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**ANALYSIS OF INDONESIA-MALAYSIA COOPERATION IN IMPROVING  
THE QUALITY OF SAGO EXPORTS FROM THE MERANTI ISLANDS RIAU  
2020-2022**

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**Venia Jusliani<sup>1</sup> & Fitrisia Munir<sup>2</sup>**

International Relations Programme, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,  
Universitas Islam Riau, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia  
Email Correspondence: veniajusliani232019@gmail.com

***Abstract***

This study aims to analyse the form and effectiveness of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in improving the quality of sago exports from Meranti Islands Regency, Riau, during the period 2020-2022. The background to this study stems from the importance of sago as one of Indonesia's leading plantation products, which has high economic value and plays an important role in international trade, particularly with Malaysia as the main export destination. Although Meranti Islands Regency is the largest sago centre in Riau Province, improving product quality and export sustainability still faces several challenges, such as limited processing technology, low farmer productivity, and fluctuating market demand. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method, collecting data through literature studies, observations, and interviews with the Meranti Islands Regency Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and sago industry players. The analysis was conducted using a liberalism perspective and the concept of international cooperation to explain how the two countries build mutually beneficial relationships, particularly through technology transfer, quality standard improvement, workforce training, and institutional support. The findings show that Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation has had a positive impact on improving the quality and value of sago exports, as evidenced by an increase in export volume in 2021 and the existence of assistance, processing, and quality standardisation programmes for sago. However, this study also identifies obstacles such as unfair trade competition, dependence on the Malaysian market, and weak supply chain coordination at the local level. Government efforts such as partnership facilities, international marketing, the opening of processing plants, and the launch of the superior sago variety Sagu Selat Panjang are important factors in promoting sustainable export growth.

**Keywords: Bilateral cooperation, Indonesia-Malaysia, Sago exports, Meranti Islands, Liberalism, International trade**

## **INTRODUCTION**

International trade is one of the key factors driving a country's economic growth, especially in an era of globalisation characterised by increased cross-border economic interaction and regional market integration. ASEAN countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, have strengthened their trade relations through their involvement in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), thereby opening up opportunities for the optimisation of leading sectors. One of Indonesia's strategic commodities with great potential to strengthen exports is sago, especially that originating from the Meranti Islands Regency, Riau Province. The Meranti Islands are the largest sago production centre in Indonesia, with a significant contribution to the national sago supply. However, despite its abundant natural resources, the development of the sago industry in this region still faces various challenges, such as low farmer productivity, limited processing technology, and suboptimal product quality standards.

On the other hand, Malaysia is Indonesia's main trading partner in sago exports, as well as a country with more advanced industrial and processing technology capabilities. This condition makes bilateral cooperation between the two countries strategic for improving the quality and value of Indonesian sago exports. Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation in the sago sector not only focuses on trade activities, but also includes technology transfer, quality standard improvement, capacity building, investment in processing industries, and institutional strengthening. Through a liberal approach and the concept of international cooperation, the relationship between the two countries is seen as a complementary effort to obtain mutual benefits, especially in increasing the competitiveness of sago commodities in the global market. Several efforts by the Indonesian government to support the increase in sago exports include facilitating partnerships, strengthening international marketing, developing agribusiness terminals, developing superior sago varieties called "Sagu Selat Panjang", and establishing industrial-scale processing plants.

Meanwhile, Malaysia contributes to the provision of processing technology, market access, and investment support. However, the implementation of this cooperation still faces obstacles, such as fluctuations in demand, market dependence, trade competition, and an inefficient supply chain. Based on these conditions, this study seeks to analyse the bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in improving the quality of sago

exports from the Meranti Islands during the period 2020–2022, as well as to assess the effectiveness and challenges faced in its implementation. This study is important given the urgency of developing the sago industry as a strategic national commodity that has the potential to strengthen food security, improve the welfare of local communities, and expand Indonesia's access to international markets.

This study uses the perspective of liberalism as the main basis for understanding the dynamics of cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in improving the quality of sago exports. Liberalism departs from the view that countries are fundamentally capable of establishing cooperative relationships because they have a shared interest in creating prosperity, stability, and economic progress. Unlike realism, which emphasises competition and the struggle for power, liberalism views international relations as full of opportunities for collaboration that benefit all parties. The concept of *absolute gains* is an important emphasis in this theory, whereby countries cooperate not to outperform others, but to obtain the greatest possible mutual benefits. In the context of Indonesia and Malaysia, liberalism can explain how the two countries utilise the complementarity of resources—Indonesia as the largest producer of raw sago, and Malaysia as a country with more advanced industrial and processing technology needs—so that cooperation becomes a rational choice to improve the quality of sago exports.

