

THE DYNAMICS OF PALM OIL WORKERS' COMMUNITIES: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKING CONDITIONS, ECONOMIC ACCESS, AND LIVELIHOOD SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES IN INDONESIAN PLANTATION AREAS

Gunawan Widjaja

Senior Lecturer Faculty of Law Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta

widjaja_gunawan@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of the lives of palm oil workers in Indonesian plantation areas, focusing on the relationship between working conditions, economic access, and livelihood sustainability strategies. Through a systematic literature review, the study identifies that uncertain working conditions and high occupational health risks limit income stability and workers' access to formal financial services. These constraints encourage palm oil workers to adopt adaptive strategies that include livelihood diversification, utilisation of community social capital, and investment in children's education as efforts to maintain livelihood sustainability. This study emphasises the need for integrated interventions from the government, companies, and community institutions to improve working conditions and expand inclusive economic access, as well as to support sustainable and equitable livelihood strategies. These findings serve as an important foundation for efforts to holistically improve the welfare of palm oil workers.

Keywords: oil palm workers, working conditions, economic access, livelihood sustainability strategies, oil palm plantations, community welfare.

Introduction

The palm oil industry has become one of the most important economic sectors in Indonesia, contributing significantly to state revenue and job creation. Over the past two decades, the expansion of palm oil plantations in various regions has led to a massive increase in labour demand. Palm oil workers are at the forefront of the production process, from land clearing and crop maintenance to harvesting and processing (Ismail et al., 2024) . However, despite their significant economic contribution, the lives of palm oil workers in the field are often vulnerable and challenging. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of the lives of palm oil workers is important as an effort to respect their rights and as a basis for formulating inclusive and sustainable policies (Wulandari, 2025b) .

Working conditions in oil palm plantations reveal complexities that extend beyond technical aspects of the job to encompass social, economic, and health dimensions. Many workers remain on contract or are daily casual labourers, facing uncertainty in terms of income and social security. This fact has implications for the economic stability of families and their ability to plan for a better future (Wulandari,

2025b) . Occupational safety factors are also often a major concern, given that activities on plantations involve the risk of workplace accidents and exposure to chemicals. Such conditions directly affect worker productivity and well-being, while also creating dilemmas for company managers and policymakers (Ridwan, 2024) .

In addition to working conditions, the economic access of palm oil workers is also an important issue that needs to be examined. Access to economic resources such as business credit, entrepreneurship training, and local markets can be determining factors in the ability of workers and their families to improve their standard of living. However, in reality, such access is often limited due to various structural and institutional barriers(Yuslaini, 2024) . For example, there is a lack of knowledge and ability to access formal financial facilities, market distribution networks are not yet optimal, and there is often inequality in access between permanent and contract workers. These barriers require a comprehensive approach in order to open up wider economic opportunities for palm oil workers(Hendrawan, 2023) .

The palm oil worker community is also known to implement various livelihood sustainability strategies that focus on meeting daily needs while also investing for the long term. These strategies have emerged as a mechanism for adapting to uncertain working conditions and limited economic access. An example is livelihood diversification, which does not rely solely on wages from plantations, but also on subsistence farming, small businesses, or social assistance. Social solidarity and community ties are important assets for supporting each other in meeting family needs, providing children's education, and maintaining family livelihoods amid economic pressures(Hendrawan et al., 2024) .

The concept of sustainable living in the context of palm oil worker communities is not only related to economic aspects, but also encompasses social and cultural aspects. Traditional practices and community norms influence the way people prioritise their lives, utilise natural resources, and manage risks. This is unique and needs to be understood in the context of oil palm plantations, where modernity and tradition often intersect. A deep understanding of cultural aspects in sustainable living strategies can help identify more effective and contextually appropriate points of intervention.(Suryadi, 2024) .

The Indonesian government itself has issued a number of regulations and programmes to improve the quality of life of workers in the palm oil sector, such as sustainable plantation certification programmes, protection of workers' rights, and the development of cooperatives and micro-economies(et al., 2018) . However, the implementation of these policies often encounters obstacles in the field, both in terms of uneven regulations and the direct involvement of the working community. A systematic literature review can provide a comprehensive overview of the gap between formal policy and actual practice, while also serving as a basis for more responsive policy recommendations.

