

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN AN UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION ARENA *INTERMEDIARY TRADERS IN BANJARNEGARA*

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Abstract *Distribution dynamics constitute a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of agrarian systems. State-driven regimes of agrarian inclusion generally assume that farmers' welfare can be achieved through the expansion of legal access to land, while distribution is treated as a technical domain governed by market mechanisms. This article conceptualizes distribution as a competitive social arena in which actors contest positions, capital, and strategies under conditions of structural uncertainty. Based on qualitative research in Batur Village, Banjarnegara Regency, drawing on in-depth interviews, literature review, and observation the study shows that intermediary traders in the potato trade occupy an ambivalent and vulnerable position. While frequently stigmatized as dominant actors within the distribution chain, they simultaneously face market pressures, price volatility, and limited institutional protection. Intermediary traders develop entrepreneurship as a survival strategy embedded in the distribution arena. Read as a social practice, entrepreneurship emerges not as evidence of successful inclusion, but as an effect of the absence of state institutional protection. It functions as a mechanism through which distributional risks are systematically transferred to local actors. These findings underscore that the distribution arena constitutes a primary site where formal inclusion intersects with subtle forms of exclusion in contemporary agrarian struggles.*

Keyword:

Agrarian distribution, intermediary traders, entrepreneurship, social arena, structural inequality

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1. Introduction

In contemporary agrarian studies, structural inequalities in the agrarian system are generally understood through issues of land ownership, access to natural resources, and the relationship between farmers and the state. Various policy interventions, such as agrarian reform and social forestry, are then designed as regimes of inclusion aimed at expanding access and improving the position of farmers. However, the dominant focus on the control of production assets still leaves fundamental questions: who is actually included in the reformed agrarian system, and who remains beyond the reach of the policies? In practice, agrarian actors such as farmers, labourers, and traders not only face disparities in land ownership but also have

to navigate an uneven agricultural product distribution structure, while adapting to practices and policies that do not always favor those in the weakest positions (Semedi & Bakker, 2014). However, the arena of agricultural product distribution is often treated as a neutral technical domain in agrarian policy analysis (Shohibuddin, 2019). At the same time, it is precisely there that social and economic relations are intensively conducted, and inequalities and exclusions are reproduced through mechanisms that are often invisible.

This situation can be concretely observed in the trade of potato commodities in Batur Village, Banjarnegara Regency, Central Java. This commodity has a complex distribution chain involving various levels of actors (Santoso, 2019). In practice, farmers in Batur sell their harvests to middlemen (collectors or intermediary traders), who then sell them to large traders or wholesalers with access to regional or national markets. Intermediary traders play an important role as a link between local production and a wider distribution network. They function as facilitators who bridge the needs of farmers with market demands that are not easily adjusted by the farmers. Many farmers experience failure due to the absence of practical and efficient markets, as well as limited capacity to independently distribute their harvests. Beyond their role as facilitators, intermediary traders are often positioned as influential patrons in the potato economy. This dependence forms a patron-client relationship, where the trader not only acts as a buyer but also as a provider of capital and access to vital resources (Megasari, 2019).

This article starts from the ambivalent position of intermediary traders in the agricultural product distribution system. The distribution system can be understood as a social arena that brings together various actors with different interests, such as capital, and diverse strategies, who compete with each other to maintain their positions and gain profits (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). However, this competition takes place under unequal conditions, as not all actors have the same access to economic, social, or symbolic capital (Habibi, 2022). Intermediary traders occupy an ambiguous position in the distribution arena. On one hand, they have strategic access to market networks, price information, and capital flows that are often perceived as sources of power in the distribution chain (Hardinawati & Fauzy, 2017; Julianto & Darwanto, 2017). This perception gives rise to a dominant narrative that positions intermediary traders as actors who control prices and accumulate the largest profits compared to other actors (Amang, 2016; Ningrum, 2021). However, this understanding tends to oversimplify the more complex reality of the distribution arena. Several studies show that in practice, the position of middlemen is actually fragile because they are under double pressure. The demands from upstream are the farmers as suppliers of goods, and the demands from downstream include price fluctuations, buyer preferences, and market uncertainties (Bernstein, 2010; Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Sitorus et al., 2018).

The position of intermediary traders is increasingly squeezed not only by the unequal market relations but also deepened by technological advancements. Price information that was previously monopolized by traders can now be accessed by farmers through the internet and other digital devices. As demonstrated by Muharam & Persada (2020) in the case of Sumberejo Village, the use of information technology such as websites, e-commerce, and social media allows farmers to obtain market information directly and expand their distribution reach without fully relying on intermediary traders. They are not only face systemic challenges due to market changes and digitalization, but also structural challenges that make their position increasingly vulnerable in a distribution system that formally appears inclusive, yet continues to reproduce structural biases that marginalize their role. Farmers now have a stronger bargaining position, able to compare prices from various regions, and are no longer fully dependent on the information provided by traders.

The ambiguity of the intermediary traders' position rarely receives serious attention in agrarian studies, which have so far focused their analysis on land tenure issues. Intermediary traders are often reduced to actors who benefit from the market, while the structural vulnerabilities they face in the distribution arena go unnoticed. In fact, they are intermediary actors who must survive within a distribution structure that is fragile, unstable, and systematically positioned beyond the reach of state intervention. Intermediary traders cannot be understood as absolute power holders as depicted in the narrative of exploitative middlemen, because intermediary traders are subjects shaped through the mechanism of 'remote regulation'. The state does not regulate the distribution arena; it frames distribution affairs as market affairs, thereby transferring the risks of price fluctuations, demand uncertainty, and distribution failures to local actors. This logic reflects the practice of governmentality in local development and economy (Li, 2007) where intermediary traders are forced to self-regulate, negotiate relationships with farmers and markets, and bear the consequences of uncertainties they did not create.

