

PORTRAIT OF CHILD LABOR IN SMALL-SCALE OIL PALM PLANTATIONS: DILEMMA BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WORK

POTRET PEKERJA ANAK DI PERKEBUNAN KELAPA SAWIT SKALA KECIL: DILEMA ANTARA PENDIDIKAN DAN PEKERJAAN

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ABSTRAK

Di tengah meningkatnya prospek ekonomi dan dukungan pemerintah terhadap perkebunan kelapa sawit, tetap saja perkebunan kelapa sawit masih menyimpan banyak masalah sosial. Munculnya pekerja anak di perkebunan sawit skala kecil adalah fakta yang terjadi. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis situasi dilematis terkait dengan pilihan bekerja atau melanjutkan pendidikan yang dihadapi oleh para pekerja anak di perkebunan kelapa sawit skala kecil di Desa Seberu, Kecamatan Silat Hilir, Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu, Provinsi Kalimantan Barat. Kami menggunakan pendekatan etnografi dengan tujuan mendeskripsikan aktivitas, perilaku, tindakan, percakapan, interaksi interpersonal di dalam komunitas social serta unit keluarga petani skala kecil. Kami menemukan tiga faktor utama mengapa anak menganggap pendidikan tidak relevan dengan kebutuhan keseharian mereka dan memilih untuk bekerja di perkebunan sawit skala kecil. Faktor pertama adalah akses terkait jarak ke sekolah dan infrastruktur jalan yang tidak memadai. Faktor Kedua tidak adanya imajinasi mengenai pentingnya bersekolah untuk masa depan. Faktor ketiga adalah adanya pemenuhan gaya hidup dan bukan karena kesulitan ekonomi keluarga.

Kata Kunci: Pekerja Anak, Perkebunan, Kelapa Sawit, Pendidikan, Kapuas Hulu.

ABSTRACT

Amid increasing economic prospects and government support for oil palm plantations, oil palm plantations still have many social problems. The emergence of child labor in small-scale oil palm plantations (smallholders) is a fact. This article analyzes the dilemma related to the child laborers' choice of working or continuing education in small-scale oil palm plantations in Seberu Village, Silat Hilir District, Kapuas Hulu District, West Kalimantan Province. We use an ethnographic approach to describe activities, behaviors, actions, conversations, and interpersonal interactions within social communities and small-scale farming family units. We found three main reasons why children consider education irrelevant to their daily needs and choose to work on small-scale oil palm plantations. The first factor is access, which is related to the distance to schools and inadequate road infrastructure. The second factor is the need for more imagination about the importance of going to school for the future. The third factor is lifestyle fulfillment rather than family economic difficulties.

Keywords: Child Labor, Plantation, Oil Palm, Education, Kapuas Hulu.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the world's largest and most crucial palm oil producers. As evidenced by a report from the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI), Indonesia's palm oil production by the end of 2021 could reach around 46.8 million tonnes of Crude Palm Oil (CPO) and approximately 4.4 million tonnes of Palm Kernel Oil (PKO),

bringing the total to about 51.3 million tonnes (GAPKI, 2021). Indonesia's palm oil production and exports are massive. Indonesia and Malaysia account for 85 percent of the world's palm oil production, with Indonesia remaining the number one producer (Jayed et al., 2011; Ayompe et al., 2021; Papilo et al., 2022).

Unsurprisingly, the prospects for the palm oil industry are very lucrative and look increasingly bright in the future. Palm vegetable oil is the essential ingredient of various derivative products consumed by the public, such as raw materials for the cosmetic, pharmaceutical, and even food industries (Hoe et al., 2020; Hadid et al., 2022). Therefore, it is unsurprising that soap used for bathing, lipstick to decorate, plastic for food packaging, and cooking oil used for cooking are derivatives of palm oil products. In addition, the government has targeted CPO as an alternative fuel to fossil fuels. In 2016, the Indonesian government issued a regulation through the mandatory B20, and in 2020, Indonesia officially implemented B30, which makes 30% of biodiesel fuel derived from CPO (KEMENPERIN, 2021; Latisya, 2022).

Despite the growing economic returns of oil palm and increasing support from the government, oil palm plantations still need to be improved. Problems include massive deforestation, biodiversity destruction, social problems such as small-scale farmers facing financial hardship, and child labor (Petrenko et al., p. 5, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016; Nurfatriani et al., 2019). The weak supervisory function of children in Indonesia has made this phenomenon still occur frequently. Findings of child labor violations are evident in oil palm plantations in Indonesia (Gotwald, 2018). Children in Indonesia (US Department of Labour, 2018), 'roles' are still being given to perform hazardous work in the plantation sector, including palm oil and tobacco production. Their role is picking up fallen palm kernels or cleaning dry fronds. This is through imitating parental support, especially that of mothers, as a typical female survival pattern.

The government, in this case, the Ministry of Manpower, still lacks the necessary financial and personnel resources to enforce child labor laws throughout Indonesia adequately. This is understandable, given that Indonesia's oil palm plantation area exceeds 14.6 million hectares (Ministry of Industry, 2021). The massive area of oil palm plantations and the weak supervision system from the government create a gap in the potential for child laborers working in oil palm

plantations. Given that small-scale oil palm plantations are generally not standardized by the RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) and ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil), this potential is even more significant. RSPO Principle 3.2 clearly states that "children shall not be employed or exploited" (RSPO, 2019). This could reduce the possibility of children being exploited to work in oil palm plantations if there is a commitment to using clear standards. However, many smallholders face resource and capacity constraints and need more readiness to fulfill legality requirements such as RSPO or ISPO (Schoneveld et al., 2018; Nurfatriani et al., 2019). As a result, without external support, many smallholders will likely fail to meet compliance standards, one of which is not being able to prevent children from helping or working on their oil palm plantations.

