

Dynamics of Socio-Economic and Cultural Changes on Agribusiness Institutions in Oil Palm Development Areas in West Sulawesi Province, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to examine the role of agribusiness institutions in shaping socio-economic and cultural changes among oil palm smallholders in West Sulawesi, Indonesia, and to assess the involvement of government and private companies in supporting smallholder farmers' economic improvement within the nucleus-plasma partnership system.

Research Method: A qualitative descriptive-analytic approach was applied. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, involving smallholders, managers of agribusiness institutions, private-sector actors, and relevant government agencies. Thematic analysis was conducted through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, with triangulation across multiple sources to ensure validity.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal that agribusiness institutions have not significantly influenced smallholders' economic levels. Limited government and private sector participation have restricted access to capital, technology, and market information. Despite this, smallholders' independent cultivation of oil palm has improved household income and driven cultural transformation, shifting traditional farming practices toward more modern, market-oriented practices.

Implications: Strengthening agribusiness institutions through active collaboration between government, private companies, and farmers is essential for sustainable development and equitable benefits. Policy measures should focus on capacity building, facilitating access to finance, technology transfer, and market integration. Further research is recommended to explore effective models of institutional intervention and to assess the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts of agribusiness support on smallholder communities.

Keywords: agribusiness institutions; oil palm; socio-economic change; cultural transformation; smallholder farmers; nucleus-plasma partnership.

Introduction

Indonesia has the world's largest oil palm plantation area and is also the world's largest producer of palm oil. According to the Indonesian Plantation Statistics published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2024, the total area of oil palm plantations in Indonesia reached 16,005,060 hectares. The expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia has continued to increase year over year, and plantation locations are now almost evenly distributed across all major islands and provinces, except for

Nusa Tenggara, Bali, DKI Jakarta, and North Sulawesi. In West Sulawesi Province, the area of oil palm plantations is not yet as extensive as in other provinces in Indonesia. However, the oil palm plantation area in West Sulawesi is considerably larger than that of other plantation commodities such as cocoa, coconut, clove, and pepper. Based on BPS data in 2024, the area of oil palm plantations in West Sulawesi Province reached 146,590 hectares.

The expansion of oil palm plantations in West Sulawesi Province is expected to increase agricultural activities to support regional economic growth, particularly for smallholder oil palm farmers who serve as plasma farmers in cooperation with large plantations managed by private companies or the government. This cooperation pattern between smallholder oil palm farmers (plasma) and large-scale plantations, whether privately or state-managed, is commonly referred to as the nucleus–estate smallholder scheme (Perkebunan Inti Rakyat/PIR) (Badrun, 2010; Mangoensoekarjo & Semangun, 2008). Socio-economic changes in oil palm development areas are characterized by shifts in livelihood patterns, changes in land access and control, and the restructuring of production relationships among farmers, plantation companies, and other institutional actors. At the same time, these changes interact with local value systems and cultural practices, which often undergo adaptation, marginalization, or even disruption. These dynamics directly or indirectly affect the performance and sustainability of agribusiness institutions, both formal ones, such as cooperatives and business partnerships, and informal institutions rooted in local norms and indigenous knowledge.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop farmer institutions based on the understanding that agricultural processes require resilient human resources supported by adequate infrastructure, equipment, financing, marketing, and other related components. Farmer institutions, or more broadly agribusiness institutions, play an important role in ensuring the sustainability of agro-industrial activities (post-harvest processing) through cooperation with large plantation enterprises, both private and government-owned. Through such cooperation, oil palm smallholders, as plasma farmers, can improve their socio-economic conditions, which in turn leads to cultural changes among farmers, particularly behavioral shifts from traditional farming systems toward modern, profit-oriented farming aimed at improving the living standards of plasma farmers.

Agribusiness institutions have a strategic role in bridging the interests of various stakeholders, improving value chain efficiency, and strengthening the bargaining position of smallholder farmers within the oil palm agribusiness system. However, most previous studies have focused on economic and environmental aspects. At the same time, analyses that integrate socio-economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions remain relatively limited, especially in the context of oil palm development areas in eastern Indonesia. Within the agribusiness system, institutions are included in the supporting services subsystem, where they must support activities in the input supply, farming operations, agricultural product processing, and marketing subsystems. Farmers, as the main actors, are both the subjects of agribusiness development and the consumers of services provided by institutions that support agribusiness. Agribusiness will function effectively if there are no gaps between supporting institutions and business activities (Tedjaningsih, 2018).

