

## Dynamics of Life of People's Palm Plantation Farmers in Silaut South Coast District (1992-2023)

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas tentang dinamika kehidupan petani sawit rakyat di Silaut Pesisir Selatan. Sawit pertama kali diperkenalkan oleh penduduk transmigrasi dari pulau Jawa dan menjadi sektor ekonomi utama masyarakat Silaut saat ini. Sawit ini tidak hanya memberikan kesejahteraan kepada petani sawit tetapi juga terhadap buruh tani sawit. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan sejarah sosial-ekonomi dengan menggunakan teori fungsionalisme struktural. Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah metode penelitian sejarah yang dilakukan melalui empat tahapan yaitu heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi dan historiografi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan peranan penting masyarakat transmigrasi di Silaut dalam mengembangkan perkebunan kelapa sawit yang kemudian diadopsi oleh masyarakat sekitar. Sawit menjadi komoditas utama karena tanah di Silaut bergambut tebal dan tidak cocok untuk pertanian padi. Sawit menjadi sektor ekonomi utama semenjak tahun 2012 dan semakin berkembang hingga tahun 2023, sehingga tidak ada lagi sawah atau petani padi di Silaut. Peningkatan ekonomi yang signifikan terjadi pada tahun 2021-2022 yang disebabkan oleh tingginya harga sawit waktu itu. Kesejahteraan dapat dirasakan oleh seluruh petani termasuk buruh, sehingga sawit mengubah tatanan kehidupan masyarakat di Silaut dan memberikan dampak yang positif terhadap ekonomi daerah serta meningkatnya infrastuktur yang ada.

**Kata kunci:** transmigran, ekonomi, perkebunan sawit.

### Abstract

*This research discusses the dynamics of the lives of smallholder oil palm farmers in Silaut Pesisir Selatan. Palm oil was first introduced by transmigration residents from the island of Java and has become the main economic sector of the Silaut community today. This palm oil not only provides welfare to palm oil farmers but also to oil palm farm workers. This research uses a socio-economic historical approach using structural functionalism theory. The research method used in this research is a historical research method which is carried out through four stages, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation and historiography. The results of this research show the important role of the transmigration community in Silaut in developing oil palm plantations which are then adopted by the surrounding community. Palm oil is the main commodity because the land in Silaut has thick peat and is not suitable for rice farming. Palm oil has become the main economic sector since 2012 and will continue to grow until 2023, so that there are no more rice fields or rice farmers in Silaut. A significant economic increase occurred in 2021-2022 which was caused by the high price of palm oil at that time. Prosperity can be felt by all farmers including workers, so that palm oil changes the life structure of the people in Silaut and has a positive impact on the regional economy and improves existing infrastructure.*

**Keywords:** transmigrant, economy, palm plantation.

### INTRODUCTION

Palm oil was introduced in 1992 when a member of the transmigration community who returned home underwent training at

the Transmigration Training Center in West Sumatra province. He got this idea after talking with people from Pasaman and Riau. Silaut was transformed into an

oil palm plantation since the entry of private companies in 1997. This was marked by the entry of a plasma plantation owned by PT Sukses Jaya Wood in Silaut and the establishment of a plasma plantation covering an area of 3000 ha in the Silaut transmigration area. The presence of oil palm plantations is expected to be able to change the order of people's lives. Transmigration in Silaut. Then this plasma plantation was abandoned and not managed by PT Sukses Jaya Wood since 2002 and its management was continued by the transmigration community. The presence of these plasma plantations began to attract the local community, so that gradually the community began to clear land for oil palm plantations.

Palm oil plantations are the main economic sector that supports the economy of the community in Nagari Silaut, Pesisir Selatan Regency (Siradjuddin, 2015). This palm oil plantation is an alternative for the South Pesisir regional government to support the local economy. Silaut has the largest oil palm plantation area in Pesisir Selatan Regency, reaching 8,587 ha with a total production of 70,205.07 tons (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Pesisir Selatan, 2024). Based on statistical data from Nagari Silaut, there are 494 people with the status of farmers/planters, 27 people as farm laborers/planters, and 58 private employees out of a total of 588 families

recorded from a total population of 2074 people (Nagari Silaut Kec. Silaut, 2024).

