

## The Impact of Sugarcane Plantations on the Socio-Economic Life of the Community in Sungai Asam Village, Kerinci Regency (2000-2023)

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### Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang Dampak Perkebunan Tebu Terhadap Kehidupan Sosial Ekonomi Masyarakat di Desa Sungai Asam Kabupaten Kerinci 2000-2023. Artikel ini ditulis untuk menganalisis Perkembangan Perkebunan tebu di Desa Sungai Asam pada tahun 2000-2023 dan Dampaknya terhadap kehidupan sosial ekonomi masyarakat. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan sejarah sosial-ekonomi dan menggunakan teori involusi pertanian yang dikembangkan oleh Clifford Geertz sebagai alat analisis untuk menjelaskan pokok bahasan. Kemudian untuk menganalisis persoalan dalam tesis ini digunakan metode penelitian sejarah yaitu heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa perkebunan tebu sebagai perekonomian masyarakat di Desa Sungai Asam dan menjadi perkebunan tebu terluas di Kabupaten kerinci, namun belum mampu memberikan kesejahteraan terhadap kehidupan petani tebu. Kesejahteraan petani bergantung pada fluktuasi harga gula tebu. Hal ini yang kemudian menciptakan dinamika kehidupan petani di tengah masyarakat yang tercermin dari tingkat konsumtif masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** perkebunan tebu, sosial-ekonomi, kehidupan petani.

### Abstract

*This article discusses the Impact of Sugarcane Plantations on the Socio-Economic Life of the Community in Sungai Asam Village, Kerinci Regency 2000-2023. This article was written to analyze the Development of Sugarcane Plantations in Sungai Asam Village in 2000-2023 and its Impact on the socio-economic life of the community. This article uses a socio-economic history approach and uses the theory of agricultural involution developed by Clifford Geertz as an analytical tool to explain the subject matter. Then to analyze the problems in this thesis, historical research methods are used, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The results of this study indicate that sugarcane plantations as the economy of the community in Sungai Asam Village and are the largest sugarcane plantations in Kerinci Regency, but have not been able to provide welfare for the lives of sugarcane farmers. The welfare of farmers depends on fluctuations in the price of sugarcane. This then creates the dynamics of farmers' lives in the community which is reflected in the level of community consumption.*

**Keywords:** sugarcane plantations, socio-economics, farmer's life.

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as an agrarian country, has a strong economic base in the agricultural sector, shaped by a long historical trajectory from the colonial period to the modern era (Adawiyah, 2024; Safira et al., 2024) The diversity of crops and the potential of agricultural land have played a significant role in people's lives and the

national economy. Jambi Province, located in the highlands of Sumatra, is known as a center of plantation-based agriculture, including Sungai Asam Village, which became the center of sugarcane plantations in Kerinci Regency (Andeffa, 2021). Historically, agriculture in Jambi grew rapidly during the Dutch colonial era, starting with tea plantations in the

early 20th century, which later transformed into smallholder sugarcane plantations after the colonial government left (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Sumarno, 2016).

The emergence of sugarcane plantations in Sungai Asam occurred in the 1940s as an economic solution for the community after the Dutch left Kayu Aro Barat. Former tea plantation workers shifted to sugarcane farming as a means of survival amid limited economic resources (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Sumarno, 2016). Sugarcane was gradually developed in five locations, with Sungai Asam chosen as the main center due to its fertile soil and favorable climate. By the 2000s, sugarcane fields cultivated by the community covered 1.320 hectares (Sumarno, 2016), making Sungai Asam the largest sugarcane-producing village in Kerinci. However, the progress of sugarcane plantations was not always positive. Over time, they declined due to land conversion, economic pressures, and changes in people's livelihoods (Sari, 2022).

Sugarcane production in Sungai Asam involves a long cycle of 11-12 months from planting to harvesting, followed by manual processing into sugar, which farmers preferred because raw sugarcane fetched low (Sari, 2022; Sumarno, 2016). Most farmers chose to process their cane into sugar to obtain better prices; raw cane sold for only

Rp500 per kilogram, while processed sugar reached Rp14.500 per kilogram in 2023 (Sumarno, 2016). This long production cycle and dependence on traditional methods posed major challenges. Moreover, the lack of capital to purchase modern equipment, such as processing machines worth hundreds of millions of rupiah, limited efficiency improvements, forcing most farmers to rely on old techniques (Sukiyem, 2024; Wasiran, 2024).

