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Analysis of Factors and Impacts of Converting Rubber Land to Oil Palm in Tabir Selatan District, Merangin Regency, Jambi, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the problems farmers face when converting rubber land to oil palm land, whose welfare level is above that of rubber farmers. This study aimed to determine the reasons for farmers in converting agricultural land to oil palm plantations and the socio-economic impacts of the conversion of oil palm agricultural land in Mekar Jaya Village, Tabir Selatan District, Merangin Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. Data collection techniques used are interviews, observation, and documentation. The results show that farmers mainly convert rubber land to oil palm land because palm oil prices are superior to rubber prices. Hence, oil palm farmers have higher incomes and guaranteed welfare levels than rubber farmers. In addition to the economic impact, land conversion also impacts the social sector in terms of welfare and environmental effects on land ecology. This article implies the need for research on the rubber price supply chain and land ecology.

Keywords: Land Conversion, Palm Oil, Welfare

INTRODUCTION

Oil palm plantations are increasingly being developed in Indonesia because of their high economic value. The growth of oil palm plantations is supported by the Ministry of Agriculture (2023), which states that palm oil is a high-value export commodity for the economy and non-oil and gas foreign exchange. Apart from that, palm oil also has promising employment prospects for Indonesia. Palm oil farming is being intensified in various regions because of its high value and selling price on the market (Pratomo & Saputra, 2022). The increase in the selling price of palm oil is not far from the high price of Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB) (Elvawati, 2022). With high selling prices, farmers intend to change rubber agricultural commodities to oil palm plantations. The conversion of rubber land to oil palm land has increased the development of the palm oil industry in Indonesia. According to the Central Statistics Agency (2022), oil palm plantations have quite a significant potential compared to rubber farming. This has become an international concern because Indonesia is the world's leading producer of vegetable oil (Purba, J.H.V., & Sipayung, 2018).

Since 2006, Indonesia has become the largest palm oil producer in the world, and in 2016, Indonesia succeeded in overtaking Malaysia as a palm oil-producing country

(Aflaha, 2022). Indonesia's share of CPO or Crude Palm Oil reaches 53.4% of the world's total CPO, while Malaysia's share is 32% (Anjani et al., 2022). From here, oil palm farming has increasingly intensified in various regions of Indonesia. According to a study by the Ministry of Industry (2017), Malaysia, Thailand, Nigeria, and Colombia are the largest palm oil-producing countries apart from Indonesia. Malaysia produced 19.9 tonnes of palm oil in 2017, compared to 36.5 million tonnes produced by Indonesia in the same year. Malaysia could become Indonesia's main competitor in the palm oil market (Prayitno & Widyawati, 2021). From here, the Indonesian palm oil industry contributed to foreign exchange of up to 239.4 trillion (Anjani et al., 2022).

The importance of palm oil exports for the country's economy has resulted in an increasingly high demand for vacant land that is still unfulfilled (Ulum & Syaputri, 2021). Many areas are converting empty land into oil palm plantations, which is usually called the conversion of oil palm land. On the other hand, the conversion of palm oil will have various impacts. Negative impacts of converting land to oil palm plantations include damaging land ecology and ecosystems. Apart from that, the positive impact farmers feel from land conversion is convenience and improvement of the community's economy (Zulkarnaini, 2018). Many communities consider their land before converting it to oil palm land, especially on peat land.

Riau is the province in first place with the most extensive oil palm plantations in Indonesia, with an area of 2.86 million hectares. Then followed by West Kalimantan with 2.02 million hectares, East Kalimantan with 1.31 million hectares, North Sumatra with 1.25 million hectares, South Sumatra with 1.12 million hectares, and Jambi with 1.08 million hectares, becoming the province with the most extensive oil palm plantations in 2020. Riau Province has 219 private companies and 19 state companies spread across all districts in Riau (Nasari, Tanjung, and Handayani, 2023). Despite many oil palm plantations in Indonesia, large land areas are still needed for processing, replanting, or a shift in plant types as the main crop in oil palm development. The community and even private companies operating in the agricultural sector increasingly seek vacant land to increase oil palm land. Many people have decided to switch to oil palm plantations rather than continue working on rubber plantations. This happens because the selling price of palm oil is increasing daily in various regions, especially in Jambi Province. Oil palm guarantees people's welfare and is a popular crop today.