These various conditions lead to child labor in oil palm plantations. In particular situations, children are forced to work generally due to economic pressure from poor parents (Fors, 2012). There is some research evidence that when small-scale oil palm plantations are developed, people can have employment opportunities. Research by Ayompe et al. (2021) found that small-scale oil palm plantations have a positive impact by creating jobs that alleviate poverty in the area. Meanwhile, Pasaribu et al. (2020) found that if oil palm plantations are carried out with a sustainable orientation, they will be able to meet the diverse needs of the current and future population and contribute to improving the quality of life for children of oil palm farmers. The conditions under which child laborers work in small-scale oil palm plantations due to parental poverty cannot be generalized because the causes or reasons for their work are very diverse.

In addition, many studies have found that the situation of child labor in oil palm plantations is much more complex than just the problem of economic difficulties of the parents. A UNICEF report (2016) explained that children living in remote, rural areas in oil palm plantation areas are often limited to primary health care education services. Meanwhile, Sodano et al. (2018) believe that reducing palm oil production contributes

to addressing the exploitation of child labor. This means that child labour will remain near palm oil plantations poor or not poor families. As a neighboring country bordering Indonesia, Malaysia also proves that the expansion of oil palm cultivation contributes positively to income generation and poverty reduction. However, human rights issues such as child labor cannot be eliminated (Haryati et al., 2022). Corciolani et al. (2019) explained that the phenomenon of child labor will still exist in the social problems of oil palm plantations because moral legitimacy only applies in palm oil consumer countries, while in palm oil producing countries, pragmatic legitimacy that is oriented towards the economy is more likely to apply.

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach. The research was conducted for approximately thirty-five days between February and March 2020. The qualitative approach allows researchers to see different cultures from everyday habits and study society and their rituals through interviews, observations, and literature studies (Bhattacharya, 2017). The research activities were carried out during the initial COVID-19 pandemic when rural community knowledge about COVID-19 had not spread entirely and was considered new knowledge in Indonesian society (Ghani & Sitohang, 2020). These conditions allow researchers to move to obtain data without being constrained by physical distancing so that the ethnographic study approach can be applied in its entirety.

Ethnographic studies are more effective in providing descriptive detail, ensuring accuracy, minimizing reactivity, and allowing causal processes to be traced (Hammersley, 2017). By living life, living with the local community, and participating in community gardening activities in Seberu Village, researchers try to understand why the people of Seberu Village are close to the life of oil palm gardening. Ethnographic studies look at people's experiences as the best source of knowledge about what is happening in that culture. This data is a limited source, but its value is significant (McIntosh & Wright, 2019).

This research was conducted in Seberu Village as part of Silat Hilir District, Kapuas Hulu Regency, West Kalimantan Province. The research location must meet the criteria for large community oil palm plantations. Around the area is a phenomenon of child labor, which is present as a research object. Indonesian national elites have been actively promoting large-scale oil palm development in Kapuas Hulu since around 2000, with large-scale oil palm operations starting in Silat Hilir in 2001 (Hasudungan, 2018).

The data in this research was collected using literature review, observation, and interviews. Data obtained from direct observation can describe activities, behavior, actions, conversations, interpersonal interactions, and organizational or community processes so that direct observation can capture the complete "informant's story" (Goodyear et al., 2014). In-depth interviews and unstructured interviews guide researchers in collecting primary data. In-depth interviews were conducted during FGDs with the community and local government structures, such as the head of Silat Hilir Subdistrict, the Head of Seberu Village, representatives of oil palm plantation companies around Seberu Village (PT RAP), and village community leaders. In-depth interviews are extended conversations with an interactive exchange of ideas, where the researcher works to develop a close relationship with the participant so that the informant can draw in-depth and meaningful responses (Trainor, 2013).

Unstructured interviews to understand the community, parents, and children working in small-scale oil palm plantations in various locations around the locus village. Unstructured interviews were conducted with twelve oil palm farmers and twelve children of oil palm farmers aged 14-18 years. The questions were sequenced loosely, and the time could be arranged or changed in response to the informant being interviewed (Kvale, 1996; in Trainor, 2013).

The researchers directly involved were the first author with the help of the second author, who searched for secondary data through a literature review approach related to child and family labor in oil palm plantations. The literature review is the process of finding, obtaining, reading, and

evaluating research literature in the study area of research interest. By getting used to reading that area, researchers can avoid “reinventing the wheel” (Bordens & Abbott, 2018).

