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Study Assessment of Soil and Water Quality Conditions on Barren Agricultural Lands in Tropical Regions

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ABSTRACT

Barren land is non-productive land that is difficult to use as a medium for integrated agricultural cultivation. The aim of this research is to determine the profile and feasibility status of land in barren agricultural areas quantitatively. The research method used was descriptive with purposive data collection. Data analysis included SQI and WQI parametric analyses. The research results indicate that the ideal soil parameter is only pH 7.5–7.7, while for water parameters it is pH 8.0–8.1, meeting water quality standards. SQI values range from 0.44 to 0.49 and WQI from 0.45 to 0.57. SQI and WQI values at the research site fall into the poor category, indicating difficulty in converting the land into agricultural use. SQI and WQI show a strong correlation as depicted in the model $Y = 4.113 + 0.026$ ($R^2 = 0.789$). Correlation tests showed strong correlations in soil between redox potential and soil pH (0.449), and redox potential and organic matter (0.377). Weak correlations were found between cation exchange capacity and soil pH (0.009), and nitrate and total N (0.517). In water, strong correlations were found between water pH and nitrite (0.302) and ammonia (0.529). Additionally, water pH showed weak correlations with carbon dioxide (0.752) and organic matter (0.659). The values of soil and water parameters have an immediate impact on plant growth patterns. Therefore, integrated agricultural cultivation patterns need to be developed. In conclusion, empirically, the condition of barren land indicates poor land use feasibility. The poor profile and biophysical feasibility conditions of barren land are attributed to environmental pollution and runoff from other land areas.

Keywords: Biophysics; Plant; SQI; WQI

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1. Introduction

Crop cultivation is a significant agribusiness activity widely practiced in tropical regions^[1]. Indonesia, as the largest tropical country in Southeast Asia, exhibits diverse agricultural land characteristics^[2]. One type of agricultural land found in Indonesia is barren land. Barren land can be defined as critical land that is difficult to use for intensive agricultural cultivation^[3]. Marginal land is often found in barren agricultural areas and agricultural areas adjacent to household activity locations^[4].

The occurrence of barren land can be attributed to continuous intensification of chemical usage in those areas^[5]. Several heavy metal elements such as Pb, Cd, Hg, and Cr which are intense in the soil will affect the formation of marginal agricultural land^[6]. Additionally, intense sedimentation processes and prolonged droughts also influence the formation of critical land^[3]. These critical agricultural lands significantly disrupt farming activities since not all commodities can be cultivated in such conditions. Moreover, barren land also exhibits very low harvest productivity, making it highly unsuitable for agricultural land use^[5].

Agricultural land in tropical regions can recover if there is a structured reduction in land use intensity^[7]. Furthermore, this recovery process requires a long time and physiological adaptation of some plants to effectively utilize the land^[8]. This implies that critical land requires time and stages to revert to its original state for integrated agricultural land use^[9]. This is due to the semi-comfortable nature of agricultural land, which causes a long process of purifying the soil from the impact of environmental pollution^[10].

Barren agricultural land has an impact on the reproducibility of crop cultivation in the area^[2]. From an empirical study related to the performance of rice cultivation on barren land, it can only produce a harvest productivity of 1,000 kg/ha^[11]. Marginal land also affects the level of biodiversification of rice plant species that can be cultivated only 5 species^[12]. Barren land also affects the ecological characteristics of the environment in the area^[13]. The existence of massive marginal land is also closely related to the impact of climate change in tropical regions^[14]. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the feasibility status of land based on soil and water quality parameters to determine its suitability for agricultural activities.

Based on the aforementioned background, the objec-

tive of this study is to quantitatively determine the profile and feasibility status of barren agricultural lands. It is hoped that the findings of this research can be used as a reference for more comprehensive land management based on existing land feasibility analyses.

2. Methods

2.1 Research location

The data collection for this research was conducted in barren agricultural lands in Wonopringgo Village, Pekalongan (109°27'30"–109°28'13" and 7°50'–7°50'84"). Data collection was carried out at three different locations (**Figure 1**), considering the differences in land characteristics. The ecological profile of the sampling locations included areas of paddy irrigation flow, active agricultural lands, and semi-permanent lands.