Judging from the regional structure, Merangin Regency depends on oil palm plantations in Jambi Province. Every year, sectors dominated by agriculture and plantations contribute more than 60% of GRDP (Gross Regional Domestic Product). Palm oil and rubber were the two smallholder plantations with the highest volumes in 2020 compared to previous years; production increased by 4,312 and 2,775 tons, respectively. Merangin Regency, each sub-district, has promising prospects in terms of employment. Tabir Selatan is one of the sub-districts in Merangin Regency, Jambi Province. Tabir Selatan is one of the sub-districts that produce palm oil in Jambi. The people in the Tabir Selatan Sub-district worked as rubber farmers before the development of the palm oil industry.

The development of the agricultural sector will provide more benefits in the future (Wijaya & Glasbergen, 2016). Agriculture is still the main factor in meeting the economic needs of the Indonesian people, especially people in Jambi Province, where much land is being converted. Mekar Jaya Village is one of the villages where more people convert agricultural land to oil palm plantations than in other villages. The selling value of rubber latex is starting to fall every day, causing a lack of interest in the market; people are starting to feel disadvantaged because the harvest and prices are not balanced (Juliadi & Agustiar, 2023). Communities are considering

converting their land to oil palm plantations, which may increase income. Due to the large number of farmers converting agricultural land, rubber farmers have followed in the footsteps of oil palm farmers in Mekar Jaya Village. This incident is the background for this research, which aims to find out the reasons why farmers convert agricultural land to oil palm plantations and to determine the socio-economic impact of converting agricultural land to oil palm plantations.

This research will be analyzed using James S. Coleman's Rational Choice theory. James S. Coleman's Rational Choice Theory of actors and resources. Actors are seen as having confident choices or goals when carrying out their actions. Farmers are called actors in this research because they have a rational choice, maximize benefits, and have an excellent opportunity to achieve their desired goals. A resource attracts attention and can be controlled by an actor (Anjeli & Susilawati, 2022). These two elements control resources that interest other people and involve actions from actors (George Ritzer, 2012). Coleman believes that rationality is a different form and is influenced by different points of view. There are problems, such as being rational according to one individual and irrational according to another individual (George Ritzer, 2012).

MATERIALS & METHODS

This research uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach, which aims to explain the reasons behind the land conversion carried out by farmers and determine the socio-economic impact of the land conversion itself (Sugiyono, 2016). The location of this research is Mekar Jaya Village, Tabir Selatan District, Merangin Regency, and Jambi Province, Indonesia, because many people are converting rubber land to oil palm land. Apart from that, the reason for choosing the research location was based on the author's observations during observations in Mekar Jaya Village; many people complained about the price of rubber on the market, which was decreasing and was not even selling.

In this research, there are two types of data: primary and secondary data. Primary data was taken directly through interviews and observations with informants in the field (Sugiyono, 2016). Secondary data is used to support data in the field provided by local agencies, such as Village Maps and the area of Mekar Jaya Village. Other information was obtained from the Central Regional Statistics Agency and books and journal articles related to the research topic.

The data collection techniques employed are observation, interviews, and documentation. The data collection process was undertaken in 2024 from January to March. Observations in this study used non-participant observation; in other words, the researcher was not directly involved and only observed conditions independently (Sugiyono, 2016). Researchers observed the socio-economic conditions of the community in Mekar Jaya Village. This research used semi-structured interviews in data collection using predetermined research instruments (Sugiyono, 2017). The documentation taken in this research is the official documentation of the Mekar Jaya Village map and photo documentation of farmers' activities in harvesting oil palm, the process of selecting oil palm seeds, and documentation relating to the impact of the conversion of agricultural land. In this research, four informants were chosen as sources of information based on predetermined criteria, including three primary informants, namely oil palm farmers, oil palm intermediaries, and the community, who saw the amount of oil palm land privately. Meanwhile, 1 supporting informant in this research was the Head of Mekar Jaya Village.