Palm oil plantations are the main economic sector in Silaut. The development of oil palm has had a significant economic impact on people's lives, especially oil palm farmers. Oil palm farmers in Silaut can be classified into plasma farmers, independent farmers and farm workers (Utami dan Halimatussadiyah, 2021). The economic improvement in Silaut has had a significant influence on the dynamics of the socio-economic life of the Silaut community. This can be seen from the level of household consumption, including housing, clothing, food and health services. The lives of people who own private land, such as plasma farmers and independent farmers, are different from those of workers. Plasma farmers and independent farmers on average have permanent houses and cars. (Utami dan Halimatussadiyah, 2021). Meanwhile for the workers, they live in a camp with stilt houses made of wood, but there are also those who have permanent houses, although simple, and also half-pole houses. This economic improvement also affects educational standards in Silaut, the society there is more open and multicultural. This is also because the people there are immigrants consisting of Javanese and Minangkabau ethnic groups.

Palm oil farmers in Silaut also face challenges in obtaining profits comparable to industrial palm oil plantations. This is

caused by several factors, including smaller production scales, limited access to technology and resources, and a lack of bargaining power in negotiating the selling price of harvested crops. (Hutabarat, n.d., 2017). Since 2016, palm oil prices have never been stable, farmers have complained about cheap palm oil prices (Portal Resmi Pemerintah Kabupaten Pesisir Selatan, 2024). In early May 2020, the price of palm oil reached IDR 400/kg. To overcome unstable price fluctuations, the Indonesian Palm Oil Farmers Association (Apkasindo) Pesisir Selatan Regency is working to determine the price of oil palm Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB) collectively. (InfoPublik, 2024). The price of fresh fruit bunches (FFB) from palm oil has shown an upward trend since 28 May 2020 with daily increases ranging from IDR 50 to IDR 80 per kilogram, reaching IDR 1,090 per kilogram (InfoPublik, 2024). However, this price is still lower than the price of palm oil FFB from plasma plantations.

Fluctuating palm oil prices can plunge people into poverty. Palm oil prices are often manipulated by companies or the market (Zaiyardam dan Lindayanti, 2017), even though almost all residents depend on palm oil for their economy. Palm oil prices are determined by companies in a market mechanism, not by the farmers themselves (Zubir, 2018). Farmers do not have freer access to markets (Mela, dkk, 2019). This leaves

farmers in a vulnerable position and dependent on other parties to determine their income. How farmers survive and their strategies to continue to exist are certainly very interesting to study. One of them is that they form complex relationships with other communities. Apart from that, the unbalanced dynamics in people's lives are also interesting to explain, this can be seen from the lifestyle of farmers in society.

The attraction of transmigration communities to start oil palm plantations is the focus of discussion in this research. The research also seeks to explain that palm oil is the main economic sector in Silaut and shows the strategies of oil palm farmers to survive in the face of price fluctuations. Apart from that, this research also discusses the dynamics of the lives of dawit farmers which can be seen from the farmer's lifestyle.

## **METHODS**

This research uses historical research methods, starting from heuristics, source criticism, data interpretation and historiography (Zed, 2003). Heuristics is the collection of written and oral sources. Written sources are archives, documents and certificates, while oral sources are interviews obtained from actors such as oil palm farmers, oil palm toke, oil palm workers, government institutions and traditional leaders (niniak mamak and cadiak clever) in Silaut. After that is

source criticism. Source criticism is the stage of testing sources, to see the authenticity and credibility of the documents and oral sources that have been obtained. After that, the data was interpreted to provide interpretations, opinions and analyzed and interpreted to prepare a research report describing the dynamics of farmers' lives on smallholder oil palm plantations in Silaut from 1992 to 2023. The final stage was writing a scientific article.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Attraction of Transmigration Communities to Palm Oil Plantation**

