

## Soybean Imports and the Construction of Global Dependence in Indonesia's Food System

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### Keywords:

Food  
Soybean  
Sovereignty  
Political Economy  
Import

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### Article history:

Received 12-02-2025  
Revised 01-27-2026  
Accepted 02-06-2026

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### ABSTRACT

Indonesia's dependence on soybean imports, which accounts for 70–75% of national demand, cannot be understood solely as a technical failure of agriculture, but rather as a social construct resulting from an unequal global political economy. This article analyzes how the discourse of development, trade liberalization since the 1990s, and the dominance of multinational corporate oligopolies have institutionalized dependence as a “practical inevitability” that normalizes Indonesia's subordination in the global food system. Unlike the technocratic approach that dominated previous literature, this study integrates a constructivist perspective with new dependency theory to unravel the asymmetrical power relations hidden behind narratives of comparative efficiency and market integration. The main novelty lies in proving that food dependency is not the result of rational economic calculations, but rather a discursive product reinforced by state policies, the WTO trade regime, and corporate control over the global value chain. Findings show that domestic policies biased towards rice, the absence of producer price protection, and permissive imports create a self-reinforcing cycle of dependency. The transformation towards food sovereignty requires breaking the structure of dependency through agrarian reform, strengthening local production, and repositioning the paradigm from global market integration towards development based on food sovereignty.

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Published by : Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH  
Bengkulu, Indonesia

ISSN : 2252-5270 & E-ISSN : 2620-6056



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## 1. Introduction

The soybean crisis in Indonesia is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be understood solely from the perspective of production and consumption. This issue is not merely a matter of agricultural technicalities or an imbalance between production and domestic consumption, but also reflects the existence of unequal and institutionalized global relations (B. Arifin, 2013). In the context of developing countries such as Indonesia, high dependence on imports of strategic food commodities, such as soybeans, indicates complex structural dynamics in the global food system (Wijaya & Glasbergen, 2016). This dependence has a significant impact on various aspects of national strategy, ranging from food sovereignty and economic stability to the welfare of small farmers who are increasingly marginalized. In addition, this crisis also reflects how the meaning of food self-sufficiency is shaped and debated in the landscape of economic globalization, which is characterized by trade liberalization and the dominance of global markets over domestic food policies.

Studies on food dependency, particularly in the context of developing countries, have undergone a shift in analytical approach over time (Adnyana, 2005; Azahari, 2008; Rosmayati et al., 2024). The soybean crisis in Indonesia is an important example that reflects the close relationship between global economic dynamics and national food policy. Until now, technocratic and classical economic approaches that focus on increasing efficiency and productivity have dominated food policy analysis (Hernawati, 2021; Mahi et al., 2017; Rosmalah et al., 2024; Siringo & Daulay, 2021). However, this approach is considered insufficient to explain the roots of recurring structural inequalities, especially in Global South countries such as Indonesia (Adinda, 2023; Risyanto & Mahdoh, 2018). As an alternative, a constructivist perspective is used to explore in greater depth how ideas, meanings, and social institutions are formed, and how these three elements influence economic and political relations in the food sector. In the context of soybean import dependency, it is important to note that this condition is not merely the result of

rational economic calculations, but also the result of social constructions shaped by development discourse, global market pressures, and state policies that often align with external interests (McMichael, 2020; Safa'at, 2013; Sunarminto, 2018; Suyatna et al., 2018). Thus, the soybean crisis is not only a matter of insufficient domestic production, but also a matter of how global structures and narratives help determine the direction of national food policy.

According to the new dependency theory framework, the economic dependence of developing countries on developed countries is not solely the result of internal weaknesses or national policy failures. Rather, it is due to the structure of international relations that keeps developing countries in a subordinate position (Cardoso & Faletto, 2024). Evans (2018) argues that the contemporary global economic system creates "structural dependency" through unequal trade mechanisms and control over global value chains. Serrano dan Pinilla (2011) prove through their study that international trade patterns tend to benefit developed countries by systematically "deteriorating terms of trade" for developing countries. Furthermore, Wallerstein (2020) demonstrates that the position of developing countries within the modern world system is determined by a global political economic structure designed to perpetuate the dominance of core countries over peripheral ones. In this context, Indonesia's dependence on soybean imports from the United States and Brazil reflects a pattern of global economic domination manifested through trade liberalization and neglect of the domestic agricultural sector. This process reinforces structural dependence and weakens the state's capacity to achieve food sovereignty.