The reason for selecting informants was based on the length of time farmers have been farming, so they have sufficient experience and knowledge about the rubber and oil palm agricultural sectors. The shortcomings in this research lie in the time of data collection, namely, informants who

find it challenging to find and adjust the time for data collection with informants in the field, a lack of freedom in conveying information from informants in the field, and difficulty finding further information.

Table 1. List of Informants

No	Informant's initials	Work	Age
1.	SL	Head of Mekar Jaya Village	53 Years
2.	AB	Palm Oil Middlemen	46 Years
3.	PT	Palm Oil Farmers	33 Years
4.	MY	Palm Oil farmers	47 Years

The data validity test is used to see whether the data obtained in the field is correct (Sugiyono, 2016). Data validity testing used source triangulation to determine differences and similarities in data acquisition from observations, interviews, and documentation. The data obtained is then analysed using data analysis techniques from Miles and Huberman. Miles and Huberman highlighted four essential parts: data collection, condensation, display, and conclusion (Sugiyono, 2022).

RESULT

Profile of Agriculture in Mekar Jaya Village

Mekar Jaya Village is in Tabir Selatan District, Merangin Regency, Jambi Province. Mekar Jaya Village has an area of approximately 9.50 km2. According to the Central Statistics Agency (2024), Mekar Jaya Village has a population of approximately 2,429 people, consisting of 1,259 men and 1,170 women. Most people in Mekar Jaya Village work as rubber and oil palm farmers in the fields. Initially, farmers carried out economic activities to meet their daily needs by farming. The first commodity planted by the community was rubber on land in a bushy state, and there were no plants yet. Starting from here, in the transmigration program in Mekar Jaya Village, the community worked as farm labourers managed by local entrepreneurs by tapping rubber latex in the fields.

Rubber farming began the emergence of the economic center in Mekar Jaya Village. Daily activities are in the fields, from planting, caring for, and treating until it is strong enough to grow, until harvest time arrives. In caring for rubber trees, farmers must make a *bedeng* (Hut) to protect the plants from attacks by wild animals in the fields. In guarding and caring for rubber trees, it takes a reasonably long time, around 7 years, to reach harvest time. During the waiting period for rubber trees until harvest, farmers work as farm laborers, such as *terbas* (opening new land) in other people's places, with daily wages. After waiting for 7 years, farmers can harvest rubber trees so that the sap comes out to be sold and make money. In addition to getting money, farmers can also barter or exchange necessities with rubber intermediaries.

Farmers who work on other people's land usually get wages divided between the landowner and the farmer who works as a labourer. However, the results of working as a rubber farmer are not enough to meet daily needs, so they began to think about converting their land to oil palm land, which is more profitable than rubber trees. Several years ago, before the emergence of rubber and oil palm farming in Mekar Jaya Village, the condition of the land was still mostly empty or overgrown.

Before this land conversion phenomenon emerged, people still worked as rubber farmers by tapping sap daily. Rubber farmers' activities are mainly carried out in the fields daily, from tapping to giving rubber medicine so that the sap immediately solidifies and hardens, which is called *ngobat*. Rubber farmers' activities and working hours are not comparable to the results they get from each harvest. The increasingly high price of rubber medicine also makes it difficult for farmers to divide the results according to the needs that will be used later. The needs are increasing daily, and the selling value is lowering,

making rubber farmers slightly confused about fulfilling these needs.

Rubber farmers began to reduce their activities by working as rubber tappers and tried to find income from various more profitable ways. Rubber farmers have used multiple methods to obtain large amounts of latex in the harvest process, but this only lasted a few harvests. Farmers who used to work as rubber farmers tried to find information from other farmers, such as oil palm and coconut farmers. The difference in working hours and the results obtained by the two farmers are very different from those of rubber farmers, who only get a small profit from the harvest process.