The history of smallholder oil palm plantations in Silaut cannot be separated from the transmigration policy implemented by the Indonesian government during the New Order (Orba) era. Transmigration was a clever idea and idea that succeeded in anticipating population density in a region due to the colonial government's failure to regulate population distribution in Java. The New Order government implemented the transmigration program as a way to regulate human relations with the land (Yulia Rahma Fitriana. dkk, 2019). The transmigration process in Silaut began in 1985 and lasted until the early 1990s, bringing a large influx of people from densely populated areas to this region. This program aims to reduce population density in the area of origin and increase

the use of large empty land in various areas, including Silaut.

In 1992, Kasri, who at that time served as Chair of the Village Unit Cooperative (KUD) in Silaut, began to feel concerned about the conditions faced by transmigrants. He attended various trainings facilitated by the government for the progress of transmigration areas, so that he was able to build relationships with KUD Chairmen from other areas such as Pekanbaru and Pasaman. Kasri learned that oil palm has great potential to develop on peatlands and can become a profitable commodity. He began proposing the idea of developing palm oil plantations to the government and also sought support from Bank Rakyat Indonesia (BRI) for initial financing. Even though this idea was not initially well received by the public, Kasri continued to work hard to make his vision a reality.

One of the important turning points in the history of oil palm plantations in Silaut occurred in 1995 when PT Sukses Jaya, investing in the plantation sector, conducted a site survey in Silaut. Although initially this plan faced resistance from communities concerned about environmental and social impacts, in 1996, collaboration between the Silaut community and PT Sukses Jaya Wood was successfully realized. This company agreed to help develop plasma oil palm plantations on transmigrant land in Silaut 1, Silaut 2 and Silaut 3, as well as

developing a core plantation covering an area of 3,000 ha.

The oil palm planting process began in 1997, and all of this activity is managed by the community with financial support from PT Sukses Jaya Wood. The presence of this company provides employment opportunities for local residents and also allows them to plant secondary crops among palm oil plantations to diversify their income. However, after the planting process was complete, PT Sukses Jaya Wood requested a land certificate from the community for security reasons, but it turned out that the certificate was then pawned to the bank without the community's knowledge. In 2022, this company will no longer manage the plasma plantation and will violate the agreement that was made. As a result, the community had to take over the management of the plantation and redeem their land certificates from the bank.

This event marked the beginning of the development of smallholder oil palm plantations in Silaut. The presence of PT Sukses Jaya Wood paved the way for other companies such as PT Sapta which entered Silaut in 2006 and brought a breath of fresh air to local palm oil farmers. PT Sapta opened 14,500 hectares of oil palm land and provided reasonable palm oil prices and easier access for farmers to sell their crops. The presence of PT Sapta and other companies such as PT Ingkasi Raya,

which is developing 11,500 hectares of land, is changing the economic and social landscape in Silaut. In 2024, most of the land in Silaut will be planted with oil palm, replacing the previously dominant rice and corn crops.

This transformation has had a significant impact on the Silaut community. Palm oil plantations are the main source of income and encourage the development of infrastructure such as roads, schools and health facilities. However, this development also poses challenges, including environmental impacts such as deforestation and a decline in the quality of peat soils that were previously rich in biodiversity. Nevertheless, the history of smallholder oil palm plantations in Silaut shows how transmigration policies and commodity development can change economic and social dynamics in remote areas, providing better economic opportunities for local residents, while continuing to strive to maintain a balance between development and environmental sustainability.

### **Palm oil is the main economic sector in Silaut**

The people's oil palm plantation in Silaut emerged after the failure of the PT Sukses Jaya Wood plasma plantation in 2002. The 3000 hectare plantation was continued by the Silaut transmigration community and adopted by the surrounding community. Palm oil is a strategic commodity and has

high value in national and international markets. The government and various parties see the great potential of this industry as a long-term investment.

