

RESEARCH ARTICLE

South Sumatra's Opportunities in Accessing ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of local government policies in South Sumatra in accessing and enhancing economic cooperation with countries in the Southeast Asian region, particularly within the framework of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Although economic cooperation among ASEAN nations has advanced significantly over recent decades, there is still untapped potential by local governments in Indonesia, including South Sumatra, in contributing to regional economic integration. The research investigates how local economic policies in South Sumatra can strengthen its involvement in the AEC, with a focus on trade, investment, and infrastructure development that fosters connectivity

among ASEAN nations. A qualitative approach with policy analysis is employed to understand the strategies adopted by the government of South Sumatra to promote economic collaboration with ASEAN countries. The findings are expected to identify crucial factors influencing the success or failure of accessing ASEAN market and offer recommendations for improving coordination between central and local governments to enhance South Sumatra's role in the ASEAN economic network. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the development of more effective regional economic policies that support regional integration and elevate South Sumatra's standing in the ASEAN economic landscape.

Keywords: *Local Government, Cooperation, Economy, South Sumatra, AEC*

I. Introduction

Economic cooperation among countries in Southeast Asia, particularly within the framework of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has witnessed significant progress in recent decades. A major initiative in this economic integration is the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to establish a single market and integrated production base in the region (Y. Effendi, 2014). Indonesia, as a key ASEAN member, actively promotes economic cooperation between the members of ASEAN. Hence, the role of local governments in



designing and implementing economic policies oriented towards international trade and cross-border cooperation is crucial in achieving this objective (Hatta, 2020).

Local governments hold a strategic position in fostering local economies to support international cooperation. In Indonesia, including South Sumatra Province, regional economic policies directly influence the ability of regions to engage in trade and investment within ASEAN. Local governments serve as intermediaries between national economic policies and more specific local-level implementations, enabling regional key sectors to access international markets (Sabaruddin, 2015). Research shows that openness to international trade enhances resource allocation for producing goods and services, which in turn can absorb labor and reduce unemployment (Febryastuti, 2019).

South Sumatra possesses key sectors with the potential to enhance economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. The agriculture sector, particularly palm oil and rubber, stands out as one of the most significant. Data indicates that South Sumatra is one of Indonesia's leading producers of palm oil and rubber, with considerable potential for export to ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam ((BPS), 2020). Additionally, the renewable energy sector, especially with biomass and hydroelectric, presents promising prospects for fostering closer economic ties with ASEAN countries committed to sustainability and carbon emission reduction (Widyawati et al., 2021).

Despite its potential, South Sumatra faces significant challenges, particularly related to infrastructure disparities that limit

cross-border trade connectivity. Developing port infrastructure, such as Tanjung Api-Api Port, is a strategic step to enhance the competitiveness of South Sumatra's key products in international markets. (Ardine et al., 2023). However, the lack of efficient transportation networks in some areas hampers goods distribution and increases logistics costs (Hounsounou et al., 2021).

In addition to infrastructure challenges, discrepancies between central and local government policies often hinder the implementation of economic policies effectively. Research by Park (2024) highlights that misalignment between centrally focused macroeconomic policies and locally oriented sectoral development policies can slow the implementation of initiatives supporting international economic cooperation. Therefore, it is essential to improve coordination between central and local governments to achieve optimal economic integration (Lee, 2022).

The role of local government economic policies in strengthening international economic cooperation also pertains to the development of export-oriented key sectors. Agriculture, renewable energy, and port infrastructure in South Sumatra can serve as a starting point for designing economic policies that support international trade with ASEAN countries. Policies promoting foreign investment, industrial development, and workforce training will further bolster South Sumatra's position within the global economic network (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2019). This aligns with Indonesia's long-term goal of reinforcing ASEAN economic integration, wherein each member state is expected to contribute



significantly to regional economic growth (Darmawan et al., 2024).

The renewable energy sector in South Sumatra holds significant potential to strengthen economic relations with ASEAN countries, particularly in the context of their commitment to reducing carbon emissions and transitioning to cleaner energy sources. Cooperation in renewable energy could become a key pillar in fostering economic cooperation, aligned with ASEAN's sustainability commitments and climate change mitigation efforts (Sihombing, 2022). Research by Rusdi et al (2021) suggests that local governments can leverage renewable energy potential to attract investments and develop environmentally friendly technologies that support sustainable economic growth.

The adoption of renewable energy technologies, such as solar power plants and integrated energy systems, can help reduce dependence on fossil fuels, which still dominate Indonesia's energy sources (Sijabat et al., 2024). For instance, implementing solar home systems (SHM) and photovoltaic-integrated water pumps offers environmentally friendly and sustainable energy solutions, particularly for remote communities (Musyafiq et al., 2021; Sunardi et al., 2021). Moreover, the development of green technologies in the renewable energy sector can significantly contribute to carbon emission reduction, a critical aspect of climate change mitigation efforts. These initiatives not only enhance energy efficiency but also support improved environmental safety (Koval et al., 2023).

