

NAVIGATING THE POLITICS OF SPACE: CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABLE PALM OIL SPATIAL PLANNING IN INDONESIA

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Abstract. Indonesia's palm oil sector faces a fundamental paradox between its significant economic contribution to development and community welfare and its substantial socio-ecological impacts, such as deforestation, land conflicts, and spatial injustice. This study aims to analyze the challenges in implementing sustainable palm oil spatial planning through a critical anthropological approach. The method used is a qualitative literature review with thematic synthesis of various scientific studies, policy documents, and recent empirical studies. The research results identified five main challenges, namely the process of technicization that depoliticizes agrarian conflicts, the mismatch of scale between administrative boundaries and socio-ecological systems, the contestation between state-planned spaces and spaces lived by communities, spatial injustice in distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions, as well as governance fragmentation. The findings indicate that the technocratic approach in spatial planning risks becoming an instrument that conceals structural issues and maintains inequalities, including the marginalization of indigenous community rights. Therefore, a more inclusive, integrated, and spatial justice-based spatial planning approach is needed, emphasizing the recognition of rights, community participation, and cross-scale and sectoral coordination to achieve sustainability that is not only focused on ecological aspects but also social and intergenerational justice.

Keywords: Sustainable Palm Oil, Spatial Planning, Critical Anthropology, Spatial Justice, Indonesia, Land Governance, Ispo Certification, Indigenous Rights, Watershed Management, Anti-Politics Machine

Abstrak. Sektor kelapa sawit Indonesia menghadapi paradoks mendasar antara kontribusi ekonomi yang besar terhadap pembangunan dan kesejahteraan masyarakat dengan dampak sosial-ekologis yang signifikan, seperti deforestasi, konflik lahan, dan ketidakadilan spasial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tantangan dalam implementasi perencanaan spasial kelapa sawit berkelanjutan melalui pendekatan antropologi kritis. Metode yang digunakan adalah tinjauan literatur kualitatif dengan sintesis tematik terhadap berbagai kajian ilmiah, dokumen kebijakan, dan studi empiris terbaru. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima tantangan utama, yaitu proses teknisasi yang mendepolitisasi konflik agraria, ketidaksesuaian skala antara batas administratif dan sistem sosial-ekologis, kontestasi antara ruang yang direncanakan negara dan ruang yang dihidupi masyarakat, ketidakadilan spasial dalam dimensi distributif, prosedural, dan pengakuan, serta fragmentasi tata kelola. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan teknokratis dalam perencanaan spasial berisiko menjadi instrumen yang menutupi persoalan struktural dan mempertahankan ketimpangan, termasuk marginalisasi hak masyarakat adat. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan pendekatan perencanaan spasial yang lebih inklusif, terintegrasi, dan berbasis keadilan spasial, dengan menekankan pengakuan hak, partisipasi masyarakat, serta koordinasi lintas skala dan sektor guna mencapai keberlanjutan yang tidak hanya berorientasi pada aspek ekologis, tetapi juga sosial dan keadilan antar generasi.

Kata Kunci: Minyak Sawit Berkelanjutan, Perencanaan Tata Ruang, Antropologi Kritis, Keadilan Spasial, Indonesia, Tata Kelola Tanah, Sertifikasi ISPO, Hak-Hak Masyarakat Adat, Pengelolaan Daerah Aliran Sungai, Mesin Anti-Politik

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's palm oil industry represents one of the most consequential agricultural transformations of the 21st century. As the world's largest producer, accounting for approximately 50% of global supply, Indonesia cultivates 14.85 million hectares of oil palm across 26 provinces, supporting the livelihoods of an estimated 16.2 million people and contributing 11.3% of national export revenues. For millions of smallholder farmers—who manage over 40% of total plantation area oil palm cultivation has delivered measurable income improvements, with studies documenting 14-22% increases in household consumption compared to alternative crops. This economic transformation has been particularly significant in historically marginalized regions of Sumatra and Kalimantan, where oil palm development has catalyzed infrastructure investment and employment generation (IPOSS, 2026; Judijanto, 2026a; Petrenko dkk., 2016).