Based on the preceding, this article aims to analyze the dilemma faced by child laborers on small-scale oil palm plantations in Seberu Village, Silat Hilir Sub-district, Kapuas Hulu District, West Kalimantan Province. The fact that most small-scale oil palm farmers are not estimated to be poor, although they are likely to become poor in the event of price and production shocks (Cahyadi & Waibel, 2015) and have higher incomes than food farmers (Saragih et al., 2020), has attracted people to work in this field, including children who should still be studying. In addition, there is an interesting phenomenon where the motivation for children to work in small-scale oil palm plantations is not due to primary needs or to overcome poverty. The article will fill the knowledge gap and contribute to the understanding related to the gaps and complexities of child education issues in small-scale oil palm plantations. This is based on three main points, namely: standards for managing small-scale plantations and attention to child education and labor issues, the problem of poverty in small-scale oil palm plantations, and the dynamics within families related to child labor in oil palm plantations and its impact on their future.

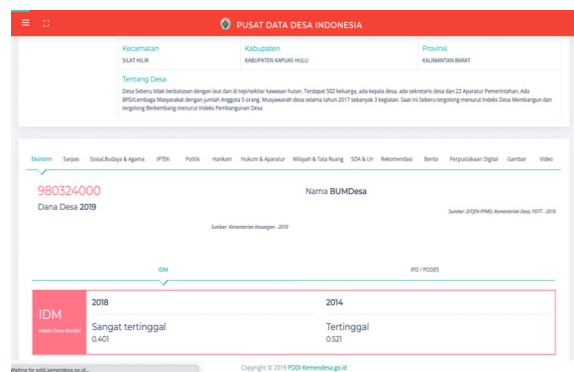
SEBERU VILLAGE REGIONAL AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

In this section, we will discuss the profile of the geographical and socio-demographic conditions of Seberu Village, the changes that occurred after the introduction of oil palm plantations, and the dilemmatic situation related to the choice of working or continuing education faced by child workers on small-scale oil palm plantations in Seberu Village. Silat Hilir District, Kapuas Hulu Regency, West Kalimantan Province.

Seberu Village is located on the easternmost border of Silat Hilir District, Kapuas Hulu Regency, West Kalimantan Province. Seberu Village is included in the Silat Hilir sub-district

area, which consists of 13 villages and has the second largest village area, namely 139.35 km² or equivalent, 11.84% of Silat Hilir Sub-district (BPS, 2020). The population of Seberu village is 1,777 people.

Most of the residents of Seberu village are native Dayak people. The Dayak sub-tribe in Seberu village is primarily a Dayak sub-tribe from the Iban/*ibanic* group, namely the Seberuang Dayak (Darmadi, 2016; Shin, 2022). Others are from the Ensilat Dayak sub-tribe. On the other hand, several Malay and Javanese ethnic groups also live in harmony in Seberu Village. Most of the people of Seberu Village adhere to Catholicism, Christianity, and a small part of Islam.



Picture 1. Village Index Developing Seberu Village which is in the underdeveloped village category
Sumber: PDDI (2019)

Seberu Village, which is also one of the villages in Silat Hilir District, is included in the underdeveloped category of the Independent Village Index (IDM), even though in the Kapuas Hulu RJPMD, Silat Hilir District is an Agropolitan, which is a strategic area of the district, for economic interests originating from the sector plantations (RJPMD Kapuas Hulu, 2021). There are four hamlets in Seberu village, namely Sekar Jaya Hamlet, Sungai Mali, Sungai Ringin, and Sao Atas. Sungai Ringin Hamlet and Sao Atas Hamlet have horrible connectivity problems in terms of infrastructure. The poor quality of the roads and the lack of access to telephone signals, internet, and even electricity means that these two hamlets have quite an apparent economic disparity compared to the other two hamlets.

The poor infrastructure in Sungai Ringin Hamlet and Sao Atas Hamlet has isolated the residents from adequate health and education services. In Seberu, there is only one elementary school (SD) located in Sekar Jaya Hamlet. There are no Early Childhood Education institutions (PAUD), no Middle Schools (SMP), and no High Schools (SMA). Only Sekar Jaya Hamlet and Sungai Mali Hamlet can still be within walking distance of Seberu Elementary School. The other two hamlets had to travel a distance of 4-5 KM with badly damaged roads.



Picture 2. Access the Sungai Ringin hamlet road, Seberu Village

Source : author's personal photo (10 March 2020)

Education is a fundamental problem in this region; the population of Silat Hilir is 20,087 people, and the majority (14,298 people) only have elementary school graduates and do not even have a diploma (BPS, 2020). In remote areas of Indonesia, the spirit of education is closely related to geographical aspects. Hilly locations, inadequate infrastructure, and long-distance access to schools are challenges to getting an education (Juharyanto et al., 2020). Similar things also happen for health access, reaching the Community Health Center. All education and

health services are only located in the Silat Hilir sub-district center. Apart from that, to access the sub-district office, the people of Seberu Village must use motorized boats to cross the Kapuas Hulu River.

Almost all Seberu villagers are polyculture farmers, such as agriculture (vegetables, corn, rice, etc.), rubber, and palm oil farmers. The profession of oil palm farmers is relatively new in Seberu Village, around the last 10-15 years, starting in 2010 when rubber prices fell, and people tried their luck by becoming oil palm farmers. World rubber prices from 2010-2015 experienced fluctuations, with a downward trend dominating (Noviantoro et al., 2017). Of the people of Seberu Village who work as oil palm farmers, a small portion work for the oil palm plantation company PT RAP, some are owners of oil palm plasma plantations, and the majority are small-scale, self-supporting oil palm plantation owners.