Research on foreign cooperation by local governments has attracted the attention

of academics. For example, Tahalel et al. examined the role of the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government in strengthening its position as part of global metropolitan cities. This study discussed various international cooperation initiatives integrated into regional development planning and provided policy recommendations to optimize cross-border cooperation (Tahalel et al., 2024).

Similarly, Isnaeni (2013), in her study titled "Peran Strategis Pemerintah Daerah dalam Kerjasama Internasional untuk Pembangunan Berkelanjutan," presented a case study of Surabaya, illustrating how international cooperation serves as an effective mechanism for achieving sustainable development agendas. The study emphasized the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in integrating sustainable development goals into local policies (Isnaeni, 2013).

Additionally, studies on the role of local governments in ASEAN sub-regional cooperation, particularly the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), have highlighted how local governments in South Sumatra can leverage sub-regional cooperation to accelerate tourism development and optimize local resources (S. Effendi et al., 2024). This research emphasizes the importance of exploring local resource potential and harmonizing government policies to support regional economic integration.

Economic cooperation between ASEAN member has become a central focus in studies exploring the role of local government policies in supporting regional economic integration. Research indicates that strengthening logistics sectors and port



development supported by local policies can significantly increase cross-border trade volumes within ASEAN (Ansofino, 2016). Furthermore, the development of integrated regional transportation infrastructure can enhance cross-border trade efficiency by up to 25% (Kartiasih, 2019). These findings highlight the critical role of transportation and logistics infrastructure policies in the context of ASEAN economic cooperation.

Renewable energy sectors, such as biomass and hydroelectric power, also hold significant potential for driving economic cooperation within ASEAN. Policies offering foreign investment incentives and supporting environmentally friendly energy technologies are key to unlocking this potential (Heirina & Ayub, 2024). Research by Nazipawati (2023) reveals that economic growth in South Sumatra is influenced by road infrastructure and workforce quality, emphasizing the importance of local policies in supporting key sectors such as agriculture and renewable energy.

While numerous studies discuss the general role of local governments, a significant gap exists in literature focusing on specific regions like South Sumatra, with its unique key sector characteristics (Nazipawati, 2023). This research aims to fill this gap by exploring multisectoral integration, including agriculture, energy, and infrastructure, relevant to enhancing ASEAN economic cooperation. Moreover, addressing the issue of policy misalignment between central and local governments remains critical, as it often hinders the implementation of policies supporting international economic cooperation (Tinambunan et al., 2020).

Hence, it is imperative for South Sumatra's local government to formulate economic policies not only centered on developing key sectors but also on strengthening infrastructure capacity, enhancing human resource quality, and improving coordination between central and local governments. This approach will ensure that South Sumatra can seize existing opportunities in ASEAN economic cooperation and contribute to stronger regional economic integration. This study aims to analyze the role of economic policies implemented by South Sumatra's local government in supporting access and active participation in the AEC by exploring strategies to elevate the province's position within ASEAN's economic network.

II. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the role of the local government in South Sumatra in enhancing economic cooperation among ASEAN countries. A descriptive qualitative approach is chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena, such as the economic policies implemented by local governments. According to Sugiyono, qualitative research is a method employed to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of an object, producing descriptive data in words or observable actions (Sugiyono, 2015). In this context, the study utilizes secondary data, including regional economic policy documents, annual reports, and trade data from relevant institutions such as the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) and the Ministry of Trade. These documents provide essential insights into the



policies implemented and their impacts on cross-border economic cooperation, particularly within the ASEAN context.

The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis, where data collected through document studies are categorized based on themes relevant to the research focus, such as economic policies and challenges in international cooperation. This process involves comparing data from various sources to ensure the validity and consistency of findings. Source triangulation—a method to strengthen data reliability by comparing information from multiple reports and previous studies—is also applied in this research (Sukanto, 2016). This aligns with Sugiyono's emphasis on the importance of triangulation in qualitative research to enhance result accuracy. The study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the role of local governments in fostering regional economic integration and ASEAN cross-border cooperation. This is a critical issue in the context of globalization and regional cooperation, offering valuable insights into the interplay between local policies and broader regional economic frameworks.

III. Discussions

a. South Sumatra's Economic Potential in the Context of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

The economic policies implemented by the South Sumatra Provincial Government play a crucial role in promoting economic cooperation among Southeast Asian nations, particularly with ASEAN member states. These policies must align with national strategies and

regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Research by Nazipawati (2023) highlights that economic growth in South Sumatra is influenced by factors such as labor availability and infrastructure, which are essential elements for fostering international economic collaboration. Furthermore, Deru et al. (Deru et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of regulatory actors' behavior in achieving high regional innovation indices, strengthening regional competitiveness in international cooperation.