The economic dynamics of Sungai Asam were heavily influenced by fluctuations in sugar prices throughout the research period. Prices rose significantly from Rp2.600 per kilogram in 2000 to Rp14.500 in 2023, yet this increase did not automatically improve farmers' welfare (Sumarno, 2016). Rising production costs, inefficient distribution, weak market bargaining power, and lack of supportive government policies left farmers vulnerable to structural poverty (Bungin, 2009; Sari, 2022). Limited access to markets and rising input costs often forced farmers into debt to finance production (Wasiran, 2024).

The community's quality of life was also shaped by simple consumption patterns, low educational attainment, and limited infrastructure (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022). Many children of farmers completed only elementary education and went directly into farming, perpetuating intergenerational poverty (Endrizal &

Meilin, 2016). Poor road conditions hindered mobility and marketing of sugarcane, while climate change increased crop failure risks (R. E. Putra, 2024). Yet, the people of Sungai Asam demonstrated resilience through solidarity and mutual cooperation in farming and overcoming production challenges (Lestari, 2015; Nathalia & Aini, 2023).

This study adopts a socio-economic historical approach and Clifford Geertz's theory of agricultural involution, which emphasizes productivity stagnation caused by intensification without structural transformation. This is evident in the reality of sugarcane farmers in the village (Geertz, 1983). Farmers work harder but experience no significant improvements in income or quality of life. They remain dependent on sugarcane farming due to the absence of viable alternatives in terms of capital, training, or market access (Mubyarto & Daryanti, 1991; Soekardjo, 1963). The decision to persist in sugarcane farming is also influenced by land access, lack of technology, and entrenched traditions (Anwas, 1992; Sutomo, 2004).

Government efforts such as training programs, fertilizer subsidies, and cooperative establishment have been attempted but remain limited and ineffective in improving farmers' livelihoods on a broad scale (Mirzawan, 1999). Agricultural diversification into crops such as potatoes and chilies began in 2023, driven by farmer dissatisfaction with

stagnant returns from sugarcane (Sari, 2022). Nonetheless, loyalty to sugarcane as a local economic identity persists amid modernization pressures and infrastructural constraints.

This study is important not only for understanding local agricultural history but also for enriching insights into how Indonesia's agrarian structures face socio-economic transformation challenges. Through an in-depth case study of Sungai Asam, it contributes to understanding agricultural involution in rural communities and underscores the need for effective, sustainable policy interventions to improve farmers' welfare (Geertz, 1983; Linblad, 2002; Mubyarto, 1984). The development of smallholder agriculture must extend beyond technical improvements to include education, healthcare, and economic policy restructuring that favor small producers, ensuring sustainable and inclusive prosperity for sugarcane farmers.

## **METHODS**

This research on the impact of sugarcane plantations on the socio-economic life of the community in Sungai Asam Village, Kerinci Regency (2000-2023) employed the historical research method, which consists of four interrelated stages. The first stage was heuristics, namely the collection of data and relevant sources, including archives, government documents, village reports, scholarly literature, as well as oral sources obtained through in-depth

interviews with sugarcane farmers, community leaders, village officials, and other stakeholders knowledgeable about the development of sugarcane plantations in Sungai Asam. This stage aimed to obtain a factual and chronological picture of when and how sugarcane plantations emerged, along with the socio-economic changes that occurred between 2000 and 2023 (Pranoto, 2010).

The second stage was source criticism. At this stage, the researcher verified and validated the authenticity and reliability of the sources, both externally by examining the origin and genuineness of documents and their explanations and internally, by evaluating the consistency of content and its conformity with historical facts in the field. Source criticism also involved selecting the most authoritative, credible, and relevant data to minimize bias or distortion (Sjamsudin, 2012).