PALM OIL PLANTATIONS AND CHANGES IN POPULATION EMPLOYMENT

Before oil palm plantations came to Seberu Village, one of the people's jobs was fishing in the Kapuas River tributary. Apart from that, rubber plantations have also become the main commodity for village communities, interspersed with farming activities in the forest. In a relatively short period, such activities began to be reduced or even disappeared since the entry of palm oil commodities into Seberu Village, pioneered by the entry of PT RAP, which has been flying its business flag in Silat Hilir District since 2005. This is a 'normal' occurrence on the island Kalimantan, which has experienced rapid landscape transformation over the last few decades due to the presence of oil palm plantations, causing significant loss of natural forests and diversity of flora and fauna (Gatti & Velichevskaya 2020). Rural indigenous communities around Kalimantan's forests, especially those who previously depended heavily on forests and other natural resources, were forced to convert their land into oil palm plantations (Santika et al., 2019).

PT RAP, better known as “Salim” in the local community, has carried out its business activities by creating plasma plantations owned by some of the Seberu Village community and some plantations owned by the regional government. As time went by, the people of Seberu Village began to try to clear land and plant and cultivate palm oil plantations independently on their customary land. This is because the compensation paid by palm oil companies to local communities is considered very low, and many promises are not fulfilled, thus triggering further conflict (Clerc, 2012). Several residents of Seberu Village feel cheated by their land use rights, which have become plasma oil palm plantations. They only get 160 thousand per hectare monthly, paid every semester (6 months = Rp. 960,000). Generally, the right to use a plasma plantation area has a period of 20-25 years before the contract can be renewed, which is more detrimental to the community (Panjaitan, 2019).

Most of the residents of Seberu Village are farmers. These include rice, vegetable, rubber, fruit, and independent oil palm farmers (BPS, 2020). Seberu Village generally needs to have culture and knowledge about palm oil plantations. The Dayak tribe lives more in a shifting cultivation culture. Even rice plants planted in shifting cultivation are considered “The Staff of Life” (Hasudungan & Neilson, 2020; Murhaini & Achmadi, 2021). This causes people to need to learn how to produce palm oil products that meet standards, where to sell them, and only have full hope in collectors to be able to help them get the bestselling price (Papilo et al., 2022). Good practices in smallholder oil palm plantations result from the farmers’ experience and knowledge and the level of support the farmers receive regarding access to agricultural training (Lee et al., 2014). Both of these things they need to gain experience and access to palm oil knowledge.

THE DILEMMA OF CHILDREN ON SMALL PALM OIL PLANTATIONS: WORK OR EDUCATION

Geographical conditions, limited access, and limited job options influence the conditions of children in the research location. These children

are then faced with a dilemma between increasing their education opportunities or working on oil palm plantations. In this section, the dilemma faced by children in Seberu Village will be explained between choosing to work or continuing their education.

1. Portrait of children in Seberu village

Children in Seberu Village face real-life situations where to survive, they have to choose between working and continuing their education. However, this is not dichotomous because some children continue to go to school and work on oil palm plantations. Children who work to help their parents’ economic lives have the opportunity to learn to care for oil palm plantations and also learn various aspects related to life. From observations, filling their free time is also a factor in why they more often help voluntarily; therefore, there is no specific wage if they help work in the family’s small-scale oil palm plantation. This pattern often occurs in farming families, where children explore discursive strategies to form their own identities and new trajectories as the ‘next link’ as part of the transfer of knowledge to farming families (Riley, 2009).

In Seberu Village, there are three categories of oil palm plantations: large-scale companies, plasma plantations (owned by residents but with a sharing system with the company), and small-scale plantations owned by residents and managed independently. In this situation, children face their living situation surrounded by oil palm plantations. This situation influences their perspective on education and their possible employment choices.

To work in companies, these children are limited by age and educational qualifications. So, from the researchers’ observations, in Seberu Village, no children were working in the company’s oil palm plantations. Moreover, as the closest company to Seberu Village, PT RAP is stringent regarding the minimum age for oil palm farm workers. Based on an interview with one of PT RAP’s GRD staff, it was stated that the company strictly monitors the age regulations for workers in the company but does not deny that

the practice of child labor still exists in small-scale oil palm plantations (smallholders).

.... "Kalau kami tegas tidak mengizinkan pekerja anak dibawah 17 tahun, jadi kami belum bisa menjawab apakah anak itu baik dengan ikut bekerja di sawit terutama dengan kebun keluarganya sendiri."

..."We do not allow child labour under the age of 17, so we cannot yet answer the question of whether it is appropriate for children to work on their own family's oil palm plantations."

.... "Itu kan sudah saya bilang tadi, kami kalau yang seperti itu (fenomena pekerja anak di kebun sawit) kami tidak bisa bertanggung jawab karena menyangkut masing-masing pribadi masyarakat (lahan sawit keluarga)."

.... "I have already said that the phenomenon of children working in oil palm plantations is not our responsibility, because it is the responsibility of their respective families."

(H.M. Staff GRD (*Government Relationship Development*) PT RAP. Interview 2 March 2020.)

