

Palm Oil Workers Employment Policy and Sustainability

Kebijakan dan Keberlanjutan Ketenagakerjaan Buruh Kelapa Sawit



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ABSTRACT

Employment policies in Indonesia's palm oil industry often have a significant impact on palm oil workers. Many of the government's efforts to appreciate the existence of workers through regulations have stalled due to low participation by plantation owners and companies. The reality of palm oil workers in Musi Banyuasin Regency indicates the weak knowledge of workers and low participation by plantation owners, which results in a lack of security for palm oil workers' livelihoods. This research uses a qualitative approach, collecting in-depth interviews and participant observation data. The research results show that workers' low understanding of labor regulations causes the working conditions of palm oil workers to become increasingly difficult, as does the low participation of plantation owners in the implementation of labor regulations, which makes regulations increasingly less functional as the main aim of making palm oil workers prosperous.

Kata Kunci
 Buruh;
 Sawit;
 Regulasi;
 Nafkah;

ABSTRAK

Kebijakan ketenagakerjaan di industri kelapa sawit sering kali menimbulkan dampak yang signifikan bagi buruh sawit di Indonesia. Berbagai upaya pemerintah untuk mengapresiasi eksistensi buruh melalui regulasi banyak terhenti akibat rendahnya partisipasi pemilik perkebunan maupun perusahaan. Tujuan artikel ini untuk mengungkap realitas kehidupan buruh sawit di Kabupaten Musi sebagai sebuah potret dan praktek sosial yang dapat dijadikan referensi buruh serta stakeholder di wilayah lainnya. Realitas buruh sawit di Kabupaten Musi banyuasin mengindikasikan lemahnya pengetahuan buruh serta rendahnya partisipasi pihak pemilik perkebunan yang menyebabkan kurang terjaminnya nafkah buruh sawit. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, pengumpulan data yang digunakan berupa wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rendahnya pemahaman buruh terhadap regulasi ketenagakerjaan yang menyebabkan kondisi kerja buruh sawit menjadi semakin sulit, begitu juga rendahnya partisipasi pemilik perkebunan terhadap implementasi regulasi ketenagakerjaan yang menjadikan regulasi semakin tidak berfungsi sebagaimana tujuan utama untuk mensejahterakan buruh sawit. Pemahaman buruh sawit terhadap regulasi serta rendahnya partisipasi stakeholder menyebabkan kondisi buruh yang semakin termarginalkan.

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Introduction

Since 2007, Indonesia has become the largest producer of CPO (crude palm oil), surpassing Malaysia (Amzul Rifin, 2010; Fathana, 2018). For Indonesia, this sector is not only one of the main sources of foreign exchange reserves, but also the main instrument for poverty alleviation and rural economic development (Khairiza & Kusumasari, 2020; Manurung, 2021; Santika et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is stated that plantation crops, including oil palm, function as drivers of economic growth and income distribution.

Through job creation, increasing farmer incomes, and investing in infrastructure, the palm oil industry significantly contributes to regional development and improves the welfare of rural communities (Urugo et al., 2021). The palm oil sector proved resilient during the Asian financial crisis, which began in 1997 and played a significant role in Indonesia's economic recovery (Krishna & Kubitzka, 2021). The Indonesian government has taken significant steps to improve conditions for workers in the palm oil industry. One of the efforts that has been made is to adopt and implement stricter labor laws and regulations. Some of these regulations include Manpower Law Number 13 of 2003, which regulates minimum wage standards, reasonable working hours, and basic workers' rights such as leave, social protection, and safety in the workplace. In addition, the government has collaborated with certification bodies such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) to ensure that palm oil companies comply with fair and decent labor standards (Gelder et al., 2017). Although these efforts have resulted in some improvements, labor conditions in the Indonesian palm oil industry are still far from ideal (Kumala Putri et al., 2018). There are still many cases where workers, including children and migrant workers, are treated unfairly and work in dangerous or inhumane conditions (Setiyono & Imelda, 2021). In addition, many workers do not have access to adequate social protection (Sabariman, 2019), such as health insurance and old-age security. Weak law enforcement and the lack of independent monitoring of company compliance with labor standards are also major challenges. Therefore, the efforts made by the Indonesian government need to be improved and expanded to ensure the sustainability of the palm oil industry and the welfare of workers involved in it (Mudatsir, 2021), one of which is Musi Banyuasin Regency, which is a center for palm oil production in South Sumatra Province. Musi Banyuasin has a significant role in the national and regional economy. Therefore, an analysis of the dynamics of labor policies in the palm oil industry in this area will provide relevant insights into the practices and challenges faced, especially in palm oil production centers in Indonesia (Utamy et al., 2020). Labor policies and practices in Musi Banyuasin Regency reflect diverse characteristics, including differences in the scale of plantation operations, the relationship between companies and workers, and local