These changes present new challenges for middlemen as intermediaries, as market mechanisms are not entirely under their control. The distribution arena is also a space where various actors contest economic, social, and symbolic capital, and continuously negotiate their positions within an unequal structure. Intermediary traders are actors who gain agency and are subjects facing structural vulnerability. Placing intermediary traders as an analytical lens, this research shows that their position cannot be reduced to being merely dominant actors or victims. Intermediary traders operate in a distribution arena that is formally promised to be inclusive through market mechanisms, but practically neglected by direct state intervention. This condition reflects a form of remote regulation, where the state is present through discourses of modernization, efficiency, and market liberalization, but absent in providing institutional protection for local distribution actors. In such situations, intermediary traders develop various situational and relational survival strategies, which are a form of practical entrepreneurship born from the need to manage economic and social risks transferred to the local level. It is this ambiguity that emphasizes that the distribution arena is an integral part of the agrarian system, and that agrarian struggles occur within social relations, access to information, and informal entrepreneurial practices that support the circulation of everyday commodities. This article contributes to the debate in economic anthropology and agrarian studies by shifting the focus from production to distribution, and by demonstrating how formal inclusion regimes in agrarian policies still leave hidden forms of exclusion at the distribution level. This study focuses on exploring how intermediary traders in the potato distribution system in Batur navigate and respond to the risks that persistently shape their position. Additionally, this study also questions: how do intermediary traders remain in a vulnerable position within an apparently inclusive distribution arena?

2. Method

Data collection was carried out using a qualitative approach with an ethnographic method, aiming to understand in depth the social dynamics and economic strategies of actors involved in potato distribution through direct engagement in the field. Participant observation and in-depth interviews with various actors involved in the potato trade made it possible to trace the everyday practices of distribution actors, explore their narratives and experiences, and observe the strategies developed by traders within the dynamics of their vulnerable positions.

The research was conducted in Batur Village, Batur Sub-district, Banjarnegara Regency. This village was chosen because sufficient secondary data could be obtained to map the

distribution of potato production, allowing time, energy, and resources to be allocated more effectively to explore the issue of middlemen's vulnerability. The location was also selected because it has a complex distribution network involving a variety of economic actors, ranging from farmers, small traders (bakul kecil), large traders (bandar), to local and interregional markets, thus providing a more diverse and comprehensive picture.

Fieldwork, including observation and in-depth interviews, was carried out over approximately eight weeks. Preliminary observation was conducted first to map field conditions and assess their compatibility with the initial research concept. Participant observation was then carried out simultaneously with in-depth interviews. The technique for identifying informants was based on a "chain referral" approach, in which key informants were obtained through permissions and recommendations from village authorities and local stakeholders. Key informants provided broad and general insights into the roles of middlemen, while subsequent informants offered more detailed and authentic information regarding specific strategies and micro-level relational practices. In-depth interviews were guided by the main research questions and their sub-questions, which were later developed into more detailed questions as field instruments for data collection.

Informants were divided into two categories: tengkulak as small-scale middlemen, and large-scale tengkulak often referred to as bandar. The categorization of middlemen was based on the distribution flow and the length of the market chain. Middlemen who distributed or sold their goods outside the region, such as to Jakarta or West Java, were classified as large-scale tengkulak, whereas those who sold their goods to local markets or to larger traders were classified as small-scale middlemen. This categorization was based on definitions recognized both by the traders themselves and by local residents, although the final classification and validation were determined based on the informants' own validation and field consensus.

The duration and progress of fieldwork were adjusted according to the needs of data collection. Evaluation of data collection activities was conducted weekly to ensure that the data remained aligned with research objectives. If gaps in field data occurred, follow-up confirmation was conducted online; therefore, collecting and recording contact information was an essential step for data validation. Data analysis was carried out gradually and reflectively, considering the researcher's positionality and the research impact during fieldwork.

Any mismatch between the initial research questions or arguments and the data found in the field was evaluated and adjusted according to the authenticity of field findings. The informants' responses were treated as new empirical material that could be analyzed from multiple perspectives. The theoretical framework draws from Barth (1998a, 1998b) who views distribution as a social arena where economic actors act strategically, build alliances, and maintain their positions in ever-changing conditions.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Agrarian Inclusion Regime and the Distribution Arena

In the last two decades, agrarian policies in Indonesia have increasingly been framed within what is often referred to as the *agrarian inclusion regime* (Resosudarmo et al., 2019; Yuda, 2021). Through programs such as agrarian reform and social forestry, the state seeks to expand legal access to land for small farmers and Indigenous communities previously excluded from formal agrarian arrangements. However, as political anthropology has long emphasized, such inclusion is never neutral. Inclusion is always selective, determining which aspects of agrarian life are deemed worthy of intervention and which are left to operate through market

mechanisms (Angkoso et al., 2020; Li, 2007). The forms of exclusion produced by these policies often remain obscured, as they emerge gradually and are naturalized as “normal” consequences of market dynamics. The economy, therefore, cannot be understood as a standalone market mechanism, but rather as a process that is always institutionalized within specific social relations and institutions (Dale, 2008; Polanyi, 2002). Economic actions are embedded in social networks, norms, and relations of trust, rather than driven solely by individual rational calculation (Granovetter, 1985). This perspective calls for an expansion of the analytical lens to examine not only who is included in agrarian policies, but also who is marginalized, and in which arenas such marginalization is actively produced.