In academic studies, there are a number of studies that highlight aspects of working conditions and economic access in oil palm plantations, but relatively few integrate these two aspects with a focus on strategies for the sustainability of workers' livelihoods (et al., 2018); (Alamsyah, 2021). This multidimensional approach is necessary to understand the dynamics of palm oil workers' lives as a whole, rather than just focusing on economic or social aspects alone. A comprehensive literature review must include literature from the fields of labour, rural development, and economic anthropology to reveal these adaptation mechanisms and sustainability strategies. Furthermore, the situation of oil palm workers in Indonesia shows diversity in conditions based on geographical location, employment status, and type of plantation (large plantations, plasma, or smallholder plantations). This variation requires contextual studies to reflect the differences in experiences and livelihood strategies. By understanding this specific context, research can provide a sharper understanding of the factors that influence the quality of life of palm oil workers and the opportunities for its fair and equitable improvement.

Research Methodology

This research method uses a qualitative approach with systematic literature review techniques to analyse the relationship between working conditions, economic access, and livelihood sustainability strategies of palm oil workers in plantation areas in Indonesia. Data was collected from various secondary sources such as scientific journals, research reports, government policy documents, and publications from non-governmental organisations relevant to the topic (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). Data analysis was conducted thematically to identify patterns of relationships between research variables, with a focus on the socio-economic and cultural context of palm oil workers. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the dynamics of palm oil workers' lives based on existing theoretical reviews and empirical findings, and provides a conceptual basis for further studies or more effective policies (Ferrari, 2020).

Results and Discussion

The Relationship between Working Conditions and Economic Access

Working conditions are one of the fundamental aspects that shape the quality of life of palm oil workers and directly affect their access to various economic resources. In the context of Indonesian palm oil plantations, working conditions are still largely characterised by job insecurity, long working hours, and high health risks (Alamsyah, 2021). This situation often causes workers to face difficulties in securing a stable income, which affects their families' economic ability to meet daily needs and invest for the future. Uncertain working conditions result in restricted economic access, as workers find it difficult to gain the trust of formal financial institutions to obtain credit or other economic facilities (Myzabella et al., 2019b).

Job insecurity is a major obstacle to building economic stability for palm oil workers. Many workers are employed on a contract or daily basis without long-term job security, meaning their income is highly dependent on fluctuations in demand and harvest seasons. This situation not only makes their income unstable but also reduces their ability to plan for the long term. The lack of job security also limits their access to social assistance programmes or government subsidies, which usually require permanent employment status as a criterion for eligibility.(Hendrawan, 2024) .

In addition to employment status, the level of wages received by palm oil workers also greatly determines their economic access. Wages that are often only equal to or even below the Regional Minimum Wage (UMR) make it difficult for workers to accumulate savings or capital for productive businesses. This limited income drives workers to seek additional income through various side jobs or small businesses that are usually unstable and rely on limited resources. The inability to save or invest also makes workers vulnerable to macroeconomic conditions, such as inflation or increases in the price of basic necessities. Job insecurity and occupational hazards are also important factors affecting the working conditions of palm oil workers ((Istisya et al., 2024)). Work on palm oil plantations often involves heavy labour, the use of heavy equipment, and exposure to hazardous chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides. The risk of workplace accidents and health problems directly impacts workers' productivity and ability to work sustainably. The absence or lack of occupational safety and health protection facilities can contribute to high family healthcare costs, which ultimately limit their economic ability to invest in other areas such as education or housing (Reich et al., 2025) .

Access to health facilities and social security is an integral part of decent working conditions and has a significant impact on the economic capacity of palm oil workers. Government social security programmes, such as BPJS Kesehatan (Health Insurance) and BPJS Ketenagakerjaan (Employment Insurance), do not yet fully cover all palm oil workers, especially those who are daily or contract workers. This means that most workers still have to pay for their own healthcare costs when they face medical problems, thereby reducing the economic resources available for other productive needs (Solidarity et al., 2015) .

