



## The Economy of Oil Palm Smallholders in Post-Conflict Aceh

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### Article

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### Abstract

This article aims to describe the economy of oil palm smallholders in post-conflict Aceh. The data for this study were gathered through observation, interviews, and a review of the relevant literature. This study found that oil palm plantations were one of the industries that helped the people of North Aceh get back on their feet economically after the conflict. The peaceful conditions in post-conflict Aceh propelled the former GAM combatants to plunge into the oil palm plantation sector because the potential for land was quite wide. The success of the oil palm plantation activities by former GAM combatants encouraged the community to participate in planting oil palm so that the area of oil palm plantations continued to increase in North Aceh, and then the community's economy also increased. These conditions strengthened peace because GAM combatants successfully switched from conflict-related activities to economic ones.

**Keywords:** Economic; Oil Palm; Post Conflict, Nort Aceh

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### Introduction

The potential of agriculture becomes a good foundation for realizing economic development for the community and increasing a prosperous standard of living. The economic potential of the agricultural sector has great opportunities to realize the welfare of the farmer's community because this sector is a fundamental one where the potential is still promising (Saragih, 2010). According to Kusumaningrum (2019), the agricultural sector in Indonesia still plays a role in increasing Indonesia's economic growth and supporting the financial activities of society in general. It can be seen in the formation of GDP, foreign exchange earnings, employment, food supply, and the supply of industrial raw materials. The agricultural sector also plays a role in inequitable development through efforts to reduce poverty and improve people's incomes (FDS, 2019).

One of the agricultural sectors that can support the economy of the Indonesian people is the oil palm plantation sector. Palm oil is a vegetable oil-producing plantation crop originating from West Africa, namely Angola and Gambia, Central America, and South America (Nasution et al., 2018). In essence, palm oil comes from a tropical tree planted and harvested over a large area. Most of the oil palm plantations were in Sumatra during the Dutch colonial period because they were considered relatively more advanced. However, in recent years,

Kalimantan has become an alternative area because it has a large area and potential for oil palm development (Rizal, 2021).

The increasing energy demand has forced the world community to expand new and renewable energy sources. In Europe and America, natural resources are used widely as alternative energy sources in forestry. In Asia, agricultural products have become the primary source of bioenergy development, including palm oil plantations (Papilo et al., 2022). As a potential sector, palm oil production in Indonesia has contributed to 45% of the total world palm oil production since 2006 (Badrun, 2010). Over the past ten years, Indonesia and Malaysia have become two countries that supply the world with a lot of palm oil products (Mahlia et al., 2001). Both countries make about 85% of the palm oil in the world (Jayed et al., 2011). In the 2000s, Indonesia surpassed Malaysia as the world's largest producer of palm oil, and palm oil continues to be Indonesia's leading export product (FAO, 2015). The oil palm has contributed to economic growth, rural development, and poverty alleviation, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia as the two biggest palm oil producers in the world (Basiron, 2007; Kubitz et al., 2018; Rist et al., 2010). The increase in the area of Indonesian palm oil plantations from 133,298 acres in 1970 to 11,914,499 acres in 2016 has been able to place Indonesia as the world's largest producer of palm oil, namely 31.1 million tons, followed by Malaysia with 19.2 million tons (Nasution et al., 2018). These conditions were influenced by Indonesian people who work in the agricultural sector. The 2013 Agricultural Census noted that about 4.56 million households in Sumatra cultivate perennial crops, and only 39.16 thousand families grow seasonal crops. The types of perennial crops that are cultivated in Sumatra are oil palm (1.2 million households) and coconut (895 thousand households) (BPS, 2014).