In practice, the state tends to confine its interventions to production and land ownership, while positioning the arena of agricultural product distribution as a technical–economic domain presumed to be self-regulating. This limitation reflects a form of *governmentality*, in which the state actively delineates the boundaries of its responsibility by displacing distributional risks onto local actors. Economic risks and uncertainties are not eliminated, but rather relocated to the level of individual actors through ostensibly neutral market mechanisms (Hall et al., 2013). The state is not entirely absent; instead, it refrains from direct intervention, allowing market uncertainties, price fluctuations, and distribution failures to be framed as outcomes of grassroots dynamics. Consequently, these risks are rarely recognized as structural problems (White, 2012) but are instead treated as individual burdens to be managed by farmers and intermediary traders themselves. This transfer of risk takes place within what can be understood as a *distribution arena* in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) a relational space in which actors encounter one another and compete under conditions of pronounced inequality in access to capital. The distribution arena becomes a site of contestation over positions, profits, and livelihood sustainability through the uneven control of economic, social, and symbolic capital (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). Distribution practices rely heavily on informal mechanisms, personal networks, and reputational trust, as documented in studies of the informal economy. Here, the state is present primarily through the establishment of rules that normalize competition as a market condition, while providing little institutional protection for actors operating within this arena.

Intermediary traders occupy an inherently ambivalent position within this structure. On the one hand, they possess access to distribution networks and price information; on the other, they remain dependent on large traders and brokers in downstream markets. These dynamics are consistent with findings from studies on agricultural commodity supply chains in Indonesia, which highlight the crucial role of intermediary traders in marketing while simultaneously underscoring their vulnerability to price volatility and payment uncertainty (Lumintang et al., 2022; Mardalisa & Varwasih, 2025). Dependence on large traders, pressure to maintain supply continuity, and price fluctuations determined beyond their control collectively place intermediary traders in layered forms of structural vulnerability. These practices suggest that intermediary traders’ entrepreneurship operates less as an expression of market power than as practical ingenuity in managing risks, maintaining social relationships, and sustaining positions within an unequal distribution arena. In Batur, field evidence demonstrates that survival under such uncertainty requires the development of adaptive strategies that function as informal risk-management mechanisms. One key strategy involves independently absorbing price risks during market downturns. Traders such as Mrs. Usi and Mr. Wawan, for instance, choose not to reduce purchase prices paid to farmers even when prices in major markets decline sharply. As Mr. Toso explained:

“If market prices fall, and farmers also reduce the selling price to the traders, there is a risk that farmers will no longer sell their harvest to the traders.”

– Translation of Interview with Mr. Toso, June 24, 2025.

Short-term losses are accepted as consequences that must be borne in order to sustain farmers’ trust as primary suppliers. Intermediary traders are particularly reluctant to jeopardize this trust, especially given the relatively high and continuous demand for potato supplies in the market. Conversely, when market prices rise above the initial agreement with farmers, the resulting price differential becomes a source of profit for traders. This profit is understood as compensation for the risks absorbed during periods of low prices. Traders describe this arrangement as ‘cross-temporal subsidies’: losses incurred in one period are offset by gains in another, with the primary objective of ensuring a smooth flow of goods and maintaining stable social relations with farmers. This strategy demonstrates that the economic practices of intermediary traders are not driven solely by profit maximization, but also by long-term social calculations within a competitive distribution arena.

The vulnerability of intermediary traders is also evident in their relationships with wholesalers or agents in central markets. To mitigate risk, traders carefully select their business partners, collaborating only with wholesalers who operate permanent stalls and possess strong reputations, information typically obtained through networks of fellow traders. However, this strategy does not always prove effective. Many traders, such as Mr. Toso and Mrs. Siti, have experienced fraud by market agents, resulting in losses amounting to hundreds of millions of rupiah. Nevertheless, they continue to prioritize timely payments to farmers even when payments from wholesalers have not yet been received. As emphasized by Mr. Takwin, maintaining reputation and trust with farmers is essential for preserving relational capital that remains profitable over the long term. For intermediary traders, symbolic capital is often regarded as more valuable than short-term economic gains.

“Intermediary traders strive to avoid being in debt to farmers. When payments from agents or large traders have not yet been received, intermediary traders choose to pay the farmers first. “

–Translation of Interview with Mr. Toso, June 26, 2025.

The practice of paying farmers before receiving payment from agents illustrates how distribution risks are systematically borne by local actors within the agrarian inclusion regime. This decision cannot be understood merely as an individual choice or as a reflection of personal ethics. Rather, it constitutes a response to the structural configuration of the distribution arena, which fails to provide institutional protection for intermediary actors. While the state expands formal access to land and production, it simultaneously withdraws from regulating agricultural distribution. The agrarian inclusion regime, which prioritizes the legalization of land access, operates on the assumption that markets will manage commodity circulation efficiently and fairly. Distribution is thus treated as a technical and economic domain governed by price mechanisms and informal contracts. Consequently, risks such as payment delays, price volatility, and transaction failures are not recognized as structural problems, but are instead framed as natural outcomes of market dynamics.

