

Review Article

Commercialization of Sago through Estate Plantation Scheme in Sarawak: The Way Forward

Hafizan Mohamad Naim,¹ Ahmad Nizar Yaakub,¹ and Dayang Asmah Awang Hamdan²

¹Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

²Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Correspondence should be addressed to Hafizan Mohamad Naim; hafizanmohamadnaim@gmail.com

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Sago has been hailed as a next viable commodity in Sarawak, Malaysia, given its potential as a versatile crop. Realising its potential, Sarawak state government has started initiatives to stimulate sago plantation from subsistence farming to estate plantation. The move of introducing sago estate plantation is a bold one considering that Malaysia is the first country introducing such plantation design. This is a reflection on sago estate plantation in the state of Sarawak. It is observed that, in order to ensure success of the plantation scheme, factors such as rigorous land consolidation programme aiming to maximize sago production; introduction of a modern planting method that integrates well with the traditional planting method; rigorous scientific research in finding the best sago variety that produces high yield; effective communication between related agencies and smallholders; and concentrated involvement of all actors, governmental agencies, mills, and smallholders, have to be addressed accordingly. To conclude, it is hoped that this writing can be utilized as part of a contribution to accelerating commercialization of sago as a next viable commodity crop not only in Sarawak but in Southeast Asia as a whole.

1. Introduction

Sago (*Metroxylon sagu*) is a palm species which is indigenous to Southeast Asia region, specifically Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines. It is known for its tolerance to wet growing condition and has a main advantage of the ability to thrive in harsh swampy peat environment [1]. Besides that, sago palm is resistant to extreme weather changes making it a versatile plant as it takes less maintenance to cultivate. In regard to the replanting process, sago palm needs minimum care and replanting is not necessary as the parent palm proliferates suckers. Comparing sago palm with other crops such as palm oil, the latter requires replanting every 25 years which is quite costly making sago palm a better option for planting.

In regard to sago production, currently Malaysia is the third largest sago producer in the world after Indonesia and Papua New Guinea which combined produce approximately 94.6 percent [2] of the world production. Indonesia, the

biggest producer of sago starch in the world, produces 585,093 tons per year [3].

In terms of hectareage, the latest data produced in 2014 estimates that Indonesia has the world's largest hectareage of sago plants (Table 1). Comparing the data with data produced by the Department of Agriculture Sarawak, by 2012, all four districts in Mukah division, namely, Mukah, Dalat, Matu, and Daro, have cultivated an estimated 11,112 hectares, 28,169 hectares, 4,306 hectares, and 3,149 hectares of sago, respectively. Out of 67,957 hectares of land cultivated with sago in Sarawak, 43,426 hectares was planted by small-scale sago farmers and 24,531 hectares was planted by commercial sago plantation. Sago is deemed as a next viable commodity crop in Sarawak given the fact that about 1.69 million hectares of peat soil can be cultivated with this palm [4].

Realising sago potential, Sarawak government has started initiatives to stimulate sago plantation from subsistence farming to estate plantation. One of the initiatives is by appointing Land Custody and Development Authority (LCDA) to