Yet this prosperity narrative coexists with mounting evidence of severe socio-ecological consequences. Indonesia has lost approximately 3 million hectares of primary forest to oil palm expansion representing one-third of total forest loss with associated greenhouse gas emissions of 220 Mt CO₂eq annually, nearly one-fifth of Indonesia's total emissions. Peatland drainage for plantations, though accounting for only 14% of plantation area, generates 92% of sectoral emissions through subsidence and fires. Beyond environmental degradation, palm oil expansion has catalyzed over 4,000 documented land conflicts involving communities who lost access to customary territories without free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) or adequate compensation. Human rights organizations have documented 798 arrests, 243 injuries, and 19 deaths in palm oil-related land disputes (Austin dkk., 2015; Eggen dkk., 2024; Harsya dkk., 2024; Judijanto, 2025a).

This paradox simultaneous economic advancement and socio-ecological crisis—reflects deeper tensions in how space is planned, governed, and contested in Indonesia's palm oil landscapes. Plantations frequently operate in zones designated for other purposes in Regional Spatial Plans (RTRW), yet violations are "normalized" through policy adjustments rather than structural corrections. In Sumatra's watersheds, oil palm expansion has been directly linked to increased flooding frequency and intensity as soil compaction from plantations reduces infiltration capacity and drainage infrastructure channels water toward downstream communities. Administrative boundaries fail to capture watershed-scale hydrological linkages, enabling upstream jurisdictions to capture economic benefits while downstream areas bear the costs of flooding (Gokkon, 2020).

Existing scholarship on sustainable palm oil spatial planning predominantly employs technical-rational frameworks focused on land suitability modeling, zoning compliance, and certification standards. While valuable, these approaches often overlook the fundamentally political nature of spatial planning: whose knowledge counts in defining "suitable land"? Whose interests are served by particular spatial configurations? How do technical discourses render certain problems visible while obscuring others? (Asiimwe, 2010)

This study addresses these gaps by applying critical anthropological frameworks to analyze spatial planning for sustainable palm oil in Indonesia. We draw particularly on Ferguson's concept of the "anti-politics machine" how development interventions technicalize inherently political problems of power and distribution, thereby depoliticizing them; Lefebvre's spatial triad distinguishing conceived space (planners' representations) from lived space (community experiences); and Soja's multidimensional spatial justice framework encompassing distributive, procedural, and recognitional dimensions. This lens enables us to interrogate how spatial planning functions not merely as neutral technical coordination but as a political process shaping who gains access to resources and who bears environmental burdens (Alamsyah dkk., 2026; Budiman dkk., 2020; Neubert dkk., 2025; Silver, 2014).

The Indonesian palm oil case proves particularly instructive because it exemplifies tensions between national sustainability commitments mandatory Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification since 2020, the 2018-2021 new permit moratorium, and various landscape governance initiatives and persistent implementation challenges, including slow certification uptake, weak enforcement, and marginalization of customary rights. The government's adoption of "fit-for-purpose" spatial planning language, promising flexibility and adaptation, raises critical questions: fit for what purpose? Whose purposes? Does flexibility enable context-appropriate solutions or facilitate regulatory capture? (Suratiningsih dkk., 2024).

