are a number of online media coverages that are chosen because they cover the counter-hegemonic discourses surrounding food estate. For example, the reports by Kaltengdaily (Kaltengdaily, 2023), VOA (Sucahyo, 2024), and Mongabay Indonesia (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024). These sources remain important as they capture stories on how organized civil society members challenge the dominant framing of industrial agriculture. Meanwhile, social media content of Dicky Senda is selected because it represents a specific type of decentralized resistance and counter-hegemonic discourse at the grassroots level, although they do not directly challenge the food estate. I argue, his content is important to be included because as a part of Mollo Indigenous community, his content represents the indigenous knowledge on food provision that offers alternative framing that challenges the state's dominant narrative of industrial agriculture.

Combining online media coverages on food estate and social media content by Dicky Senda allows a comparative analysis between institutionalized discourse and everyday forms of resistance. In addition, it also enables the tracing on how hegemonic meanings are contested across different communicative spaces. Ultimately, this selection aims to ensure that this study focuses on visible policy debate as well as incorporates community-based perspective that are often marginalized in dominant development paradigms.

The comparatively small corpus that I chose is justified by its ability to address my research objective which is to reveal that discourse legitimizes the hegemonic formation of the Indonesian government in promoting industrial agriculture, particularly by establishing food estate. By prioritizing the function of discourse over the high volume of the corpus, this selection allows for a nuanced understanding on how hegemony operates. As Nonhoff (2019, p. 86) argues that "focusing on the function, and less on the materiality of discourse, is helpful for constructing a corpus that can still be handled well by a single researcher," while still providing profound insights into the mechanisms of power.

This study echoes hegemony analysis, a form of discourse analysis proposed by Nonhoff (2019). Nonhoff (2019) emphasizes that hegemony is not merely a concept of power but rather a function of how power is produced and sustained through discursive practice. Hegemony analysis, therefore, examines how various discursive elements connect and reinforce one another to generate meaning and legitimacy. Individuals and groups within civil society are shaped by and participate in hegemonic discourse, ultimately determining whether these discourses form coalitions or resistance.

Coding was conducted using a structured codebook derived from Nonhoff's hegemony analysis framework. The whole analytical praxis, as developed by Nonhoff (2019; Golinczak, 2019) consists of six steps that involve 1. Preparatory work which includes defining discourse and the scope; 2. Selecting/designing discourse corpus; 3. Structuring the analysis which includes textual and discourse level analysis; 4. Analyzing individual texts which is the core of this study and includes the process of contextualizing the text, identifying discursive demands, coding discursive relations, reconstructing chains of equivalence, identifying hegemonic strategemes, and identifying hegemonic demands; 5.

Analyzing across texts on a discourse level to reconstruct hegemonic project and discourse coallition; and 6. Checking the validity of hegemonic strategemes.

To ensure the validity of hegemonic strategemes, Nonhoff (2019) includes the checking the validity of them in the final stage of the analytical process. The aim of this step is to examine two things: the presence of linguistic patterns (strategemes) and whether these patterns show real discursive power in the empirical material. Strategemes present the "patterns that build up the hegemonic strategy, such as the articulation of chains of equivalence, the construction of an antagonistic division, and the representation of hegemonic demand" (Nonhoff, 2019, p. 99). Meanwhile, the evidences refer to the corpus chosen as the primary unit of analysis (see Table 1. List of the discourse corpus as the unit of analysis).

Validity is established when the core element of strategemes (chains of equivalence, the construction of an antagonistic division, and the representation of hegemonic demand) are present across multiple texts and actor. This shows that the discourse is shared and performed by different actors and form what Nonhoff (2019) termed as "discourse coalition." In addition, these patterns must persist over time and across different media types. This is to make sure that the discourse has fulfilled a hegemony function rather than being a temporary occurrence.