Indonesia has great potential to achieve food self-sufficiency due to its natural resources and agricultural traditions that have been deeply rooted for centuries (A. L. Arifin, 2021; Timmer, 2004a). However, the current situation reveals a concerning paradox of dependence on imports, particularly for strategic commodities. Soybeans are a concrete example of this phenomenon. Although soybeans have become an integral part of the national food culture, data shows that, in 2023, 84.6% of the national demand for soybeans will need to be met through imports, primarily from the United States (BPS, 2022; Pusat Data dan Sistem Informasi Kementerian Pertanian,

2020). This high dependence on imports has serious consequences. From a macroeconomic perspective, soybean imports have depleted the country's foreign exchange reserves by up to IDR 24 trillion per year (Aldillah, 2015; Hartawan, 2024; Kharisma, 2018; Laily et al., 2021). This condition has also structurally weakened the foundation of national food security, threatening the sustainability of local farmers' livelihoods. These farmers should be the backbone of domestic food production (Grace et al., 2021; Neilson & Wright, 2017; Paipan & Abrar, 2020; Putri, 2015). The dependency on soybean imports reflects broader systemic problems in national food governance and requires a comprehensive approach to address them (Ardiansyah & Faridatussalam, 2023; Mahdi & Suharno, 2019; Paipan & Abrar, 2020).

The main problem with this dependence is the low productivity and competitiveness of domestic soybeans. Indonesia's average soybean yield is only 1.5 tons per hectare, which is far below the 3.5-ton-per-hectare maximum potential of superior varieties (Adri et al., 2020; Aldillah, 2018; Andayanie, 2016; Setiawan, 2024). Low economic incentives, market price fluctuations, and limited technological support and market access have made many farmers reluctant to grow soybeans (Andayanie, 2016; Imanullah, 2017; Soedarto & Ainiyah, 2022). Within a constructivist framework, this situation can be understood as the result of development policies and discourse that treat the agricultural sector as less important and strategic than the industrial and export sectors.

Although the government has implemented various programs to increase domestic soybean production, such as the UPSUS Program and the use of new, high-yielding varieties, the results have fallen short of expectations. Land extensification and production incentives alone are insufficient to alter the firmly established dependency structure. In fact, soybean cultivation areas tend to decline, and production remains stagnant (Imanullah, 2017; Soedarto & Ainiyah, 2022). This reinforces the argument that dependence on soybean imports is not only an agricultural technology issue, but also a socioeconomic construct reinforced by development policies and global trade relations.

According to the new global dependency theory, trade relations between developing and developed countries are often exploitative,

benefiting the dominant party (Santos, 1970). By relying on imported soybeans as the main ingredient for tempeh and tofu production, Indonesia has indirectly become a permanent market for global producers, who control prices and supply. This relationship creates economic dependence and weakens the internal capacity to build a resilient national food system.

Studies on food dependency in developing countries have produced various theoretical and empirical perspectives attempting to explain the complex relationship between domestic production, international trade, and food sovereignty. Early studies by Prebisch (1950) and Singer (1950) on the deterioration of terms of trade laid the groundwork for understanding structural imbalances in commodity trade between developed and developing countries. Cardoso dan Faletto (2024) built on this analysis, demonstrating that the economic dependence of Latin American countries was not solely the result of internal weaknesses but also a consequence of unequal integration into the global capitalist system. Contemporary studies, such as those by McMichael (2013, 2020), have developed the concept of the "corporate food regime," which explains how multinational corporations and the neoliberal trade regime shape the structure of global food dependency by controlling value chains, agricultural technology, and trade policy. Meanwhile, Clapp (2016) identifies the role of "ABCD companies" in creating food commodity trade oligopolies that reinforce the dominant position of major producing countries. While these studies provide an important theoretical framework, they mostly focus on Latin America and Africa, paying limited attention to the dynamics of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia.

The literature on Indonesia's soybean crisis tends to take a technocratic, classical economic approach, emphasizing solutions such as increased productivity, land extensification, and market efficiency (Harsono, 2012; Swastika et al., 2011; Zakaria, 2010). Simatupang and Maulana (2008), for example, analyzed the decline in domestic soybean production from a comparative advantage perspective. They concluded that trade liberalization and low productivity were the main causes of import dependency. Rusastra and Simatupang (2005) examined the soybean self-sufficiency policy, focusing on the

technical aspects of cultivation and institutional support. However, they did not explore the global political economic dimensions shaping the structure of dependency. Hermanto and Swastika (2011) identified factors hindering domestic soybean production, such as competition for land with rice cultivation, farmers' capital constraints, and price fluctuations. However, their analysis remained within a problem-solving framework that assumes import dependency can be overcome through technical intervention alone. While these approaches make important contributions to our understanding of production, they tend to ignore the role of development discourse, power relations in global trade, and social constructions of food self-sufficiency in shaping and reproducing structural dependency.