This study pursues three interconnected objectives. First, we identify mechanisms by which the technicalization of spatial planning depoliticizes agrarian conflicts in palm oil landscapes, rendering power relations invisible. Second, we analyze scalar mismatches between administrative units and socio-ecological systems (watersheds, customary territories), and their implications for justice. Third, we explore contestations between state-conceived space and community-lived space, examining both dispossession processes and resistance practices. Our contribution is threefold. Theoretically, we extend Ferguson's anti-politics machine concept from discrete development projects to ongoing spatial governance systems, demonstrating the persistence of the logic of technicalization in contemporary neoliberal

resource governance. Empirically, we provide an integrated synthesis of recent scholarship (2020-2025) on Indonesian palm oil spatial planning that foregrounds political-spatial dimensions often marginalized in technical analyses. Methodologically, we demonstrate the qualitative literature review's capacity for generating interpretive insights and analytical themes that transcend primary studies through critical theoretical engagement.

The article proceeds as follows. Section II reviews conceptual foundations spanning fit-for-purpose planning, sustainable palm oil frameworks, and critical anthropology approaches. Section III details our qualitative literature review methodology. Section IV presents thematic findings organized around five key challenges. Section V synthesizes findings through critical analysis, developing implications for theory and practice. Section VI concludes with policy recommendations grounded in spatial justice principles

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology, distinct from a systematic literature review (SLR) in its interpretive rather than aggregative aims. While SLR uses rigid protocols for exhaustive retrieval and meta-analysis of primary studies, qualitative literature review synthesizes conceptual and empirical literature to develop a deep understanding of complex phenomena through thematic interpretation. This approach proves appropriate for research questions exploring political-spatial processes, power relations, and contested meanings that resist quantification (Susanto dkk., 2024).

Our analytical framework integrates critical anthropology (Ferguson, Escobar, Li) with critical geography (Lefebvre, Soja, Harvey), examining how palm oil spatial planning is produced, contested, and politicized; mechanisms of depoliticization and technicalization; and tensions between conceived and lived space. This interdisciplinary synthesis enables moving beyond technical problem-framing toward political-ontological analysis.

We conducted iterative searches across multiple databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science) combining keywords: "sustainable palm oil," "spatial planning Indonesia," "land use conflict," "ISPO certification," "indigenous rights," "critical anthropology development," "spatial justice," "watershed management," paired with temporal limiters (2020-2026 for empirical studies) and geographic focus (Indonesia). This yielded 147 web sources, including peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, technical reports, and grey literature.

Inclusion criteria encompassed: (a) substantive discussion of spatial planning and palm oil in Indonesia; (b) critical anthropological or political ecology perspectives on development/governance; (c) spatial justice, fit-for-purpose planning, or lived space concepts;

(d) agrarian conflicts, indigenous rights, or certification implementation; (e) publications since 2020, with exceptions for seminal theoretical texts. Exclusion criteria eliminated purely technical agronomic studies lacking socio-political dimensions, as well as non-Indonesian cases without conceptual relevance. We supplemented the literature with presentation materials from a January 2026 focus group discussion on anthropological perspectives on palm oil sustainability frameworks, offering grounded insights into practitioner and academic debates.

Analysis followed established thematic synthesis protocols. First, familiarization through deep reading identified key concepts, arguments, and empirical patterns. Second, line-by-line coding yielded descriptive codes closely aligned with the source material. Third, related codes were grouped into descriptive themes reflecting explicit content without interpretation. Fourth, interpretive analysis generated analytical themes that transcend primary studies by connecting empirical findings with theoretical frameworks and identifying cross-cutting patterns, contradictions, and gaps (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). For example, descriptive themes such as "ISPO implementation challenges among smallholders" and "low government recognition of participatory maps" were synthesized into the analytical theme "technocratic gatekeeping and procedural exclusion," which was interpreted through Ferguson's anti-politics machine and Soja's procedural justice concepts. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation—when additional literature yielded no novel concepts or insights (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation (journal articles, policy documents, and other materials) and transparent grounding of interpretations in textual evidence, supported by extensive citations. Transferability is supported through a thick description of Indonesian and other relevant contexts, enabling readers to assess relevance to other settings. Dependability derives from a documented audit trail of methodological decisions. We acknowledge limitations: a geographic focus on Indonesia limits generalizability; a literature-based methodology lacks direct fieldwork insights; English- and Bahasa Indonesia-language publication bias may affect the substance; qualitative interpretation involves researcher subjectivity, mitigated through methodological transparency (Lim, 2024).