Initially the economic value of palm oil was still low, efforts to continue to develop and increase productivity continued to be made. Every year, the price of palm oil slowly begins to improve. This is in line with increasing demand in the global market as well as various policies that support the development of the palm oil industry in Indonesia. With prices continuing to creep up, palm oil farmers in Silaut are starting to experience an increase in prosperity. Investment in infrastructure, improving agricultural technology, and improving agricultural management capabilities also contribute to improving the quality of life of the community.

The arrival of PT Sapta in 2005, which became fully operational in 2006, triggered significant changes in the local economy. The presence of PT Sapta provides production facilities that enable farmers to sell their palm oil harvests more easily and efficiently. Since the operation of PT Sapta, more and more Silaut residents have begun to switch and invest in oil palm cultivation. In 2007, there was a significant increase in the number of farmers planting oil palm due to easier access to markets through processing facilities provided by PT Sapta. This factory helps overcome one of the

main obstacles previously faced by farmers, namely the difficulty in selling their crops efficiently.

Based on data from BPS Pesisir Selatan in the period from 2003-2012, Silaut has smallholder oil palm plantations covering an area of 8,684 hectares out of a total land use of 92,175 hectares. In 2013, Silaut District became the only District in Pesisir Selatan Regency that did not have rice fields. The secondary crop production that is widely planted is soybeans amounting to 24 tons on a land area of 146 ha. Then there was also corn production of 479 tons, cassava production of 271 tons and sweet potato production of 70 tons. Palm oil is the main plantation commodity in Silaut. The area of smallholder oil palm plantations reached 6,149 ha with total production of 19,409 tons. Apart from that, commodities cultivated by the community include rubber, coconut, palm oil, chocolate and areca nut.

Table 1. Table of palm oil plantation area from 2016-2020

No	Year	Area/ha
1	2016	7.005.00
2	2017	7.410.00
3	2018	8.094.00
4	2019	8.587.00
5	2020	8.756.00

Source: BPS Kabupaten Pesisir Selatan

From the table above, you can see the rate of development of smallholder oil palm plantations from 2016-2020, where every year there is an increase.

Production output each year also increased in 2016 by 36,360 tons, in 2017 by 61,333 tons and in 2020 it reached 70,000 tons. Land use from 2012 to 2023 also experienced significant changes. In 2020, the area of rice fields was 0 ha, while oil palm plantations were 8,756 ha with total production of 70,205.07 tons. This shows that plantations play an important role in the economy in Silaut.

Palm oil is the main economic sector, followed by rubber plantations covering an area of 834 ha, corn on 254 ha, and coconut around 144 ha. Meanwhile, other economic sectors also include livestock and tourism. However, the majority of people in Silaut are oil palm farmers even though they have civil servant status.

### **Dynamics of Palm Oil Marketing Networks**

The smallholder palm oil marketing network in Indonesia, especially in regions such as Silaut, reflects the complexity of an ecosystem involving various stakeholders, from small farmers to large traders and processing companies. Trade is increasingly controlled by large-scale commercial corporations and retail networks. The interaction between direct producers and the food industry goes far beyond the “simple” transaction of exchanging commodities for money (Van der Ploeg, 2019).

The farmer's farming business is in an economy dominated by capitalistic relations, the farming business is absorbed into commodity production and becomes a small-scale commodity producer, selling and buying at prices determined by commodity capitalism and its capital turnover is based on loans from banks. Farmer farming units become part of the capitalist system. However, this business is not a capitalist production unit and works in a different way from capitalist-run agricultural businesses (Van der Ploeg, 2019). Price dynamics are often unstable, small farmers struggle with limitations in determining a fair selling price for their crops, often relying on middlemen or collecting traders with low bargaining power.

