

VULNERABILITY OF FARM WORKERS AT THE WELFARE LEVEL IN PURBALINGGA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural laborers in rural areas are increasingly vulnerable due to limited land ownership, rising operational costs, and stagnant agricultural skills, conditions that also characterize Karangtengah Village in Purbalingga Regency and threaten the sustainability of farming as a primary livelihood. This study aims to analyze the forms and underlying causes of vulnerability among agricultural laborers and examine their impact on welfare levels. Using a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using an interactive model of Miles and Huberman Interactive Model that involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to capture the dynamics of vulnerability, access, and adaptation. The findings show that land ownership is concentrated among a small number of actors, production costs are relatively high, and agricultural activities remain highly dependent on external inputs such as machinery and chemical fertilizers. In addition, limited knowledge, weak regeneration due to low youth involvement, and dependence on informal credit systems ("bank titil") further exacerbate vulnerability. The novelty of this study lies in its localized analysis at the village level, which highlights the interconnectedness of structural inequality, sociocultural constraints, and adaptive limitations in shaping multidimensional vulnerability among agricultural laborers an aspect often overlooked in broader regional studies. In conclusion, reducing vulnerability requires integrated strategies, including community empowerment, equitable access to land, capacity building, and the development of diversified and sustainable agricultural systems.

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INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector remains the backbone of the economy in rural Indonesia. The majority of rural communities rely on agriculture for their livelihood, whether as owner-occupiers, tenant farmers, or farm laborers. However, over time, the agricultural sector faces increasingly complex challenges. Modernization, land conversion, and changes in economic structures have impacted the role and position of farmers in rural areas.

This situation is also felt in Purbalingga Regency, particularly in Karangtengah Village, Kemangkong District, which has an agrarian character but faces various social and economic dynamics. Karangtengah Village covers an area of 2.25 km², equivalent to 225 hectares. Of this total area, approximately 174 hectares, or 77.3 percent, are agricultural land, and 37.36 hectares are village land and village treasury.

This means that more than one-fifth of the agricultural land is controlled by the village government, while most of the remainder is owned by a handful of large landowners. Based on demographic data, the population of Karangtengah Village is 3,355, consisting of 1,700 men and 1,655 women. This composition indicates a significant potential for a productive workforce, but the majority of residents work as farm laborers, not landowners.

This situation demonstrates structural inequality in land ownership, which impacts the community's welfare. Farm laborers are in a highly vulnerable position due to their lack of access to land and capital, and their reliance on a fluctuating and uncertain daily wage system.

This situation aligns with the findings of Winoto (2018), who explained that the agrarian structure in Indonesia remains unequal, with a small group controlling the majority of land resources, while the majority of farmers are merely cultivators or farm laborers. This inequality exacerbates rural poverty and limits opportunities for improving welfare.

In addition to land ownership issues, another challenge faced by farmers in Karangtengah Village is the rising cost of agricultural operations. The prices of fertilizers, pesticides, fuel, and land rent continue to rise, while the selling price of agricultural products has not experienced a commensurate increase. This situation results in increasingly smaller profit margins for farmers, often leading to losses. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (2023) also shows a similar trend at the national level, where the Farmer Exchange Rate (NTP) frequently falls below 100, indicating that farmers' incomes are not commensurate with production costs.

Another factor exacerbating the vulnerability of farm laborers is the lack of skills and innovation in agricultural practices. Most rural farmers still use traditional methods and lack access to modern technology, both due to limited capital and knowledge (Susanto, 2021). As a result, land productivity tends to stagnate, and farmers' ability to navigate climate change, market changes, and technology is severely limited. These limitations contribute to farmers' low bargaining power with middlemen, capital owners, and the market.

In Karangtengah Village, the phenomenon of "abandoning agriculture" is beginning to emerge. Younger generations tend to choose non-agricultural jobs, such as industry and services in urban areas, as farm laborers are considered economically unprofitable. This phenomenon is known as deagrarianization (Bryceson, 2002), in which rural communities shift from agricultural-based activities to non-agrarian ones. This shift has resulted in a decline in the agricultural workforce, increased reliance on seasonal labor, and weakened farmer regeneration.