RESULTS

Technicalization and the Anti-Politics Machine

Reframing Agrarian Conflict as Land Suitability

Land conflicts between plantations and local/indigenous communities are systematically reframed through processes of technicalization. Rather than engaging with root causes—unequal power in HGU (plantation permit) allocation, unrecognized customary tenure, historical dispossession—conflicts become "land suitability" or "zoning compliance" issues amenable to expert analysis. This obscures fundamental political questions: who holds authority to define "suitable land"? By what criteria? Whose claims count as legitimate? (Bakhtiar dkk., 2019) A 2020 audit revealed 3.3 million hectares of oil palm in forest zones. Rather than triggering restitution to communities with customary claims, the government introduced "legalization" schemes through Articles 110A and 110B of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, normalizing violations through legal adjustments. "Land legality" discourse masks the reality that communities often hold customary claims that are unrecognized by formal legal systems that privilege state forest designation over long-standing indigenous presence (RAN, 2024).

This exemplifies Ferguson's anti-politics machine: technical language ("spatial mismatch," "regularization," "harmonization") neutralizes political conflict over sovereignty and justice, shifting issues into expert domains (foresters, land administrators, certification auditors) while marginalizing affected communities' political claims (Ferguson, 1994; Larner & Walters, 2004; Leslie, 2018; Suarez, 2017).

ISPO Certification as Technocratic Governance

ISPO presents sustainability as a technical checklist—seven principles, measurable indicators, and audit protocols. While principles sound neutral and objective, implementation involves politics: Who possesses the capacity to meet standards? Who bears compliance costs? Independent smallholders face a 43% non-compliance rate due to land-tenure challenges, limited capital, and administrative complexity. Certification becomes "technocratic gatekeeping" separating "sustainable" from "unsustainable" producers, but critical questions about distributional equity remain unasked (Judijanto, 2025b, 2025e, 2025d, 2025c). Moreover, ISPO's emphasis on legal compliance and good agricultural practices marginalizes procedural and recognition-based justice. Plantations can achieve certification while operating on contested land if they hold valid permits, even if those permits were issued without meaningful community consent. The technical audit focuses on environmental management

systems and documentation rather than on the substantive resolution of historical grievances or the equitable distribution of benefits (Earthqualizer, 2023).

"Fit-for-Purpose" as New Technocratic Shield

"Fit-for-purpose spatial planning" promises flexibility, adaptation to local contexts, and integration of multiple land uses. Yet anthropological questions remain marginalized: fit for what? whose purpose? In practice, flexibility risks legitimizing plantation expansion in previously non-compliant zones through arguments of "ground reality" and "land optimization". Rather than substantive transformation, fit-for-purpose can become a new language enabling business-as-usual—what stakeholders call "changing old words without changing old logic" (Enemark, 2013). The critical issue is not flexibility per se, but whether adaptive planning processes democratically negotiate trade-offs or provide technocratic cover for powerful actors' interests, without explicit mechanisms to ensure procedural and recognitional justice, fit-for-purpose risks depoliticization, similar to earlier development discourses that Escobar critiques as cultural projects of control disguised as neutral expertise (Johnson, 2014).

Scalar Mismatches and Scale Politics

Administrative Boundaries versus Watershed Systems

Spatial planning organized around administrative units (*kabupaten*/regency, *provinsi*/province) fails to capture hydrological linkages within watersheds (DAS—*daerah aliran sungai*) at the watershed scale. In Jambi's Tembesi watershed, upstream oil palm expansion causes downstream flooding across jurisdictional boundaries, yet district-level spatial plans do not integrate watershed considerations. Plantation drainage infrastructure optimizes production within concession boundaries while externalizing flood costs to areas beyond those boundaries—a negative externality enabled by a scalar mismatch (Gokkon, 2020). This is not merely a technical oversight requiring "better coordination." It reflects political priorities: administrative boundaries enable state legibility, territorial control, and revenue allocation (plantation taxes accrue to hosting jurisdictions, not downstream flood-impacted districts). Choosing administrative over ecological scales facilitates cost externalization—upstream jurisdictions capture economic benefits while downstream areas bear environmental burdens (Merten dkk., 2017).