Small farmers in the palm oil sector often face relatively lower prices for their crops. This is caused by a long and unfair marketing chain, where they have to sell their palm fruit to local middlemen called *toke*. *Toke* then sells the harvest through suppliers, who have direct access to processing companies or factories. This long supply chain structure means that small farmers do not have direct access to final buyers, so they receive prices that are much lower than the actual market value.

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The palm oil marketing network in Silaut is quite diverse, giving farmers flexibility in deciding where to sell their crops. Farmers can choose to sell their palm oil to large companies in Silaut, such as PT Sapta and PT Ingkasi Raya, or they can collaborate with companies in Muko-Muko, Bengkulu Province. Geographically, Silaut and Muko-Muko are very close because they are both on the border, which makes it easier for farmers to sell their crops to the area.

Silaut farmers also face challenges such as fluctuating palm oil prices. During the first harvest in 2000, the price of palm oil on the market only reached 200 rupiah per kilogram. This low price disappoints many farmers, because palm oil, which is expected to be the main source of income, has not been able to provide significant prosperity for them. Since

2016, palm oil prices have never been stable, farmers have complained about cheap palm oil prices (Portal Resmi Pemerintah Kabupaten Pesisir Selatan, 2024). In early May 2020, the price of palm oil reached IDR 400/kg. To overcome unstable price fluctuations, the Indonesian Palm Oil Farmers Association (Apkasindo) Pesisir Selatan Regency is working to determine the price of fresh fruit bunches (FFB) for palm oil collectively (InfoPublik, 2024). The price of fresh fruit bunches (FFB) from palm oil has shown an upward trend since 28 May 2020 with daily increases ranging from IDR 50 to IDR 80 per kilogram, reaching IDR 1,090 per kilogram (InfoPublik, 2024). However, this price is still lower than the price of palm oil FFB from plasma plantations.

Fluctuating palm oil prices can plunge people into poverty (May-Zaiyardam-Fajri Rahman, 2017). The price of palm oil is often manipulated by companies or the market, even though almost all residents depend on palm oil for their economy. Palm oil prices are determined by companies in a market mechanism, not by the farmers themselves. This leaves farmers in a vulnerable position and dependent on other parties to determine their income. The highest increase in palm oil prices occurred in 2021-2022, although this increase in palm oil prices did not last long, providing a breath of fresh air for the lives of palm oil farmers. Many of

them were able to buy cars after the price of palm oil rose.

In the face of low prices, farmers have their own strategies to continue to exist as oil palm farmers, including: minimizing palm oil operational costs so that the palm oil is cared for and harvested by itself. In this way, farmers can survive even though palm oil prices are low. However, the situation for workers is the opposite, their energy is no longer used by farmers so they will face a difficult situation. Therefore, the stability and high price of palm oil determines the lives of the Silaut people.

#### **Lifestyle of Smallholder Oil Palm Plantation Farmers**

Farming society consists of several different levels of social strata. Farmers who produce with their own means of production will gradually transform into small capitalists who will also exploit other people's labor, or will lose their means of production and transform into wage workers. This is the tendency of a form of society where the capitalist production pattern dominates (Van der Ploeg, 2019).

Farmers with large land ownership tend to experience a greater increase in economic prosperity compared to small farmers. These economic advantages allow them to invest in modern agricultural technology, expand production land, and even diversify into

other economic sectors. In contrast, farmers with limited land often face greater economic challenges, including dependence on intermediaries who tend to be detrimental, as well as erratic price fluctuations. This condition hampers their ability to improve their standard of living and achieve more sustainable prosperity.

Successful farmers in Silaut are generally those who have large plantation areas. Their success cannot be separated from more advanced thinking and awareness of the very valuable investment value of land. They understand that owning and managing land well can provide sustainable economic benefits and significantly improve living standards. This approach reflects a long-term understanding of agriculture's potential as a stable and growing source of income.