In Aceh, oil palm plantations are a promising sector. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) states that in 2018, the number of Indonesian palm oil exports to India reached 6.7 million tons. This figure makes India the world's largest palm oil export destination. Meanwhile, exports to Pakistan in 2018 reached 2.5 million tons (Majalah Sawit Indonesia, 2019). These export activities, supported by the area of oil palm plantations in Aceh, have increased from 196,640 ha in 2012 to 441,272 ha in 2016 (Nasution et al., 2018). One of the areas in Aceh that has the potential to manage palm oil plantations is the North Aceh District. However, this potential has not been optimally developed to become a mainstay commodity in economic development (Asnawi et al., 2015). Although oil palm plantations have the potential to improve the community's economy, the conflict in Aceh has resulted in the community not being able to move freely. During the Aceh conflict, security conditions were not conducive, as were economic conditions. When the 1997–1998 crisis occurred, Aceh's economic growth was unfavorable for four consecutive years. After the crisis, the economy in Aceh did not improve and continued to decline. One of the reasons is the condition of prolonged conflict. Negative growth continued until 2004, causing the poverty rate to double at the national level (Maifizar, 2018). After the tsunami disaster and the peace agreement, Aceh's economy improved steadily. Nevertheless, this rise is modest in comparison to the extent of the destruction and losses inflicted by the conflict and tsunami (Maifizar, 2018). In 2012, the Acehese economy improved, with economic growth rates of 5.20% without oil and gas and 6.06% with oil and gas. This circumstance suggests that the agriculture sector of Aceh Province is the most essential to its growth. The vast number of people who work as smallholders and the expansion of agricultural infrastructure are elements that contribute to the agriculture sector's considerable contribution to the economy of Aceh (Sufriadi, 2017).

In post-conflict Aceh, oil palm plantations have begun to attract public attention because they are pretty economically promising. Several studies confirm that the oil palm plantation sector has had a positive effect on the community's economy and, at the same time, has become an alternative employment opportunity for the community (Adhariani & Afrizal, 2021; Basiron, 2007; Corley, 2009; Dharmawan et al., 2016, 2019; L., 2015; Majalah Sawit Indonesia, 2014; Nasution et al., 2018; Putri et al., 2021; Silitonga, 2019). The economic impact of oil palm plantation activities is a natural thing because this activity has been around for a long time. By successfully including smallholders, the oil palm boom in Southeast Asia has contributed significantly to rural economic development and poverty alleviation (Ruml et al., 2022). Nasution et al. (2018), in their study, emphasized that palm oil is a plantation crop that can improve the economy of smallholders, reduce poverty, and encourage rural development through smallholders' income. The same thing was also stated by Silitonga (2019) in his research, that in North Sumatra, oil palm plantations have a significant contribution to the economy of the province of North Sumatra.

Aceh's economic condition, which had slumped due to prolonged conflict, gradually improved when peaceful conditions were achieved. Likewise, the oil palm plantation sector is starting to come back. In 2015, the potential for palm oil in North Aceh was in third place in Aceh Province. This indicates that oil palm can become a mainstay commodity for the people of northern Aceh, especially oil palm smallholders. Therefore, this article aims to describe the economic potential of oil palm in North Aceh and the economy of oil palm smallholders after the Aceh conflict. Through this study, it is hoped that information can be obtained about the potential of oil palm plantations to

improve the community's economy as well as the economic development of oil palm smallholders after the Aceh conflict.

## Research Method

This research will be conducted in 2021 in North Aceh District to study the economic revival of oil palm smallholders in post-conflict conditions as well as the dynamics that are developing regarding the efforts to revive the economy of oil palm smallholders in post-conflict North Aceh District. This article used a qualitative approach with a descriptive model. According to Neuman (2014), a descriptive study aims to provide a specific picture describing a social phenomenon's relationship, situation, and social setting. The data used in this study were primary and secondary. Primary data is obtained directly from the first source by interview or observation. Simultaneously, secondary data was obtained, among other places, from relevant literature. The data obtained in this study were then analyzed using the interactive analysis technique of the Miles and Huberman model (Ridder et al., 2014). Using this technique means that the analysis has started since the data collection process was carried out. This means that the interview data and observation results are verified directly by several sources during the interview process. Then, compare the results with the results of literature reviews and observations to get accurate information.