government policies and capacities. Therefore, the study conducted allows to identify and understand patterns, convergence, and divergence in employment policies and practices in various contexts (Supriyati, 2016). Theoretically, the regulation aims to create a better socio-economic order for palm oil workers and guarantee their existence in producing palm oil. However, in reality, some of the realities of palm oil workers' lives are still far from the expectations of the regulations that have been created. The phenomenon of workers' lives getting worse and the absence of social security for them causes the rules to seem to only side with plantation owners. Through a study of policies and the sustainability of palm oil workers' employment, the author wants to reveal the reality of palm oil workers' lives in Musi Regency as a portrait and social practice that can be used as reference material for other regions in Indonesia.

Method

The research methodology used is a qualitative model with a case study approach that allows exploration and understanding of certain phenomena or events within the framework of real-life contexts through a comprehensive analysis of one or more specific examples (Sundler et al., 2019). In terms of interviews, key informants comprised 12 farmers, nine landowners, four palm oil buyers, three village and local government staff, and three community leaders and community members with knowledge and experience of palm oil labor activities sawit (Plümper et al., 2019). The interviews focused on their understanding of the regulations and the impacts they cause (Berends & Deken, 2021). Direct observation was conducted in Sekayu, Lawang Wetan, Babat Toman, Babat Supat, Sungai Lilin, Keluang, Sungai Keruh and Plakat Tinggi by reviewing palm oil production locations by observing the activities of palm oil workers (Moen & Middelthon, 2015) while document studies were conducted by collecting data and information related to labor regulations through document studies including Law Number. 13 of 2003 concerning the Legal Basis of Work (agreements, wages, layoffs), Job Creation Law: New rules on PKWT, outsourcing, layoffs, foreign workers, Government Regulations and Regulations of the Minister of Manpower Technical regulations on wages, working hours, job security. The data analysis technique used is qualitative analysis. This qualitative analysis includes grouping findings, identifying patterns, and interpreting meanings from the data collected (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Flynn, 2023).

Result and Discussion

Labor regulations in the palm oil sector are an effort to ensure that workers' rights are protected and decent work standards are implemented throughout the palm oil industry supply chain (Aswan & Tanjung, 2021). Labor regulations in the palm oil sector are crucial to ensure workers' rights are respected and decent work standards are implemented (Rika et al., 2022). The palm oil industry, one of the economy's essential sectors, often faces working conditions, human rights, and sustainability challenges. From the field observations of 8 research locations, the author found that many palm oil workers still face difficult working conditions. Work on palm oil plantations often involves long working hours under the hot sun, heavy physical work, and the risk of work accidents. In addition, access to work safety facilities such as personal protective equipment is often limited, even though palm oil workers are regulated by Law Number 13 of 2003 concerning Manpower which includes basic workers' rights, minimum wages, working hours, and protection of occupational health and safety (Nurhayati et al., 2023). Problem exploration was carried out through interviews and focus group discussions, and substantial facts about difficult working conditions for palm oil workers, including their understanding of regulations and participation in implementing regulations, were presented in diagram 1.