The decision of intermediary traders to avoid debt to farmers reflects the internalization

of risks transferred by the state to local actors. When large traders in downstream markets have not yet made payments, intermediary traders continue to pay farmers in order to maintain supply continuity and their reputation as reliable partners. This practice reveals that distributional stability is not guaranteed by institutional mechanisms, but is instead sustained through economic sacrifice and relational labor undertaken by intermediary traders. It also highlights how intermediary traders manage asymmetries of capital within the distribution arena. Large traders and wholesale agents occupy stronger positions because they control market access and payment flows, while farmers remain vulnerable as suppliers dependent on transactional continuity. Intermediary traders are situated between these two poles and function as buffers of risk. By paying farmers in advance, they preserve symbolic capital in the form of trust and reputation, even at the cost of short-term economic capital (Granovetter, 1985; Hart, 1973). This practice simultaneously demonstrates how the agrarian inclusion regime generates subtle forms of exclusion. Although intermediary traders are not explicitly excluded from agrarian policies, the state's restriction of intervention to the sphere of production implicitly transfers the burden of managing distributional risks to local actors.

The distribution arena can be understood as a social space where the impacts of the agrarian inclusion regime are produced and experienced unevenly. Here is where intermediaries find themselves in a paradoxical position: they are expected to support the smooth circulation of commodities, while simultaneously being left to bear the risks inherent in market uncertainty and the absence of state regulation. When institutional protection is absent, everyday entrepreneurial practices do not emerge as expressions of free rational choice, but rather as survival work bound by relations of trust, reputation, and moral obligation toward farmers. Distribution becomes an arena where economic risks are negotiated through personal sacrifices and continuous relational work. Reading this configuration allows us to see that the agrarian struggle does not stop at issues of land access and production, but continues in fragile distribution practices, where inequality is subtly reproduced through seemingly normal market mechanisms.

3.2 Survival Strategies of Intermediary Traders in an Uncertain Distribution Arena

If the previous section conceptualized the distribution arena as a space neglected by state intervention and conditioned by the logic of governmentality, this section begins with a more specific question: how do intermediary traders survive and maintain their positions within a fragile, competitive, and highly uncertain distribution arena? Rather than viewing intermediary traders as homogeneous actors or merely as extensions of market mechanisms, this section examines the concrete strategies they employ to manage both economic risks and relational risks. Relational risks here refer to the potential disruption of trust, reputation, and the continuity of trading relationships, which constitute key prerequisites for the smooth functioning of distribution.

Drawing on the concepts of arena and capital (Bourdieu, 2011; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and the perspective of situational agency (Barth, 1998a) the strategies of intermediary traders in this study are understood as responses that are both structured and situational to a distribution arena that offers no guarantees of price stability, payment certainty, or institutional protection. The distribution arena refers to a relational space in which intermediary traders interact with farmers, wholesalers, and other traders under conditions of unequal access to economic, social, and symbolic capital. Economic capital is reflected in the capacity to absorb price risks and provide upfront financing, social capital is manifested through networks of trust with farmers and wholesalers, while symbolic capital is visible in reputations as traders who

are “trustworthy” and “do not delay payments.” Within this framework, traders’ agency is understood as the capacity to make strategic decisions within tight and shifting structural constraints. The survival strategies of intermediary traders, conceived as forms of practical entrepreneurial ingenuity, refer to their ability to read market situations, weigh relational risks, and flexibly adjust their actions without severing the relationships that sustain distribution. Entrepreneurship, therefore, is understood not only normatively as individual innovation but also as a social practice embedded in an unequal and uncertain distribution arena.

From an interactional perspective, intermediary traders navigate the distribution arena as part of a complex web of social relations, in which trust, reputation, and negotiation define the boundaries of inter-actor relationships (Barth, 1998). Their role extends beyond mere buying and selling to include social labour, risk calculation, and the maintenance of complex relationships with both farmers and larger traders.

As actors positioned between two poles, intermediary traders face structural pressures from both upstream and downstream simultaneously (Sitorus et al., 2018). On the upstream side, they must maintain relationships with farmers, ensure supply continuity, and sustain trust through various nonformal mechanisms, such as providing capital at the beginning of the planting season, tolerating harvest delays, and absorbing part of the risks associated with crop failure (Megasari, 2019). On the downstream side, intermediary traders confront price fluctuations, demand uncertainty, volatile logistics costs, and competition with large traders and distribution networks that possess stronger access to capital and information. This dual pressure places intermediary traders in a vulnerable position, as failure on one side can immediately threaten the sustainability of their businesses. It is under these conditions that traders’ survival strategies become situational, adaptive, and highly dependent on their ability to balance relational demands and market pressures. This transformation also reshapes social relations between farmers and intermediary traders. Patron-client relationships that used to be the norm are slowly changing into more transactional ones based on cost-benefit analyses instead of loyalty or personal closeness. This sequence of interactions illustrates that risk management operates in layered ways, following the rhythm of distribution from upstream to downstream.

These changes generate new challenges for intermediary traders. They are required to continuously formulate survival strategies within an increasingly open distribution system, maintain bargaining positions, and renegotiate relationships with farmers who have become more rational and autonomous. At the same time, they confront social and economic risks simultaneously. Intermediary traders constantly adjust their strategies to navigate markets that are increasingly risky and competitive. Both small farmers and intermediary traders face market uncertainty and economic pressure through adaptive strategies, livelihood diversification, and the use of practical local knowledge (Berry, 1993; De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002; Escobar, 2011). These approaches help traders sustain trust and social ties with farmers even amid structural instability and market volatility. Several strategies employed by intermediary traders to cope with these vulnerable positions described in sub sections below.