ANALYSIS

Historical Background: Industrial Agriculture in Indonesia

Agriculture has been the priority sector since the New Order Era of President Suharto. Along with the country's transition to industrialization in the mid-1980s and market liberalization, the government began to harness the practice of industrial agriculture. The Government of Indonesia has since then actively promoted industrial agriculture through policies and market controls that favor large-scale plantations. This decision was often made at the expense of smallholder farmers and environmental sustainability. In addition, during this era, the state converted one million hectares of peat swamp forest into rice paddies in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. However, this ambitious project failed, and the government abandoned it, resulting in a dried-out wasteland that experiences extensive annual wildfires (BBC News Indonesia, 2020).

The role of international financial institutions has also historically played a huge role in supporting industrial agriculture in Indonesia. For instance, the signing of the Letter of Intent to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1997 marked the strengthening of agricultural liberalization that allows the elimination and reduction of tariffs and subsidies to promote market-oriented approaches that can favor agribusiness transnational corporations in the industrial agriculture (Asyidiqi, 2025). This situation forced small farmers to adopt what Scott (1998) refers to as homogenization as the utilization of 'high-modernist technology' to enforce a uniform standard in agriculture, considered as more developed and necessary. In addition, the capital boost from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank also provides full support for the government in the expansion of oil palm plantations within two decades (Chao, 2022).

In 2010, under the administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the state kicked off the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFFE) project. To promote MIFFEE, the Government of Indonesia promoted the slogan “Feed Indonesia, feed the world” (Ito et.al., 2014). The MIFFE is large-scale mono-crops plantations comprising food estate and oil palm plantation which were initiated in the name of profiting from the food demands from the rich countries with small lands (Silubun & Putri, 2019) and connecting food and energy crises to the concept of a food and energy estate (Ito et.al., 2014). Later on, the slogan “Feed Indonesia, feed the world” was modified to “Indonesia feed the world 2045” which has been disseminated through mass media as well as workshops conducted by Indonesia's Ministry of Agriculture (Tribunnews Makassar, 2023). In addition, through a state-owned media namely ANTARA, the state propagate industrial agriculture as a solution to food security.

In recent years, the Government of Indonesia under the administration of President Joko Widodo has also escalated many policies that support industrial agriculture. For instance, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry through the Minister of Environment and Forestry Regulation Number 24 of 2020 allows the legalization of forest land utilization, including the protected forest land for food estate projects (Izzati et al., 2023). This legalization was later strengthened by Government Regulation Number 23 of 2021 concerning Forestry Management (Government Regulation on Forestry Management) which regulates the utilization of protected forests for food estate development with the mechanism of the Use of Forest Areas for development purposes outside of forestry activities (Maskun et.al, 2021). The creation of the policy referred to as Job Creation Law also opens room to allow land grabs and forest conversions for large-scale plantations including food estate projects (Sedayu, 2021).

The Government of Indonesia also attempted to replicate the MIFFE through food estate. In several press conferences related to food estate in Central Kalimantan, government officials often refer to industrial agriculture as the way to achieve “economic welfare” (Sedayu, 2024), “food security” (Hidayat, 2023), and solutions to “food self-sufficiency” (Belinda, 2023). Under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto, the Government of Indonesia then rebranded the food estate with the name Cetak Sawah Rakyat in several provinces which are Central Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, South Sumatera, South Sulawesi, and South Papua (Utama, 2024). The program started following the release of Decree of the Director General of Agricultural Infrastructure and Facilities of Ministry of Agriculture Number 63.6/KPTS/SR.040/B/11/2024 that provides technical guidelines to Cetak Sawah Rakyat (Directorate of Agricultural Infrastructure and Facilities, Ministry of Agriculture, 2024). In several news, government officials like a regent and officials from the Ministry of Agriculture framed Cetak Sawah Rakyat as an epitome of “modern agriculture” (Ikhwan, 2025), a way of “boosting agricultural productivity” (Antonia, 2025), a way of “optimizing unused land” (Putra, 2025), and a manifestation of “agricultural development” (Putra, 2025).