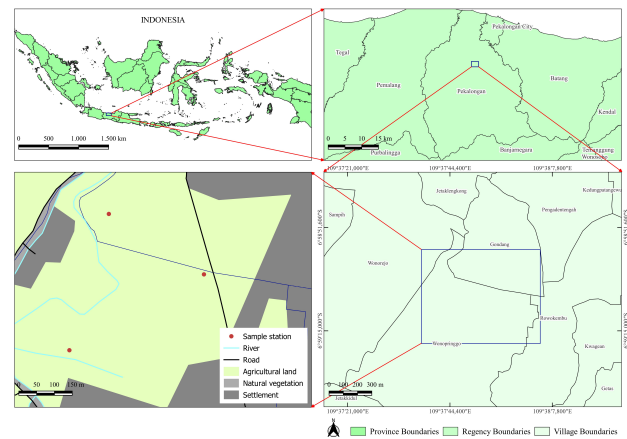


Figure 1. Sampling location map.

2.2 Sampling parameters

The data samples were obtained from three different sampling locations. At each sampling location, water and soil samples were collected periodically. Soil quality parameters observed included soil type and texture measured using a hydrometer, as well as soil pH, redox potential, organic carbon (OC), organic matter (OM), and cation exchange capacity (CEC) measured using APHA methods^[15]. Total nitrogen (N), C/N ratio, and nitrate (NO₃) parameters were measured using the Tan method^[16].

Water quality parameters observed included water pH measured with a Eutech EC-pHtest30 pH tester, salinity mea-

sured with an ATAGO Master IP65 refractometer, dissolved oxygen and water temperature measured with a YSI550i DO Meter. Other parameters included carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrate (NO₃), orthophosphate (PO₄), ammonia (NH₃), Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD), Total Organic Matter (TOM), alkalinity, and nitrite (NO₂) measured using water quality assessment methods^[15]. Data collection for soil and water quality was conducted both in situ and ex situ.

2.3 Data analysis

The description of water and soil quality data was done narratively. The research results were tested using non-parametric correlation tests to identify relationships between variables. Statistical analysis in this study was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2011 and SPSS version 19.02 software. The analysis results were then used to draw conclusions from the analysis.

2.4 WQI and SQI analysis

The Water Quality Index (WQI) and Soil Quality Index (SQI) data are estimated based on the equation by Ma^[17]:

$$WQI/SQI = \sum_{k=1}^n (W_k V F_k) \quad (1)$$

$$V F_k = \sum_{i=1}^m (A_{ki} P_{ij}) \quad (2)$$

Where: WQI/SQI is the water/soil quality index; W_k is the weight of the k variable; $V F_k$ is the principal component score; A_{ki} is the weight of the variable i ; P_{ij} standard coefficient; i is a variable; and j is the maximum standard variable.

The score values on the WQI and SQI values are grouped by class using the *Sturges* formula^[18]:

$$\text{Sturges formula} : n_c = 1 + 3.3 \text{Log}_{10}(N) \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Classrange} : h = A/n_c \quad (4)$$

Where: n_c is the number of classes, N is the value of the observation result, A is the data range, and h is the class range. Furthermore, the calculation results from the formula are classified into ranks I to IV, where rank "I" is the *excellent* category.

From **Table 1** depicts the *Soil Quality Index* (SQI) and *Water Quality Index* (WQI) values at an object site. The SQI

and WQI values are based on the classification results of existing value ranges.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Soil parameters

The soil parameters at the research site are considered quite extreme based on the profile of soil physics and chemistry parameters (**Table 2**). The only soil parameter that is ideal ranges from pH 7.5 to 7.7. Other parameters such as redox potential, total nitrogen (N), organic matter, cation exchange capacity, and nitrate tend to be low, indicating that the land here is infertile. The infertility of the soil at the research site is due to nutrient deficiencies and the aridity of the land.

The soil characteristics at the research location are described as sand and clay with a low percentage of tightness (**Table 2**). Clay soil has a low water solubility level making the few solubility of nutrients^[19]. Sand soil tends to have a low fertility level due to minimal nutrient solubility^[20]. Both types of soil are not ideal when used as a medium for cultivating paddy, vegetables, and fruits^[19-21]. Sand and clay soils are more suitable for use as a medium for cultivating aquatic plants with an integrated control system^[22]. The presence of sand and clay soil types in highland areas triggers nutrient porosity which causes aridity in the soil layer structure^[23].

Barren agricultural land triggers nutrient deficits, thereby affecting soil productivity profiles^[24]. Soils have a varied capacity to absorb nutrients^[13]. On average, barren land has dry and nutrient-poor soil characteristics^[21]. Additionally, the levels of cation and anion exchange capacities tend to be low due to the lack of minerals in barren land^[24].

3.2 Water parameters

The water quality parameters at the research site also tend to be poor to support agricultural cultivation activities. The water quality parameter that meets the standard for agricultural business cultivation is only pH (8.0–8.1). Other parameters such as nitrite, carbon dioxide, nitrate, phosphate, ammonia, COD, and organic matter tend to be very low (**Table 3**). The poor water quality parameters are due to the water sources flowing at the research site having a deficient nutrient profile.