3.2.1 Volume Reduction: A Strategy of Positional Adjustment

Price fluctuations constitute a structural condition shaping the potato distribution arena in Batur. Uncertainty is not an exceptional circumstance, but a normalized condition that is continuously negotiated by actors involved. For intermediary traders, price changes directly affect their position, as commodities purchased from farmers must be swiftly channeled to downstream markets whose absorption capacity is often unstable. The risks they face are not

merely economic, but also social, particularly the risk of damaging relationships with farmers when harvests are not absorbed or payments are delayed.

Reducing the volume of purchases during periods of price instability functions as a strategy of positional adjustment within the distribution arena. Rather than withdrawing entirely from transactions, traders choose to remain present as buyers, albeit with limited capacity. This strategy allows them to maintain access to supply without bearing the full burden of price volatility. Such practices reflect traders' efforts to preserve their relational position through careful management of economic capital, while simultaneously safeguarding the social capital built through trust-based relationships with farmers.

This strategy is operationalized through partial purchasing combined with strict quality selection. Intermediary traders who ship potatoes to wholesale markets tend to buy only large-sized potatoes that meet specific quality standards aligned with downstream demand and pricing. Smaller or lower-quality potatoes are excluded. The remaining produce is typically returned to farmers to be sold through local channels. Farmers usually sell these unsold potatoes to local traders or smaller-scale buyers who do not impose stringent size or quality requirements. Pak Agus, for instance, divides his harvest into two distribution channels: high-quality, large-sized potatoes are sold to Bu Us as his main intermediary trader, while smaller potatoes or those damaged by pests are sold to Pak Saiful, a local trader. This pattern indicates that volume reduction by intermediary traders does not necessarily entail total rejection of farmers' produce, but rather a selective adjustment attuned to downstream market signals.

Field data further show that this strategy is also enacted through reductions in the number of trucks and shipment volumes. Pak Takwin described his approach as follows:

"If at first it was 20 tons per week, now it's only two tons per week. I won't do it. I eventually stopped."

— Interview with Pak Takwin, 5 June 2025.

In this case, weekly market demand declined from 20 tons to only two tons, prompting the trader to discontinue shipments. This decision reflects the trader's threshold of risk tolerance, where small shipment volumes are deemed disproportionate to transportation costs, price risks, and payment uncertainties. Similar practices were observed in Bu Us's operations. Under normal conditions, she ships two to three trucks per day, each carrying approximately 7.5 tons. When market demand weakens, shipments are reduced to a single truck or suspended altogether. These practices illustrate that intermediary traders actively recalibrate the scale of their transactions in response to market signals, rather than rigidly maintaining distribution volumes amid fluctuating demand.

Volume reduction at the intermediary level does not remain an individual strategy; it produces cascading effects on downstream actors, particularly small-scale collectors. In recent months, Bu Saroh, a collector, experienced shifts in purchasing patterns from the intermediary traders who typically absorbed her stock. These traders now only accept large-sized potatoes considered easier to sell in downstream markets, while smaller potatoes are no longer purchased. Bu Saroh explained:

"In the past few months, the traders who buy my potatoes no longer ask for the small types. They say that only the big potatoes sell."

— Interview with Bu Saroh, 6 June 2025.

This selective practice reflects the increasingly vulnerable position of intermediary traders amid market fluctuations. On the one hand, they are constrained by narrowing standards and demands from downstream markets; on the other, they must continue to maintain supply relationships with actors below them. As the room for maneuver of intermediary traders contracts, market risk cannot be fully absorbed at their level and is instead transferred downward in a tiered manner to smaller collectors. Consequently, collectors like Bu Saroh bear the burden of accumulating unsold stocks of small potatoes, while their capacity to pass on risk to other actors is far more limited. This case demonstrates that vulnerability within the distribution arena is relational and stratified: market pressures at one node are not eliminated but redistributed to actors occupying weaker positions.

In addition to reducing volume, intermediary traders also employ delayed collection as a response to limited mobility and price volatility. However, this strategy does not always benefit traders. In practice, price agreements with farmers are often established prior to collection, while transport capacity; truck availability, loading schedules, and distance to market, may prevent same-day pickup. When collection is delayed, traders face the risk of price declines beyond their control. Pak Toso explained:

“What sometimes causes losses is when traders and farmers agree on today’s price, but we can’t load the goods today and have to load them tomorrow. By then, the price has already dropped.”

— Interview with Pak Toso, 24 June 2025.

In such situations, traders continue to pay farmers according to the previously agreed price, even when market prices have fallen by the time the goods are sold. This decision is made not out of ignorance of the resulting loss, but as an effort to preserve farmers’ trust as primary suppliers. The price differential risk resulting from delayed collection is borne entirely by intermediary traders, indicating that they function not only as commodity distributors but also as buffers for price risk within an arena characterized by deep uncertainty.

For intermediary traders with stronger managerial capacity and market experience, such as Bu Us, adjustments are also made through the management of written collection queues during periods of high demand. When market prices decline, these queues are not strictly enforced but may be deliberately slowed as a form of adjustment to prevailing conditions. This practice allows traders to regulate the rhythm of distribution without openly canceling agreements with farmers, while simultaneously reducing exposure to unfavorable price movements.