Several critical studies have begun to explore the political and economic dimensions of Indonesia's food dependency, though they vary in focus and depth of analysis. For example, Khudori (2008, 2013) criticizes Indonesia's agricultural liberalization policies, demonstrating how pressure from international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, has eroded national food sovereignty through structural adjustment programs. (Fauzi, 2014) analyzes the impact of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture on Indonesia's agricultural sector. He points out that the rules favor developed countries while limiting the policy space of developing countries. Mardiyaningsih et al. (2010) examine Indonesia's food import policies and identify conflicts of interest among importers, the processing industry, and local farmers regarding soybean policy formulation. However, these studies have not generally integrated a constructivist approach that analyzes the formation of meaning and discourse with new dependency theory, which explains the structure of global power relations. Furthermore, existing literature has not thoroughly explored how soybean import dependency stems not only from production deficits but also from discursive constructions that normalize global market integration as "modernity" and "economic rationality" while marginalizing alternatives based on local food sovereignty.

This article attempts to address this gap by using constructivist perspectives and new dependency theory to analyze how Indonesia's dependence on soybean imports is socially, politically, and

discursively constructed within the context of the global political economy. Unlike previous literature's technocratic approach, this study maps patterns of dependency, identifies causal factors, and deconstructs how development discourse, narratives of comparative efficiency, and the neoliberal trade regime have institutionalized dependency as a "practical inevitability" that is difficult to question. By prioritizing a critical analysis of power relations in the global soybean value chain, the role of multinational corporations in creating oligopolistic structures, and the contradiction between rhetoric about food self-sufficiency and policies that actually deepen integration into the global market, this study contributes to the discourse on sustainable agricultural development and national food sovereignty in the era of globalization, both theoretically and practically. Through a qualitative analysis combining policy documentation studies, international trade data, and critical literature on the political economy of food, the article opens up new spaces for formulating agricultural policies that are more equitable and sovereign and based on local strengths. It also provides an analytical foundation for the food sovereignty movement, which challenges the global corporate food regime's hegemony.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach and a documentary method to analyze the social construction of Indonesia's dependency on soybean imports in the context of the global political economy. This method was chosen based on three epistemological considerations. First, food dependency is a structural and discursive phenomenon requiring an in-depth analysis of discourse, policy, and hidden power relations behind trade data (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). Second, integrating constructivist perspectives and new dependency theory requires an analysis capable of revealing meanings, narratives, and ideologies in policy documents and academic literature (Fairclough, 2013). Third, the relationship's complexity between global actors and domestic policy requires triangulation of diverse data sources for a holistic dependency structure understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thus, qualitative documentation studies provide the analytical space necessary to unravel the layers of social construction

shaping dependency while identifying systematic patterns in policies reproducing Indonesia's subordination in the global food system.

Secondary data was collected from credible sources, including government reports from the Ministry of Agriculture, the BPS, and the Ministry of Trade for the period from 2010 to 2024; publications from international institutions such as the FAO, the World Bank, UNCTAD, and the WTO; indexed journal articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar; national policy documents such as the RPJMN, the Ministry of Agriculture Strategic Plan, and the Self-Sufficiency Program; and trade data from UN Comtrade. Documents were selected based on criteria of authenticity and credibility of the publishing institution, relevance to the research, and suitability of the time frame, as suggested by Bowen (2009) and Prior (2003). We analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis techniques with a thematic approach through the following stages: organizing the data, conducting an in-depth reading, coding based on key concepts from new dependency theory and constructivism, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting them within a theoretical framework while taking into account Indonesia's historical and political-economic context (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, thick description with direct quotations, and epistemological reflexivity in transparent theoretical assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

This study has methodological limitations that must be acknowledged for epistemological transparency. First, relying on secondary data restricts the ability to capture the direct perspectives of farmers, importers, and policymakers. This can result in representational bias, wherein the voices of marginalized groups are not adequately represented in official documents (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). Second, the researcher's subjectivity is still involved in selecting documents, which can affect the completeness of the picture of the phenomenon (Fairclough, 2013). Third, focusing on the period from 2010 to 2024 may not fully capture long-term historical dynamics since the colonial era. Fourth, critical theory-based interpretations emphasize power relations and structural inequalities. Although these interpretations provide deep insights, they may also overlook dimensions of local agency and resistance at the grassroots level

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Finally, since no field verification of published statistical data was conducted, the possibility of data reporting bias cannot be fully controlled.

It is important to reflect on these limitations in order to place the research findings in an appropriate epistemological context. The findings should be understood as a critical interpretation of the available documents rather than an objective representation of a complex reality. These limitations imply that further research integrating ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews with farmers and policymakers, and comparative analyses of other Global South countries would complement our understanding of the social construction of food dependency (Finlay, 2002). Nevertheless, despite the established methodological limitations, this study significantly contributes to the understanding of the structural and discursive dimensions of Indonesia's soybean import dependency, a topic largely overlooked in literature dominated by technocratic approaches.