The State's Hegemonic Construction of Industrial Agriculture in Indonesia: The Case of Food Estate

Industrial agriculture as a hegemonic project is formatted by the constant articulation of the sector as a legitimate solution to "food security" and "economic welfare," Meanwhile, at the same time, the state also constructs what Nonhoff (2019, p. 90) identifies as a "lack that is to be overcome" by framing existing conditions as states of "precarity," "unproductivity," and "inefficiency" to justify the expansion of industrial agriculture.

1. Discursive Construction of Industrial Agriculture as "legitimate solution"

Based on the background presented above, the Government of Indonesia constructs industrial agriculture, in the form of food estate, as the legitimate solution to achieve food security and economic growth. This construction is formed through the strategic articulation of discursive demands. In the analysis of discursive hegemony, Nonhoff (2019) elaborates discursive demands as smallest elements of political discourses. Nonhoff (2019) then categorizes discursive demands into three types based on their capacity: cumulative demands, encompassing demands, and societal demands.

Cumulative demands are conditioned as the basic demands that only cover partial aspects of the universal (common good). Hence, they still need to be complemented with other demands. Subsuming demands also represent necessary conditions, but are bigger in scope. These demands can already meet a specific group of related demands on their own. Encompassing demands are the most powerful demands in this hierarchy which articulate a sufficient condition to overcome the lack of the universal entirely. The fulfillment of these demands is equivalent with the satisfaction of all other societal demands.

Table 2. The Hierarchy of discursive demands in industrial agriculture

Type	Example from discourse corpus	Actors	Function
Encompassing	"Food security" (Sedayu, 2021; Belinda, 2023; Tribunnews Makassar, 2023; Hidayat, 2023; Sucahyo, 2024, Asrida & Sarjan; 2024; Putra, 2025)	The President of Indonesia, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Environment and Forestry	Represents universal good
	"Economic welfare" (Antonia, 2025; Putra, 2025)	State-affiliated media, Ministry of Agriculture	
Subsuming	"Agricultural development" (Putra, 2025)	Ministry of Agriculture	Organizes multiple goals
	"Modern agriculture" (Ikhwan, 2025)	State-affiliated media, Kapuas Regent, Central Kalimantan	

	"Productivity boost" (Antonia, 2025)	Department of Agriculture and Food Security of East Nusa Tenggara Province, State-affiliated media	
Cumulative	"Food estate"	All actors	Partial improvements
	"Land optimization" (Putra, 2025)	Ministry of Agriculture	

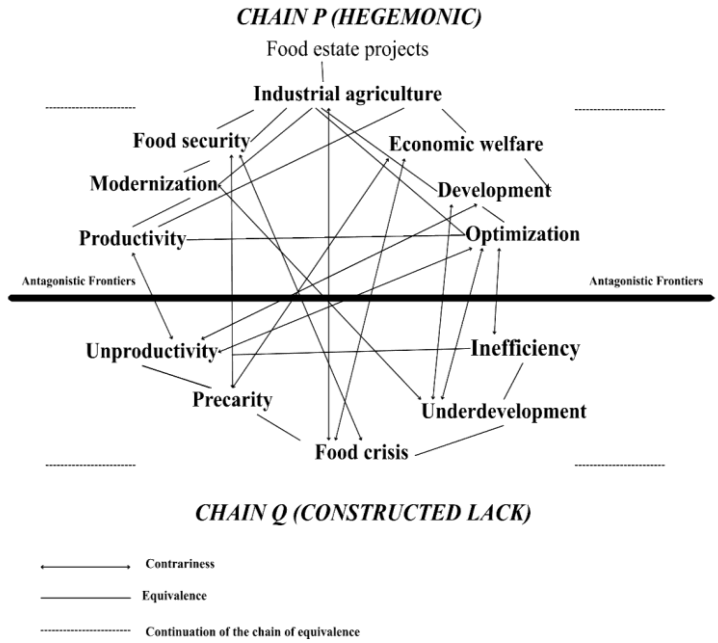
The discursive demands surrounding the narrative of industrial agriculture are hierarchically structured. At the highest level, "food security" and "economic growth" sever as encompassing demands that represent the universal national interest. Subsuming demands, such as "agricultural development" and "modern agriculture," and "productivity boost" are positioned as important mechanism for achieving this universal. Meanwhile "food estate" and "land optimization" support the overall narrative. By being repeated across texts, this configuration legitimates industrial agriculture as an inevitable solution, instead of being a contested political choice.