The current shift in the economic development paradigm no longer relies solely on the agricultural sector, but rather on the agribusiness system, since the old paradigm emphasized farming activities for farmers (food producing) and capture and cultivation activities for fishers (food gathering and food producing). The agribusiness system encompasses agriculture, agro-industry, marketing, and related supporting services. In other words, the agribusiness system has evolved into an agribusiness

management system that applies management functions—planning, organizing, directing, controlling, and evaluation—across all agribusiness subsystems, from upstream to downstream, as well as their supporting sectors (Rahim & Astuti, 2005). Meanwhile, according to Rosnita (2008), the modernization of entrepreneurs and workers is the key to agricultural modernization, as they serve as motivators, direction-setters, and regulators of business dynamics.

Another essential requirement is creating an entrepreneurial education environment for both entrepreneurs and farmers, aimed at producing environmentally conscious entrepreneurs—those who consistently monitor developments in the business environment, particularly the external environment. This holistic approach is necessary because it has implications for socio-economic and cultural change and is highly beneficial for plantation core managers and plasma farmers as they work together to create a more advanced business climate. The role of environmentally oriented entrepreneurial education presents both challenges and opportunities. It is essential to advance the business sector in the current era of globalization, for example, by using digital tools to support the development of agribusiness institutions (Rauf et al., 2021).

Based on the above discussion, the objectives of this study are:

- To examine socio-economic and cultural changes affecting agribusiness institutions in oil palm development areas in West Sulawesi Province.
- To identify the factors influencing socio-economic and cultural aspects of agribusiness institutions in oil palm development areas in West Sulawesi Province.
- To determine which agribusiness institutions play the most significant role in socio-economic and cultural changes in oil palm development areas in West Sulawesi Province.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Agribusiness Institutions

Agribusiness institutions are the formal and informal rules, norms, and organizational arrangements that govern interactions among actors within the agribusiness system. From the perspective of institutional economics, institutions are understood as the “rules of the game” that shape economic behavior through shared norms, values, and agreed procedures (Veblen; Deliarnov, 1997). Thus, institutions encompass not only formal organizations such as cooperatives and business partnerships, but also social values and cultural practices that influence economic decision-making (Nuraini et al., 2016; Syahyuti, 2007). Within the agribusiness context, institutions play a strategic role in coordinating upstream–downstream relationships, reducing transaction uncertainty, and enhancing efficiency and competitiveness among economic actors (Cramer & Jensen, 1994). Agribusiness encompasses the entire chain of activities, from the provision of production inputs and cultivation to post-harvest processing, marketing, and consumption (Amruddin, 2021b). Accordingly, agribusiness institutions function as regulatory mechanisms that connect the interests of farmers, companies, financial institutions, and government agencies.

Several studies indicate that well-functioning agribusiness institutions contribute to stronger bargaining power for farmers, improved access to capital and technology, and greater sustainability of agricultural enterprises (Anantanyu, 2011; Suardi, 2016). These institutional roles include human resource development, the dissemination of innovations, the provision of inputs and marketing services, and the strengthening of farmer-based organizations such as farmer groups and cooperatives. However,

institutional performance is strongly shaped by local socio-economic and cultural conditions, making agribusiness institutions inherently dynamic and adaptive.

Social and Economic Change

Social change refers to the transformation of social structures, interaction patterns, and value systems in response to both internal and external dynamics (Elly, 2006). Such changes are often driven by technological innovation, environmental shifts, and economic restructuring, which alter how communities earn their livelihoods (Lumintang, 2015). In rural settings, social change is commonly reflected in shifts in livelihood strategies, changes in labor relations, and the reorganization of access to productive resources. Economic change is associated with variations in people's capacity to generate income, distribute resources, and consume goods and services. Conceptually, economics examines how people manage limited resources to satisfy diverse needs (Sukirno, 1982). Community economic welfare can be observed through the ability to meet basic needs, as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Rauf, 2018). Indicators of economic conditions include income levels, types of employment, asset ownership, and access to education and health services (Ria, 2017). In agribusiness systems, economic change often creates opportunities for income growth, while simultaneously carrying the risk of unequal benefit distribution. Production, distribution, and consumption processes are therefore central elements in understanding economic changes at the household level in agricultural communities (Soeharto, 2009). Consequently, analyses of economic change must account for the interaction between economic structures and the institutions that regulate them.