Farm laborers, as a landless group who rely solely on labor, are the most vulnerable to economic fluctuations and social change. Their dependence on daily wages makes their income unstable, while social protection for this group remains very minimal. According to Suhartini (2019), farm laborers are the group with the lowest level of welfare in rural areas, as they lack productive assets, alternative skills, or socioeconomic security. In this context, the welfare of farm laborers is determined not only by economic aspects, but also by access to education, skills, and employment opportunities.

The above phenomenon demonstrates that the vulnerability of farm laborers in Karangtengah Village is multidimensional. This vulnerability is caused not only by limited land and income, but also by an unfavorable socio-economic structure, a lack of agricultural innovation, and the weakening attractiveness of the agricultural sector for the younger generation.

Several previous studies have addressed the issue of poverty and agrarian inequality in Indonesia (Winoto, 2018; Suhartini, 2019; Susanto, 2021). However, most of these studies have focused on the macro scale, such as the national agrarian structure or inequality at the provincial level, and have not specifically addressed the vulnerability of farm laborers at the village level, with their varying local characteristics. Yet, the socio-economic conditions, land ownership structures, and agricultural production systems in each village have unique dynamics.

This research is guided by the issue of increasing vulnerability among farm laborers in Karangtengah Village, shaped by structural inequalities in land access, rising production costs, limited skills, and shifting socio-economic dynamics in rural areas. Therefore, this research seeks to answer how these forms of vulnerability emerge and what factors contribute to their sustainability, as well as how they affect farm laborers' well-being. The aim of this research is to analyze the multidimensional nature of vulnerability at the village level and to examine its implications for livelihood sustainability, while providing a more context-specific understanding that can inform inclusive rural development strategies.

Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study as the primary strategy, aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the forms of vulnerability experienced by farm laborers and how these conditions affect their well-being in Karangtengah Village, Kemangkon District, Purbalingga Regency. Qualitative research is considered appropriate as it enables a holistic exploration of social phenomena based on participants' perspectives within their natural context (Moleong, 2017), while the descriptive approach allows for a systematic and factual portrayal of the community's socio-economic conditions without manipulating research variables (Sugiyono, 2019). The case study design was selected because the research focuses on a specific local setting with strong agrarian characteristics, where agricultural land constitutes 77.3 percent of the total village area, enabling an in-depth examination of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics shaping farm laborer vulnerability (Yin, 2018).

Data collection was conducted over a six-month period, from June to December 2025, through a combination of in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Approximately 20 informants were involved in this study, selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in agricultural activities and their understanding of local socio-economic conditions. These informants consisted of farm laborers, landowners, village officials, and community leaders, with diverse age backgrounds to capture varied perspectives and experiences. Primary data were obtained from interviews and observations, focusing on livelihood strategies, access to resources, and perceptions of well-being, while secondary data were sourced from village documents, Central Statistics Agency (BPS) reports, local government publications, and relevant academic literature.

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive model as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which is operationally implemented through three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involves selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw field data through coding and categorization based on key themes such as land access, income patterns, and adaptive strategies. Data display is conducted by organizing the reduced data into matrices, narrative descriptions, and thematic groupings to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification are performed continuously throughout the research process by identifying patterns, relationships, and causal links, while also re-checking findings against field data to ensure consistency. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was applied by comparing interview results, observational findings, and documentary evidence. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of farm laborers' vulnerability and the factors influencing their well-being in a rural socio-economic setting.

Result

Based on field research conducted in Karangtengah Village, Kemangkon District, Purbalingga Regency, a number of fundamental issues were identified that illustrate the socio-economic vulnerability of farm laborers. These issues relate to land ownership structures, agricultural production systems, human resource skills, and access to capital and innovation. The following six key findings demonstrate how these factors interrelate and influence the welfare of farming communities in this region.

Inequality in Land Ownership and Low Income for Farm Laborers

The first finding indicates that land ownership in Karangtengah Village is still dominated by a handful of individuals or families. The majority of residents serve only as cultivators or farm laborers working on land owned by others.