From here, various questions began to arise from rubber farmers after hearing that the yields of oil palm farmers were higher than those of rubber, which only had a small profit with the amount of effort expended by rubber farmers. People who used to work as rubber farmers began to convert rubber land to oil palm plantations, which were considered more profitable than rubber. People still prioritize rubber as a livelihood and work extra to meet their daily needs. People began to accept the changes gradually. On the other hand, there are still people who maintain their land and follow the changes peacefully (Putri, Restu, and Agus, 2024).

Oil palm is one of the plants that sells at a high price among the people of Sumatra, especially in Jambi Province. Based on the results of interviews in the field with informants, 80% of the people in Mekar Jaya Village have started converting agricultural land to oil palm land, and 20% of the people are holding on because they need significant capital in the land conversion process.

Reasons farmers convert rubber land to oil palm

The results show that there are several reasons why farmers convert their land from rubber to oil palm.

The first reason is the economic condition of the community. People who used to work as rubber farmers generally work on their land or other people's land by sharing half of the harvest they get. Several years ago, before the decline in rubber prices on the market, farmers still relied on rubber as their primary source of income to meet their needs. The income earned by rubber farmers was not enough to meet basic household needs and other needs. In addition, farmers also look for additional work, such as looking for and collecting *Berondol* (palm seeds that have fallen off) on other people's land.

Rubber became the most essential commodity, especially for the people in Mekar Jaya Village at that time. However, after the selling price of rubber decreased, farmers began to be confused because rubber was one of their sources of livelihood. Rubber trees were producing less and less sap every day, and the age of the trees also affected the amount of sap that farmers got every day. Rubber farmers have used many methods, from clearing the land to reducing undergrowth that causes rubber sap to be disturbed, providing quality rubber medicine, and reducing the provision of stale sap.

The second reason is the impact on the environment. Over time, rubber farmers began to try to follow in the footsteps of oil palm farmers, who were considered to provide more benefits from each harvest. Regarding care, rubber, and oil palm trees have many noticeable differences. The care process for oil palms is tricky because it goes through various processes, starting from selecting high-quality oil palm seeds or seedlings, selecting the type of fertilizer and providing fertilizer, guarding, and the process of planting seedlings, which must be monitored from various things that threaten the growth of the oil palm. Meanwhile, care for rubber trees tends to be easier because the administration of drugs is small and only given during the rainy season to prevent the released sap from freezing and, at harvest time, to glue the sap into large lumps called Mbangket. Oil palms' care and fertilizer process is done

twice yearly according to plant conditions (P. Priotama, N. Nurliana, 2023). Land conversion has become one of the significant phenomena that have begun to occur in Indonesia (Firdaus, A., Sahlan, S., & Fattah, 2023). The study results show that maintenance is why farmers convert rubber land into oil palm land. The maintenance process and working hours required by farmers in the harvest process are more relaxed for oil palm farmers than for rubber farmers. If rubber's selling price is comparable to oil palm's, above IDR 10-15,000 per kilogram, few people will likely convert rubber land to oil palm land. Damage to the ecology of the land also impacts the disruption of the growth and development of new plants, namely oil palm, due to the roots of rubber trees still left on the land.

The third reason is social conditions. Farmers converting rubber land to oil palm land are also supported by increasing household expenses, while rubber income decreases daily. Regarding welfare, people with oil palm land are superior to those without (Interview 9, January 2024). In addition, this shows that farmers are in the process of converting rubber land to oil palm land because the level of welfare of their community is below the level of welfare of oil palm farmers.

There is a difference between oil palm farmers and rubber farmers in the harvesting process; farmers with oil palm land tend to relax because the harvesting process is only carried out once every 2 weeks, although oil palm care is more difficult. After all, a lot of fertilizer is required for the growth process to reach the market target. At the same time, rubber that must be tapped daily takes a long time to collect into one large size before being sold.