## Results and Discussion

North Aceh Regency is geographically located between 040 43' - 050 16' North Latitude and 96° 47' - 97° 31' East Longitude. Administratively, North Aceh Regency is bordered by Lhokseumawe City and the Malacca Strait in the North, Bener Meriah Regency in the South, East Aceh Regency in the East, and Bireuen Regency in the West. The total area of the North Aceh Regency includes 27 sub-districts and 852 Gampong, with a total area of ± 3,296.86 km<sup>2</sup>. (Pekab Aceh Utara, 2021). In 2020, the population of the North Aceh Regency will be 602,793 people, with a population growth rate of 1.22% and a population density of 183 per km<sup>2</sup> (BPS Aceh Utara, 2021).

### The Economy of Oil palm smallholders in North Aceh District Post-Conflict

Oil palm cultivation in Indonesia began in the mid-nineteenth century when Dutch conquerors transported seeds from Africa (Robins, 2021). At that time, the oil palm sector had limited economic significance (Gatto et al., 2017). However, a large-scale plantations were built in Java and Sumatra in the late nineteenth century (Baudoin et al., 2017). In the late 1960s, state-run companies were founded in Sumatra and later in Borneo and Papua New Guinea (Larson, 1996; Obidzinski et al., 2014). The Indonesian government actively involved and assisted smallholders beginning in the late 1970s (Baudoin et al., 2017; Gatto et al., 2017), tying oil palm agriculture to its transmigration programs. These initiatives were put in place to relocate people from the overcrowded islands of Bali and Java to sparsely populated ones like Sumatra. The so-called transmigrants were given about two acres of land for settlement, rubber and oil palm production, and the establishment of monocultures (McCarthy and Zen, 2016). In the mid-1980s, a new policy allowed major private enterprises and foreign investors to convert government-owned forest lands into oil palm plantations, which was further encouraged by easy access to finance for plantation and processing facility creation. The Nucleus Estate and Smallholder (NES) initiatives brought smallholders into the oil palm business. Nucleus estates provided land, credit, village infrastructure, agricultural inputs, and training to so-called plasma farmers (McCarthy & Zen, 2016; Rist et al., 2010), and employed farmers as plantation laborers to avoid the unproductive first years of oil palm cultivation (Gatto et al., 2017). These "inti-plasma schemes" were related to transmigration plans that impacted the farmers' economy.

In Aceh, the economic impact of oil palm plantation activities prior to the conflict was insignificant. Prior to the Aceh conflict, Aceh's economy grew an average of 10% per year. When Aceh entered a period of conflict, economic growth tended to be negative (Fachrezy, 2020). Mahjuddin (2012) stated in his study that during the period 1990-2005, Aceh's economic growth was in the negative category with an average of -2.5% per year, and the lowest change occurred in 1992, which was -23.9%, much lower than the growth rate in the 1998 economic crisis, which was -9.3%. After the conflict, different conditions began to occur: peace made security and stability in Aceh gradually improve, and the economy slowly recovered. The peace period made people return to the plantations and agricultural lands they had left during the conflict. As a result, the economy

in the plantation sector has returned to life, and poverty in Aceh has gradually decreased. The results of the National Socio-Economic Survey noted that in 2020, the poverty rate in North Aceh Regency was 17.02%. This figure has decreased by 0.36% from the previous year (BPS Aceh Utara, 2021). Of course, this is inextricably linked to community-based efforts to create oil palm plantations.

In 2019, the oil palm plantations in the North Aceh Regency area reached 18,185 hectares, with a total production of 203.91 thousand tons per year. The land area and production results outperform other plantation sectors in North Aceh, such as coconut, rubber, coffee, cocoa, and sugarcane (BPS Aceh Utara, 2021; BPS Provinsi Aceh, 2020). From these figures, it can be seen that the oil palm plantation sector in North Aceh Regency is one of the leading sectors. It is also confirmed from field observations that the author conducted in January 2021 that the community's management of oil palm plantations tends to increase after the conflict. Also, the Section Head of the North Aceh Agriculture and Plantation Service stated that the increase in oil palm production was very rapid after the conflict. In the period from 2006 to 2016, there was an increase from 40% to 78% (Interview Result, February, 2021).