The third stage was interpretation, which involved analyzing and establishing logical connections between facts and data that had passed the source criticism process. The researcher examined key events influencing changes in the sugarcane plantation sector and their impact on the community. A socio-economic historical approach was applied, combining analysis of agrarian conditions, sugarcane production activities, farmers' work networks, economic fluctuations, and social dynamics (Pranoto, 2010).

Additionally, Clifford Geertz's theory of agricultural involution was used as an analytical framework to understand the stagnation of farmers' welfare in the context of intensification without significant structural transformation.

The final stage was historiography, namely the systematic writing of research findings in the form of a scientific narrative. This involved arranging interpreted facts chronologically and analytically to provide a comprehensive understanding of the development, changes, and problems faced by sugarcane farmers in Sungai Asam over the last two decades (Sjamsudin, 2012). The findings were presented not only in narrative form but also through tables, interview excerpts, and supporting quantitative data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Geographical, Social, and Economic Conditions of Sungai Asam Village**

Sungai Asam Village is located in Kayu Aro Barat District, Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province, surrounded by the Bukit Barisan Mountains, which shape its unique geographical characteristics. The area has fertile volcanic soil, sufficient river flow, and a cool climate with evenly distributed rainfall throughout the year, making it highly suitable for cultivating sugarcane as the main commodity (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016). The volcanic soil is rich in nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and

potassium, which strongly support crop cultivation (Suryanita, 2022). The village lies at an altitude of 1,500 meters above sea level, with a natural drainage and irrigation system, though conservation efforts such as terracing are still required to mitigate the risk of soil erosion on sloping land (Anwas, 1992; Firmansyah et al., 2016).

The village is divided into several hamlets, with a social structure dominated by indigenous residents who have inherited farming traditions for generations. The majority of the population works as sugarcane farmers, whose role is central to the local economy and the village's identity (Sumarno & Fikrman, 2019). The presence of rivers and a strong spirit of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) have shaped a culture of close social solidarity (Nathalia & Aini, 2023).

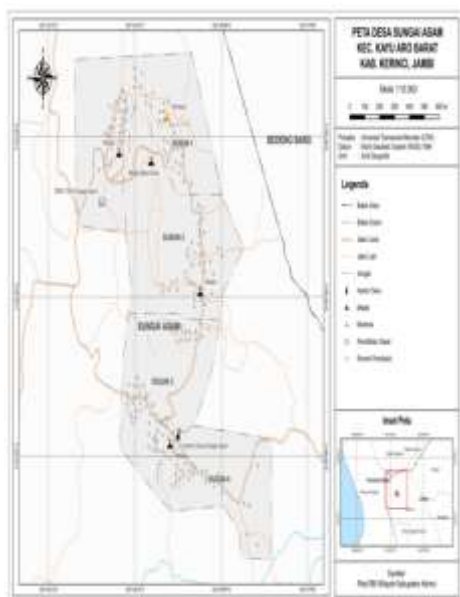


Figure 1. Map of Sungai Asam Village  
Source: Sungai Asam Village Office Archives, 2023

Here is the table that has been rewritten in a neat format:

Table 1. Population of Kerinci Regency, 2010-2022

Year	Population
2010	1.469
2014	1.390
2016	1.523
2020	1.564
2022	1.554
2023	1.643

Source: (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2022)

The village's education system remains underdeveloped, with only one elementary school available, while students must travel to other villages to pursue higher education (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022). Health facilities are also limited, with only one auxiliary community health center. Poor infrastructure, such as the main village road that becomes difficult to access during the rainy season, further exacerbates the village's underdevelopment (Sumarno, 2016).

### Sugarcane Plantations as Local Economic Identity

The history of sugarcane plantations in Sungai Asam began in the 1940s as a post-colonial transformation when former Dutch tea plantation workers shifted to sugarcane farming (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Sumarno, 2016). The choice of Sungai Asam as the center was based on the fertility of its soil, tested through the cultivation of various crops. At its peak in 2000, sugarcane plantations covered 1.320

hectares, making it the largest in Kerinci (Sumarno, 2016).

However, macroeconomic changes, land conversion, and price fluctuations reduced the area to only 840 hectares in 2023 (Sari, 2022). Data from BPS and interviews also showed a decline in the number of sugarcane-farming households, as many switched to horticultural crops considered more profitable and faster to harvest (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Data wawancara petani, 2024).