South Sumatra's government is expected not only to focus on local economic growth but also to actively enhance engagement in international economic partnerships. Hatta and Nursanty (2020) underscore the need to identify key sectors, such as agriculture and renewable energy, to boost competitiveness and collaboration with ASEAN countries. For example, the palm oil and rubber sectors hold significant potential for increasing exports and strengthening ties with ASEAN nations that offer vast markets for these products.

South Sumatra boasts several key sectors with significant potential to strengthen economic cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly in agriculture and renewable energy. Among these, palm oil stands out as one of the most dominant sectors. As one of Indonesia's leading palm oil producers, South Sumatra contributes over 30% of its total exports to this commodity (BPS, 2024). High demand from ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines presents a substantial opportunity to expand the province's international market presence



within the framework of ASEAN economic cooperation.

The province's palm oil plantations span over 700,000 hectares, primarily managed by independent farmers and large corporations (BPS, 2024). This production is vital for maintaining the stability of vegetable oil supply across Southeast Asia. Such a strategic position highlights South Sumatra's potential not only as a leading producer but also as a pioneer of sustainable plantation management practices.

However, rising international market concerns regarding sustainability present a significant challenge for the palm oil sector in South Sumatra. Sustainability certifications like Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) are crucial for enhancing product competitiveness in global markets. Despite its importance, ISPO adoption remains limited, particularly among independent farmers (Hutabarat, 2018). To address this, the provincial government must provide training and incentives, enabling farmers to adopt environmentally friendly practices and meet international standards (Dharmawan et al., 2021; Pandiangan & Ernah, 2019).

Palm oil's significance extends beyond exports. The sector is instrumental in creating jobs and driving infrastructure development in South Sumatra. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (2023), the palm oil industry supports over one million jobs directly and indirectly across the province. Additionally, revenue from palm oil exports has funded various development programs, such as rural road improvements, better education access, and enhanced healthcare services for local communities.

Ensuring the sustainability of the palm oil sector requires addressing environmental challenges while maintaining high production levels. Collaborative efforts among local governments, private companies, farmers, and international organizations are essential to achieve economic growth alongside environmental protection.

ASEAN economic cooperation presents significant opportunities to expand the market for palm oil products, which are in high demand in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Widyaningtyas & Widodo, 2016). ASEAN member states have established platforms to facilitate cross-border trade through market integration and the elimination of tariff barriers. In this context, local government policies that support increased production, quality improvement, and sustainability of palm oil products are essential. Policies such as the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification play a crucial role in meeting international market standards, particularly in countries that increasingly demand sustainable products (Novianto et al., 2022).

While palm oil demonstrates significant export potential, the rubber sector in South Sumatra also offers vast opportunities for strengthening regional economic cooperation. As one of Indonesia's largest rubber producers, South Sumatra contributes approximately 24.03% of the country's total rubber plantations, covering 919,500 hectares (BPS, 2022). This sector is a major livelihood source for rural communities, particularly smallholder farmers who dominate plantation ownership. The dominance of the rubber sector is also reflected in South Sumatra's exports, where rubber products constitute the



largest share of the province's non-oil and gas commodity exports (Sasmi et al., 2023).

Rubber production in South Sumatra plays a critical role in supporting downstream industries domestically and exports to ASEAN nations. For instance, the province supplies processed rubber for the automotive industries in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, which require high-quality raw materials for manufacturing tires and other vehicle components (Fauzi, 2021). In 2023, South Sumatra accounted for 43.47% of Indonesia's total processed rubber exports, underscoring its strong performance in regional trade (Kemendag, 2023; Ramadhan & Fahmi, 2023). The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) further facilitates this trade by reducing tariffs and improving market access, positioning South Sumatra as a key player in the Southeast Asian rubber trade.

In addition to supporting the trade sector, rubber holds strategic value in driving local economic growth. The rubber plantation sector provides employment for over 1.5 million residents of South Sumatra, including farmers, plantation labourers (BPS, 2024), and workers in the processing industry. Income generated from rubber has contributed to improving rural community welfare and fostering infrastructure development in rubber-producing areas. Local governments also utilize revenue from this sector to support social and economic development programs, such as providing access to education and healthcare services in rural communities.

Despite its strengths, the rubber sector faces significant challenges related to sustainability and product quality. Inefficient farming techniques, limited access to modern

technology, and fluctuating commodity prices hinder farmers' productivity (Khaswarina et al., 2023). Additionally, environmental concerns such as deforestation from plantation expansion require urgent attention to ensure alignment with sustainable development principles (Kotowska et al., 2015). Addressing these challenges requires government support, including training programs for environmentally friendly farming techniques and improved access to modern processing facilities.