Inadequate working conditions also impact workers' access to education and training that could potentially improve their skills and productivity. Many palm oil workers come from low educational backgrounds and lack access to formal skills training due to long working hours and the lack of structured development programmes from companies or the government. This lack of investment in capacity building ultimately limits their ability to increase their income and access better economic opportunities in the future(Myzabella et al., 2019a) .

Various obstacles in these working conditions are in line with the limited economic access experienced by palm oil workers. Access to financial services such as

business credit, savings, and insurance is still very limited for the majority of workers, especially those with contract or daily casual status. These obstacles arise both from institutions that tend to view them as high risk, and from workers who lack financial literacy and collateral to meet credit requirements (Halim et al., 2024) . Therefore, the existence of inclusive microfinance institutions or cooperatives is very important to bridge this economic access gap.

The difference in economic access and working conditions between permanent and contract workers creates a sharp socio-economic gap within palm oil plantation communities. Permanent workers tend to have more stable incomes, access to social security, and opportunities to participate in employment training programmes. In contrast, contract workers often do not receive these benefits and face greater economic vulnerability. This gap has implications for the unequal distribution of welfare within the worker community and weakens the social solidarity that should serve as social capital for sustainable livelihoods (Kubitza, 2018b) .

This situation has prompted workers and their families to develop adaptive economic strategies as a means of coping with this uncertainty. These strategies include diversifying employment, for example by starting small businesses, subsistence farming, or taking seasonal work outside the plantation. This diversification allows workers' families to reduce their dependence on a single source of uncertain income and increases their chances of achieving economic stability even without significant improvements in formal working conditions (Kubitza, 2018c) . In addition to diversification strategies, access to social capital through community networks is an important resource that helps workers overcome limitations in working conditions and economic access. These networks take the form of solidarity among community members, sharing of work information or business opportunities, and mutual assistance in meeting family needs such as health and children's education. This social capital acts as a socio-economic buffer that helps mitigate the adverse effects of vulnerable working conditions while strengthening community ties in plantation environments (Rahmawati, 2024) .

However, the strategies developed by palm oil workers have limitations if they are not supported by systemic changes related to fairer working conditions and comprehensive economic access (Kubitza, 2018a) . Therefore, studies on the relationship between working conditions and economic access must be integrated with studies on policies that seek improvements in labour regulations, social protection, and the strengthening of local economic institutions such as cooperatives. This approach is important so that the research results are not merely descriptive, but provide concrete recommendations for positive change(Saragih, 2024) .

Previous research indicates that interventions through skills enhancement programmes and access to microfinance services have the potential to significantly improve the livelihoods of oil palm workers. The success of such programmes, such as

entrepreneurship training and the provision of unsecured credit, is usually closely related to improvements in working conditions that provide income stability and worker confidence to optimally utilise these economic opportunities (Sinaga, 2021) . In other words, improvements in working conditions and economic access must go hand in hand in order to have a sustainable positive impact.

A literature review shows that plantation companies that implement sustainability standards in their employment practices tend to improve the welfare of their workers and their economic access. Certifications such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) require companies to pay attention to worker welfare aspects, including fair wages, health insurance, and safe working conditions. The implications of these standards are not only to improve workers' quality of life, but also to increase their economic access opportunities through improved employment status and strengthened collective bargaining power (Wulandari, 2023) .

In addition to the role of companies, effective government policies in protecting workers' rights and expanding economic access are crucial to the future welfare of palm oil workers. Strengthening labour regulations, monitoring the implementation of minimum wages, and inclusive social protection programmes are important steps in addressing job insecurity. On the other hand, the development of local economic infrastructure such as microfinance institutions, cooperatives, and entrepreneurship training is believed to be able to significantly improve workers' economic access (Sinaga, 2013) .