Another strategy that commonly emerges during price downturns is stricter quality selection. Traders tend to purchase only large-sized, high-quality potatoes, while still attempting to maintain relationships with regular farmers. As a result, sorted-out potatoes—particularly smaller-sized ones—become difficult to absorb, especially for small collectors who lack direct access to broader markets. This practice shows that volume and quality adjustments operate in tandem as responses to downstream market pressure. Quality selection reinforces the notion that volume reduction is not only quantitative but also qualitative, functioning as a mechanism of risk filtration within the distribution arena.

Drawing on Barth (1998a) perspective on situational agency, these strategies reflect traders’ capacity to act and make decisions within constraining structural limits. While the distribution arena exerts pressure through price volatility and market uncertainty, it does not

entirely eliminate room for agency. Reducing purchase volumes becomes one way for traders to navigate this arena without losing their position as trusted intermediaries, while also demonstrating practical ingenuity in managing distribution risks in the absence of institutional protection. These practices illustrate how traders actively respond to structural vulnerability through situationally adaptive strategies, while sustaining the social relationships that form the foundation of potato distribution in Batur.

3.2.2 Communication with Wholesalers as the Management of Relational Risk

Although intermediary traders function as a bridge between production areas and downstream markets, they do not exercise direct control over price formation or payment certainty. Their position is highly dependent on the responses of wholesale markets (Widyastuti & Setiyawan, 2024), which lie beyond their sphere of control. As a result, the risks they face are not only economic in nature but also relational. Intensive communication with wholesalers can therefore be understood as a strategy for managing relational risk within a distribution arena characterized by minimal formal guarantees. Through routine and multi-layered communication, traders seek to obtain information on price trends, market absorption capacity, and relatively secure delivery times. Such information functions as strategic capital, enabling traders to adjust purchasing volumes, determine loading schedules, and regulate the flow of commodities from the farm level without relying entirely on speculation.

Field data indicate that communication between intermediary traders and wholesalers does not occur sporadically but rather follows relatively structured stages within the distribution process. Prior to shipment, traders first confirm the existence of demand from wholesalers before purchasing potatoes from farmers. This confirmation serves as a prerequisite to prevent traders from bearing the risk of stock accumulation that cannot be absorbed by the market. Pak Toso explained that this initial communication determines whether the purchasing process can proceed:

“Communication with wholesalers takes place in the morning before loading or before collectors start looking for potatoes. If the goods are available, then loading proceeds and we buy from farmers.”

—Interview with Pak Toso, 25 June 2025.

This statement shows that traders’ decisions to purchase potatoes from farmers are highly dependent on the certainty of absorption by wholesalers (the market). In other words, upstream purchasing is not conducted speculatively but rather based on downstream market signals obtained through intensive communication with wholesalers. A similar practice was described by Mas Lukman, who noted that price and demand checks are conducted every morning via text messages:

“Every morning before starting work, I check prices and demand from wholesalers via WhatsApp.”

—Interview with Mas Lukman, 25 June 2025.

This stage illustrates that decisions to purchase potatoes from farmers do not stand alone, but are strongly conditioned by early signals from downstream markets. Communication thus functions as a risk-filtering mechanism before economic capital is deployed. Communication also continues in real time during the distribution process. Traders frequently conduct video

calls to show the quality of potatoes available in farmers' storage facilities while simultaneously ensuring that the goods match wholesalers' demand. In addition, reconfirmation takes place when sudden price changes occur in wholesale markets. These practices demonstrate that communication serves not merely as information exchange but also as a means of negotiating position amid rapid price fluctuations. After delivery, communication continues through confirmation of arrival, transmission of weighing slip photos, and follow-up regarding payment. Payments are generally made one to three days after the wholesaler receives the goods. This stage is particularly critical, as the time lag between delivery and payment constitutes a primary source of vulnerability for intermediary traders.

Intensive communication with wholesalers is a crucial prerequisite in potato distribution, yet in practice it is insufficient to guarantee transaction security. Risks of delayed payment, default, and even fraud remain tangible threats within a distribution arena that lacks institutional protection. Consequently, intermediary traders develop broader mechanisms for managing relational risk, one of which is social selection of wholesalers. This selection is not based on formal contracts but on assessments of reputation, track record, and the degree of social embeddedness of wholesalers within market networks. Pak Takwin, for instance, emphasized the importance of verifying the identity and background of wholesalers before entering into cooperation. This verification involves confirming ownership of a market stall, knowing the wholesaler's place of residence, and tracing their reputation through other traders in the same market:

“To avoid being cheated by agents, you need to know where they live, who they are, whether they own their stall or not, and whether their track record is bona fide. Usually we check through their peers.”

—Interview with Pak Takwin, 5 June 2025.

Wholesalers who own their own stalls are perceived as more trustworthy, as they are assumed to have long-term commitments to the market and reputations to maintain. In addition, traders apply extra precautionary mechanisms for new wholesalers through staged payment systems. Bu Siti and Mas Lukman explained that cooperation usually begins with small volumes and cash payments before full trust is extended:

“If the money hasn't appeared yet, don't proceed. With a new wholesaler... even less than ten million rupiah already makes you worried.”

—Interview with Mas Lukman, 26 June 2025.

This principle indicates that trust within the distribution arena is not instantaneous but is built gradually through a series of tested transactions. To strengthen their bargaining position and reduce the potential for disputes, traders also make use of written evidence and digital traces. Weighing slips are photographed and sent via WhatsApp, while price agreements are confirmed through written messages prior to shipment, allowing communication to function simultaneously as an informal safeguarding mechanism. Wholesalers' reputations thus operate as symbolic capital that determines access to transactions and the sustainability of trading relationships. For intermediary traders, caution in partner selection and the maintenance of intensive communication constitute strategies for sustaining their position within a highly competitive and high-risk distribution arena. In this sense, communication forms part of the practical ingenuity of intermediary traders.