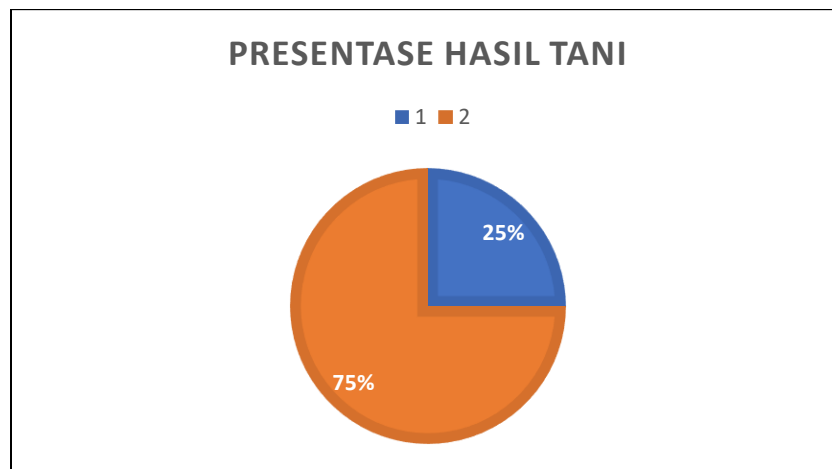


Figure: Percentage of Agricultural Yields, 2026

Under the prevailing sharecropping system, cultivators receive only about one-third (1/3) of the harvest, while the remaining two-thirds are shared by the landowner and covered by operational costs. This situation indicates a significant economic disparity between landowners and farm laborers. This inequality aligns with Suhartini's (2019) findings that the unequal agrarian structure is a major cause of poverty and social vulnerability in rural areas. Farm laborers who lack productive assets are in a weak bargaining position, leaving their welfare entirely dependent on landowner policies and seasonal harvest yields.

Dependence on Mechanization Systems and Rainfed Systems

Although Karangtengah Village is a relatively large agricultural area, the irrigation system in some areas is still rainfed. Theoretically, rainfed land can be utilized for up to four harvests per year, but in reality, the community is only able to plant one or two crops because they are waiting for the availability of mechanized equipment such as tractors.

Table 1: Calendar of Mechanization Systems and Rainfed Systems

Season	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Dry				X	X	X	X	X	X			
Rain	X	X	X							X	X	X

This heavy reliance on agricultural machinery leads to delayed production cycles and low productivity. This reflects weak planting time management and low agricultural resource management capacity at the local level (Susanto, 2021). Limited access to tools and production inputs is a major obstacle to increasing crop yields and farmer welfare.

Low Agricultural Knowledge and Skills

Research also shows that most farmers in Karangtengah Village still have minimal skills and knowledge related to modern agricultural practices. This long-standing reliance on chemical fertilizers is accompanied by a lack of understanding of the long-term impacts on soil fertility. As a result, land quality declines, productivity stagnate, and operational costs increase. According to Winoto (2018), low adaptability to technology and sustainable agricultural practices is a major factor in the stagnation of the agricultural sector in Indonesia. This situation indicates that without increased human resource capacity, reliance on fertilizers and traditional methods will continue to exacerbate farmers' economic vulnerability.

Lack of Innovation and Participation of the Younger Generation

Another problem is the declining interest of the younger generation in the agricultural sector. Although some young people are studying agriculture, most of the younger generation prefer non-agricultural majors and aspire to work in the city. Agriculture is considered economically unpromising and socially unsophisticated. This phenomenon demonstrates the de-agrarianization process that is beginning to occur at the village level, with young workers increasingly attracted to the industrial and service sectors (Bryceson, 2002). The lack of youth involvement has slowed agricultural innovation and weakened farmer regeneration. If this situation continues, the sustainability of the agricultural system in Karangtengah Village will be increasingly threatened.