In addition to liberalism, this study also utilises *Institutional Liberalism* theory to understand how cooperation between two countries can be stable, structured, and sustainable. Keohane argues that international institutions, whether in the form of bilateral agreements, economic forums, or technical mechanisms, serve to reduce uncertainty, provide information flows, and create a set of rules that increase trust between countries. The existence of the 2009 Indonesia–Malaysia MoU is evidence of how an institution can serve as a framework that ensures the continuity of technology transfer, improvement of quality standards, harmonisation of trade regulations, and guidance for sago business actors at the local level. With this institution in place, cooperation is not merely spontaneous or informal, but rather a planned process that makes it easier for both countries to achieve their common goals.

This theoretical framework is also reinforced by the concept of international cooperation, which views relations between countries as an effort to complement each other's needs that cannot be met independently. Holsti explains that cooperation arises when countries face issues that require joint attention and leads to a process of negotiation, agreement drafting, and implementation of programmes that satisfy all parties. In Indonesia–Malaysia

relations, international cooperation is evident in the form of capacity building for farmers, standardisation of export standards, and development of a more efficient sago supply chain. This concept explains that cooperation between countries is a rational process that arises from economic interdependence and the need to increase the competitiveness of products in the global market.

The entire theory is integrated through a bilateral cooperation framework that forms the operational basis for relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. Bilateral cooperation enables both countries to implement technical programmes directly, flexibly, and in accordance with the needs of both parties. By using these four theories in an integrated manner, the study is able to explain that Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation in improving the quality of sago exports is not only driven by economic needs, but also strengthened by a theoretical foundation that emphasises interdependence, institutions, and the rationality of inter-country cooperation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to comprehensively describe the form and effectiveness of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in improving the quality of sago exports from the Meranti Islands during the period 2020–2022. A qualitative approach was chosen because it provides an in-depth understanding of the dynamics, processes, and policies governing cooperation between the two countries, while a descriptive method was used to systematically describe the phenomenon based on data obtained in the field and through documentary studies.

Research data was collected from various sources, both primary and secondary. Primary data sources were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants such as the Meranti Islands Central Statistics Agency (BPS), relevant agencies, and sago industry players, accompanied by direct observation of the sago processing and distribution processes in local factories. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from government documents, statistical reports, archives of Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation agreements, scientific journals, and other official publications relevant to the research topic.

Data collection techniques were carried out through interviews, observations, documentation studies, and literature searches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions of sago production and the implementation of bilateral cooperation. All collected data were then analysed using interactive analysis techniques, which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage,

researchers selected and simplified information to obtain the most relevant data. Next, the data was presented in the form of narratives, graphs, or tables to facilitate interpretation. The final stage, drawing conclusions, was carried out by linking the findings with liberalism theory and the concept of international cooperation as the basis for analysis.

This research was conducted in the Meranti Islands Regency, Riau Province, because this area is the largest sago production centre in Indonesia and is the main region involved in the sago trade with Malaysia. Using this method, the research is expected to provide a clear picture of how Indonesia-Malaysia bilateral cooperation contributes to improving the quality and value of sago exports.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in the sago sector demonstrates the dynamics of a mutually beneficial economic relationship, especially for accelerating the improvement in the quality and value of sago exports from the Meranti Islands. The results of the study show that collaboration between the two countries takes place through trade mechanisms, industrial exchange, and market integration, although there is no formal agreement specifically regarding sago. Malaysia acts as the main export destination, consistently absorbing raw sago and sago flour products from Meranti, while Indonesia acts as the main supplier because it has the largest sago plantation area in the world. The geographical proximity and socio-cultural ties between the people of Riau and Malaysia further strengthen this trade relationship, resulting in more efficient distribution and lower logistics costs. This is in line with previous research findings that historical interactions between border communities are an important social capital in strengthening traditional trade between countries.