Relational risk management is also manifested through market diversification strategies. Large traders such as Bu Us and Bu Siti ship potatoes to multiple wholesale markets, Kramat Jati, Cibitung, Cikopo, Bandung, as well as Surabaya and Bali to avoid dependence on a single market. When prices in major wholesale markets are deemed unfavorable, they redirect sales to local markets closer to Desa Batur, such as Ajibarang or Purwokerto, albeit with smaller volumes. This strategy reflects traders' flexibility while simultaneously underscoring the limitations of their position within a distribution arena marked by uncertainty. Intermediary traders can thus be understood as actors who continuously negotiate their position between downstream market pressures and the demands of farmers as suppliers. This negotiation is also reflected in upstream trading relations, particularly through the principle of "never owing farmers," which functions both as a moral foundation and an economic strategy.

3.2.3. Careful Calculation of Income and Expenditure

Careful financial management constitutes one of the key strategies through which intermediary traders survive within the potato distribution arena, an arena marked by price fluctuations, unstable logistics costs, and uncertainty of payment from downstream markets. In conditions where the state provides neither price guarantees nor institutional protection, even minor miscalculations can have serious consequences for business continuity. For this reason, the recording of income and expenditure is not practiced merely as an accounting technique but as an adaptive mechanism for managing risks that are structurally embedded in the distribution arena. Traders do not simply calculate the margin between buying and selling prices but also take into account transportation costs, loading and unloading fees, sorting expenses, and potential depreciation in value due to declining commodity quality. These calculations help traders determine safe transaction thresholds and adjust purchasing volumes in accordance with their available capital capacity.

Such financial management practices are generally simple in form, yet highly consequential in effect. Pak Takwin, for example, routinely conducts monthly financial evaluations by dividing his financial position into three main categories: receivables in the market, debts to farmers, and cash available at home. Through this basic bookkeeping system, he is able to monitor his overall business position and anticipate potential losses at an early stage. Conversely, the absence of systematic record-keeping becomes a serious source of vulnerability. Small losses often go unnoticed when they are not recorded and gradually accumulate into substantial losses over time, as Pak Takwin emphasized in recounting his observations of other traders who eventually went bankrupt:

"How much money is in the market, how much debt is owed to farmers, how much cash is at home. From there I can calculate whether I make a profit or a loss each month."

"If it's not calculated, losing one million doesn't feel like a loss. It keeps going, and after a year the loss has already become very large without being noticed."

"Many traders don't calculate like this. Losing little by little doesn't feel like anything, until in the end they lose a lot."

—Interview with Pak Takwin, 6 June 2025.

Field observations also indicate that weak financial management has direct consequences

for traders' relationships with farmers. Traders who lack orderly bookkeeping often delay payments without clear planning, sometimes for more than a month. Such delays are frequently not driven by bad intentions but by a "digging one hole to cover another" practice resulting from poorly managed cash flow. The effects are cumulative: traders' reputations deteriorate, farmers' trust erodes, and supply relationships are eventually severed. Within a distribution arena that relies heavily on personal relationships and trust, failures in financial management erode not only economic capital but also the social capital that sustains the intermediary trader's position.

In this sense, financial calculation can be understood as part of a defensive and situational form of entrepreneurship practiced by intermediary traders. While traders have no control over price fluctuations or the payment rhythms of the market, they still retain a degree of agency in managing how these risks affect their economic and relational positions. Discipline in financial recording and calculation thus becomes a strategic instrument for maintaining existence within a fragile distribution arena. At the same time, it reveals that entrepreneurship in this context is not a normative choice but a practical response to risk transfer institutionalized through the absence of state protection.

3.2.4. Maintaining Farmers' Trust through Transparency and Social Proximity

Within the potato distribution arena in Batur, the sustainability of trading relations is not determined by formal contracts or state regulation, but by reputations that are continuously produced and tested through everyday practices. Transparency emerges as a structural demand imposed by a distribution arena that lacks state protection. If the distribution arena is understood as a relational space permeated by price uncertainty and payment risk, then reputation functions as a form of symbolic capital that enables traders to maintain their positions. This capital is generated through concrete practices such as open weighing, clear explanations of weight deductions, and timely payment. These practices operate as signals of reliability that are collectively observed, interpreted, and evaluated by farmers and small-scale collectors.

Violations of transparency trigger effective social sanctions. Farmers repeatedly identify *main timbangan* (manipulating scales) as the most damaging form of malpractice. Reducing weight by several kilograms per sack is understood as an indicator of bad faith on the part of traders. This practice is often accompanied by the tactic of nominally increasing the purchase price to mask weight manipulation so that cheating does not immediately appear in a single transaction but accumulates over time in farmers' experiences. However, the distribution arena does not tolerate such practices in the long run. Information about dishonest traders circulates through farmers' social networks and informal communication channels—*rasan-rasan* (gossip) among farmers, as well as WhatsApp groups and Facebook posts where farmers share grievances. As several informants noted, a trader's bad reputation can quickly spread across villages, prompting farmers to redirect their supply to other traders. This mechanism of social sanctioning renders reputation not only a resource but also a disciplinary instrument that compels traders to internalize the boundaries of acceptable behavior within the distribution arena.