In a global context, the trend towards economic and social sustainability in the palm oil agribusiness sector demands a paradigm shift from the exploitation of labour and resources towards a more equitable and inclusive model. Palm oil workers, as an integral part of the global value chain, must receive the attention they deserve so that the negative economic and social impacts of the industry can be minimised.(Hariyanti, 2024) . An in-depth literature review on the relationship between working conditions and economic access for palm oil workers can serve as a strong foundation for advocating for their rights in the context of national and international sustainable development.

Strategies for the Sustainable Livelihoods of Palm Oil Workers

The livelihood sustainability strategies implemented by palm oil workers are an adaptive response to the uncertainty of working conditions and limited access to economic resources () that they face on a daily basis. In the context of Indonesian palm oil plantations, these strategies are multifaceted and dynamic, encompassing efforts to meet economic, social, and cultural needs so that families can survive and potentially improve their lives in the long term. Understanding these strategies highlights not only individual aspects, but also the social and environmental interactions within communities that help shape these sustainability patterns (Siregar, 2024) .

One of the most common economic strategies is livelihood diversification. With income from their main job on the plantation not always stable or sufficient, worker families often seek additional income through other activities such as subsistence farming, small-scale animal husbandry, or micro-entrepreneurship. This diversification not only serves as an economic buffer against income fluctuations, but also increases food security and economic independence for families (Wulandari, 2025a) . This diversification strategy demonstrates the creativity and adaptability of palm oil workers in facing economic challenges. In addition to economic diversification, oil palm workers also rely on social networks as vital social capital in facing economic and social difficulties. Community solidarity is manifested through mutual assistance, reciprocal aid, and the sharing of resources and information. These networks are important in helping to overcome urgent difficulties such as healthcare costs, children's education, or other sudden needs (Haryati, 2025) .

This type of social capital strengthens solidarity and social bonds among workers and bolsters their bargaining position in relation to companies and the government. For many palm oil worker families, their children's education is a strategic investment to improve the social and economic mobility of the next generation. Despite financial constraints, families strive to educate their children to a level that will enable them to acquire higher skills or formal education (Nana-Otto, 2016) . This livelihood sustainability strategy reflects the hope of breaking out of the cycle of uncertainty and low economic dependence through improving the quality of human resources. Education is also seen as a path to better economic opportunities in the future (Tan, 2022) .

Sustainable living strategies are not only economic and social in nature, but also involve cultural aspects and local values. Community traditions and norms play an important role in regulating how communities manage resources, solve problems, and cooperate. The values of mutual assistance, frugality, and collective solidarity are key elements that strengthen the social structure in the face of economic pressures and job uncertainty. This approach shows that sustainable living is the result of an interaction between the economy and culture that support each other (Ismail et al., 2024) .

The role of women in livelihood sustainability strategies is also very significant. Many women working in the palm oil industry take on dual roles, namely as the main source of additional income through small businesses and also as household managers. Their activities in micro-businesses such as selling food, selling handicrafts, or managing small gardens are the pillars of the family economy. The contribution of these women strengthens the economic sustainability of households while improving the balance between economic and social needs (Wulandari, 2025b) .

Equally important is the role of local institutions and community organisations in developing strategies for the sustainable livelihoods of palm oil workers. Cooperatives, farmer groups and social organisations provide a platform for workers to access training, business capital and social support. Through these institutions, economic

empowerment and skills training programmes are easier to implement and tailored to local needs. The existence of active local institutions and organisations is a key factor in strengthening the capacity of the worker community to survive and thrive (Ridwan, 2024).

Adaptation strategies to risks are also an important element in livelihood sustainability. Palm oil workers often face complex economic, health and social risks. Therefore, they develop risk mitigation mechanisms such as saving in the form of productive assets (small plots of land, livestock), seasonal migration to find additional work, or utilising social assistance from the government and NGOs. These mechanisms reflect workers' awareness and ability to anticipate the uncertainty inherent in their working and economic conditions (Yuslaini, 2024).