Table 2. Number of Sugarcane-Farming Households in Sungai Asam, 2000-2023

Year	Number of Farmer Households
2000	600
2003	580
2006	560
2009	540
2012	520
2015	500
2018	480
2021	465
2023	450

Source: Sungai Asam Village Head Archives

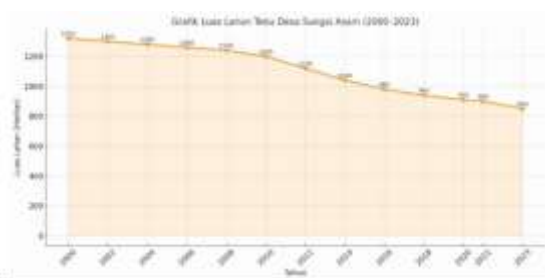


Figure 2. Sugarcane Plantation Area in Sungai Asam, 2000-2023

Source: Sungai Asam Sugarcane Farmers and Village Cooperative

Sugarcane farming is not only an economic activity but also a cultural heritage and collective identity passed down from generation to generation (Nathalia & Aini, 2023). The practice of

mutual cooperation manifests not only in production activities but also in dealing with soil erosion, limited tools, and collective marketing (Lestari, 2015; Nathalia & Aini, 2023).

### Sugarcane Production and Marketing Process

Sugarcane cultivation in Sungai Asam follows a long process: planting-maintenance-harvesting over 11-12 months, followed by processing into sugar either individually or in groups (Sari, 2022; Sumarno, 2016). Most production still relies on traditional methods, such as crushing cane with oxen, boiling the juice in large furnaces using firewood until it thickens, and molding it into sugar with simple molds (Sukiyem, 2024; Wasiran, 2024). Only a small number of farmers can afford modern processing machines, which cost hundreds of millions of rupiah, usually through bank loans. Those unable to obtain loans are forced to rent equipment and sell their sugar to factory owners at lower prices (Sukiyem, 2024; Wasiran, 2024). Social solidarity is reflected in collective sharing of tools and facilities.



Figure 3. Traditional Sugarcane Processing Using Oxen



Figure 4. Modern Sugarcane Processing, 2023  
 Source: Author's Documentation



Figure 5. Sugar-Making Process from Cane  
 Source: Author's Documentation

Sugar prices have fluctuated significantly, rising from Rp2.600/kg in 2000 to Rp14.500/kg in 2023. Meanwhile, raw sugarcane prices remain low at around Rp500/kg (Sumarno, 2016; Tinem, 2025). This disparity has encouraged farmers to process cane into sugar themselves, even though it requires more effort and time.

Table 3. Sugar Prices, 2000-2023

Year	Price (Rp/kg)
2000	2.600
2023	14.500

Source: Farmers' interview data, 2024

Distribution is mainly conducted through local weekly markets, middlemen, and, more recently, social media and e-commerce, although internet access remains limited (Jamilah, 2024). Poor road infrastructure and transportation make farmers more dependent on local middlemen, who often offer non-competitive prices (R. Putra, 2023).



Figure 6. Cane Sugar  
 Source: Author's Documentation

### Socio-Economic Impact of Sugarcane Plantations

#### 1. Farmers' Welfare and Consumption Patterns

The income of sugarcane farmers is highly fluctuating and often insufficient to improve their standard of living. Their highest monthly earnings range between Rp1 million and Rp6.9 million (before deducting production and fertilizer costs), but the net income is much lower once operational expenses are subtracted (Sukijan, 2024). Many farmers must take on side jobs or continue working in sugarcane farming simply due to limited capital.

The consumption patterns and lifestyles of the community are simple—

most houses are made of wood, vehicles are used primarily for farming activities, and household needs are purchased at small village stalls or in neighboring villages, as Sungai Asam lacks traditional markets or minimarkets (Bagus, 2024; Nuryanti, 2024). This lifestyle reflects the economic stagnation caused by agricultural involution as described by Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1983).