Lefebvre observes that "state space subordinates both chaos and difference to its implacable logistics" administrative simplification enables governability but sacrifices ecological coherence. In palm oil landscapes, this produces what geographers term "uneven development": spatial configurations in which economic growth and environmental degradation coexist, with benefits and burdens distributed inequitably (Bakonyi & Darwich, 2024).

Plantation Scale versus Community Scale

Industrial plantations operate on scales ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of hectares, using monoculture optimization logic. Communities operate at the smallholder/household scale (averaging 2 hectares per independent farmer) with mixed farming systems that diversify both subsistence and market production. Large-scale plantations dominate landscapes, transforming tenurial arrangements, livelihood patterns, and access to resources (forests, rivers, subsistence land) (Barahamin, 2023). A critical question emerges: at what scale is "sustainability" measured? Corporate profitability at the plantation scale may coexist with household-level food insecurity. Studies show that while oil palm increases cash income, households lose crop diversity, face debt burdens from 2-hectare plots insufficient to meet family needs, and experience reduced resilience to price shocks or harvest failures. Sustainability evaluation must therefore consider multiple scales and whose well-being counts in assessment frameworks (Kubitza dkk., 2018).

Conceived Space versus Lived Space Contestations

State Representations and Community Experiences

Conceived space in palm oil governance manifests in Regional Spatial Plans (RTRW), HGU permit maps, land suitability models, and moratorium zones abstract representations that prioritize legal compliance, efficiency, and productivity. These understand space as "land" a commodity that can be allocated, controlled, and optimized through formal legal systems (Makinde & Lanrewaju, 2024).

Conversely, lived space encompasses customary territories (wilayah adat), community-managed forests, mixed gardens, sacred sites, and traditional resource-use areas. Communities understand these as "places" inseparable from social identity, subsistence security, cultural practices, and spiritual meanings. Space is multifunctional (for food, medicine, construction materials, and rituals) and governed by customary institutions and intergenerational knowledge (JKPP, 2015).

Dispossession and Conflict

When conceived space overrides lived space without free, prior, and informed consent, violent dispossession often results. Over 4,000 documented land conflicts involve communities losing access to customary territories without consent or adequate compensation. In 99 cases across four provinces (West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, Riau, West Sumatra), companies acquired and managed community land without consent; in 67 cases, no compensation was provided whatsoever. Women disproportionately lose land rights as oil palm registration favors male household heads, and women lose access to mixed gardens essential for subsistence (Shahab & Lyons, 2019).

Communities respond through resistance: demonstrations (76% of cases), land occupations and blockades (45%), and "pilfering" fruit from contested plantations (29%). These are not merely "criminal acts" but assertions of alternative spatial legitimacy "this land is ours, not yours". The state typically responds with criminalization: 798 arrests, 243 injuries, 19 deaths in palm oil land conflicts. Conflict resolution mechanisms are largely ineffective: over 67% of cases do not resolve attempts at local government mediation (73%), court mediation (25%), direct negotiation (19%), or RSPO complaints panels (11%) (Wedel, 2019).