Lack of Diversification and Integration of the Agricultural Economy

Table 2 of the Agricultural Economy

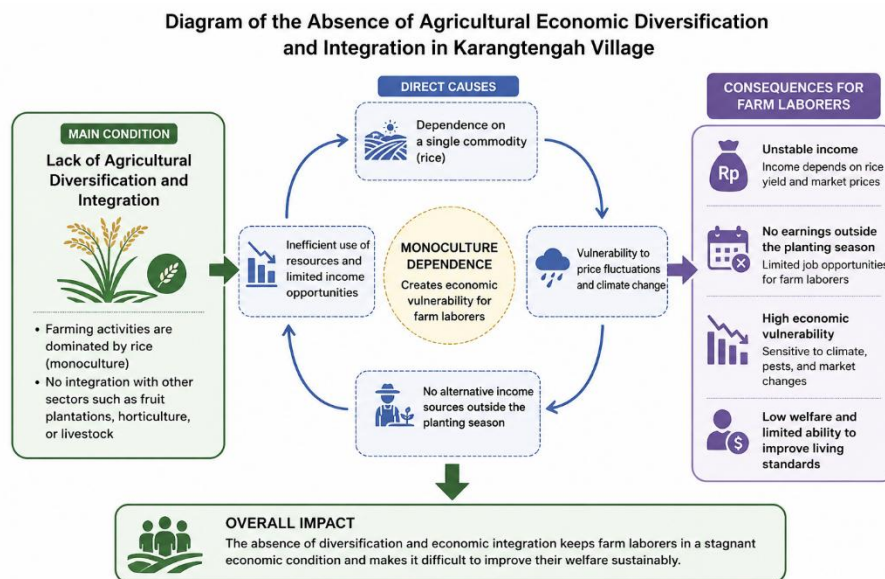


Figure. Lack of Agricultural Economic Diversification and Integration and Its Implications for the Vulnerability of Farm Laborers in Karangtengah Village

Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2026

Further findings indicate that most agricultural activities in Karangtengah Village are still monocultural and not integrated with other sectors such as fruit plantations or livestock farming. The agricultural pattern, which relies solely on rice, makes the village economy highly dependent on a single commodity and vulnerable to market price fluctuations and climate change. However, integrating agriculture with livestock and horticulture can increase resource

efficiency and expand farmers' income sources (Setiawan, 2020). This lack of economic diversification leaves farm laborers with no alternative income sources outside the planting season.

Dependence on Informal Financial Institutions (Titil Banks)

The final problem identified is the high dependence of farmers on informal financial institutions, or titil banks. This practice occurs because access to formal financial institutions, such as banks and cooperatives, remains limited due to the lack of asset collateral and complicated administration. The informal lending system, with its high interest rates, actually exacerbates the economic burden on farmers. This situation traps farmers in a cycle of debt that is difficult to break. This finding is consistent with research by Sari (2022), which explains that weak access to formal capital drives smallholder farmers to informal financial institutions, which actually deepens their dependence and reduces their ability to become economically empowered.

Table 3 of the Agricultural Economy

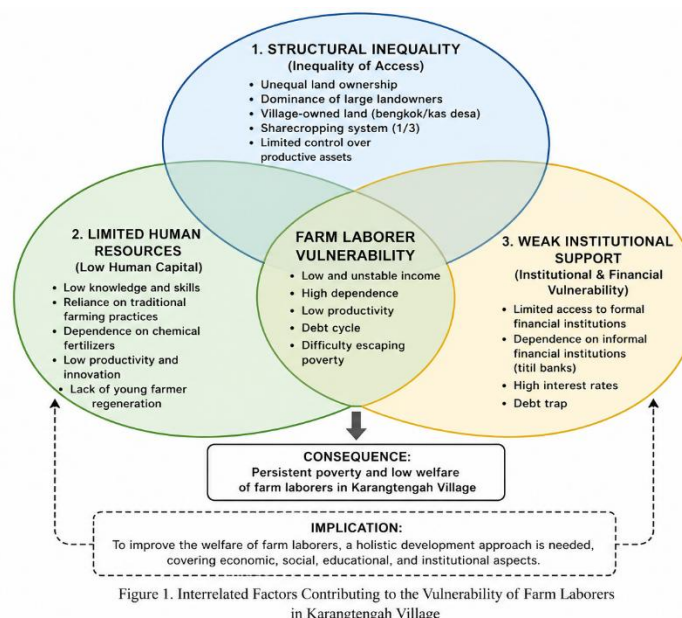


Figure 1. Interrelated Factors Contributing to the Vulnerability of Farm Laborers in Karangtengah Village