### **3. Results And Discussion**

#### **3.1. Pattern of Indonesia's Soybean Import Dependency: Empirical Findings from Trade Data**

An analysis of Indonesian soybean trade data from 2010 to 2024 reveals a concerning pattern of increasing structural dependence. According to BPS data from 2024, soybean import volumes increased consistently from 1.74 million tons in 2010 to 2.63 million tons in 2023, with an average annual growth rate of 2.8%. The level of import dependency on total national demand reached 70%-75%, reaching 84.6% in some years, such as 2015 and 2020 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). Geographic analysis reveals the dominance of three main supplier countries: the United States (45%-55% of total imports), Brazil (25%-30%), and Argentina (15%-20%). Collectively, these countries account for over 95% of Indonesia's soybean import requirements (UN Comtrade, 2024). Dependence on a few supplier countries creates strategic vulnerability to Indonesia's food security because fluctuations in production or changes in export policies in these countries can directly impact domestic supply stability (Clapp, 2017; R. L. Naylor & Falcon, 2010).

Data from the domestic production side shows a significant downward trend in both the planting area and the production volume of soybeans. The area dedicated to soybean cultivation has dramatically declined from 1.51 million hectares in 1992 to just 586,000 hectares in 2023, reflecting a decrease of over 60% in the past three decades (BPS, 2022; Hermanto & Swastika, 2011). During the same period, domestic soybean production declined from 1.87 million tons to 880,000 tons, despite significant annual fluctuations due to climate variability and policy dynamics (Pertanian, 2023). Indonesia's average soybean productivity has stagnated at around 1.4–1.6 tons per hectare, which is far below the 3.5 tons per hectare potential of superior varieties and the productivity of major producing countries, such as the United States and Brazil, which produce 3.5 and 3.3 tons per hectare, respectively (USDA, 2023). This productivity gap reflects various structural problems, including limited access to quality inputs, suboptimal cultivation technology, land fragmentation, and insufficient irrigation infrastructure for soybean crops (Hermanto & Swastika, 2011; Zakaria, 2010).

A trade value analysis shows that soybean imports have become a significant burden on the trade balance and national foreign exchange reserves. From 2010 to 2023, the value of soybean imports increased from USD 791 million to USD 1.87 billion, equivalent to IDR 28.5 trillion at an exchange rate of IDR 15,250 per USD (Perdagangan, 2023). This increase in import value is due not only to growth in volume, but also to the volatility of soybean prices in the international market. These prices are greatly influenced by commodity speculation, weather conditions in producing countries, and global trade policies (Gilbert, 2010; Headey & Fan, 2010). These price fluctuations create uncertainty for the domestic soybean processing industry, particularly for tempeh and tofu producers. Most of these producers are micro and small businesses with limited financial capacity to absorb price volatility (Mardiyaningsih et al., 2010; Rachman & Sudaryanto, 2010) Data reveals that 60% of the 3.5 million tons of soybeans consumed nationally each year are used for traditional foods like tempeh and tofu, while 40% are used for animal feed and soybean oil. This indicates that dependence on imports affects not only food security, but also the sustainability of micro-

businesses and local food culture (Pertanian, 2023; Simatupang & Maulana, 2008).

### 3.2. The structure of the global soybean trade and the dominance of multinational corporations

Data from international trade and corporate reports show that the global soybean market is dominated by a highly concentrated oligopoly. Four major multinational corporations—Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus, collectively known as the "ABCD companies"—control about 70 percent of the global trade of food commodities, including soybeans (Clapp, 2016a; Murphy et al., 2012). A 2020 UNCTAD report confirms that market concentration in soybean trade has increased over the past two decades. The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) shows a concentration level of over 2,500, indicating a market far from perfectly competitive. These corporations control not only trade but also critical logistics infrastructure, including ports, storage facilities, transport vessels, and commodity trade financing. This gives them the ability to influence prices, quality, and supply availability in global markets (Clapp, 2014; Howard, 2016).

An analysis of these corporations' annual reports reveals their utilization of vertical integration to maximize control over the soybean value chain, from production and trading to processing (Cargill, 2023). For example, Cargill has integrated operations in all major soybean-producing countries and controls a global distribution network spanning more than 70 countries (Cargill, 2023). These corporations' dominance is reinforced by their access to agricultural technology, including transgenic soybean biotechnology developed by Monsanto (now part of Bayer). This technology creates dependence among farmers in producing countries on external inputs and contract systems that benefit corporations (Clapp, 2021; Howard, 2015). Data shows that over 90% of internationally traded soybeans are transgenic varieties (genetically modified organisms/GMOs), reflecting the use of technological innovation to strengthen corporate control over the global food system (ISAAA, 2022; James, 2019).