Cultural Change

Cultural change can be understood as a process of enculturation, namely the continuous learning and internalization of values, norms, and cultural practices through social interaction (Koentjaraningrat, 2009; Widiarto, 2007). Culture is not static; it evolves alongside modernization, globalization, and the diffusion of new technologies (Inglehart, 2020). These processes influence individuals' ways of thinking, attitudes, and behavior in both social and economic activities. In the agribusiness context, cultural change is evident in the transition from traditional farming practices toward more modern, commercial, and market-oriented production systems. Enculturation occurs through family structures, education, social groups, and formal institutions such as government bodies and economic organizations (Devito, 1997). Such cultural transformations directly affect how communities manage resources, establish working relationships, and engage with agribusiness institutions. Social, economic, and cultural changes are closely interconnected and collectively shape the dynamics of agribusiness institutions. Institutions that can adapt to these changes are more likely to support agribusiness sustainability and enhance the welfare of local communities.

Research Conceptual Framework

The development and expansion of oil palm plantations in Southeast Sulawesi Province have led to significant social, economic, and cultural changes for communities living near plantation areas. These changes occur both directly, through increased employment opportunities and income, and indirectly, through shifts in social structures, livelihood patterns, and community value systems. In the context of the nucleus-plasma partnership, the sustainability of oil palm development largely depends

on the extent to which plasma farmers experience tangible economic and social benefits from agribusiness activities.

The shift from traditional short-term crop farming to long-term oil palm cultivation encourages changes in farmers' behavior and mindset. Farmers no longer focus solely on meeting household needs but are moving toward market-oriented, sustainable production systems. This transformation reflects a broader paradigm shift from conventional farming toward an integrated agribusiness system. Agribusiness institutions serve as key intermediaries between plasma farmers and core plantations, providing essential support, including production inputs, financing, technical guidance, and marketing assistance. Effective institutional support enables farmers to learn and transition into entrepreneurial roles, accelerating their adaptation to socio-economic and cultural changes. However, changes in behavior and cultural values do not occur instantly; they require long-term adaptation and learning processes. Therefore, institutional support for sustainable agribusiness is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring the success of socio-economic transformation and the long-term sustainability of oil palm agribusiness.

The following figure illustrates the interaction patterns between socio-economic and cultural changes and their influence on agribusiness institutions.

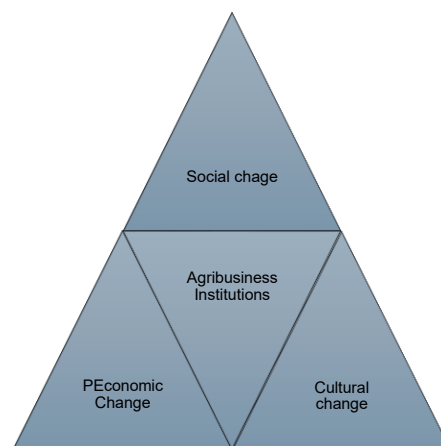


Figure 1. Interaction Pattern of Socio-Economic and Cultural Changes on Agribusiness Institutions

Research Method

This study is designed as a descriptive-analytical research with a qualitative approach to examine the role of agribusiness institutions in supporting the development of oil palm plantations and their implications for socio-economic and cultural changes in local communities. The study focuses on agribusiness institutions operating in oil palm development areas in West Sulawesi Province, including those managed by the government, private companies, and farmer-based self-managed institutions. The research subjects are oil palm farmers participating in the plasma plantation scheme and partnered with core plantations, as well as relevant agribusiness institutional actors. The study emphasizes three main elements of institutions: resources, organizational structure, and norms, along with their relationship to socio-economic and cultural transformation processes among plasma farmers.