2. Chains of Equivalence and Antagonistic Division

The hegemonic formation is further produced through the construction of chains of equivalence that systematically links industrial agriculture to positive national outcomes. According to Laclau & Mouffe (2001) "chains of equivalence" contains of diverse discursive elements that are linked by their shared opposition to a common "antagonist." In this framework, the antagonist is not merely a specific actor, but a discursive construction that acts as a "constitutive outside." This "constitutive outside" is perceived as a threat or a failure that causes the current social order incomplete. Thus, the emergence of a new hegemonic project is justified.

Following Laclau & Mouffe (2001), Nonhoff (2019) explains that chains of equivalence are formed when multiple demands that are "obviously different" are rearticulated to be equivalent. Further, Nonhoff (2019, p. 71) explains that "chains of equivalent come into existence not because their elements have something positive in common" (Chain P). Instead, they are linked by a "negative relation of contrariety" (Chain Q) to a common opponent.

Figure 1. The construction of chains of equivalence on industrial agriculture



As summarized on Table 2. The Hierarchy of discursive demands in industrial agriculture, the industrial agriculture as a hegemonic project repeatedly equates it with "food security" (Sedayu, 2021; Belinda, 2023; Tribunnews Makassar, 2023; Hidayat, 2023; Sucahyo, 2024, Asrida & Sarjan; 2024; Putra, 2025) and "economic welfare" (Antonia, 2025; Putra, 2025), "modernization" (Ikhwan, 2025) and "development" (Putra, 2025), and "productivity" (Antonia, 2025) and "optimization" (Putra, 2025). This eventually forms a coherent hegemonic chain (Chain P). Meanwhile at the same time, this chain is also made up from the relations of contrariety that forms an opposing chain (Chain Q). The elements of Chain Q can be found in the Government of Indonesia's justification on enabling industrial agriculture such as "precarity" due to climate crisis (Hidayat, 2023, Tribunnews Makassar, 2023), "underdevelopment" (Hidayat, 2023, Ikhwan, 2025), "unproductivity" (Antonia, 2025), "food crisis" (Kaltengdaily, 2023, Asrida and Sarjan, 2024), and "inefficiency" (Belinda, 2023). As the result, we can see what Nonhoff (2019, p. 72) terms as "two confronting and mutually exclusive camps represented by chains of equivalence" or simply called Antagonistic Frontiers.

3. Representation Mechanism and the Centrality of "Food Security" and "Economic Welfare"

Nonhoff (2019) states that representation is central to the hegemonic formation, in which treat particular demands as the one that represents the universal. universal. As known in Laclau's theory, "such elements are called empty signifiers" (Laclau, 1996, p. 36–46: Nonhoff, 2019, p. 74). In this case, "food security" and "economic welfare"

are the empty signifiers that symbolically represent the broader national interests, while they remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse meanings.

As seen in the chains of equivalence (see Figure 1. The construction of chains of equivalence on industrial agriculture), “food security” (Sedayu, 2021; Belinda, 2023; Tribunnews Makassar, 2023; Hidayat, 2023; Sucahyo, 2024, Asrida and Sarjan; 2024; Putra, 2025) and “economic welfare” (Antonia, 2025; Putra, 2025) are articulated in relation to a wide range of demands while at the same time are placed in opposition to all elements that are associated with constructed lack. The representational function of these empty signifiers is not established through explicit claims alone. They emerge through the density and repetition of discursive linkages across texts (see Table 2. The Hierarchy of discursive demands in industrial agriculture and Figure 1. The construction of chains of equivalence on industrial agriculture).