This bilateral cooperation is reflected in several important aspects. First, Malaysia has high demand for food products and requires a consistent supply of sago raw materials, thereby encouraging stable trade cooperation with Indonesia. Second, this collaboration has led to improvements in the quality of sago processing in Meranti, as local producers have had to adjust their products to Malaysian industry standards, such as drying quality, cleanliness and starch consistency. This phenomenon indicates a transfer of standards, although it is not formally a transfer of technology. Third, local governments are also involved in facilitating the export process, simplifying permits, and improving the supporting infrastructure for the sago industry, thereby strengthening the capacity of local producers to meet foreign market

demand. The results of bilateral cooperation are reflected in the increased quality and value of sago exports.

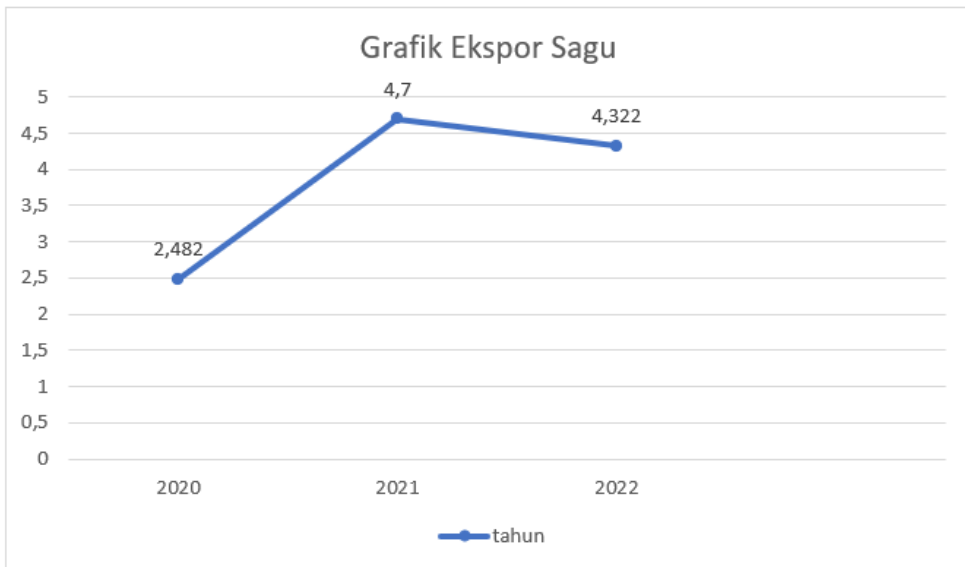


Figure 1 Graph of Sago Exports from 2020 to 2022

Research data shows that sago exports to Malaysia increased significantly in the 2020-2022 period. In 2020, exports stood at 2,482, then rose dramatically in 2021 to 4.7, before declining slightly to 4,322 in 2022. However, the export value remained much higher than in the early years, indicating the success of improving production quality and strengthening the sago value chain in Meranti District. The slight fluctuation in 2022 was due to logistical constraints, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, production limitations, and market access that was not yet fully optimal for local MSMEs. The improvement in sago quality is inseparable from the modernisation of processing technology that has begun to be implemented in several local factories. Research shows that the dry extraction method can increase starch yield and reduce liquid waste, resulting in cleaner sago that meets food safety standards.



Figure 2 Sago flour production results

The image shows the final stage of sago flour production at the processing plant. A machine functions as an outlet for sago flour after it has undergone crushing, settling, filtering, and drying. From the bottom of the funnel, dry sago flour flows out, forming a fine white pile on the floor of the production area. The factory environment appears to be enclosed and protected, indicating that this process is carried out in a processing room designed to maintain cleanliness and ensure the quality of the flour remains good.

The pile of sago flour shown indicates that the product is ready for packaging or distribution. The white colour of the flour indicates that the fibre separation, starch precipitation and drying processes have been carried out properly. This image illustrates how raw materials in the form of hard, fibrous sago trunks are converted through a series of mechanical processes into flour with high economic value, which is used in foods such as papeda, traditional cakes, or other processed products. Overall, this image highlights an important stage in the sago production chain, namely the conversion phase from wet starch to ready-to-use sago flour.

After the sago is ground into flour and packaged, it is transported by cart to the local port. Since many ports in sago-producing areas do not serve international routes, the cargo is then transported using inter-island cargo ships or the KLM (motor sailing ship) Samudra Indah. The KLM (motor sailing ship) Samudra Indah transports sago containers to major ports such as Makassar, Surabaya, Bitung, or Belawan. At major ports, sago undergoes

export document checks, including quarantine certificates, invoices, packing lists, and customs documents. These inspections are important to ensure that export products comply with health, safety, and international regulations.