The research sites were selected purposively in several regencies of West Sulawesi Province that are active in oil palm development and have functioning agribusiness institutions. Informants were purposively selected and included plasma farmers, administrators, members of agribusiness institutions, business actors, and stakeholders from relevant government agencies at both the regency and provincial levels. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation. Interviews aimed to explore the formation and operational processes of institutions, the core-plasma partnership patterns, and the socio-economic and behavioral changes among farmers. Observations focused on farming practices, institutional activities, and social interactions within agribusiness activities. Secondary data were gathered from official government documents, institutional reports, and supporting literature.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Interview and observation data were analyzed to identify patterns in how individual behavior transforms into collective behavior, the dynamics of agribusiness institutions, and the impacts of these dynamics on socioeconomic and cultural changes among farmers. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques.

Results and Discussion

Analysis Result

Initial Establishment of Oil Palm Plantations

Interviews with several oil palm farmers in plantation areas revealed that private companies primarily established plantations in West Sulawesi Province through investment schemes. These companies entered rural areas by clearing land and establishing partnerships with local farmers. Forms of cooperation included providing oil palm seedlings, offering technical guidance for cultivation, and guaranteeing the purchase of farmers' harvests. In the early stages, farmers who previously relied on traditional crops such as upland rice, cocoa, and other food crops were gradually encouraged to switch to oil palm cultivation. This transition was motivated by economic incentives, promises of increased income, and market certainty provided by private companies.

Development of Farmer Business Patterns

Over time, as farmers gained knowledge and experience in managing oil palm plantations, farming practices shifted. Many farmers began developing their own oil palm farms, reducing their dependence on private companies. Independent farmers managed land clearing, seedling procurement, and plantation maintenance using their own resources. This change reflects socioeconomic dynamics in which farmers are no longer solely plasma partners but have evolved into independent agribusiness actors. However, limited capital, access to technology, and market information remain significant challenges for these independent farmers.

Oil Palm Marketing Patterns

The study identified several marketing patterns for fresh fruit bunches (FFB) in the research area:

- Company-affiliated farmers: Farmers who have formal partnerships with private companies sell their harvest directly to the company at pre-agreed prices.

- Independent farmers: Farmers without formal agreements sell their FFB directly to processing companies.
- Through intermediaries (collectors): Farmers sell their FFB to collectors or intermediaries who have capital and transportation facilities. The collectors then resell the FFB to processing companies.

Collectors serve as an alternative for some farmers due to limited direct access to companies, particularly because of distance, transportation costs, and minimum volume requirements.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Dynamics of Farmers

The growth of oil palm plantations has significantly impacted the socio-economic conditions of local communities. Economically, farmers' incomes have generally increased since cultivating oil palm, although fluctuations in FFB prices often affect income stability. Socially, work patterns and community interactions have shifted from subsistence farming to market-oriented commercial farming. Culturally, traditional values such as cooperation and collective work have diminished, giving way to more individualistic work patterns. The long-term, individual nature of oil palm farming activities influences this shift.

Conditions of Farmer Agribusiness Institutions

The research shows that agribusiness institutions managed by oil palm farmers in the study area are not yet functioning optimally. Existing institutions, such as farmer groups or cooperatives, have not fully succeeded in collecting, managing, and marketing farmers' production. Several factors contribute to these institutions' underperformance, including low member participation, weak institutional management, limited capital, and a lack of trust among farmers. As a result, farmers often prefer to sell their harvest individually, either directly to companies or through collectors. This situation indicates that strengthened agribusiness institutions have not fully kept pace with the ongoing socio-economic and cultural changes. Consequently, farmers' bargaining power within the oil palm agribusiness system remains relatively weak.

Discussion

Socio-Economic Changes in Oil Palm Plantation Development

The entry of private companies into oil palm plantation development in West Sulawesi Province has been a key driver of socio-economic change in rural communities. Initially, these companies acted as agents of change, introducing modern agricultural production systems to local farmers by providing seedlings, initial capital, and market access. This aligns with modernization theory, which posits that social change occurs through the diffusion of innovations from external actors to traditional communities (Rogers, 2003). The shift in farmers' livelihoods from traditional agriculture to oil palm plantations reflects changes in household economic structures. Farmers who previously relied on subsistence farming began to adopt a market-oriented, commercial agricultural approach. According to Todaro and Smith (2015), such rural economic transformations are characteristic of economic development processes, marked by rising incomes and changing labor patterns. However, the study shows that increased income does not always translate into economic stability. Fluctuating fresh fruit bunch (FFB) prices, dependence on buyer companies, and rising production costs contribute to farmers'

economic vulnerability, particularly for independent farmers. This indicates that the economic changes are partial and not yet fully sustainable.