Counter-Mapping as Resistance

Participatory mapping by indigenous communities represents efforts to make lived space legible in the cartographic language of conceived space. Organizations like JKPP (Indonesian Community Mapping Network) have supported communities in producing maps showing customary boundaries, high-conservation-value areas, and traditional-use zones. These function as "counter-hegemonic practices"—reclaiming power to represent space and contesting official maps' claims that territories are "empty" or "degraded" land requiring "optimization" (PACOS, 2025). However, effectiveness remains limited. Government recognition of community maps is low; they rarely integrate into official Regional Spatial Plans. Participatory mapping is vulnerable to elite capture within communities and can exacerbate internal conflicts over boundaries. A paradox emerges: to make lived space visible to the state, communities must translate rich, multi-dimensional spatial meanings into simplified technical maps (coordinates, GIS, boundaries) potentially reproducing the very abstraction they resist (Ridhwan dkk., 2021; Wulandari, 2020).

Spatial Injustices: Uneven Burdens and Benefits

Distributive Injustice

Benefits from palm oil concentrate among large corporations (profits from economies of scale and infrastructure support), the government (taxes and foreign exchange), and smallholders with adequate capital and land (income increases). Burdens disproportionately fall on indigenous communities (land loss without consent/compensation), downstream populations (flooding from drainage infrastructure), women (loss of subsistence gardens and tenure rights), and future generations (environmental degradation and climate impacts) (Kubitza dkk., 2018). Studies document complex livelihood effects. Oil palm yields cash income that is 14-22% higher than rubber cultivation, but households lose crop diversity, face debt due to inadequate plot sizes (2 hectares are insufficient for family needs), and experience reduced resilience. Large plantations externalize the costs of flooding to downstream communities through drainage infrastructure designed to optimize production within concession boundaries. No effective mechanisms exist for redistributing benefits or compensating burden-bearers: mediation attempts fail in over 67% of conflicts (Asmara & Randhir, 2024).

Procedural Injustice

Spatial planning and permitting processes remain largely top-down and technocratic. Communities rarely participate meaningfully in decision-making, determining "suitable land" or "appropriate development". Free, prior, and informed consent is frequently absent or "manufactured" through coercion, bribery, or manipulation (Epistema, 2021). Participatory mapping efforts receive limited recognition from the government; community maps rarely integrate into official spatial plans. Multi-stakeholder platforms show potential for dialogue but suffer from power asymmetries in which corporate and government voices dominate, while community representatives often play tokenistic roles. Procedural exclusion perpetuates distributive injustice: those excluded from defining spatial futures lack the power to ensure equitable distribution of benefits (Fehmita Mubin, 2019).

Recognitional Injustice

Indonesian legal frameworks inadequately recognize customary land rights (hak ulayat). The Basic Forestry Law claims state ownership of approximately 75% of land (under Forestry's jurisdiction) without sufficient consideration of pre-existing customary rights. Lived space becomes invisible in official representations: customary territories appear as "empty land" or

"degraded land" needing "optimization" (Jong, 2025). Indigenous communities face misrecognition as "backward," "inefficient," or "obstacles to development" rather than stewards of biodiversity and holders of local ecological knowledge. This constitutes epistemic injustice: indigenous knowledge and sustainable land management practices are devalued compared to "technical expertise" from foresters, agronomists, and planners. Recognitional injustice enables distributive and procedural injustices—when communities' rights and knowledge are deemed illegitimate, their exclusion from planning and their dispossession appear justified (German dkk., 2010; Jakes, 2024; Nepal, 2024).

Fragmented Governance and Coordination Failures

Hollowed-Out Multi-Level Governance

Post-Reformasi, decentralization devolved substantial spatial planning and permitting authority to district/provincial levels. This creates interpretive gaps: national policies (moratorium, mandatory ISPO, National Action Plan) encounter varied district-level implementations that reflect local political economies. Authority fragments across sectoral agencies (Forestry, Agriculture, Environment, and Development Planning—BAPPEDA) that operate in bureaucratic silos with separate mandates, budgets, and limited incentives for coordination (Pranoto dkk., 2024). This "hollowed-out governance" undermines state capacity for coherent policy enforcement. For example, officials in a West Kalimantan district rejected spatial plans that incorporated participatory community maps, despite the district government's acceptance, illustrating vertical disconnection. Districts compete for investment (including plantations), creating regulatory races to the bottom (Binawan & Osawa, 2023; JKPP, 2015).