The difference can be seen in the activities of rubber farmers and oil palm farmers during the harvest process.

Picture 1. Palm oil harvesting process

Picture 1 shows oil palm farmers harvesting or taking palm fruit using *Mendodos*. The oil palm fruit is small, called sand fruit, which can not be sold.

Picture 2. The process of tapping rubber latex

Picture 2 shows the activities of rubber farmers who are tapping sap in the fields. The activities of rubber farmers and oil palm farmers are very different, as in the picture above. Rubber farmers must tap several times until they produce a large pile of sap or *odel* that can be sold.

Impacts of land conversion on farmers

Land conversion from rubber to oil palm has several impacts. The impacts felt by farmers include economic, environmental, and social impacts.

Economic impacts focus on community income before and after converting rubber

land to oil palm land. Before the land conversion process in Mekar Jaya Village, the community only had a small income. It still lacked household needs, children's education, and other needs when working as rubber farmers. However, when the community began to convert rubber land to oil palm, everything changed regarding income levels, household expenses, and even the level of community welfare.

The increasing level of needs makes people think about looking for additional money apart from the rubber harvest every month, in contrast to people who work as oil palm farmers, who are starting to be sufficient because the daily harvest is increasing with a higher selling price than the price of rubber. People feel that there is a change in their economic system after carrying out land conversion. The changes in the community experience a correlation that changes from one to another following other dimensions (Adinda et al., 2022). Not only that, this land conversion also positively impacts people's lives, such as clear hopes for an increase in the level of income obtained by farmers (Casanova Noviyanti & Sutrisno, 2021).

The impact caused by the environment and the loss of habitat for animals in the fields causes damage to the ecosystem. In addition, oil palm fronds can also be used as organic fertilizer. Not only that, farmers can also use coconut fiber as a natural fertilizer to fertilize plants, especially oil palm leaves.

Picture 3. Rubber land before being converted to oil palm

Land that was previously barren and had no plants on it has started to be planted with rubber by farmers in the fields.

Picture 4. Rubber land that has been converted to oil palm

The social impact referred to in this study is the level of community welfare after converting rubber land to oil palm. Before converting rubber land to oil palm plantations, people spent more time in the fields working as rubber farmers. Welfare is one of the things that all people want; in this case, the level of welfare is satisfied with the fulfillment of prosperous needs and goals (Marsela & Wijaya, 2020). Welfare in the conversion of rubber land to oil palm is seen in the triangle of the relationship between the market state and welfare that can be felt by oil palm farmers themselves (Fadri, Candra, and Chaniago, 2021).

Not only that, this land conversion also has positive and negative impacts on the lives of the people in Mekar Jaya Village; the positive impact is that the level of income and welfare of the community is increasing every day, and the working hours are less than those of previous rubber farmers. Furthermore, there is a negative impact: the destruction of the soil ecology that still contains rubber tree roots on land that was previously used as rubber land by farmers. This weakens the interaction between families and communities. However, this changed immediately after converting rubber land to oil palm began to appear in Mekar Jaya Village. People who have oil

palm land have more time because of the difference in working hours compared to people who work as rubber farmers, who only have a little time at home.

When viewed from the income of people who work as rubber farmers and oil palm farmers, there are differences between them. Based on the results of interviews with informant L (53 years old), it shows that people who work as rubber farmers generally get a harvest of around IDR 2,000,000 per month (approx. USD 118) on 1 hectare of land, and the harvest process is 2 times a month during the dry season without rain. Meanwhile, people who work as oil palm farmers get a yield of IDR 3,000,000 per month (approx. USD 177), and the harvest process is 2 times a month. During the rainy season, rubber farmers cannot tap the sap because this condition makes it difficult for the sap to freeze. This differs from oil palm; the weather during harvest does not affect oil palm farmers. In the rainy or dry season, oil palm farmers can still harvest. Not only that, in the selection of oil palm seeds, the level of care and the process of providing high-quality fertilizers will provide significant results in each harvest (Putri, Restu, and Agus, 2024). As the planting age passes, the number of oil palm fruits produced each month will increase (Fitriyana, 2018).