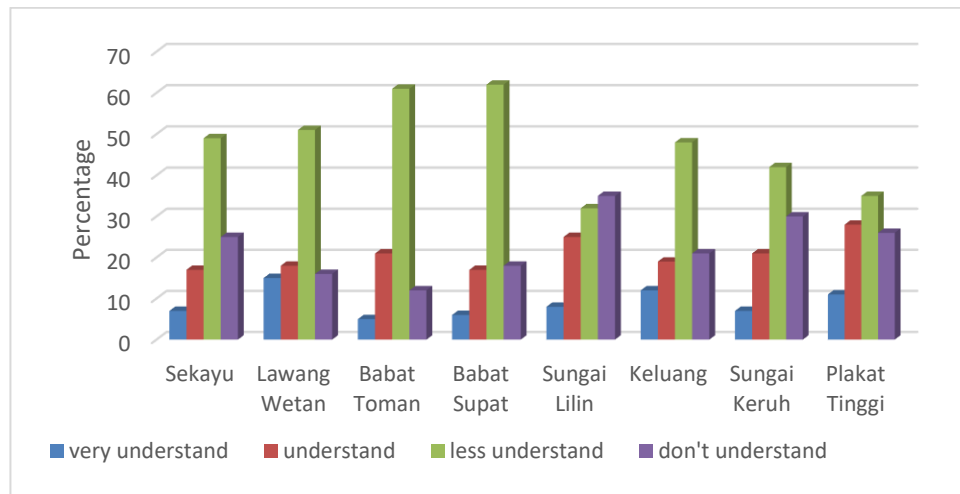


Diagram 1. Palm Oil Workers' Understanding of Employment Regulations

Source: Primary Data Processing 2024

Data in diagram 1 shows a fairly dominant difference between workers who are very familiar with labor regulations and workers who are less familiar with labor regulations. The diagram data also presents a portrait of workers who understand and do not understand labor regulations, which averages 12 to 35 percent for workers who do not understand, while workers who understand 8 to 28 percent. Understanding the display of this data, it can be said that palm

oil workers' understanding of labor regulations is still very low, and they are vulnerable to complex work patterns. Many palm oil workers have low levels of education (Bugis et al., 2019), which can affect their ability to understand existing labor regulations. Information about labor rights is often presented in an official format, making it difficult for workers with low education to understand. This situation causes palm oil workers to be unaware of their basic rights, such as minimum wages, working hours, health benefits, and work safety, because the information is conveyed in a language that is difficult to understand (Rahayu et al., 2023). In organizational communication theory, the processes, messages, and interactions that take place within and between organizations are essential for understanding the internal and external dynamics of the organization and how information is conveyed and understood by members of the organization (Putri & Rusdi, 2023). Palm oil workers who are part of an organization that produces palm oil should have access to messages and interactions within the organization (Hamiru et al., 2019). Still, if access is limited, it is not surprising that their knowledge and understanding of regulations become very weak. This situation actually creates their dependence on the message giver. Difficult working conditions result in palm oil workers being dependent on other parties due to lack of understanding (Pandjaitan-Sjahir, 1990), as happened to palm oil workers in Keluang and Sungai Keruh Villages where to get information they only wait for notification from the foreman, as well as the conditions of workers in Sungai Lilin, Babat and Sekayu Villages who only get information through notice boards. This condition can lead to potential misuse or manipulation of information by certain parties. Limited access to information regarding employment regulations results in lower knowledge of palm oil workers, which has implications for participation and the situation of palm oil workers who do not know their basic rights, such as minimum wages, reasonable working hours, and health benefits. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment by employers (Jufri et al., 2021). Ignorance of regulations and legal procedures makes it difficult for palm oil workers to file complaints or seek legal assistance if their rights are violated. Various problems faced by palm oil workers in eight research locations were resolved by listening to one-way directions from the foreman so that exploitation of workers was very easy to do through the foreman who was considered a representative of the landowner.

Low knowledge of labor rights makes palm oil workers active in 8 villages and less involved in trade unions or other labor organizations, even though participation in trade unions is essential to fight for their interests and rights collectively, coupled with ignorance of regulations and legal procedures. On the other hand, palm oil workers will undoubtedly find it

challenging to develop themselves because they do not have access to information about training and skills development, so their abilities are minimal (Hasmiaty et al., 2021).

Stakeholders are very important in implementing labor regulations in Musi Banyuasin. In this case, stakeholders refer to various parties with an interest or involvement in labor issues. In general, local governments have the primary responsibility for implementing labor regulations in their areas (Che Hassan Pahmi et al., 2022). They are responsible for making policies and ensuring that their implementation is in accordance with applicable regulations. Apart from that, the Musi Banyuasin district government should be involved in implementing and supervising employment regulations. Diagram 2 presents data from interview processing results from informants regarding implementing employment regulations in 8 research locations.