In Indonesia, multinational corporations dominate the soybean market by controlling imports and distribution. Although local

importers registered with the Ministry of Trade formally carry out imports, data shows that most of these importers have long-term contracts or strategic partnerships with ABCD companies. In practice, these contracts give multinational corporations significant control over soybean prices and supply in the Indonesian market (Fauzi, 2014; Patunru, 2018). Analysis of trade contract patterns reveals that the price of imported soybeans received by Indonesia generally follows the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) price benchmark plus quality-based, logistics-based, and margin-based premiums, creating an opaque price structure that disadvantages domestic consumers (Clapp & Helleiner, 2012; Murphy et al., 2012). This structural dependence is reinforced by the absence of significant alternative sources of supply given that the United States, Brazil, and Argentina collectively account for more than 80% of global soybean production (USDA, 2023).

### 3.3. The Dynamics of National Food Policy: Between Rhetoric and Reality

An analysis of Indonesia's food policy documents from 2010 to 2024 reveals a contradiction between the rhetoric of food self-sufficiency and the policies that actually increase dependence on imports. The RPJMN documents from 2010-2014, 2015-2019, and 2020-2024 consistently state a commitment to achieving strategic food self-sufficiency, including soybeans. These documents set targets to increase domestic production and reduce import dependency (Bappenas, 2010, 2015, 2020). However, budget allocations and program implementation show a different reality. According to state budget data, of the Ministry of Agriculture's total budget of Rp 25 trillion per year for the 2015-2023 period, only 3-5% is allocated to soybean programs, which is much smaller than the allocations for rice (40-50%) and corn (15-20%). This is despite the fact that Indonesia's dependence on soybean imports is much higher than its dependence on other commodities (Keuangan, 2023; Khudori, 2013).

Soybean self-sufficiency programs, such as the National Soybean Production Improvement Program (P2KN), the UPSUS Soybean Program, and the Integrated Crop Management Movement (GPPTT), have shown inconsistent results that fall short of their targets (Pertanian, 2019, 2021). For example, an evaluation of the

UPSUS Soybean Program, launched in 2015 with a production target of 1.5 million tons by 2019, revealed that the target was not met; actual production reached only 982,000 tons that year (Pusat Data dan Sistem Informasi Kementerian Pertanian, 2020; Swastika et al., 2016). The program evaluation report analysis identified various implementation constraints, including limited availability of quality seeds, low farmer adoption of cultivation technology, competition with other more profitable commodities (especially rice and corn) for land use, selling price uncertainty that discourages soybean planting, and weak institutional coordination in program implementation at the field level (Hermanto et al., 2017; Rachman, 2018).

More problematic is the import policy, which tends to be permissive and out of sync with efforts to increase domestic production. According to data from the Ministry of Trade (2023), soybean import recommendations (RIPH) are issued year-round, disregarding the domestic harvest period. This causes local soybean prices to decrease when farmers bring their produce to market. The absence of seasonal tariffs or import restrictions during the harvest period discourages farmers from growing soybeans because there is no guarantee of fair prices (Fauzi, 2014; Patunru, 2018). Price data analysis shows that, during the harvest season (April–May and October–November), the price of dry soybeans often falls below the government purchase price (HPP) due to competition with abundant imported soybeans (BPS, 2022; Mardiyarningsih et al., 2010). The HPP policy for soybeans is ineffective because, unlike the policy for rice, it is not accompanied by adequate government purchase commitments. BULOG has absorption obligations and large warehousing capacity for rice (R. Naylor et al., 2001; Timmer, 2015).

#### 3.4. The Development Narrative and Discourse Construction on Food Dependency

A discursive analysis of policy documents, official speeches, and media reports reveals how dependence on soybean imports has been constructed and normalized through dominant discourses on efficiency, comparative advantage, and global market integration. Since the era of trade liberalization in the 1990s, policy documents have consistently promoted the idea that Indonesia should focus on

producing commodities in which it has a comparative advantage, such as palm oil, rubber, and cocoa, while importing those that are produced more efficiently in other countries (Bank, 1993). This discourse legitimizes import dependency as a rational and efficient choice while obscuring dimensions of food sovereignty, strategic vulnerability, and socioeconomic impacts on small farmers (McMichael, 2009; Patel, 2013). The narrative of "economic efficiency" is reinforced by recommendations from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF. These institutions emphasize the importance of agricultural trade liberalization and reduced government intervention in food markets in various reports (Bank, 1993, 2007).