Most of the successful farmers in Silaut come from among immigrants who settled in this area. These immigrants generally have a broader vision and a strong determination to take advantage of the opportunities that exist in Silaut. They often start with little capital, but with hard work and strategic thinking, they succeed in expanding their land holdings and developing profitable palm oil plantation businesses. Their understanding of the importance of investment in land and the economic potential of the agricultural sector gives them an advantage in utilizing the existing resources in Silaut.



Picture 1. Form of a luxury house in Silaut District.

Successful farmers in Silaut live very prosperously, they can make ends meet without having to work hard. This success creates a better life, such as being able to perform Hajj or Umrah as a family, providing proper education to children and so on. His financial success has also encouraged him to contribute further to the local community, with plans to build a mosque in Silaut with work scheduled to begin in 2024.

Apart from successful farmers, there are also groups of less fortunate farmers in Silaut. This group usually consists of migrants who arrived after the transmigration program ended, those who previously sold their land to meet their daily needs, and transmigrants who chose to sell the land they owned. Their misfortune is often caused by the decision to sell land assets that could provide long-term income, so that they lose the opportunity to exploit the economic potential of the land. This decision makes it difficult for them to achieve economic stability and experience challenges in

developing sustainable agricultural businesses.

One of the factors that causes farmers to be less fortunate is limited capital so they have to deal with banks. Many of them have to deal with banks to get loans to cover oil palm plantation maintenance costs. This reliance on bank loans means they have to pay installments every month, which is often a significant financial burden. When income from palm oil is not enough to cover living costs and installments, this makes it difficult for their lives to improve. Limited access to capital and dependence on loans are the main factors that keep many small farmers in Silaut trapped in a cycle of economic hardship.



Picture 2. The shape of a less fortunate palm oil farmer's house

Palm oil workers in Silaut District are migrants after the transmigration program was completed or children from transmigrant communities. They work as palm oil workers and other laborers, often because the agricultural land they own is not enough or does not exist at all, so they have to look for other work to meet their

daily needs. The piece rate system cannot provide a decent salary because the work area is limited. Buyung said, sometimes he can only work four days in one week. Each worker is given their own harvest area by the foreman. Once the land is finished, the worker must wait for the next distribution. This work system makes it difficult for workers to get a decent salary, and often their salary is less than the minimum wage set. This is one factor in the workers' lives not getting better

The wage system applied on these plantations is a piece wage system. This piece wage system is determined according to the results of work, which can be measured by certain measures, for example the number of pieces, the amount of weight, the amount of area of what is done. So it is hoped that this system can encourage workers to be enthusiastic and work harder. In the living wage concept, what is offered is a wage concept that takes into account the interests of workers and employers and divides responsibilities between the government and employers.



Picture 3. The atmosphere of the palm oil workers' camp at the PSS plantation

We are aware that the fate of workers is closer to profit than profit. Workers have no clear future because their accounts are zero. Workers are pressured, blackmailed, castrated and oppressed by the authorities. After that, when they are old, they are considered dregs and thrown away and forgotten (Tjandraningsih dan Herawati, 2009). That is the fate of workers that Buyung also feels, all his life he has been a worker, and for the past seven years he has been a palm oil worker. There is no prosperity, all that remains is a body that is getting weaker as age begins to grow old.

## CONCLUSION

He idea of planting oil palm in Silaut first emerged in 1992 by the transmigration community. The planting process took place in 1997 when PT Sukses Jaya Wood opened a plasma plantation area of 3,000 hectares. Palm oil plantations have experienced significant development in line with the improvement in palm oil prices over time. Palm oil is the main economic sector and the lives of the Silaut people depend on the price of palm oil. Even though oil palm plantations promise a better life, only people who own large areas of land can truly feel the benefits. This smallholder plantation system reflects a miniature capitalist system, where capital owners get much bigger profits, while workers continue to live in poverty unless they start investing in

managing smallholder oil palm plantations. Apart from that, the average oil palm plantation owner is also involved in borrowing from banks to manage.

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