During the conflict period, the productivity of oil palm in North Aceh was low. Data obtained by the authors from the Department of Plantation and Agriculture of North Aceh Regency shows that the productivity of palm oil with a land area of 12 hectares can only produce 143 tons. In 2005, the total size of oil palm plantations in North Aceh was 14,264 hectares, with an average productivity of 10.88 tons per hectare (BPS Aceh Utara, 2005). This figure is much different from post-conflict conditions, which experienced a significant increase. Total palm oil production increased from 143 tons to 203 tons in 2019 and grew to 302 tons in 2019 (BPS Aceh Utara, 2021). According to the Head of the North Aceh Agriculture and Plantation Service, this condition is supported by the expansion of oil palm land, which is increasing every year (Interview Result, February, 2021).

The economic aspect illustrates that the management of oil palm plantation land can provide welfare for people who work as farm laborers. Meanwhile, plantation landowners also benefit from oil palm production in North Aceh. It is in line with several previous studies, such as the study of Silitonga (2019) in North Sumatra, which stated that oil palm plantation activities were able to make a major contribution to the province of North Sumatra. Similarly, Nasution et al. (2018) concluded that the oil palm plantation business is viable because each hectare of land can provide an operating income of Rp. 26,931,466 per year. This condition is inversely proportional to the Aceh conflict period when oil palm plantation activities did not significantly affect the economy of the oil palm farming community. One of the causes is a community activity that is not conducive to plantation activities.

The development of oil palm plantations in Aceh basically contributed to efforts to maintain and care for post-conflict peace. After the peace, GAM members returned to being ordinary people and left activities related to the conflict. They certainly need new activities that are completely different and can support their survival economically. In this context, oil palm plantations are an alternative solution because, apart from changing activities, they can also be a source of economic income. This makes them involved in oil palm plantation activities, so this sector is then overgrown. Syukri, one of the former GAM combatants, said:

"The oil palm farmland is ideal for us to manage, especially because I benefited as a former GAM combatant. I used to think that after peace, what can I do, especially since I only graduated from junior high school? I can only farm. Finally, I thought about planting oil palm. Now I can feel the benefits, and there are advantages for me and the people around me. During the conflict, the weapon I held Now the dodos that I use... I used to have only one oil palm area. Now, it has grown to 13 hectares and accommodates around 30 farmworkers" (Interview, February 2021)

Based on the interview above, it is clear that one of the options available to former GAM fighters after the conflict was for them to work in the oil palm plantation industry. The calm circumstances that have been reached have caused the community, including GAM fighters, to dive into a new world, specifically the world of oil palm plantations. As a result of this choice, the former GAM fighters' families were able to benefit economically. They have been successful in this area and have provided benefits to the community that surrounds them. This is proven by the workers who have up to 30 people.

The findings from the interviews and observations that the author carried out demonstrate that prosperous times for oil palm producers in North Aceh District are a direct outcome of circumstances characterized by peace. They work on oil palm farms because it contributes to the

improvement of their economy, which has been severely damaged by the conflict. This was also corroborated by a number of study informants, including Mr. Sulaiman, who said:

*"Alhamdulillah, it's good now. The economy is also stable. Thank God that the oil palm plantations I planted have yielded results. Anyway, now that I'm trying to feel good, it's not like the conflict in the past..."* (Interview, February 2021)

Aside from that, if one takes a broader perspective, it can be seen that the activities of oil palm plantations growing and developing in North Aceh are related to the strategy that the government developed to empower and, at the same time, divert the actions of former GAM combatants after the conflict. This strategy was implemented after the conflict ended. This was done due to the fact that one of the GAM's bases was located in North Aceh at the time of the conflict. As a result, following the conflict and the reintegration program for GAM members into the community, a strategy was required to ensure that former GAM combatants had jobs and could become economically empowered. The community and individuals who had previously been members of the GAM might manage the oil palm fields as one of these solutions. After then, everything ran well, and the scheme was ultimately successful in rebuilding the economies of both former GAM soldiers and oil palm producers. The following are the criteria that the authors of this research identify as being supportive variables for growing the economy of oil palm smallholders in North Aceh. These conditions were identified based on the findings of this study, as follows: 1) There is potential for oil palm plantations in North Aceh because of the large plantation land available to the community, which has the opportunity to bring out the potential for welfare for the community; 2) Oil palm plantations as a strategy to maintain peace because these plantations can be the main job of former GAM combatants in North Aceh; 3) Oil palm plantation activities require a lot of workers, so this sector can create new jobs for the community; 4) The post-conflict economic success of oil palm smallholders is a trigger that can encourage the community to be actively involved in this sector to improve their families' economies.

