

## Exploring the challenges of pepper smallholder farmers in Sarawak: a qualitative study

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### Abstract

The pepper plant is considered a valuable and popular choice of crop in Malaysia despite market fluctuation affecting its prices and other constraints in the pepper industry. In addition, pepper plant is mainly grown in rural areas of Sarawak and the growers are mainly smallholders who face tough challenges in the industry. Thus, this research endeavours to explore the challenges faced by pepper growers in Sarawak as seen from their perspectives. Qualitative data with a phenomenological approach was conducted to allow an in-depth understanding of their challenges. Data analysis of six semi-structured interviews on the pepper growers was conducted at an agreeable place to the participants. A sampling method was done via snowball sampling. The findings indicated several main themes of the challenges. The emerging main themes revealed that the challenges were associated with a shortage of workers, climate, profits, government assistance, pest, and crop diseases. The result will provide useful information for the government authority, agricultural agencies, and help to formulate the action plan to enhance pepper cultivation.

## 1. Introduction

Pepper or the scientific name *Piper nigrum L.* is one of the oldest known spices in the international market. The large-scale cultivation of pepper in Malaysia began in Sarawak in 1876 when the Chinese migrants were allowed to take up large acreage of land for large production of pepper (Olalere *et al.*, 2016). The pepper plant is still a popular choice of crop among smallholders in Malaysia and is known to be an important source of side income for local people especially in some parts of Sarawak such as Kuching, Samarahan, Serian, Sri Aman, Betong, and Sarikei who actively cultivate the pepper crop. Sarawak is known as a major producer in Malaysia which covers 17,134 ha area in 2018 (Malaysian Pepper Board, 2018). The commodity price of pepper is the significant determinant of the total revenue of Malaysia particularly for the state of Sarawak and pepper growers as pepper farming is the only source of livelihood for a majority of the pepper growers in the state. Pepper farming is not only regarded as a source of side income, but it is also considered as a traditional practice that has been passed down for generations by the local people.

However, it is not easy to cultivate the pepper plant in order to obtain a good and high-quality product because pepper is usually planted by smallholder farmers primarily in infertile hill slopes (Kamarulzaman *et al.*, 2013). Thus, this study investigates the issue and explores the potential challenges faced by pepper growers.

Pepper is one of the important cash crops supporting the livelihood of about 67,000 rural dwellers in upland areas of Sarawak and about 95% of the pepper traded globally is in the form of black and white peppercorns and the remaining 5% is made up of pepper oleoresin, pepper oil, green pepper, and ground pepper (DOA, 2020). Up until recently, Sarawak is still the main producer of black and white pepper in Malaysia, which is about 23,780 tonnes of black pepper and 6,794 tonnes of white pepper in 2018 (Malaysia's Open Data Portal, 2019). It is estimated that 90% of pepper production is destined for export markets. The target markets of the pepper industry include China, the Middle East, Japan, Australia, Europe, and South Africa. The pepper production pattern in 1980-2012 indicates an increasing

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