Cultural Dynamics and Social Pattern Changes

The expansion of oil palm plantations also brings cultural and social implications. The study found a shift in social values, particularly the decline of cooperation and collective work that were central to traditional farming systems. The long-term, individually oriented nature of oil palm farming encourages farmers to be more independent and focused on their personal economic interests. This phenomenon can be explained using Soekanto's (2012) social change theory, which suggests that changes in livelihood systems affect community values, norms, and interaction patterns. In this context, shifts in farmers' economic structures weaken social bonds and group solidarity. Moreover, the emergence of independent farmers no longer reliant on companies reflects social differentiation in rural areas. Some farmers can develop independent enterprises, while others remain subordinate due to limited capital and market access. This may create socio-economic disparities within the oil palm farming community.

Marketing Patterns and Power Relations in Oil Palm Agribusiness

Marketing patterns for oil palm in the study area show an imbalance of power between farmers, collectors, and processing companies. Farmers who partner with companies enjoy market certainty but often have weak bargaining power because companies set prices unilaterally. Independent farmers selling through collectors receive lower prices due to intermediary profit margins. This situation aligns with value chain theory, which states that primary producers (farmers) often capture less value than actors in the processing and marketing stages (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2001). Farmers' weak bargaining power stems from limited access to price information, transportation, and robust economic institutions.

Agribusiness Institutions and Functional Challenges

The study reveals that farmers' agribusiness institutions, such as cooperatives or farmer groups, are not yet functioning optimally. Existing institutions fail to perform their strategic roles in collecting, managing, and marketing farmers' produce, leading farmers to sell their harvests individually. According to Uphoff (1986), effective agribusiness institutions should have clear organizational functions, active member participation, and adequate managerial and financial capacity. The underperformance of institutions in the study area is attributed to low levels of farmer trust in leadership, limited human resource capacity, and minimal government policy support or guidance. This indicates that strengthened farmer institutions have not accompanied socio-economic changes. As noted by Anantanyu (2011), farmer institutions are key to improving bargaining power, business efficiency, and agribusiness sustainability.

Implications for Sustainable Agribusiness Development

The socio-economic and cultural dynamics in the study area show that oil palm plantation development has provided economic benefits for local communities. However, it has not fully supported sustainable agribusiness development. Weak farmer institutions leave farmers vulnerable within the oil palm agribusiness system. Therefore, efforts to strengthen farmer institutions are essential through

capacity building, transparent management, and supportive policies. Strong institutions can serve as collective platforms that not only facilitate economic activities but also reinforce social cohesion and cultural values within the farming community.

Conclusion

Private companies initially drove the development of oil palm plantations in West Sulawesi Province through partnerships with local farmers, including the provision of seedlings, technical assistance, and guaranteed purchase of harvests. This collaboration triggered a shift in the rural economic structure from traditional farming to market-oriented commercial agriculture. Over time, some farmers have independently developed oil palm enterprises, reflecting socio-economic dynamics such as increased knowledge, experience, and self-reliance. However, challenges related to limited capital and market access persist.

Oil palm marketing follows three main channels: sales by partner farmers directly to companies, direct sales by independent farmers to processing companies, and sales through intermediaries or collectors. These patterns highlight differences in farmers' access and bargaining power within the agribusiness system.

The socio-economic changes were accompanied by cultural and social shifts, marked by a move from collective values toward more individualistic work patterns and a weakening of cooperation practices. However, farmers' agribusiness institutions, such as cooperatives and farmer groups, have not yet operated optimally in managing and marketing production. As a result, farmers tend to sell their harvests individually, leaving them with relatively weak bargaining positions in the oil palm agribusiness chain. Overall, while oil palm development has positively impacted farmers' incomes and economic transformation, strengthening agribusiness institutions remains critical to supporting the sustainability and independence of farmers' oil palm enterprises.

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