Once all documents are complete and goods are approved for export, the containers are transferred to international cargo ships with direct routes to ports in Malaysia, such as Port Klang or Port Pasir Gudang. These ships transport cargo across international sea lanes, with the journey taking several days before arriving in Malaysia. Upon arrival, the goods then undergo the import process, customs inspection, and distribution by Malaysian importers to factories, markets, or food processing companies that require sago as a raw material. Through this structured process, sago from Indonesia can reach Malaysia in good condition and ready for use, while also supporting international trade in Southeast Asia.

In addition, the utilisation of sago trunk and bark waste into derivative products such as bioethanol, biomass briquettes, organic fertilisers, and raw materials for the food industry has also increased the economic value of sago as a strategic national commodity. At the socio-economic level, this collaboration has had a significant impact on local communities. More than 20,000 sago farmers in Meranti have seen an increase in their income as the price of high-quality sago products has risen. Previously, most products were sold as wet sago at low prices, but now product diversification such as dry sago flour, sago noodles, sago crackers, and other processed products has succeeded in increasing sales value and competitiveness in regional and international markets.

The price of dried sago flour, which reaches £4.50/kg, is higher than that of wet sago, indicating the success of the downstreaming of the local sago industry. However, the study also found several obstacles in the implementation of this cooperation. Sago processing and distribution infrastructure is still limited, especially in remote areas where sago logging takes place. The process of transporting trunks from the forest to the factory is still done manually, requiring a lot of manpower and slowing down the production process. Problems with ship and port connectivity are also an obstacle to maintaining export stability. In addition, most MSMEs still face limitations in their mastery of market information and are not yet able to consistently apply international standards such as GMP, SNI, and HACCP.

The research analysis confirms that synergy between economic diplomacy, government policy support, research institution participation, and investor involvement is necessary to strengthen the sustainability of the sago industry. Current cooperation is still trade-based and has not developed into a formal bilateral relationship focused on the development of the sago industry

itself. Therefore, the study proposes that Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation be directed towards a strategic agreement that includes technology transfer, downstream industry development, and Malaysian direct investment in the sago sector in Indonesia. Thus, the competitiveness of Indonesian sago can be improved, while reducing dependence on exports of raw materials with low added value. Overall, this discussion shows that Indonesia-Malaysia bilateral cooperation plays an important role in strengthening the Meranti sago industry through product quality improvement, production capacity strengthening, and market access expansion. Although there are still a number of structural and technical obstacles, the trend of increasing exports and advances in processing technology prove that the relationship between the two countries has great potential to be developed as a model for strengthening strategic commodities in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia plays an important role in improving the quality and value of sago exports from the Meranti Islands. Malaysia, as a major trading partner, contributes to improving product quality through industry standards, stable market demand, and long-term trade relations. Meanwhile, Indonesia, as the main sago producer, benefits from increased demand and stimulus to improve production processes, modernise processing technology, and diversify sago products. The increase in sago exports during the 2020-2022 period reflects the successful synergy between the government, industry players, and local communities.

The significant upward trend in exports in 2021, despite a slight decline in 2022, shows that efforts to improve quality, train workers, and upgrade processing facilities have had a positive impact on the competitiveness of Meranti sago in the Malaysian market. On the other hand, technological modernisation, the implementation of quality standards such as GMP, HACCP, and SNI, and the utilisation of waste into products with economic value have also strengthened the sago industry structure in the region. However, this study also found that this bilateral cooperation still faces a number of obstacles, such as infrastructure limitations, suboptimal production capacity, and a supply chain that is not yet fully efficient.

Furthermore, Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation in the sago sector is still trade-based and has not developed into a strategic partnership that includes technology transfer or direct investment in the processing industry. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen economic diplomacy, increase the capacity of

business actors, and provide policy support from local and central governments to maximise the potential of the sago industry. Overall, this study confirms that bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia has made a real contribution to improving the quality and value of sago exports from the Meranti Islands, as well as strengthening the position of sago as a strategic national commodity. With policy strengthening, industrial modernisation, and deeper collaboration between countries, the sago sector has great opportunities to develop as one of Indonesia's leading commodities in the international market.

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