Table 1. Table of suitability of SQI and WQI values.

The value of WQI	Water/soil conditions	Interval classes	The value of SQI
> 0.80	Excellent	I	>0.75
0.60 < WQI < 0.80	Good	II	0.50 < SQI < 0.75
0.30 < WQI < 0.60	Poor	II	0.25 < SQI < 0.50
0.05 < WQI < 0.30	Badly	IV	0.03 < SQI < 0.25

Table 2. Soil quality parameters at the research location.

Location	Soil parameters									
	pH	Redox	O.C	N total	OMG	CEC	NO ₃	% sand	% silt	% clay
Station 1	7.7 ± 0.11	19.08 ± 6.33	0.45 ± 0.19	0.35 ± 0.04	0.93 ± 0.21	23.55 ± 14.12	2.22 ± 2.12	31 ± 18.43	39 ± 12.24	16 ± 7.41
Station 2	7.5 ± 0.12	11.43 ± 6.89	0.33 ± 0.25	0.25 ± 0.08	0.87 ± 0.21	26.75 ± 15.10	2.31 ± 2.22	29 ± 19.21	40 ± 12.27	19 ± 7.47
Station 3	7.5 ± 0.12	19.75 ± 7.11	0.52 ± 0.20	0.28 ± 0.08	0.93 ± 0.25	28.75 ± 14.45	3.07 ± 2.37	29 ± 18.25	42 ± 12.30	17 ± 7.56

Water quality parameters are crucial to support agricultural cultivation activities as they contribute to the addition of external nutrients^[25]. Ideal water is neutral in pH and has a balanced abundance of mineral elements^[26]. Water in plants is also utilized as a medium for nutrient transport^[27]. Poor water quality will affect the growth patterns of plants in that location^[25].

3.3 Soil Quality Index (SQI)

The *Soil Quality Index* (SQI) values at the research site range from 0.44 to 0.49, showing variability (**Figure 2**). The range of values from 0.44 to 0.49 falls within Interval Class 2, indicating that the soil condition at the research site falls into the "poor" category or tends to be poor. This classification illustrates that the soil condition at the research site is slightly contaminated and has a low level of land productivity. The contamination of agricultural land and the low level of land productivity are caused by high levels of land pollution activities in that location. Intensive use of chemicals and household waste runoff affect the level of agricultural land pollution^[28].

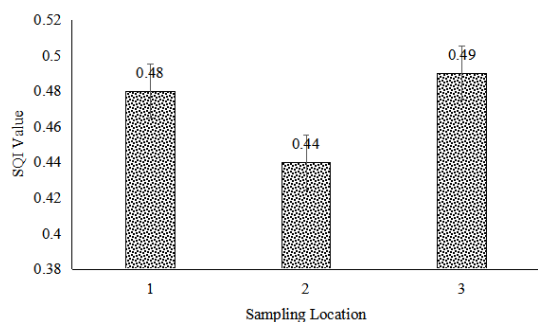


Figure 2. SQI value of the land where the research is located.

The *Soil Quality Index* (SQI) is used as an analytical method to classify and determine the status of land conditions^[29]. Poor-quality land is highly unsuitable for agricultural and livestock activities. To improve poor land conditions, fertilization processes or land recovery from chemical use can be undertaken^[13]. Good land is characterized by a balanced composition of minerals and nutrients^[30].

3.4 Water Quality Index (WQI)

The *Water Quality Index* (WQI) values at the research site range from 0.45 to 0.57, showing variability (**Figure 3**). The range of values from 0.45 to 0.57 falls within Interval Class 2, indicating that the water condition at the research site falls into the "poor" category. The poor water condition at the research site is due to contamination from upstream sources of the river. Additionally, pollution from agricultural lands also contributes to the contamination process in the waters of the research site. Water is a medium that readily dissolves, making it highly susceptible to interacting with pollutants and contaminants^[31].

The condition of the *Water Quality Index* (WQI) is essential for mapping water conditions at a cultivation site^[32]. When the Water Quality Index (WQI) is not ideal, a recovery process can be implemented through liquid purification^[25]. Water that does not meet standards will be difficult to use as a medium or supportive factor in integrated agricultural activities^[33]. In agricultural activities, both the quantity and quality of water are prioritized as essential factors^[34].

The relationship between SQI and WQI values was compared using linear regression in **Figure 4**. This means that 79% of the WQI value in barren agricultural lands is

Table 3. Water quality parameters at the research location.