The general portrait in remote areas is that parents tend not to be interested in sending their children to school and tend to teach more about how to earn income (Hidayatina & Ozanne, 2019). In the worst situation, according to the UNICEF report (2016), children in oil palm plantation environments are vulnerable to child protection problems such as trafficking and child labor due to poverty, poor access to services, remoteness, and social exclusion. Those who are part of indigenous communities risk losing their cultural identity, traditional livelihoods, and food security (UNICEF, 2016). The worst risks are not visible in the research location. However, if not careful, they are very likely to be present because there are already several situations where children are socially or economically vulnerable. Even though it is evident, based on observations and interviews, researchers found several child workers in Seberu Village. On average, these children work in small-scale, self-sufficient gardens owned by their parents, relatives, or the community around their home.

From a gender perspective, gender differences majorly impact children whose parents allow them to help or work on small-scale oil palm plantations. The Seberu Village community forbids their daughters from working in oil palm plantations. Only boys are taught and allowed to work in oil palm plantations. Girls are expected by their parents to continue their education as high as possible.

"Aku sampai sekarang tidak pernah bantu bapak kerja di kebun sawit. Kalau ikut ke kebun pernah, tapi cuma main-main saja." Bapak memang tidak bolehin aku kerja di sawit, katanya bahaya banyak bahan kimia. Pokoknya tidak aman."

"Until now, I have never helped my father work on the oil palm plantation. "I've been to the oil palm plantation before, but just playing around." My father didn't allow me to work in palm oil, he said there were many chemicals that were dangerous. It's just not safe." (M.I., 15 year old girl, 2nd grade of junior high school. Interview 10 March 2020.)

.... "Biasa anak perempuan (kegiatan membantu orang tua hanya) nyapu, ngepel...."

.... "As a daughter, I did normal activities (activities to help my parents) sweeping, mopping..."

.... "biasa ikut kawan berdua naik motor. Biar hemat juga, kami patungan bensin. Kalau dari sungai ringan ke sekolah (pusat Kecamatan Silat Hilir) bisa habis 2 liter (PP)."

.... "I usually accompany two friends on a motorbike. To save money too, we are joint venture on petrol. "If you go from the Ringin River to school (the center of Silat Hilir District) you can use up 2 liters (round trip)."

(M.Y, girl, 17 years old, 2nd grade vocational school. Interview 10 March 2020.)

This is unique, considering that the gender differences that usually influence difficult access to education for girls do not apply. Sixty percent of children worldwide who do not attend school are girls because boys are more expected to inherit their families through education (Bhat, 2010). Apart from that, the local cultural traditions of the Dayak tribe, which tend to be patriarchal, also

play a role in determining economic policies and the division of labor, where girls are expected to understand the role of women and act responsibly from an early age, such as caring for their parents or cleaning the house (Osup, 2017; Niko, 2020).



Picture 3. A junior high school student who spends his holidays working on his parents' palm oil plantation.

Source: author's personal photo (17 March 2020)

2. Various Reasons Work

Based on field findings, the researchers identified two categories of children working on small oil palm plantations. Firstly, working children still in school, and secondly, working children who have dropped out of school. Children in school help out during holidays or after school. Their parents were not coercion to help them work on the oil palm plantations. They do it voluntarily and usually intend to learn farming from their parents.

".....Kalau ikut kerja sama bapak cuma boleh habis pulang sekolah atau hari libur. Ga ada dipaksa, cuma diajak aja buat belajar merawat lahan (milik keluarga) sendiri. Sering bantu nebas-nebas, mungutin brondolan yang seperti itulah."

"...I am only allowed to work (on my family's oil palm plantation) after school or on holidays. My work was easy, just cutting weeds and picking up brondol."

(Boy with initials D, 15 years old, 3rd grade of junior high school. Interview 17 March 2020.)

For those who have dropped out of school and choose to work on oil palm plantations, they work to help their parents or earn money by working on small-scale oil palm plantations owned by other families. Several parents interviewed admitted that they forced their children to help work on the family's plantation because they believed that their intention was not to employ the children but because the children chose to work rather than go to school. Parents' primary focus is to educate children to survive by earning an independent income.

"Anak itu tidak bisa dipaksa, dia maunya apa kita ikut saja. (Si anak) sudah (mengatakan) tidak mampu sekolah dan maunya bantu di kebun juga tidak apa-apa. (mengizinkan berhenti sekolah dan bekerja)"

"I never had any kind of coercion on the part of my child (to work). It was his wish to leave school and work to help our family. The reason is that my child can no longer follow the lessons at school because it is too difficult."

"Cuma kadang saya suka marahin, kalau malas kerja nanti ga bisa makan. Tapi Cuma peringatan saja belum pernah ga saya kasih makan. Namanya anak kita sayang lah."

"Sometimes I discipline my children. I remind them that if they are lazy, they won't get any money (for food). But just a reminder, I have never really given my children food. I still love my children and want to give them the best."

(Father from boy with Initial A.A. Interview 8 March 2020.)

Meanwhile, children who are still in school work intending to help their parents, especially when they are not at school. Children who work, like D, only want to help their parents to study. They usually still want to attend school, so wages are only one of their goals. They only intend to fill their free time when they go home and on school holidays, with the sincere intention of helping their parents. Schoolchildren who try to study and work in their family's independent oil palm plantations usually only get certain prizes at particular moments. This is different from children who drop out of school and decide to

work full-time in oil palm plantations and will receive a specific nominal wage.

“Dulu Waktu SD pernah dibelikan sepatu buat sekolah setelah bantu-bantu kerja di kebun. Pas libur semester (kenaikan kelas). Kalau sekarang ya pernah dibelikan sepatu bola buat main.”