Multi-Stakeholder Platforms: Potentials and Limits

Multi-stakeholder platforms and landscape-level initiatives bring together government, private sector, NGOs, and academics for dialogue and coordination. Landscape approaches promise holistic, integrated governance, achieving sustainability objectives through cross-sector and cross-level coordination (Purnomo dkk., 2024). However, limitations persist. Power asymmetries mean that corporate and government voices dominate those of local communities and smallholders. Platforms lack enforcement mechanisms; decisions are non-binding, limiting the translation of dialogue into policy action. Slow progress reflects what Li terms "the will to improve," encountering "limits of what can be governed", well-intentioned programs confronting complex realities resisting simple solutions (Ardian dkk., 2018; Li dkk., 2025).

DISCUSSION

Anti-Politics Machines in Spatial Governance

Our findings demonstrate Ferguson's anti-politics machine operating systematically in Indonesian palm oil spatial planning. Agrarian conflicts rooted in unequal power, historical dispossession, and unrecognized customary rights are reframed as "land suitability" and "zoning compliance" challenges. Deforestation driven by profit imperatives and weak governance becomes "peat management" needing better monitoring. Flooding caused by plantation drainage infrastructure is attributed to "climate change," obscuring human land-use decisions (Benedict & Heilmayr, 2024; Judijanto, 2026b).

Technicalization produces depoliticization: structural problems enter expert domains ("we need better spatial modeling," "improved certification audits") while political questions about power distribution, justice, and development alternatives narrow. The "fit-for-purpose" concept risks becoming a technocratic shield progressive-sounding language that enables business-as-usual expansion while marginalizing justice concerns (Enemark dkk., 2015; Judijanto, 2025f, 2025e; Russo, 2025). This extends Ferguson's analysis from discrete development projects (his 1980s Lesotho case) to ongoing governance systems in contemporary neoliberal resource management. It reveals the persistence of the logic of technicalization across contexts and decades, suggesting deep structural drivers rather than incidental failures (Louis & Maertens, 2021; Rosset dkk., 2006).

Spatial Justice as Sustainability Imperative

Applying Soja's spatial justice framework reveals that current palm oil governance produces injustices across all three dimensions. Distributive injustice manifests in concentrated benefits and displaced burdens without compensation mechanisms. Procedural injustice operates through exclusionary planning processes that deny communities a meaningful voice. Recognitional injustice appears as the invisibility of customary rights and the epistemic devaluation of indigenous knowledge (Berenstain dkk., 2022; Honneth, 2001; Huddleston, 2017; Siddiqui & Lodhi, 2025).

This analysis demonstrates that "sustainability" evaluated solely through environmental criteria (reduced emissions, protected forests) proves insufficient if perpetuating structural inequalities. Certification systems focusing on technical compliance while marginalizing justice dimensions risk "greenwashing" creating sustainable palm oil imagery while reproducing injustice. Authentic sustainability requires integrating spatial justice: equitable distribution of benefits and burdens, inclusive decision-making processes, and legal-epistemic

recognition of diverse communities and knowledge systems (Astari dkk., 2025; Dufaux dkk., 2011; Fernando dkk., 2025; Judijanto, 2025b; Kleinschmit dkk., 2024).