Cases of delayed payment reveal a similar mechanism. Traders who fail to pay promptly gradually lose their legitimacy as trading partners. Bu Saroh's account of a collector who defaulted on payments illustrates how the failure to maintain financial credibility ultimately leads to the collapse of supply networks. Participation in social events, providing assistance during times of crisis, and maintaining regular communication beyond economic transactions

contribute to an image of long-term commitment. Such practices do not automatically yield immediate economic returns, but they strengthen the perception that traders are relationally invested. As emphasized by Hudayana (2018) economic practices in rural contexts cannot be separated from relational work and moral considerations enacted in everyday life. Findings from Batur Village show that relational work constitutes a prerequisite for the continuity of distribution, while also indicating how actors are compelled to manage structural risks that they did not create.

This situation differs from the context of peasant rebellion analyzed by Scott (1977) where subsistence ethics and obligations were renegotiated under conditions of acute moral breach. In the potato distribution arena in Batur, negotiation occurs within an increasingly commodified distribution system, where relations among farmers, intermediary traders, and downstream markets are shaped by a combination of economic calculation, relational work, and the management of risks that lack institutional protection. These findings demonstrate that the stability of potato distribution in Batur is not produced by formal market mechanisms but by continuous social labor performed by actors within the arena. Practices of transparency and social proximity do not reflect entrepreneurial virtue but rather a form of entrepreneurship produced by a high-risk distribution arena in which responsibility for relational stability and business continuity is fully shifted onto individual actors.



Figure 1. The middle man weighs the potatoes in front of the farmers at the farmers' houses.

The four strategies discussed in this section show that the sustainability of intermediary traders' roles is determined by their capacity to navigate the distribution arena. Transparency and social proximity, in particular, generate a reputation as symbolic capital that shapes long-term access to supply. These strategies are mutually reinforcing and operate as minimum prerequisites for survival in a distribution arena that offers no institutional protection. Unlike economic analyses that locate inequality primarily in structures of production and the distribution of productive factors, this article demonstrates that agrarian inequality is also produced and reproduced within the distribution arena through social relations, information asymmetries, and the transfer of risk (Sihite et al., 2025). Traders' agency lies in their ability to read the boundaries of the arena and act strategically within them. What is often read as intermediary traders' "entrepreneurship" cannot be understood as individual virtue or free choice but rather as an effect of a distribution regime that shifts the burden of risk management, relational stability, and business sustainability entirely onto actors.

Agribusiness studies commonly approach horticultural commodity distribution through supply chain frameworks that emphasize efficiency in the flow of goods, information, and finance. Romland et al. (2024) for example, analyze the cabbage supply chain in Purbalingga by

focusing on actor structures, marketing margins, and distribution efficiency. The findings of this article both complement and critique such approaches by showing that distribution is not merely a channel for commodity flows but a relational arena in which economic and moral risks are negotiated at multiple levels by local actors. Under these conditions, intermediary traders do not occupy a stable dominant position; rather, they inhabit an ambivalent situation, expected to act as resilient, transparent, and adaptive entrepreneurs, while simultaneously constrained by structural uncertainties beyond their control. Entrepreneurship in the potato distribution arena in Batur thus emerges not as the cause of success but as a consequence of structural vulnerability that must be continuously managed in order for distribution to persist.

4. Conclusion

This essay demonstrates that the assumptions embedded in state-led market inclusion policies and development-oriented agrarian policies, which view markets as neutral arenas, do not fully correspond with dynamics on the ground. A study of potato trade in Batur reveals that distribution constitutes a distinct arena that becomes a crucial space in which agrarian inequalities are produced and reproduced. While changes in information technology and market digitalization have shifted the ways actors access price and demand information, these shifts are selective and do not eliminate the structural vulnerabilities embedded in the positions of distribution actors. As shown in the preceding sections, the potato market does not operate as an objective price-setting mechanism but rather through relational networks linking farmers, intermediary traders, and downstream markets. Farmers' dependence on intermediary traders is not merely the outcome of individual rational choice but a consequence of the structural configuration of a distribution arena that lacks institutional protection. Intermediary traders occupy an ambivalent position. They are neither dominant actors who fully control the market nor passive intermediaries. The sustainability of their intermediary role depends on their capacity to navigate price pressures, delayed payments, and farmers' moral expectations through intensive and continuous relational work.

The argument advanced in this article shows that the entrepreneurial practices of intermediary traders, ranging from price risk management and financial discipline to the production of reputation, cannot be read as indicators of the success of agrarian inclusion regimes. Instead, these practices represent responses to the operation of market governmentality, which, as evidenced in everyday distribution practices, systematically shifts the burden of uncertainty and distributional risk onto local actors. In a distribution arena that is allowed to function informally and without institutional protection, both traders and farmers are compelled to internalize structural risks as individual responsibilities, even though the sources of these risks lie beyond their control. This article thus extends agrarian studies that have predominantly focused on production and land control. The findings underscore that contemporary agrarian exclusion does not occur only in fields but also in warehouses, distribution channels, and the networks of trust that sustain commodity circulation. Ignoring the distribution arena means overlooking a key mechanism through which agrarian inequality is reproduced, while simultaneously obscuring how local actors strive to endure within fragile and uncertain rural economies. Moreover, this article demonstrates that market mechanisms that appear inclusive in form become the very medium through which the vulnerability of intermediary traders is continually reproduced, as responsibility for relational stability, business sustainability, and risk management is transferred entirely to the level of local actors.

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