There is a difference of up to IDR 1,000,000 (approx. USD 59) between the income of rubber farmers and oil palm farmers in the harvest obtained each month. Rubber farmers feel disadvantaged because the harvest results are not comparable to their energy and working hours. Meanwhile, oil palm farmers, whose harvesting process takes 1-2 days, get more results and prices that are pretty high compared to the price of rubber sold. Land conversion that includes income has two main objectives: income to describe the current business event situation and the anticipation of future conditions from a strategy or action (Muslimah & Megawati, 2018). Land or land previously used as a source of community life is now experiencing a shift or change in land function (Irwan et al., 2018). According to Tjondronegoro and Wiradi Kusdiane (2018), the land is a place to generate various community incomes and a source for the community to carry out various interactions.

Behind the land conversion incident in Mekar Jaya Village, many farmers' economic levels have begun to improve in terms of income, welfare, and fulfillment of family needs. This shows the rationality of farmers in making oil palm a substitute for rubber. There is hope that farmers will still want to earn income even though the expenses incurred are greater, so this remains a motivation for farmers to convert land to oil palm, even though the results of the efficiency and feasibility analysis of rubber farming are based on practical parameters (Hastuti, 2018).

DISCUSSION

This section will analyze why farmers are urged to convert their rubber land into an oil palm plantation. Research on land conversion is necessary because it provides knowledge about socio-economic and environmental conditions before and after the land conversion process. The results show that the main reason farmers convert rubber land to oil palm plantations is low income and unachieved welfare levels. According to James S. Coleman's rational choice theory, which discusses actors and resources, farmers are the leading actors in this land conversion process; farmers aim to increase their income rates. Reducing rubber land is part of the rational choice chosen by farmers with full awareness (Afriyanto & Wijaya, 2024). The logical choice theory suggests that rubber farmers select oil palm as a replacement crop on their land. In this study, farmers aim to change their economic level to achieve the desired level of welfare.

Research focusing on land conversion from rubber to oil palm has not been widely conducted by other researchers, especially research examining the various impacts caused by land conversion. Oil palm is considered superior to rubber in terms of

income and welfare. The study results explain that it is essential for farmers to convert their land into oil palm land, which guarantees better future welfare. In addition to impacting the community's economy, land conversion also impacts the destruction of land ecology and the loss of ecosystems. Converting rubber land into oil palm requires significant capital to open new land with soil conditions that allow. Farmers who have converted rubber land into oil palm land have begun to improve their economic system and have valuable assets. According to research conducted by Gusriati, Sumarno, and Sudarso (2023), regarding the general income of farmers who have converted rubber land into oil palm land, they have a better life in terms of housing and valuable assets such as vehicles. According to research conducted by Syamsul Tampubolon and Sugiarto (2022), land conversion also impacts the type of economic activity and, most importantly, the level of income of the community in the area. Changes in the community's economic system experienced differences before and after land conversion, such as research conducted by Sakmawati and Muhamad Syukur (2019) regarding land conversion and its impact on the socio-economic lives of farmers, as seen based on working hours and farming activities.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of converting rubber land to oil palm plantations arises due to rubber's low selling price, making it difficult for rubber farmers to increase their income. Thus, this land conversion gives farmers a rational choice in replacing rubber plants with oil palm plantations, which increases income. The conversion of oil palm plantations has a long-term effect on farmers' lives, especially regarding farmer welfare. Although this land conversion has a positive impact on the economy of farmers, it also has a profound impact on the ecology of the land.

The weakness of this study is the lack of access to accurate village monographic data on the number of rubber and oil palm farmers and their income levels. Therefore, further research is needed on the selling price or rubber supply chain that causes low selling prices and the sustainability of land ecological conditions.

Declaration by Authors

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