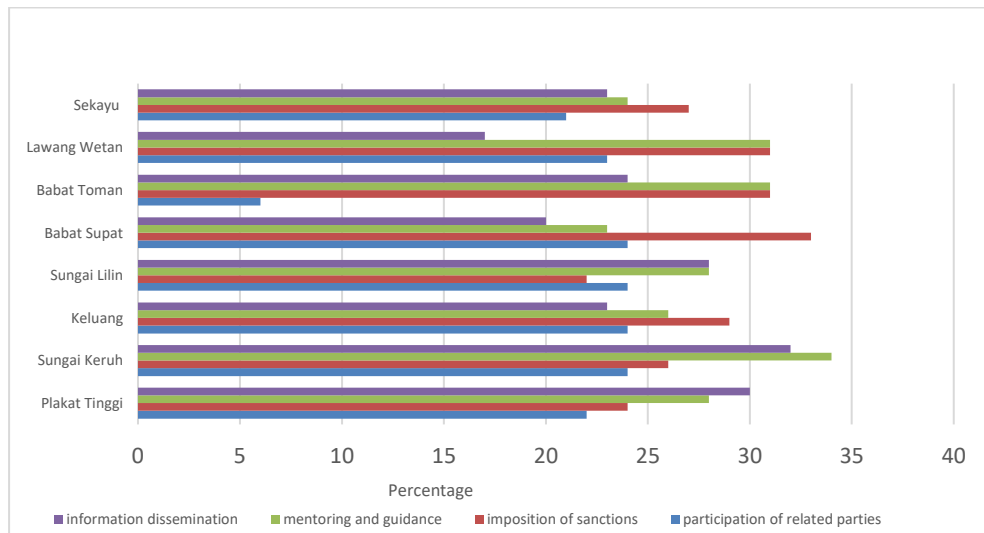


Diagram 2. Implementation of Employment Regulations in Musi Banyuasin

Source: Primary Data Processing 2024

Diagram 2 shows a low level of participation and supervision from stakeholders, who are then referred to in the interview as the government, non-governmental organizations, and plantation owners. We can see that the implementation of low regulations is almost the same in all research locations, where there are quite high sanctions, but they are not accompanied by assistance or information dissemination. Conditions like this will certainly stress palm oil workers even more when faced with problems related to their status as workers (Titisari et al., 2019).

The local government has an important role in implementing palm oil labor regulations because they are responsible for managing natural resources and economic development at the local level, as well as non-governmental organizations and plantation owners who must be

more proactive in implementing these regulations (Lawing, 2022). In reality, according to the data obtained, stakeholders are only passive, such as remaining silent and allowing the resolution to be carried out by supervisors and palm oil workers. Problem-solving is carried out only by prioritizing the principle of interests, which only harms the palm oil workers.

The functions of stakeholders in making palm oil labor policy, including local needs analysis, minimum standard setting, policy enforcement, education and counseling, and evaluation and revision, are not running as they should (Fikriman & Herdiansyah, 2017), especially policy enforcement which is always left to the plantation owner for the settlement process, so workers are in an increasingly pressured position (Berman & Van Buren, 2015; Maksum et al., 2021). Without us realizing that the role of stakeholders in implementing labor regulations related to palm oil workers is very important, the function of analyzing needs to enforcing policies and evaluations can put workers in a better position, such as ensuring that the policies that have been set are actually implemented and complied with by all parties involved. In addition, stakeholders can also carry out education and counseling programs for workers and employers about their rights and obligations by applicable labor policies; this is important to increase awareness and understanding of work regulations in the community. The implementation of labor regulations significantly impacts the sustainability of the livelihoods of oil palm workers in Musi Banyuasin Regency, covering various aspects such as minimum wages, social security, occupational health and safety, and workers' rights (Eliza, 2021). In reality, the understanding of workers and the implementation of labor regulations carried out by still weak stakeholders have an impact on the welfare of oil palm workers, as presented in diagram 3 below.