Furthermore, analyses show a shift in the meaning of "food self-sufficiency" in policy discourse, moving from an emphasis on domestic production to a more flexible definition that includes "food availability" from any source, including imports (Khudori, 2008; Sawit, 2009). This shift is evident in Law No. 18 of 2012 on Food, which defines food security as "the condition of food fulfillment for the state and individuals" without requiring that food be produced domestically (Republic of Indonesia, 2012). This redefinition allows for the justification of import dependency as a food security strategy, provided that supplies remain available and affordable (Maxwell, 1996; Timmer, 2004b). However, this definition disregards the dimension of food sovereignty, which emphasizes communities' right to determine their own food systems and control productive resources (Patel, 2009; Wiebe et al., 2010).

The construction of discourse is evident in how the mass media and public narratives frame the soybean crisis as a technical problem that can be solved through increased productivity or technological assistance without questioning the fundamental political and economic structures (Khudori, 2013; Sawit, 2007). An analysis of media coverage from 2015 to 2023 reveals that most narratives focus on "farmer failure," "technological backwardness," or "lack of capital," while few address multinational corporate domination, international subsidy inequality, or contradictions in government trade policy (Indonesia, 2020; Kompas, 2018, 2022). This technocratic narrative's dominance reflects a discursive hegemony that renders alternatives

based on food sovereignty and structural transformation difficult to incorporate into mainstream discourse (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2008). Furthermore, this discourse legitimizes market-oriented solutions, such as partnerships with multinational corporations, adoption of transgenic seeds, and expansion of contract farming. In practice, these solutions often reinforce structural dependence rather than overcome it (Clapp, 2016b; Howard, 2016).

### 3.5. The social construction of food dependency in the global political economy

In order to reveal the structural mechanisms that produce and reproduce Indonesia's food dependency, the empirical findings presented in the results section need to be understood within a broader theoretical framework. From a constructivist perspective, the pattern of soybean import dependency reaching 70-75% is not merely the result of domestic production "failures" or the "comparative advantages" of other countries. Rather, it is a product of social constructions shaped by development discourse, economic institutions, and mutually reinforcing policy practices. According to Wendt (1999), structures in international relations are both material and ideational; the meanings and norms shared by actors shape their interests and actions. In the context of food dependency, narratives about "economic efficiency," "comparative advantage," and "global market integration" have been internalized in Indonesian policy, not because they are objectively true, but because this discourse is supported by international financial institutions, multinational corporations, and domestic elites who benefit from maintaining the liberal economic order.

The construction process began during the New Order era when the Green Revolution, sponsored by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, introduced a modern agricultural model oriented toward monoculture, external inputs (e.g., chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seeds), and integration with the global market (Patel, 2013). While the Green Revolution initially increased rice production, this model created a dependence on external resources and undermined the more sustainable and diverse traditional agricultural system. This dependence became further entrenched

when Indonesia adopted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s. These programs required the liberalization of the agricultural sector, the reduction of subsidies, and the opening of the domestic market to imports in order to obtain loans from the IMF and World Bank (Bello, 2009). An analysis of Indonesia's letters of intent to the IMF from 1997 to 2003 reveals that the liberalization of food imports, including soybeans, became part of the policy package that had to be implemented. This shows that national food policy was shaped by external pressures and loan conditionalities rather than being entirely autonomous.

The discourse on dependency is reinforced through scientific knowledge production dominated by the neoclassical economic paradigm, which emphasizes market efficiency and comparative advantage. A literature review reveals that most studies on Indonesian soybeans published in national journals take a problem-solving approach, focusing on enhancing productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness without challenging the fundamental assumptions about the desirability of integrating into the global market (Cox, 1981). This approach results in policy recommendations that reinforce the status quo of dependency. For example, there is a recommendation to increase domestic production efficiency to compete with imported soybeans. However, this recommendation does not consider the structural inequalities in subsidies, technology, and economies of scale that benefit global producers. The dominance of this paradigm in scientific discourse and policy reflects Gramsci (1971) concept of hegemony, where domination is achieved not only through coercion, but also through an ideological consensus that makes an unequal order seem natural and inevitable.

### 3.6. New Dependency Theory in the Context of Food and Asymmetric Power Relations

An analysis of the global soybean trade structure confirms the central argument of the new dependency theory that the contemporary global economic system creates and maintains structural dependency relations between core and peripheral countries. The trade structure is controlled by multinational corporate oligopolies and concentrated in three major producing countries. (dos

Santos, 1970) defines dependency as "a situation in which the economies of a group of countries are conditioned by the economic development and expansion of other countries that have a dominant position," a description that fits Indonesia's position in the global soybean trade. This dependence is not merely a bilateral trade relationship; rather, it reflects a power relationship that systematically benefits major producing countries and multinational corporations while limiting the policy space and sovereignty of importing countries, such as Indonesia.