Figure 2. The representations mechanism.

Background: Counter-Hegemonic Project against Industrial Agriculture

In this part, I define the discursive coalition of NGOs and allied actors as the counter-hegemonic project. Conversely, the term, counter-hegemonic discourses, is used to refer to the diverse ecological, indigenous, agrarian, and participatory demands articulated by these actors to challenge industrial agriculture.

Despite the Government of Indonesia's positive branding on industrial agriculture, numerous local NGOs in Indonesia have offered counter-hegemonic discourses to challenge the hegemonic project of industrial agriculture, in the form of food estate. In 2023, during the COP28 Meeting week, activists from WALHI Central Kalimantan along with Greenpeace, LBH Central Kalimantan, and Save Our Borneo held a theatrical by impersonating President Jokowi along with three presidential candidates at the food estate area in Gunung Mas, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia (Kaltengdaily, 2023). By introducing the narrative *'lumbung pangan untuk siapa?*' (translated: food barns, for whom?), they challenge the equivalence of industrial agriculture = food estate = food security to food estate = food crisis = climate crisis (Walhi Kalimantan Tengah, 2023). The reason behind this theatrical action was a response to President Jokowi's speech during the Transforming Food Systems in the Face of Climate Change Forum at the COP28 meeting.

In South Kalimantan, Indonesia, a few non-governmental organizations such as Regional Executive Board of the Indonesian Farmers Union and WALHI South Kalimantan argued that Cetak Sawah Rakyat (the new name of food estate under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto) is a "top-down development project" that disregards community's inputs (Yulianus, 2025). They also linked "deforestation" to Cetak Sawah Rakyat that is claimed to be the solution to agricultural development. The same narrative to challenge Cetak Sawah Rakyat is also provided by Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA) and Papua Legal Aid Institute (LBH). Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA) brought "indigenous rights" in the discussion of Cetak Sawah Rakyat project, arguing that in the initial process, this project failed to fulfill the free, prior, and informed consent to the indigenous communities whose ancestral land are impacted by this project (Sucahyo, 2024). Papua Legal Aid Institute (LBH) brought the discussion of "biodiversity in Papua" to challenge the notion of Cetak Sawah Rakyat that sacrifices the inherent multispecies sustainability in Papua (Sucahyo, 2024). Meanwhile, FIAN Indonesia offered the discourse of local/indigenous food production and agrarian reform to challenge the state's branding on Cetak Sawah Rakyat project (Asrida and Sarjan, 2024).

Resistance can also be found at the individual level. Dicky Senda, an Indonesian food activist based in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, actively challenges the government's approach to food production that favors industrial agriculture and marginalizes alternative perspectives through social media. He is a founder and program director of Lakoat Kujawas, a grassroots movement led by the Mollo Indigenous People that promote local staple foods such as corn, tubers, and various types of vegetables including mushrooms and nuts that can be easily harvested from their home garden or neighboring forest (Ariestanty, 2022). Through his Instagram account @dickysenda, he often shares local culinary practices (*Instagram*, n.d.), traditional food cultivation methods by Mollo Indigenous People (*Instagram*, n.d.), and critiques the government's colonial approach to food politics (*Instagram*, n.d.).

The Counter-Hegemonic Construction against Industrial Agriculture

The counter-hegemonic project against industrial agriculture, primarily focuses on food estate as a nodal point, is formatted by the articulation of "food sovereignty" as the encompassing demand that challenges the state's industrial logic. At the same time, the counter-hegemonic actors articulate several demands such as "indigenous rights," "biodiversity," "multispecies sustainability," "agrarian reform," and "local food production systems" and link them together to frame food estate not as a solution, but as a source of "food crisis," "climate crisis," and "land dispossession" among other interconnected forms of lack. In short, these actors construct an alternative universal centered on local control, ecological sustainability, and community autonomy.