“When I was in primary school, I used to buy shoes for school after helping on the plantation. This was during the holidays (class promotion). Now, yes, I have even bought football shoes to wear when I play.”

(Boy with initials D, 15 years old, 3rd grade of junior high school. Interview 10 March 2020.)

These two situations are examples of conditions in which child labour is an expectation. The choice of dropping out of school, being directly involved in work, remaining in school, and helping with work at particular moments has become an everyday culture. Working for children is considered normal, and the residents of Seberu Village believe both choices are part of ‘education’. The goal is for these children to be independent and not lazy when they grow up. Especially for children who are not in school, by working, they can have provisions for life in the future. They learn how to manage their family’s oil palm land directly.

“Ya saya kira betul (temuan anak bekerja di Desa Seberu). Karena masih ada anak yang bantu orang tuanya kerja.”

“...The child labor findings are correct (Seberu Village). Because there are still many children who work in their parents’ plantation.”

“Orang tua tahu risiko, Cuma ya itulah namanya risiko. Mereka bukan kerja sebagai kuli menurut orang tua, tapi bekerja untuk belajar atau bantu orang tua saja.”

“Parents really understand the (bad) risks of children working on their plantations. However, they think this is not a condition where children are constrain to work. This is just part of independent learning activities in their family culture.”

“Pribadi sih saya tahu usia dibawah 17 tahun sebaiknya sekolah dan tidak bekerja. Cuma kadang

yah kembali orang tuanya juga anaknya harus ikut bantu atau ngga. Tapi di sini anak-anaknya ngga ada yang terpaksa bekerja juga seandainya bantu orang tuanya kerja di kebun.”

“I really agree and understand that children under the age of 17 should concentrate on school and not work. Even though there are a lot of children here who choose to work, I can assure you that there is no such thing as child labour, it’s just the children’s desire to learn and help their parents in the oil palm plantations.”

(Chairman of the Seberu Village Farmers Group, YL. Interview 28 March 2020.)

The results of interviews with Mr. YL as a representative of community figures and Chair of the Seberu Village Farmers Group increasingly confirm that the residents of Seberu Village see the phenomenon of children working in independent oil palm plantations as a common phenomenon. Children working has become commonplace so that when school-aged children work on community-owned oil palm plantations, there is nothing against them. From the informant's perspective, allowing and even teaching them how to work in independent oil palm plantations is part of family education to teach future generations how to survive. In this context, the village environment of Seberu has created an 'ecosystem' of working children who have the support of their parents and social environment. They "easily" earned money from working in their parents' gardens and were even allowed to learn to work in other people's gardens in Seberu village. From the perspective of children who drop out of school and choose to work, there is no particular reason why they choose to work. One informant explained that their reason was simple: to be more complimentary to play and earn money.

“sudah tidak sekolah, jadi lebih bebas kerja. Kalau udah sore (selesai bekerja) main sampai malam. (Kegiatan setelah bekerja) Main Hand-phone/HP (game) saja atau jajan makan sama teman.”

"I'm not at school anymore. So you have the freedom to work. When I'm done working in the

afternoon, I go and play on my gadget with my friends until late at night.”

(A boy who dropped out of school and works in a small-scale oil palm plantation. Initials A.A. age 16. Interview 15 March 2020.)

Children who have dropped out of school no longer have the burden of learning so they are more accessible to do what they want. Dropping out of school is also an actual reality that is not of particular concern to society. Children who are school drop-outs and have income from work will then be on a par with adults. On several occasions, researchers noticed that they were free to buy cigarettes and smoke them directly at grocery stalls without any obstruction from the stall owners. There is a situation where children's behavior is normalized, which is on par with adult behavior. Another situation the researcher witnessed directly was when the children spent time "hanging out" at the stalls; they could spend as much as one hundred to one hundred and fifty thousand rupiahs in pocket money. They buy instant noodles, cigarettes, energy drinks, or internet quota. They do not seem to care much about this consumptive behavior. This condition occurs because these children will easily earn money from their daily work.

Working with children is routine and has become a habit in the Seberu Village environment. Parents consider children who do not want to go to school anymore to be choosing a way to survive by learning how their parents earn money by working. The entire population of Seberu takes the phenomenon for commonplace, creating an "ecosystem" of support for children to work. Some research attributes this condition to cultural factors and weak supervision (Iryani & Priyarsono, 2013). Normalizing child labor or working children is a long-term problem. School-age children are increasingly restricted from furthering their education and accessing other jobs outside their village location because they feel that what they earn from working in oil palm plantations is enough to fulfill their daily needs.

When the community does not provide social supervision and pressure on children who choose to work and do activities that are not appropriate for their age, social control does not work optimally. In this context, the role of the local government is crucial to help change the community's character. Modouw (2021) explained that education patterns that provide space for adaptation of the mindset and fundamental character of the community and focus on developing literacy under the benefits for developing people's lives are significant to prioritize. In this context, local governments should not only focus on efforts to improve access to schools but need to pay attention to the context of family education and community education.

3. Unique situation: Economic hardship is not the main factor for children working on small palm oil plantations

The families of small palm oil farmers in the village of Seberu do not look like poor people caught in the dimensions of extreme poverty, which is defined as a state where a person is unable or does not have sufficient income to meet the basic needs of life such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health (Asrol & Ahmad, 2018). Researchers lived with small-scale oil palm farmer families during the research activities, feeling that they could meet their food needs following nutritional standards and could afford fuel and transportation vehicles such as motorbikes or motorized boats.