### **Economic Growth of Oil Palm Smallholders Post-Conflict Aceh**

In the oil palm agro-industry supply chain in Indonesia, the oil palm smallholders are one of the crucial players in preserving the continuation of the production cycle (Raharja et al., 2020) as well as in Aceh post-conflict. People who work as farm workers and plantation proprietors in North Aceh may be able to benefit from the economic effect that is caused by the operations of oil palm plantations in that region. The increasing number of oil palm farms in North Aceh is one piece of evidence that demonstrates this point. Following the end of the Aceh conflict, an oil palm processing facility in Aceh contributed to an increase in the income of nearby oil palm smallholders. As a result, the price at which goods are sold goes up as well. The author's conversations with oil palm smallholders reveal that the relatively consistent selling price of palm oil has a substantial influence on the smallholders' overall economic income. At the moment, the retail price of palm oil is between 1.588 and 2.000 IDR. It has a positive impact on the well-being of both landowners and farmworkers when prices are set at this level. According to Ruslan, one of the oil palm smallholders in the Cot Girek region of North Aceh, the expansion of oil palm cultivation paves the way for the creation of chances that lead to favorable economic circumstances (Interview results, February 2021).

In addition to the acknowledgement of research informants, another indicator of the economic growth of oil palm smallholders in North Aceh is the increasing production of palm oil. This includes the increase in the area of oil palm plantations and the growing number of workers who work for palm oil. Some members of the community in the North Aceh district are interested in growing oil palm plantations as a commodity for cooking oil to meet the demands of their households as a result of the improving conditions in Aceh, which have made the region more favorable. This information was provided by Abdul Hamid, a farmer who cultivates palm oil and owns around 15 hectares of land. He stated:

*"I feel a tremendous advantage now because the selling price range of palm oil is relatively high. During the conflict, I once sold it for 350 IDR per kilogram, which was very low. Moreover, in the past, security was not good, but it has been excellent in recent years because the selling price has reached a range of 2,000 IDR per kilogram. This is very profitable compared to the conflict period, and the benefits are excellent because a palm oil processing factory is already in Aceh. So now palm oil can make us prosperous"* (Interview, February 2021).

The condition of North Aceh is geographically favorable for the management of oil palm plantations, making the community compete to manage them. This process is ongoing even in the

present day, and the local community is continually working to boost the amount of palm oil it produces, which has tremendous potential as an economic driver. The peace conditions in Aceh have made many people interested in palm oil plantations because they support the community's economy. It was inseparable from the encouragement of the government through the Aceh and North Aceh provincial agricultural services. Of course, this becomes a process of developing the economic dimension of society because the government's task is to provide a containment facility and infrastructure for the community while increasing palm oil production so that it becomes a commodity that impacts the economic growth of the community. Many government programs are run in the plantation sector in the North Aceh district, but the oil palm commodity has proven to be capable of revitalizing society's economy.

## Conclusions

In Aceh post-conflict, the oil palm plantation sector became one of the sectors that had a positive economic impact on the people of North Aceh, especially on oil palm smallholders. In the conflict period, the conditions that are not conducive to oil palm plantation activities are neglected, and the selling price of palm oil is also low. However, the peace condition caused oil palm plantation activities to increase because former GAM combatants who returned to the community successfully entered the oil palm plantation sector and succeeded. This success is driven by the vast potential of North Aceh land, so there is an area for oil palm planting, and the selling price of palm oil is relatively high and easy. The success of the oil palm plantation activities then encouraged the community to participate in planting oil palms. As a result, the area of oil palm plantations continued to increase in North Aceh, and the community's economy also grew. In turn, the economic growth brought about by oil palm plantations aided and influenced the consolidation of peace in Aceh, as former GAM combatants were successful in transitioning from conflict-related activities to profitable economic activities.

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