In his world-systems theory, (Wallerstein, 1974) explains how the hierarchical international division of labor positions peripheral countries as suppliers of raw materials and markets for the products of core countries. This pattern remains relevant, even though the traded commodities have changed from the colonial era to the contemporary era. In the context of food, for example, despite its long history as an agrarian country, Indonesia has become a net importer of strategic food commodities, including soybeans, rice (in some years), wheat, and sugar. Meanwhile, it exports lower-value plantation commodities, such as palm oil and rubber, which are more vulnerable to global price volatility. This pattern of specialization is not the result of natural advantages or technical efficiency but rather the product of colonial history, post-independence export-oriented development policies, and structural pressures from the global trading regime that favor the production of export commodities over food for domestic consumption.

The dominance of multinational corporations in the global soybean trade is an example of what (McMichael, 2013) refers to as the "corporate food regime"—a global food system in which food production, distribution, and consumption are controlled by a few transnational corporations that operate outside the democratic control of nation-states. The economic power concentrated in the ABCD companies enables them to influence agricultural policy in producing countries through lobbying, determine prices through control over trade infrastructure and market information, and shape consumer preferences through control over retail supply chains. In Indonesia, this dominance is evident through limited alternative sources of supply, dependence on corporations' quality standards, and difficulty

developing alternative supply chains based on local production due to trade and financing infrastructure consolidated under multinational corporations' control.

The new dependency theory emphasizes that economic dependence creates political vulnerability, causing peripheral countries to lose autonomy over their domestic policies. This phenomenon is evident in Indonesia, whose commitment to trade liberalization through the WTO and various bilateral and regional free trade agreements (FTAs), such as the ASEAN-China FTA and the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), as well as pressure from international financial institutions, has significantly limited the government's ability to protect the domestic agricultural sector (Wade, 2003). For example, the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) limits member countries' ability to provide domestic subsidies, impose high import tariffs, or use non-tariff instruments to protect local farmers. Meanwhile, developed countries continue to provide massive subsidies to their farmers through the "green box" and "blue box" mechanisms, which are claimed not to distort trade (Chang, 2009). This asymmetry in rules creates an uneven playing field in which Indonesian soybean farmers must compete with American farmers who receive direct subsidies averaging USD 7,000–10,000 per year, access to low-interest credit, subsidized crop insurance, and substantial infrastructure support.

### 3.7. The reproduction of dependency is facilitated by state policy and path dependency.

The role of the state in shaping and reproducing food dependency is a crucial yet often overlooked dimension in analyses that place too much emphasis on external factors. Research findings show that Indonesian government policies, whether through deliberate design or structural negligence, have significantly contributed to the institutionalization of soybean import dependency. From an institutional theory perspective, past policies have created path dependency, where initial choices shape an increasingly difficult-to-change development path due to interlocking structures of interest, infrastructure investment, and actor expectations (Pierson, 2000). In

the context of soybeans, the policy priority of achieving rice self-sufficiency since the New Order era has resulted in irrigation infrastructure, subsidy systems, and distribution networks that heavily favor this commodity. Meanwhile, other commodities, including soybeans, have experienced systematic marginalization, the cumulative effects of which are increasingly difficult to reverse.

The disproportionate budget allocation for soybeans compared to rice reflects the political priority of maintaining political stability through affordable rice prices, while neglecting food diversification and sovereignty for other commodities. One common argument is that rice is the staple food for most of the population and should be prioritized. However, this logic ignores the fact that soybeans are an important source of protein for low-income communities in the form of tempeh and tofu. Furthermore, dependence on soybean imports creates price volatility that affects food affordability (Timmer, 2004a). Furthermore, the extreme prioritization of rice has created a monoculture in agricultural policy, making the national food system less resilient to external shocks, such as climate change, pests, diseases, and global trade crises.

Permissive import policies that are not coordinated with the domestic production cycle create a self-reinforcing cycle of dependency. For example, when soybeans are imported without restrictions during the domestic harvest period, local prices decrease, causing farmers to suffer losses or very thin profit margins. This reduces the incentive to plant soybeans in the following season (R. L. Naylor & Falcon, 2010). The resulting reduction in planting area is then used to justify increasing import quotas because domestic production does not meet demand. This further depresses prices and local production incentives. This cycle is reinforced by importers' and the processing industry's interests. These groups have developed infrastructure and business networks based on imported soybeans and have strong lobbying capacity to maintain import policies that benefit them. An analysis of Indonesia's food import policy formulation process reveals regulatory capture, wherein importers' and industry's interests tend to be better accommodated in policy than small farmers', who are scattered and less politically organized (Patunru, 2018; Suryadarma et al., 2010).