“Kemarin diajarkan juga cara mengukur lahan. Saya kemarin dibantu WWF ngukur ada 5,5 hektar lahan (sawit milik) saya.”

“The WWF taught me how to measure my oil palm land. My oil palm land turns out to be 5.5 hectares.”

(The father of the boy Initials A.A. Interview 8 March 2020.)

“saya punya 1 setengah hektar lah (kebun sawit). Sama sisanya mungkin 2 hektar atau lebih kebun karet sama ladang (sawah) padi.”

“I have 1.5 hectares of oil palm plantation land. I have another two hectares of my other land which I have planted with rubber and rice fields.”

(The father of the boy Initials L.L. Interview 8 March 2020.)

“Kalau saya tengok, utamanya petani sawit seberu. Sebenarnya anak bisa hidup layak hingga sekolah juga terjamin. Tapi juga harus ada penghasilan lain selain berkebun sawit. Tapi secara umum, masyarakat desa seberu bisa hidup layak dengan anak-anaknya dengan penghasilan saat ini.”

“In my opinion, the children of the oil palm farmers in Seberu village have the financial means to send their children to school. You could even say that they have the ability to live a decent life.”

(Seberu Village Fresh Fruitbunch Collector Initial D. Interview 2 March 2020.)

The research findings confirm that parents in Seberu Village can fulfill their primary daily needs. If they pay attention to assets and income, from researcher observations and interviews, they can send their children to school. This is in line with research by Fahmi et al. (2020), proving that there are situations where children who choose to drop out of school and work have parents who can provide primary and secondary needs and even own a permanent home. In addition, Kurahman’s study (2021) explained that the main factors that significantly affect children’s schooling duration are parents’ education level and children’s education costs, while the variable of family income of oil palm farmers does not affect children’s schooling duration.

In this research, children dropped out of school and then chose to work due to several factors. In this paper, researchers suggest that there are three main factors that cause children in Seberu Village to drop out of school and choose to work on small-scale independent oil palm plantations. First, there is no access to schools and poor road infrastructure. Second, there is no imagination regarding the importance of schooling for the future. Third, the need to fulfill lifestyle needs.

The first factor is access related to distance to school and inadequate road infrastructure. This factor is a classic problem facing education in Indonesia, especially in remote areas. Distance

from school, parents’ occupation, number of family dependents, parents’ educational background and income level, and children’s productive activities in the household can cause children to drop out of school (Aristin, 2016). Let us look at the portrait of Seberu village, which is classified as a remote area, especially Sungai Ringin hamlet and Sao Atas hamlet. The road conditions are still unpaved (dirt). In that case, it is one of the causes of children dropping out of school. The inhibiting factor for education in remote areas is the condition of unpaved dirt roads, which makes traveling to school even more difficult due to muddy road conditions during the rainy season (Juharyanto et al., 2020).

In addition, the distance between the SMA and SMK schools, with only one school in the center of the sub-district, makes access to education difficult.

..... “ngga juga biasa aja (tidak menyesal berhenti sekolah). Lebih Capek sekolah (lebih capek pergi ke sekolah daripada kerja), jaraknya jauh sama pelajarannya susah. Jadi ya ngga sekolah lagi habis (libur) semester.”

.....”I have never regretted stopping school. Because going to school is tiring, besides that the lessons are increasingly difficult for me to understand. After that I decided to stop going to school after the semester break.”

(Children who have dropped out of school and work on small oil palm plantations. Initials A.A. 16 years old. Interview 5 March 2020.)

The second factor is the need for more imagination regarding the importance of schooling for the future. Parents’ perspectives regarding education issues must be distinct from the parents’ background in oil palm plantations. This condition is influential because research states that children from parents with lower education tend to never go to or drop out of school because human capital within the family is influential (Muttaqin, 2018). Besides that, Berlian (2011) mentioned family background: low education, low income, working in the informal sector, parents’ inability to pay for education, distance from home, low aspirations and motivation to continue

education, and cultural factors. Although in this research, economic factors appear not dominant, aspirations, motivation, and sociocultural issues appear more dominant in children's decisions about whether to continue school.

Moreover, parents and the social environment in Seberu Village consider children not going to school to be nothing strange. If children no longer want to continue their education, parents tend to "give in" and put more pressure on their children to work on the family's or other people's oil palm plantations. This phenomenon is unsurprising because there are no examples of success around Seberu Village who succeeded because they continued their higher education. Children who go to high school are considered not to guarantee economic success. Pragmatically, they note that even without going to school, children can make money if they are willing to work on oil palm plantations, whether owned by their parents, relatives, or the community. Children also feel that they have job opportunities and can make money without continuing their education to a higher level. School becomes an unpleasant thing because they have to do assignments that are not relevant to them. So there are children who say they are no longer able to continue school.

"Kami sebagai orang tua ga bisa maksa, anak maunya sekolah ya kami dukung. Kalau sudah tidak mampu sekolah lagi ya kami tidak pak-sakan".....

As parents, we cannot force our children's will. If the child wants to stay in school, of course we support it, but if the child doesn't want to go to school anymore, of course we won't force them.".....

"berhenti (sekolah) karena suka sakit kepala, nda mampu katanya buat sekolah."