1. Discursive Construction of Counter-Hegemony against Industrial Agriculture

Based on the background presented above, the counter-hegemonic actors articulate "food sovereignty" (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sedayu, 2021; Yulianus, 2025) as the encompassing demand that attempts to unify diverse ecological, indigenous, and agrarian demands into an alternative vision of agricultural

development. Subsuming demands such as indigenous rights (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024), biodiversity (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024), multispecies sustainability (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024; *Instagram*, nd), local food systems (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Kaltengdaily, 2023; Sedayu, 2021; *Instagram*, nd), and agrarian Reform Asrida & Sarjan, 2024) organize clusters of related concerns beneath the universal claim. Meanwhile, cumulative demands such as participatory development (Sucahyo, 2024; Yulianus, 2025) and small-scale agriculture (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Sedayu, 2021) realize the counter-hegemonic project in practice.

Table 3. The hierarchy of discursive demands to counter industrial agriculture

Type	Example from text	Actors	Function
Encompassing	Food sovereignty (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sedayu, 2021; Yulianus, 2025)	FIAN Indonesia, LBH Papua, Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA), WALHI Central Kalimantan	Represents universal good
Subsuming	Indigenous rights (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024)	LBH Papua, Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA), Malind Indigenous Community	Organizes multiple goals
	Local/Indigenous food systems (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Kaltengdaily, 2023; Sedayu, 2021; *Instagram*, nd).	FIAN Indonesia, Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA), Greenpeace, LBH Central Kalimantan, and Save Our Borneo, WALHI Central Kalimantan, Dicky Senda	
	Multispecies sustainability (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024; *Instagram*, nd)	LBH Papua, Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA), Dicky Senda	
	Biodiversity (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024).	LBH Papua, Yayasan Pusaka Bentala Rakyat (PUSAKA)	
	Agrarian reform Asrida & Sarjan, 2024)	Agrarian Reform Consortium	
Cumulative	Participatory development (Sucahyo, 2024; Yulianus, 2025).	Indonesian Farmers Union and Walhi South Kalimantan	Partial improvements

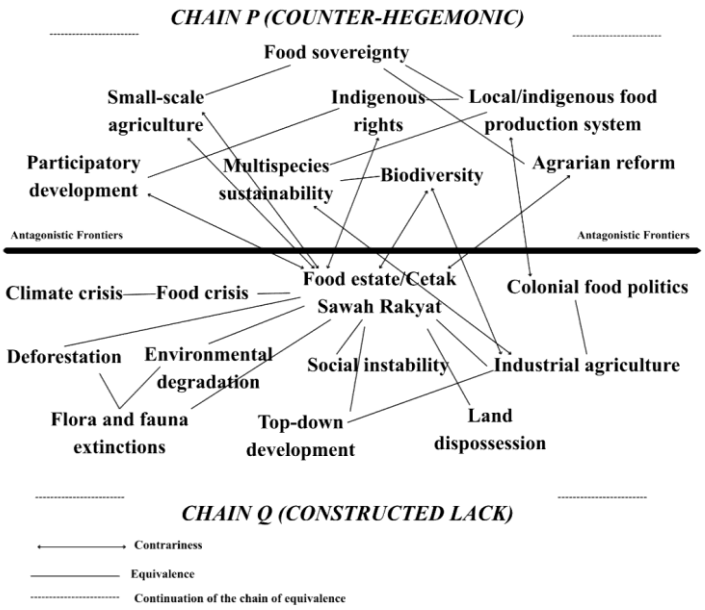
	Small-scale agriculture (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Sedayu, 2021).	Greenpeace, LBH Central Kalimantan, and Save Our Borneo, WALHI Central Kalimantan