Source: Researcher's Processed Results, 2026

From the six findings above, it can be concluded that the vulnerability of farm laborers in Karangtengah Village results from a combination of structural inequality, limited human resources, and minimal support from agricultural institutions. Inequality in land ownership and dependence on traditional production systems keep farm laborers in a stagnant economic situation. Meanwhile, the absence of young farmer regeneration and weak access to financing exacerbate the situation. These findings indicate that to improve the welfare of farm workers, a more holistic development approach is needed, not only based on economics, but also social, educational, and institutional aspects.

Discussion

The vulnerability of farm workers in Karangtengah Village, Kemangkon District, Purbalingga Regency, is a clear reflection of the complexity of agrarian issues in rural Indonesia. Covering an area of 2.25 km², or approximately 225 hectares, the village has 174 hectares of agricultural land, the majority of which (approximately

77%) is productive rice paddies. However, the fact that approximately 37.36 hectares of this land is considered bengkak land and village treasury indicates that land ownership remains concentrated in the hands of a handful of individuals, while the majority of farmers serve only as cultivators. This inequality illustrates a concrete manifestation of structural vulnerability, as explained by Chambers (1989), who argues that poverty and vulnerability are not solely measured by the lack of resources but also by limited access to available resources. The agrarian system in Karangtengah Village demonstrates a classic pattern of patronage between landowners and farm laborers. Farm laborers generally receive only one-third of the harvest after deducting production costs, which continue to rise due to the prices of fertilizer, fuel, and agricultural machinery (tractor) rentals. This condition creates livelihood inequality, as explained by Ellis (2000), namely the imbalance in the distribution of productive assets that creates sharp differences in the level of welfare of rural communities. High operational costs make it increasingly difficult for many farm workers to achieve economic independence, especially when they must deal with informal financial systems such as titil banks, which charge high interest rates and deepen the cycle of dependency.

Vulnerability is also exacerbated by ecological conditions. Most agricultural land in Karangtengah relies on rain-fed farming, meaning rice production is highly dependent on climate conditions. Theoretically, this situation reflects vulnerability to environmental change (Adger, 2006), where farmers have low adaptive capacity to weather changes and erratic rainfall. When the planting season is delayed due to delayed rains or limited tractors for plowing, the planting cycle can only be carried out twice a year, even though it could potentially yield four harvests. Reliance on mechanical machinery also demonstrates a new form of technological dependency, where access to modern production tools is limited to certain, more economically empowered groups. In addition to structural and ecological issues, social vulnerability is also evident in the human resource aspect. Farmers' lack of knowledge and skills in land management, particularly in cultivation innovation, leads to a high dependence on chemical fertilizers. Bebbington (1999) refers to this situation as weak human capital, which refers to the low individual capacity to access, manage, and utilize economic resources sustainably. A lack of training, mentoring, and technology transfer has resulted in farmers' knowledge stagnating and declining over time. Reliance on chemical fertilizers, unbalanced by ecological understanding, actually deteriorates soil quality and threatens long-term productivity.

The shift in the orientation of the village's younger generation reinforces long-term vulnerability. Most young people choose to work outside the agricultural sector, particularly in urban areas or the service sector. This phenomenon is known as de-agrarianization (Rigg, 2006), which is the process of leaving the agricultural sector because it is considered less economically promising and prestigious. Although a small number continue their agricultural education, the general trend shows that farmer regeneration in this village is very weak. As a result, the agricultural system does not experience significant innovation, and production tends to be carried out using traditional patterns. As productive workers change professions, the agricultural sector becomes increasingly dependent on older workers with low adaptability to new technologies. Another condition that exacerbates the economic vulnerability of farmers in Karangtengah is the lack of diversification of agricultural businesses. Most people rely solely on rice cultivation, without integration with other sectors such as fruit, vegetable, or livestock farming. However, according to livelihood diversification theory (Ellis, 2000), diversifying livelihoods is a key strategy for reducing economic risk and increasing social resilience. Dependence on a single commodity makes the village economy highly vulnerable to price fluctuations and weather changes. In addition, access to formal capital is still very limited, so many farmers choose informal loans with high interest rates, which further reduces their welfare.