"My child has stopped going to school. I can no longer afford it because I often have headaches."

(Father of the boy Initials M.H. Interview 23 March 2020.)

The third factor is a fulfilling lifestyle. To a certain extent, immature children are trapped in unhealthy lifestyles or living patterns. Children

who have dropped out of school and can earn their own money are considered "adults" in the village social environment. Some people in Seberu Village consider it normal for children who can earn money to buy cigarettes or even not come home at night.

Child workers who work in gardens that do not belong to their parents will usually be paid wages by the plantation owner of Rp75-80 thousand/day, less than the wages of adults, which amount to Rp 100,000/day. However, 75 thousand per day is much money for middle and high-school-aged children. Their income will increase when the child's parents are 'kind' enough to provide additional pocket money, which can be two to three million during the harvest season. Children have a relatively light workload, such as picking up brondolan or clearing weeds. Cleaning dry fronds is quite tricky for a rather heavy job because they are sharp.

"Iya aku kan sudah merokok, mau main hand-phone juga pakai pulsa (kuota), jadi biar tidak menyusahkan bapak jadinya kerja saja."

(peneliti mewawancarai C.P. sembari dia menghisap rokok dan fokus bermain game dari HP.)

"I am a smoker, apart from that I need capital (money) to be able to buy a quota to play games on a smartphone. I work because I don't want to bother my father to fulfill my needs such as buying cigarettes and internet quota."

(The researcher interviewed C.P. while he smoked a cigarette and focused on playing games on his smartphone.)

(C.P., 15 year old child who dropped out of school and works in small scale oil palm plantations)

"Sebulan bisa nabung sampai 100 ribu. niatnya pengen beli HP, yang lama sudah rusak, dirusak sama adek. Pengennya beli HP VIVO yang 1,5 juta aja."

"I can save up to 100,000 IDR per month. I want to buy a new smartphone, the old one is broken, it was damaged by my sister. I would like to buy a VIVO smartphone for 1.5 million rupiah".

(N., 16 year old child who dropped out of school and works in small scale oil palm plantations.)



Picture 4. Interview with C.P and A.A who are enjoying playing on their smartphones to fill their free time to rest, after working in the oil palm plantation.

Source: author's personal photo (15 March 2020)

With adequate economic resources, child workers in Seberu Village will quickly fulfill the lifestyle they want to achieve. It is relatively easy to earn money in Seberu Village. This will undoubtedly make the logic of simple children preferring to work rather than going to school. Working to earn money and then being able to buy anything is the logic of child labor in small-scale oil palm plantations. Sadly, they need a clear goal with their money. Their short-term desires are only to buy cigarettes, instant noodles, and energy drinks, replace smartphones, and buy internet quota to play games, even though the internet has yet to reach their village. To get an internet signal, they are usually willing to go far away and not even go home overnight to the internet signal center in the center of Silat Hilir District.

The orientation of working children is not towards education because they consider education irrelevant to their daily needs. What they do is solely based on the daily factual realities they face. Meanwhile, education only provides benefits in the short term. From a practical perspective, existing conditions do not allow them to choose to continue their education. The reality of oil palm plantations requires intervention from the local government. Sunarto (2021), for example, argues that several aspects of the demand side, such as economics (related to poverty, children have to work); logistics (school far away, no vehicles); and social

culture (early marriage, children's obligations to take care of the family, and the assumption that education does not change fate) need to be taken into account in educational planning. The local government's attention to dissecting this problem with comprehensive mapping to obtain an accurate solution is significant. In a cultural context, local governments can build critical awareness among the community regarding the education children need. The government needs to reinforce that parental support for children to continue their education is very important. At this point, the government needs to build educational programs relevant to the needs of communities in oil palm plantation areas.

EPILOGUE

Education is the right of every citizen. In the Indonesian context, some complexities mean that every school-aged population cannot enjoy this right. In the context of children on oil palm plantations in Seberu Village, this complexity arises due to three factors: first, inadequate access to schools and road infrastructure. Second, there needs to be more imagination regarding the importance of schooling for the future. Third, the need to fulfill lifestyle needs. The situation increases the children's dilemma when faced with whether to continue their education or work on oil palm plantations owned by their parents, relatives, or the community in Seberu Village. Amid this complexity, education is challenged to provide relevance for children on oil palm plantations. In this situation, structural support through government policies that provide schooling institutions relevant to children's needs becomes crucial.

Local governments, whether villages, sub-districts, or districts, must focus more on school-aged children who choose to work. Not only providing formal education that is fixed to strict hours in oil palm plantation areas, non-formal education or equality education can be provided that focuses on functional skills such as basic literacy and functional literacy (financial literacy, digital literacy, technological literacy, etc.). An educational focus appropriate to the family's economic field in Seberu village can also be

developed to raise awareness that education is relevant to children's lives, such as creating a plantation vocational school or something similar.

Government policy to provide relevant educational programs for these children is essential to providing the right to education. Still, it pays attention to the relevance of the needs of children who work to help their parents. The government is also expected to improve primary road access and school infrastructure services so that children in oil palm plantation areas have more options to receive a decent education. Culturally, apart from providing awareness to children, the main target that needs to be done is to provide awareness to parents and the community that education is an important part that needs to be given to children. Cultural awareness needs to be built in various parties to encourage children to receive education through formal or non-formal education (equivalency education).

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