Location	Water parameters								
	Temperature	pH	NO ₂	CO ₂	NO ₃	PO ₄	NH ₃	COD	OMG
Station 1	26.5 ± 1.88	8.0 ± 0.61	0.012 ± 0.68	0.006 ± 0.11	0.022 ± 0.45	0.057 ± 0.15	0.041 ± 0.19	226.25 ± 25.12	51.05 ± 8.22
Station 2	26.8 ± 1.87	8.1 ± 0.69	0.037 ± 0.64	0.016 ± 0.13	0.074 ± 0.40	0.078 ± 0.17	0.027 ± 0.18	205.34 ± 24.25	63.15 ± 8.36
Station 3	27.1 ± 1.80	8.0 ± 0.62	0.025 ± 0.62	0.010 ± 0.15	0.081 ± 0.47	0.057 ± 0.19	0.032 ± 0.19	333.22 ± 25.25	55.40 ± 8.25

influenced by the SQI value, while the remaining 21% is affected by other factors. The strong influence of SQI on WQI indicates a close relationship between soil and water conditions in the natural ecosystem. Regions with critical and polluted land conditions will affect water conditions inclusively [24].

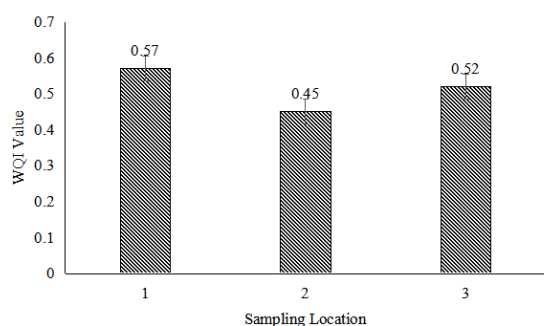


Figure 3. WQI value of the land where the research location is located.

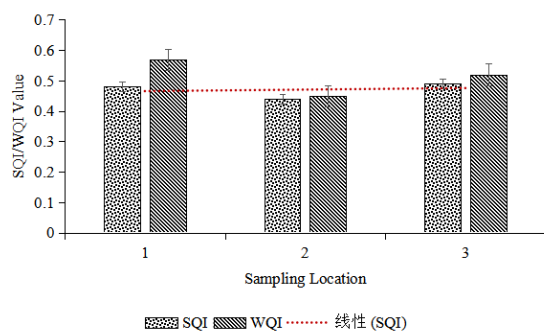


Figure 4. The relationship between the influence of SQI values on WQI and their correlation.

In fertile agricultural land, the primary indicators considered are soil condition, followed by water quality and air temperature stability [35]. Fertile soil will influence the abundance of nutrients available for plant growth [3]. Good quality and quantity of water will affect the availability of micronutrients for plants [36]. The quality of soil and water cannot be separated in crop maintenance practices in open areas [24].

3.5 Relationship of soil and water parameters

Based on the correlation test results, soil pH, redox potential, cation exchange capacity, organic matter, nitrate, and total nitrogen were found to have varying degrees of correlation (Table 4). Redox potential with soil pH (0.449) and redox potential with organic matter (0.377) showed a strong correlation. Meanwhile, cation exchange capacity with soil pH (0.009) and nitrate with total nitrogen (0.517) showed a weak correlation. Other parameters did not show significant correlations.

The high impact of correlation between redox potential and soil pH on other soil quality parameters is because these two parameters are fundamental soil parameters. Soil pH affects soil physicochemical processes [37], while redox potential influences cation exchange capacity and soil mineral solubility [38]. The dynamics of soil pH and redox potential in agricultural land are generally influenced by liming processes [8].

Water parameters also show very minimal correlation levels with each other. Based on the correlation test results in Table 5, only water pH, phosphate, ammonia, nitrite, and carbon dioxide show correlations. Water pH has a strong correlation with nitrite (0.302) and ammonia (0.529). Furthermore, pH also has a weak correlation with phosphate (0.752), and carbon dioxide has a weak correlation with organic matter (0.659). Generally, it can be analyzed that water pH significantly influences the solubility of nutrients in aquatic ecosystems.

pH affects the nitrification process, impacting the dynamics of nitrite and nitrate concentrations [39]. Excessively basic pH can make ammonia toxic [40]. Additionally, water pH affects the phosphorus cycle in aquatic environments in a chain-like pattern [41]. This means that pH in aquatic ecosystems profoundly influences both the nitrification and phosphorus cycles comprehensively.

High concentrations of organic matter also affect the solubility of carbon dioxide in water [42]. Abundant or-

Table 4. Correlation test results of soil quality parameters.