Table 4 Findings on Vulnerability

No	Vulnerability Aspect	Field Findings Description	Type of Vulnerability	Implications for Agricultural Laborers' Welfare
1	Land Ownership	Agricultural land covers 174 hectares; however, most of it is controlled by large	Structural vulnerability	Low income, lack of control over productive

		landowners and village-owned land (bengkok/cash land) totaling 37.36 hectares. Laborers mainly act as sharecroppers with a 1/3 profit-sharing system.	(inequality of access)	assets, and difficulty escaping poverty
2	Agricultural Operational Costs	Costs of tractor rental, fertilizers, and pesticides increase every planting season	Economic vulnerability	Decreasing profit margins, rising debt, and increasing dependence on capital owners
3	Rainfed Farming System	Production heavily depends on rainfall and tractor availability; harvesting occurs only twice a year	Ecological and technological vulnerability	Low productivity and high uncertainty in crop yields
4	Farmers' Knowledge and Skills	Farmers still rely on traditional methods and are dependent on chemical fertilizers	Capacity vulnerability (low human capital)	Limited innovation, low production efficiency, and soil quality degradation
5	Youth Involvement	Most young people prefer to migrate to urban areas; only a few engage in agriculture	Regenerative vulnerability (social vulnerability)	Shortage of young labor and loss of agricultural innovation potential
6	Economic Diversification	Farming relies solely on rice cultivation without integration with livestock or horticulture	Monoculture economic vulnerability	Unstable income and limited adaptability to market changes
7	Access to Capital	Many farmers rely on informal lenders ("bank titil") with high interest rates due to limited access to formal financial institutions	Financial vulnerability	Debt entrapment, declining purchasing power, and increasing difficulty in achieving welfare

Source: Researcher Data Processing Results, 2026

Based on a synthesis of all field findings, the level of vulnerability of farm workers in Karangtengah Village can be categorized as high. This is evident in seven main aspects: unequal land ownership, high operational costs, dependence on machinery and rain-fed irrigation, low knowledge and innovation, weak youth involvement, minimal economic diversification, and dependence on informal financial institutions. This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that farm worker vulnerability is not solely a result of microeconomic conditions, but rather the accumulation of interacting structural, social, and ecological factors. Therefore, efforts to improve the welfare of farm workers in Karangtengah Village require a cross-sectoral approach that focuses not only on increasing production but also on improving land access, strengthening human capacity, and sustainable economic empowerment.

Conceptually, the vulnerability of farm workers in Karangtengah reinforces the view that farmer welfare cannot be achieved without structural justice and socio-ecological sustainability. Without changes in land ownership systems, product distribution mechanisms, and increased human resource capacity, farm workers will remain subordinate and trapped in a cycle of perennial poverty.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the declining attractiveness of agriculture in Karangtengah Village is driven by rising operational costs, unequal land ownership concentrated among a few actors, and limited development of farmers' skills, which together intensify the socio-economic vulnerability of farm laborers. These conditions weaken their

independence and adaptive capacity, ultimately reducing their bargaining position within the rural economy. From the perspective of vulnerability theory, this reflects the intersection of structural constraints such as limited access to land and resources and cultural dynamics, including the declining interest of younger generations in agriculture, which further undermines farmer regeneration. Thus, the vulnerability of farm laborers is not merely economic but multidimensional, encompassing interrelated social, structural, and cultural dimensions. Based on these findings, efforts to reduce vulnerability should focus on asset-based empowerment, strengthening adaptive capacity through skills development, agricultural diversification, and access to sustainable technologies, alongside more equitable land access policies and the promotion of youth engagement in agriculture through community-based education. However, this study is limited by its focus on a single village context and a relatively small number of informants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader regional settings.

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