2. Discursive Fragmentation, the Construction of Counter-Hegemonic Equivalence, and Representation of "Food Sovereignty"

The hegemonic project of industrial agriculture relies on discursive centralization around empty signifiers, meanwhile I argue that counter-hegemonic project is often fragmented. As seen in Figure 1. The construction of chains of equivalence on industrial agriculture, industrial agriculture appears more consolidated because its demands are articulated through a relatively coherent and centralized chain of equivalence. In the hegemonic chain, demands such as "food security," "economic welfare," "development," "modernization," and productivity" correspond to and reinforce one another to support the nodal point, which is "industrial agriculture/food estate." These demands are tied through a shared developmental logic. They collectively construct industrial agriculture as the solution to a "constructed lack" represented by "food crisis," "inefficiency," "underdevelopment," "precarity," and "unproductivity." In other words, the hegemonic project of industrial agriculture successfully organizes multiple demands into a relatively stable and simplified universal narrative: industrial agriculture = food estate = food security.

On the other hand, counter-hegemonic project is more fragmented because the chain is constructed by demands that come from multiple social, ecological, and political positions that do not always fully correspond to one another. For instance, the demands like "indigenous rights" (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024), "biodiversity" (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024), and participatory development (Sucahyo, 2024; Yulianus, 2025) are linked to the "food sovereignty" (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sedayu, 2021; Yulianus, 2025) as an empty signifier but they have fewer lines of equivalence between each other. The visualization about this fragmentation is exemplified on Figure 3. The construction of chains of equivalence on counter-hegemonic discourses of industrial agriculture.

Figure 3. The construction of chains of equivalence on counter-hegemonic discourses on industrial agriculture.



However, I further argue that this apparent fragmentation is not a sign of failure. Instead, it reflects the very logic of equivalence that characterizes the counter-hegemonic project. Counter-hegemonic project against industrial agriculture must articulate a far broader and more diverse coalition of ecological, indigenous, agrarian, and participatory demands. Meanwhile, the hegemonic project of industrial agriculture simplifies social reality through binary distinctions such as “efficiency” v “inefficiency,” “optimization” vs “unproductivity,” or “security vs precarity.”

The coherence of counter-hegemonic chain therefore relies on the ability of “food sovereignty” as the empty signifier to absorb these differences and represent an alternative “lacking universal” that the state-led food estate is perceived to have failed to fulfill. As the result, all the demands that construct the counter-hegemonic project is united primarily because they share the same opposition to industrial agriculture, in the form of food estate. They see food estate and industrial agriculture as equal to “food crisis” (Kaltengdaily, 2023; Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sedayu, 2021; Yulianus, 2025) or “land dispossession” (Asrida & Sarjan, 2024; Sucahyo, 2024; Yulianus, 2025) among many constructed lacks. While these demands may lack the same degree of internal correspondence and consolidation as exemplified in the hegemonic project, they achieve a powerful, performative unity through their collective opposition to the state’s developmental logic. In addition, unlike the hegemonic project, which relies on the density of repetitive institutional linkages, the representational power of “food sovereignty” as an empty signifier emerges from its role as the essential discursive “glue” that translates isolated grievances into a collective political project for an alternative future.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that industrial agriculture in Indonesia functions as a hegemonic project that is sustained by a powerful coalition of the state and state-affiliated media. The Government of Indonesia strategically employ "food security" and "economic welfare" as empty signifiers that represent national interests. This hegemonic formation is further reinforced through the chains of equivalence that frame industrial agriculture as a legitimate solution while simultaneously delegitimizing alternatives by associating them with a "constructed lack." This includes the notion of "precarity," "unproductivity," and "inefficiency." As the result, this discursive structure is used to justify controversial policies, such as the Job Creation Law and the regulation that legalizes forest land utilization, including the protected forest land for food estate. Such as policies present the expansion for industrial agriculture as an inevitable necessity rather than a contested political choice.