Despite being launched in the 1990s, the repeated failure of the soybean self-sufficiency program also reflects deeper structural problems in Indonesian agricultural governance. These programs tend to be top-down and short-term, following the political cycle. They are not accompanied by adequate agrarian reform to address land ownership inequality. Additionally, they lack support from a robust research and extension system that can develop and disseminate innovations appropriate to local agroecological conditions (Li, 2007). Furthermore, these programs contradict trade liberalization commitments, which limit the government's ability to use effective policy instruments, such as tariffs, subsidies, and import restrictions, to support agricultural transformation. These instruments have been successful in East Asian countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, during their development periods (Chang, 2009). Without adequate protection against competition from subsidized, mass-produced imported soybeans, efforts to increase domestic production will continue to face insurmountable structural obstacles.

### 3.8. Theoretical and Practical Implications: Toward Food System Transformation

The analysis has significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding and transforming Indonesia's food dependency. Theoretically, this research confirms the relevance of new dependency theory in the contemporary food context. It shows that, although dependency's forms and mechanisms have evolved since the colonial and early postcolonial eras, the fundamental structure of asymmetrical power relations between core and peripheral countries remains intact (Hickel, 2017). Furthermore, integrating a constructivist perspective enriches our understanding of how dependency is maintained through economic mechanisms, discourse construction, knowledge production, and ideological hegemony, which make the unequal order seem natural or desirable. These findings challenge the dominant narrative in development literature, which tends to view food dependency as the result of "market failure" or "institutional weakness" that can be overcome through technical reforms and increased efficiency. They show that

dependency is a product of a global political economy that systematically benefits certain actors while marginalizing others.

In practical terms, this analysis shows that overcoming soybean import dependency requires a fundamental transformation that goes beyond technical interventions or partial production enhancement programs. First, the food policy paradigm must be reoriented, shifting from the logic of market efficiency and comparative advantage to the principle of food sovereignty. This principle emphasizes the right of communities to determine their own food systems and to have democratic control over productive resources (Wiebe et al., 2010). This requires governments to fundamentally change how they define the "success" of food policy, considering not only availability and affordability, but also sustainability, social justice, and system resilience. Second, comprehensive agrarian reform is needed, including distribution of land to landless farmers, access to water, credit, technology, and markets, and legal protection against land grabbing by corporations (Borras JR & Franco, 2012). Without agrarian reform, efforts to increase production will continue to be hindered by land fragmentation, ownership inequality, and the marginalization of small farmers.

Third, the domestic agricultural sector requires more strategic and protective trade policies, such as seasonal tariffs to protect farmers during harvest periods, import restrictions based on quotas and adjusted to domestic production, and a review of trade liberalization commitments that limit national policy space (Chang & Grabel, 2014). Though protectionist policies are often criticized for being inefficient or harmful to consumers in the short term, historical experience shows that nearly all countries that have successfully transformed their agricultural sectors—including the United States, Western European countries, and East Asian countries—have done so through a combination of trade protection, substantial domestic subsidies, and public investment in research and infrastructure (Reinert, 2007). Fourth, research and development capacity must be strengthened to produce soybean varieties suitable for Indonesia's agroecological conditions, sustainable cultivation systems that do not depend on external inputs, and innovations in post-harvest processing to increase the added value of local production.

Fifth, the soybean supply chain must be restructured by strengthening direct links between farmers and consumers or processing industries, reducing the role of intermediaries who extract excessive margins, and developing cooperatives or collective marketing institutions that give farmers a better bargaining position (Reardon & Hopkins, 2006). Lastly, transforming the food system requires democratizing the policymaking process. This involves including small farmers, consumers, and civil society in formulating and evaluating food policies. It also requires transparency in international trade negotiations, which have been dominated by corporate and technocratic elites (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009). Without this comprehensive structural transformation, Indonesia will remain trapped in deepening dependency, which has serious implications for food sovereignty, economic stability, and the sustainability of smallholder livelihoods. These livelihoods constitute the majority of the rural population.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study finds that Indonesia's dependence on soybean imports stems from social constructs within the global political economy system rather than from rational economic calculations alone. This dependence reaches 70–75% of national demand and is concentrated in the United States, Brazil, and Argentina. It confirms Indonesia's position in an asymmetrical power relationship, as described by the new dependency theory. Since the 1990s, the dominance of multinational corporate oligopolies, the WTO trade regime, and the adoption of liberalization have created market conditions that have further entrenched this dependence. Domestic policies prioritizing rice, weak food diversification, and inadequate protection for soybean farmers perpetuate this cycle. The 2008 food price crisis and supply disruptions during the pandemic demonstrate that dependence on global markets increases national vulnerability. Therefore, breaking this structure of dependence requires a fundamental transformation involving agrarian reform, strengthening local production, providing price incentives to domestic producers, implementing strategic import restrictions, and shifting policies from a focus on global market integration to local food sovereignty. Further

research on alternative production models, the experiences of Global South countries, farmers' resistance to the neoliberal food regime, and the development of agroecology as the basis for sustainable agricultural reindustrialization must support this transformation.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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