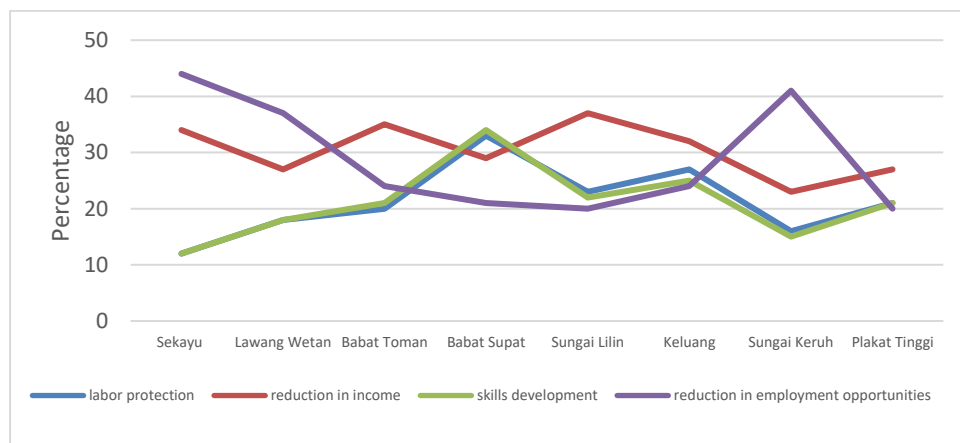


Diagram 3. Impact of Employment Regulations on the Welfare of Palm Oil Workers in Musi Banyuasin

Source: Primary Data Processing 2024

Diagram 3 shows varied impacts, such as weak protection for palm oil workers in Sekayu, Keluang, and Babat Supat Villages. Meanwhile, for income issues, Babat Supat and Keluang Villages are highly influenced by the low income of palm oil workers working in the two locations. Another problem of impact is the increasingly tricky development of skills and job opportunities that occur in Plakat Tinggi and Sekayu Villages. This phenomenon indicates that regulations significantly impact the existence and sustainability of palm oil workers in Musi Banyuasin Regency (Adnan et al., 2021; Utami & Ida Bagus Ketut Surya, 2021). The impact on sustainability is strongly related to their livelihoods; regulations have provided opportunities to achieve this situation, but their income conditions are unstable due to low understanding and participation (Alqatawenh, 2018; Blasco, 2001). For example, labor regulations that set minimum wages and social security can improve the economic welfare of palm oil workers. A decent wage allows workers to meet their basic needs and those of their families, and reduce poverty in plantation areas, but low understanding and participation of stakeholders causes the wages given to be below the minimum standard (A. et al., 2013; Rahmawati & Purwanto, 2019). The factor of fulfilling the needs of life causes palm oil workers to accept the wages given even though it is not enough for daily living needs (Drolet & Sampson, 2017; Fukugawa et al., 2018; Santra, 2021). Threats to the sustainability of livelihoods are a problem that palm oil workers must face, and they also affect the regeneration of workers on palm oil plantations and the sustainability of palm oil production. Livelihoods become a lousy image for society when professional palm oil workers cannot get welfare, leading to job migration outside palm oil plantations; palm oil worker households will try to leave their jobs and look for other jobs to meet their living needs. Meanwhile, plantation owners will find it increasingly difficult to get workers to care for and process plantation products, impacting production.

Conclusion

Labour regulation in the palm oil sector is critical to creating a fair and decent working environment. This requires commitment from all parties, including governments, companies, and civil society organisations, to ensure that the rights of palm oil workers are protected and decent work standards are consistently applied. While labour regulations bring many benefits, their implementation and monitoring are often challenging. Lack of understanding from palm oil labourers and low stakeholder participation means that labourers can still experience violations of their rights, such as payment of substandard wages or unsafe working conditions.

Through a coordinated and sustainable approach, the palm oil industry can contribute to economic development while respecting labour rights and maintaining environmental sustainability. To ensure effective implementation of labour regulations in the palm oil sector, collaborative efforts are needed from various parties, including governments, companies, trade unions, and civil society organisations. Concrete measures such as stricter supervision, education and training for workers, and increased social dialogue can help strengthen the protection of workers' rights and improve working conditions in the palm oil industry.

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