Variables	pH	Redox	O.C	N Total	OMG	CEC	NO ₃	% sand	% silt	% clay
pH	1									
Redox	0.449**	1								
O.C	0.391	0.293	1							
N Total	0.107	0.662	0.971	1						
OMG	0.201	0.377**	0.902	0.078	1					
CEC	0.009*	0.935	0.602	0.406	0.084	1				
NO ₃	0.331	0.018	0.719	0.517*	0.106	0.519	1			
% sand	-0.088	0.159	-0.902	0.943	0.219	0.796	0.739	1		
% silt	-0.218	0.173	0.175	0.019	0.023	0.204	0.015	0.935	1	
% clay	0.693	0.42	0.567	0.101	0.015	0.294	0.619	0.077	0.187	1

Table 5. Results of correlation test of water quality parameters.

Variables	Temperature	pH	NO ₂	CO ₂	NO ₃	PO ₄	NH ₃	COD	OMG
Temperature	1								
pH	0.219	1							
NO ₂	-0.118	0.302**	1						
CO ₂	0.109	-0.833	0.246	1					
NO ₃	0.105	0.521	0.36	0.555	1				
PO ₄	0.656	0.752*	0.552	0.392	0.445	1			
NH ₃	-0.693	0.529**	0.228	0.593	0.139	0.439	1		
COD	0.67	0.205	0.793	0.629	0.333	0.704	0.592	1	
OMG	-0.458	-0.105	0.573	0.659*	0.218	-0.437	0.205	-0.068	1

ganic matter increases oxygen consumption levels for decomposition processes, resulting in water conditions becoming oxygen-deficient^[43]. Oxygen-deficient (hypoxic) waters lead to excessive carbon dioxide solubility^[36]. Over-saturated carbon dioxide levels become toxic to plants^[44].

The solubility of several elements such as carbon dioxide and metal elements will make the soil barren^[45]. This also affects the level of soil fertility and low nutrient absorption^[12]. Low nutrient absorption has an impact on the level of soil fertility and plant cultivars that can grow^[46]. The best alternative to this condition is to carry out a land recovery process by means of organic fertilization and reducing the intensity of land use^[47]. This is done so that the soil can recover and acclimatize to environmental conditions^[48].

The feasibility status of land for agricultural cultivation is influenced by the performance of biotic and abiotic environmental factors^[49]. Soil and water are abiotic components of agricultural land that directly impact land suitability^[3]. Therefore, managing abiotic components is crucial in integrated agricultural activities. Poor abiotic soil components prevent biotic elements from thriving or supporting optimal environmental balance^[38].

Barren lands are extremely challenging for integrated agricultural cultivation. Poor abiotic environmental parameters significantly disrupt systematic plant cultivation processes^[50]. This is evidenced by the correlation found in this research regarding the degradation of soil and water quality parameters. If soils in agricultural areas are contaminated and of poor quality, they will similarly impact the surrounding water conditions inclusively^[51]. The coexistence of soil and water in the same zone greatly increases the potential for cross-contamination from existing pollutant wastes^[26]. The existence of marginal land in the research area is also closely related to the existence of low rainfall. The results of data from the Pekalongan Regency Statistics in 2021 obtained a rainfall value of 27 mm/day. A rainfall value of 10-50 mm/day has a low level of water solubility and is poor in nutrients^[52].

Lands in tropical regions should ideally exhibit better biophysical parameter profiles. Adequate sunlight exposure and sufficient rainfall make tropical soils more feasible^[53]. However, tropical regions, synonymous with agrarian activities, affect unplanned crop cultivation cycles^[54]. Consequently, there is a decline in land carrying capacity, leading to

a shift in land performance to non-productive barren lands^[7]. Consistent agricultural engineering activities are necessary to address this issue so that barren agricultural lands can undergo recovery^[55].

4. Conclusions

The profile of barren agricultural land generally shows poor conditions when viewed through the concentration of abiotic environmental parameters. Empirically, the condition of barren land also shows a poor level of land use feasibility from the results of the SQI (0.44–0.49) and WQI (0.45–0.57) analysis. The profile and biophysical conditions of barren land are caused by environmental pollution and runoff from household waste. Therefore, synergy in barren land management by relevant stakeholders is needed.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization and methodology: A.H. and H.A.; analysis data: H.A., F.M., A.R., S.Y. and S.; writing original draft: H.A.; editing and visualization: F.M. and A.R.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Pekalongan University in 1 July 2024.

Data Availability Statement

This research data is confidential and becomes a research archive.

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