In addition, there is a growing phenomenon of worker participation in plantation sustainability certification programmes. In the context of certification such as RSPO, workers receive training on decent work practices and environmental sustainability. Participation in this programme enables workers to acquire new knowledge, improve working conditions, and expand economic access through better job opportunities in high-standard plantations. This shows that industrial sustainability programmes can contribute to sustainable living strategies at the community level (Hendrawan, 2023). Equally important, access to non-formal education and post-employment skills training is also part of the sustainable living strategy. Technical training, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy programmes organised by various parties provide alternatives for self-development and additional business opportunities for workers and their families. With this increased competence, workers are able to develop more productive and sustainable small businesses, while reducing their dependence on their main jobs in oil palm plantations (Hendrawan et al., 2024).

Strategies for managing consumption and household finances are also significant. Palm oil workers typically apply principles of thrift and strict financial management to anticipate income uncertainty. Careful consumption management includes limiting non-essential spending, borrowing within the community, and prioritising spending on primary needs and education. These strategies are important for maintaining the economic sustainability of families in both the short and long term (Suryadi, 2024).

The use of communication technology, particularly mobile phones and social media, has become a strategic tool in the lives of palm oil workers. Through this technology, workers can access information on job opportunities, small business markets, and social assistance programmes more quickly and effectively. In addition, this communication network strengthens social solidarity and facilitates community coordination in addressing common problems. Access to technology is one of the important pillars in improving the capacity for adaptation and sustainability of life (Alamsyah et al., 2018). Apart from internal factors, the role of the government and

companies in providing policy and programme support also greatly influences the effectiveness of the sustainability strategy for palm oil workers. The government, through social protection programmes, skills training, and the strengthening of local economic institutions, provides a foundation for workers to build a better future. Companies committed to fair labour practices and safe working environments also create conditions conducive to the sustainable livelihoods of workers(Alamsyah, 2021).

The experiences and efforts of palm oil workers show that there's synergy between individual strategies, communities, and institutional support in making sustainable living happen. The success of these strategies is highly dependent on the integration of improvements in working conditions, increased economic access, and the strengthening of social and cultural capital. This integration forms a solid foundation for facing difficult working environment challenges and socio-economic uncertainty(et al., 2019b) .

In the future, strengthening formal and informal institutional systems in oil palm plantations will be essential to ensure that existing sustainability strategies become more structured and sustainable. This includes developing relevant training programmes, providing targeted microcredit, and increasing worker participation in decision-making. Investment in these institutional aspects will have a broader and longer-term impact on the welfare of oil palm workers.(, 2024) .

Overall, the livelihood sustainability strategies of palm oil workers demonstrate the resilience and creativity of communities in facing economic and social pressures. A holistic approach that combines economic, social, cultural and institutional aspects is key to understanding and supporting these strategies. An in-depth study of these livelihood sustainability strategies also opens up opportunities for more effective policies and interventions to improve the quality of life of palm oil workers in Indonesia in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion

The Dynamics of Palm Oil Workers' Lives emphasises that the working conditions experienced by palm oil workers in Indonesian plantations greatly determine their ability to access various economic resources. Job insecurity, relatively low wages, and occupational health risks are major challenges that limit income stability and access to formal financial services. These limitations have a direct impact on the welfare of workers' families and hinder their ability to invest in education, health, and other productive needs.

Furthermore, the close relationship between working conditions and economic access forces palm oil workers to develop various adaptive and multifaceted strategies for sustainable living. These strategies include diversifying livelihoods, utilising social capital in the form of community solidarity, investing in children's education, and strict family financial management. In addition to economic aspects, cultural values and local

norms also play an important role in shaping sustainable livelihoods that can withstand the uncertainty of employment and economic conditions on palm oil plantations.

Thus, this literature review highlights the need for an integrative intervention approach between improving working conditions, increasing economic access, and strengthening the sustainability strategies of palm oil workers. Support from the government, companies, and community institutions is key to creating a fair working environment and inclusive economic access. This step is crucial to realising sustainable development that is not only oriented towards the growth of the palm oil industry, but also towards the holistic and equitable welfare and livelihoods of its workers.

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