Scale Politics and Ecological Coherence

Scalar mismatches between administrative boundaries and watershed systems are not mere technical oversights but political choices with implications for justice. Prioritizing administrative scales enables state legibility and revenue capture for hosting jurisdictions while facilitating the externalization of costs to downstream areas. This exemplifies Lefebvre's observation that "state space subordinates both chaos and difference to its implacable logistics" administrative simplification enables governability but sacrifices ecological coherence (Gokkon, 2020). Addressing this requires multi-scale integrated planning, recognizing that different scales serve different purposes. Administrative scales remain necessary for governance; ecological scales (watersheds) prove essential for sustainability; community scales matter for justice. Authentic landscape approaches must coordinate across scales rather than privileging a single scale, requiring new institutional mechanisms (watershed authorities, inter-district coordination bodies) with the authority to mediate conflicts and allocate shared responsibilities (Bishai dkk., 2022).

Lived Space as Site of Alternatives

Community resistance practices demonstrations, land occupations, participatory mapping represent more than opposition; they assert alternative spatial ontologies and land-use practices. Indigenous agroforestry systems integrating rubber, fruit trees, vegetables, and forest products demonstrate alternatives to monoculture that maintain biodiversity, ensure food security, and manage risks. Customary forest management with traditional zonation (forbidden forests, utilization forests, reserved forests) sustains ecosystem services across generations (Ridhwan dkk., 2021). These alternatives remain largely invisible in planning discourses dominated by "intensification" and "optimization" narratives. Yet emerging research shows intercropping and agroforestry within palm oil landscapes can improve water infiltration and reduce flooding while maintaining productivity. This suggests possibilities for pluralistic spatial planning that accommodates multiple land-use practices rather than imposing a monoculture logic uniformly (Alerasoul dkk., 2025; Blanfort dkk., 2026; Datta dkk., 2024; Gao, 2026).

Lefebvre's conceived-lived space distinction helps articulate this as ontological multiplicity not spatial "mismatch" requiring uniform resolution, but fundamentally different ways of understanding and relating to space that planning must learn to accommodate. This implies developing planning methods that engage multiple spatial ontologies rather than imposing a single technocratic representation as the truth (Bonazzi, 2002; Davoudi & Strange, 2009; Fritsch dkk., 2023; Mukhopadhyay dkk., 2021; Schmid, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that sustainable palm oil spatial planning in Indonesia faces challenges rooted not primarily in technical deficiencies but in political processes: technicalization depoliticizes agrarian conflicts; scalar mismatches enable cost externalization; conceived space overrides lived space without consent; multidimensional spatial injustices; and fragmented governance. Critical anthropology frameworks reveal these as interconnected manifestations of power relations, not isolated implementation gaps. Authentic sustainability requires what stakeholder dialogues term "carefully re-politicizing spatial planning", not depoliticization through technicalization, but transparent, democratic negotiation of inherently political trade-offs, "favoring ecological logic and cultural logic". Spatial planning must serve life ecosystem health, community wellbeing, intergenerational justice rather than merely "tidying development maps.

This study has several limitations, including the use of a qualitative literature review method that does not involve direct field data, which may not fully capture empirical dynamics at the local level. In addition, the study's focus limited to the Indonesian context restricts the generalization of findings to other regions with different social, political, and ecological characteristics. Another limitation is the potential for publication bias due to the dominance of sources in English and Indonesian, as well as subjectivity in the interpretation of qualitative data, although this has been minimized through methodological transparency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research recommendation emphasizes the importance of strengthening spatial justice through several main steps, namely (1) legal recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples through policy reform and the integration of participatory maps into spatial planning, (2) the development of multi-scale planning based on river basins integrated with inter-regional coordination mechanisms, (3) increasing inclusivity and transparency in the planning process through meaningful community involvement, (4) the implementation of benefit redistribution

and compensation mechanisms for affected parties, (5) reforming the certification system to give more attention to social justice aspects, and (6) strengthening integrated landscape governance that can address institutional fragmentation.

Further research is recommended to develop ethnographic studies to understand real practices in spatial planning, conduct comparative analyses of various alternative governance models, and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of policies. In addition, research also needs to critically examine the role of digital technology and strengthen the gender perspective in political ecology analysis to understand impacts that are more inclusive and in-depth.

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