Figure 7. Wooden House of a Sugarcane Farmer  
Source: Author's Documentation



Figure 8. Farmers' Vehicle  
Source: Author's Documentation

## 2. Education and Social Infrastructure

The educational level of the community remains low. With only one elementary school available, many children must travel outside the village for higher education. As a result, numerous children drop out of school to help their

parents in the fields (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022). Limited family income also means that only households with additional earnings, such as those of civil servants or the village head, can afford to build permanent houses (Toni, 2024).



Figure 9. Brick House of a Sugarcane Farmer  
Source: Author's Documentation



Figure 10. Civil Servant's House Source: Author's Documentation

Healthcare services are also inadequate, with only one auxiliary health center and limited medical staff (Jamilah, 2024). Most residents still rely on traditional medicine.

### 3. Social Solidarity and Mutual Cooperation

One of the most important social capitals is mutual cooperation—whether in field maintenance, small-scale infrastructure construction, or processing harvests (Lestari, 2015; Nathalia & Aini, 2023). Solidarity is also evident in the sharing of farming equipment and barter systems among farmers.

#### **Dynamics of Transformation and Economic Diversification**

Over the last two decades, economic pressures from price fluctuations and declining productivity have pushed some farmers to shift to horticultural crops such as potatoes and chilies, which are considered faster to harvest and more profitable. Nevertheless, sugarcane farming continues to be maintained by those with limited financial resources and no other alternatives (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Sari, 2022).

Government interventions—such as training, subsidized fertilizer assistance, seed grants, and cooperative programs—have not been effective. The main barriers include limited budgets, inadequate outreach, and low capacity and education of farmers (Mirzawan, 1999).

#### **Portraits of Farmers' Lives: Case Studies**

The profile of sugarcane farmers in Sungai Asam is diverse, ranging from those who

continue to rely on traditional methods, such as Sutrianto, to courageous female farmers like Jumiati, who process and market sugar independently. Most of them, however, are only able to send their children to elementary or junior high school due to economic limitations (Individual interviews, 2024).

#### **Theoretical Analysis of Involution and Modernization Challenges**

The stagnant living conditions of sugarcane farmers in Sungai Asam confirm Clifford Geertz's thesis on agricultural involution, where intensified labor is not accompanied by structural change, resulting in stagnant or even declining prosperity (Geertz, 1983). The hard work invested in the cycle of “plant-maintain-process-sell” does not yield significant transformation due to limited access to education, technology, capital, and new markets (Linblad, 2002; Mubyarto, 1984).

The development of digital technology and modernization efforts in sugar production remain extremely limited, accessible only to farmers with large capital or access to bank credit (Sumarno, 2016). The gap between smallholder farmers and those who can afford modern processing machinery further widens inequality within the village.

## **Challenges, Constraints, and Recommendations**

Declining productivity due to aging crops, soil erosion, lack of seed regeneration, and rising input costs highlight the urgency of revitalizing this sector. Training programs on technology use, greater access to low-interest credit, infrastructure development, and farmer group empowerment need to be expanded in order to improve livelihoods (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Mirzawan, 1999).

The research findings affirm that sugarcane plantations have long served as the backbone of the economy and the social identity of Sungai Asam (Endrizal & Meilin, 2016; Sumarno, 2016). However, without technological transformation, infrastructure improvements, and policies favoring small producers, efforts to improve welfare will merely reproduce agricultural involution instead of bringing structural change (Geertz, 1983). A way out can only be achieved through synergy among farmers, government, and all stakeholders to build a more inclusive and just village economy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The sugarcane plantations in Sungai Asam Village, Kerinci Regency, from 2000 to 2023 have served as the foundation of the local economy as well as the community's social identity. Dependence on sugarcane as the sole main commodity has persisted since the colonial era and has been passed

down through generations. However, attempts at intensifying cultivation without technological transformation and with limited innovation have resulted in stagnant productivity and income.

This condition fully reflects Clifford Geertz's concept of agricultural involution, where increased labor input does not yield real improvements in living standards. Limited access to technology, education, capital, and markets combined with inadequate infrastructure has prevented the sector from functioning optimally as a driver of welfare. While traditions of mutual cooperation and social resilience remain, the economic life of sugarcane farmers continues to be constrained by structural poverty.

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