Industrial agriculture, taking the case of food estate, as a hegemonic project is contested by NGOs and grassroot activist. While the counter-hegemonic project appears structurally fragmented, this study argues that such fragmentation shows the pluralistic logic of equivalence. The strength of counter-hegemonic project lies in its ability to use "food sovereignty" as a glue to unite diverse demands, from indigenous rights to biodiversity, to challenge industrial agriculture.

The empirical findings presented in the Analysis suggest that industrial agriculture in Indonesia functions as a hegemonic project that is approaching, but has not yet achieved, absolute control. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue, all discourses—including hegemonic ones—are fundamentally contingent and open to "contestation and critique" (Van Den Berg, 2020, p. 20). The ongoing friction between the state's push for industrialization and the resistance from NGOs and grassroot activist demonstrates that hegemony is not a fixed or final condition. Instead, it is a continuous, unstable process of stabilization and contestation that relies on the constant reproduction of discursive relations and coalitional support.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to an integrated theoretical approach that connects hegemony and discourse. Following the operationalization of Nonhoff's (2019) hegemony analysis, this study explains how hegemonic power in industrial agriculture is constructed by the production and reproduction of discursive practices found in policy, media, and institutional narratives. By constructing the state's hegemonic formation and the counter-hegemonic formation, this study demonstrates that hegemony analysis can serve not only as a conceptual framework but also as a systematic methodological tool used to examine how power is articulated and contested in specific socio-political contexts.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the strategic role of discourse in civil society engagement. As discourse is central in the formation of hegemony, not only it can shape public

understanding and policy legitimacy on industrial agriculture, but also offer a counter towards them. For NGOs, this means that advocacy efforts should not only focus on material interventions but also on the construction of discourses that cover diverse group of demands under the collective banner of "food sovereignty." Rather than focusing solely on isolated grievances, campaigns should use this empty signifier to bridge disparate indigenous, ecological, and agrarian needs, translating specific "lacks" into a universal alternative to state-led logic.

In addition, campaigns should also aggressively deconstruct the state's empty signifiers (food security and economic welfare). NGOs must performatively link the food estate to the very things the state claims to solve. If the hegemonic project claims food estate = food security, the counter-hegemonic discourse must relentlessly articulate food estate = food crisis. By consistently mapping the program as equivalent to the constructed lacks (as shown in Figure 3. The construction of chains of equivalence on counter-hegemonic discourses on industrial agriculture), NGOS reinforce the antagonistic frontier that prevents the state from co-opting their narrative.

In terms of development practice, this study points out the need to question the word 'growth' and 'modernity.' The perpetual association of modernity with economic growth, achieved through industrial agriculture, fails to capture Indigenous knowledge and ecological resilience as exemplified by Lakoat Kujawas (read Background: Counter-Hegemonic Project against Industrial Agriculture). The fact that Lakoat Kujawas can maintain a localized and decentralized food production means that community's food sovereignty can be achieved without causing environmental degradation. Therefore, policymakers and development institutions should adopt alternative frameworks that aren't one-size-fit-all, but rather accommodate diverse knowledge and different socio-ecological contexts of each community.

LIMITATIONS

Since the analysis was only conducted by a single researcher, this study relies on a qualitative literature review on a relatively small and purposively selected corpus, which only includes the analysis on direct quotation from media publications and mostly are text-related. This may limit the findings from capturing the full diversity of media representations or counter-hegemonic discourses towards industrial agriculture in Indonesia. In addition, the focus on a single activist as a representation of decentralized resistance may overlook other examples by different actors in different regions and forms of resistance.

In the future, potential research could address this limitation by developing the dataset that includes a broader range of discourse corpus. In addition, mixed-methods approaches by combining the hegemony analysis with field-based or participatory research could also be something to consider to better capture the material and lived dimensions of food sovereignty and industrial agriculture.

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