To elevate the international competitiveness of South Sumatra's key sectors, strategic steps are needed to develop downstream industries. Currently, most rubber and palm oil exports are in raw or semi-processed forms, which yield lower economic value compared to finished products (Ramadhan & Fahmi, 2023). Developing local processing industries, such as tire manufacturing plants or facilities for producing palm oil derivatives like biodiesel and oleochemicals, could significantly enhance the region's economic value. Encouraging investments in these sectors through public-private partnerships and incentives is crucial.

Sustainability certifications also play a pivotal role in boosting market access for rubber and palm oil products. Farmers adopting sustainable practices have reported productivity increases of up to 20%, demonstrating the dual benefits of higher incomes and environmental preservation. By supporting widespread certification adoption, South Sumatra can strengthen its position in international markets increasingly concerned with sustainability (Junaidi, 2022).



The application of science and technology is another key driver for improving the productivity and efficiency of South Sumatra's agriculture sectors. Utilizing modern technologies, such as IoT-based sensors to monitor soil and crop conditions, can increase yields while reducing resource overuse (Saparita et al., 2019). Moreover, innovations in processing can add significant value to agricultural products, such as producing high-quality palm oil or rubber components tailored for specific industries. Leveraging these technological advancements could boost productivity by up to 30% while significantly lowering operational costs. Digital transformation also presents vast opportunities for optimizing supply chains. Blockchain-based platforms, for example, can enhance transparency and traceability in product sourcing, building consumer trust. Additionally, digital marketplaces can connect smallholder farmers directly with broader markets, including international buyers, thereby expanding their reach (Wibowo et al., 2024).

Beyond technology, innovation and economic productivity are key factors in enhancing South Sumatra's competitiveness in both domestic and international markets. Product diversification serves as a strategic approach to reducing dependence on raw commodities, such as by producing palm oil derivatives like biodiesel, oleochemicals, or palm-based food products. In the rubber sector, the development of downstream industries, such as the production of environmentally friendly tires or rubber-based components for the automotive industry, can have a positive impact on the local economy. This approach not only increases export value

but also creates new employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector.

The implementation of a green economy is a crucial foundation for achieving sustainable growth. By adopting green economic principles, South Sumatra can ensure that economic activities are not solely focused on short-term profits but also consider long-term environmental and societal impacts (Idntimes, 2024). For instance, palm oil waste can be utilized as a raw material for bioenergy, while rubber production can adopt agroforestry techniques that integrate ecosystem sustainability (Hermanto et al., 2021). Moreover, the application of green economy practices in the plantation sector can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 25%, while simultaneously increasing the competitiveness of products in international markets, which are increasingly prioritizing sustainability (Nanda, 2022).

Domestic economic integration between urban and rural areas is crucial for fostering inclusive economic growth. Urban areas can serve as centers for distribution, innovation, and processing, while rural areas remain the primary producers of raw materials (Syafi'i & Mertayasa, 2024). By integrating these regions, South Sumatra can establish a strong and mutually supportive economic value chain. For instance, palm oil processing plants in urban areas can accelerate product distribution to markets, while rural farmers gain access to technology and training. Furthermore, the stability of the financial system at local and regional levels is essential to support investment and sectoral development, particularly by providing credit access to small and medium enterprises



(SMEs) in rural areas (Syafi'i & Mertayasa, 2024).

By implementing these elements in a cohesive manner, South Sumatra has a significant opportunity to strengthen its economic position at both national and regional levels. This approach not only ensures inclusive and sustainable growth but also enhances the province's competitiveness in addressing global challenges. The integration of technological innovation, green economy principles, digital transformation, and regional synergy can create a dynamic and adaptable economic ecosystem.

However, a major challenge lies in sustainability and product quality. Palm oil and rubber commodities are often associated with deforestation and other environmental impacts, which can affect Indonesia's competitiveness in international markets. Therefore, policies should not only focus on increasing export volumes but also on improving product quality and sustainability. For example, in the European Union market, many ASEAN countries have implemented strict sustainability regulations for palm oil trade, which should be a key consideration in South Sumatra's local government policies (Deru et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, South Sumatra must develop policies that widely facilitate product sustainability certifications and provide training for local farmers to adopt environmentally friendly practices, ensuring high-quality products that meet international market standards. A comparative analysis of palm oil export volumes from South Sumatra to ASEAN countries could offer a clearer picture of untapped market potential.

b. Barriers and Challenges Faced by South Sumatra in Leveraging ASEAN Economic Cooperation

Challenges and obstacles in strengthening international cooperation must also be carefully considered. A study by Sidiq (2023) revealed that external factors – such as commodity price fluctuations – significantly impact regional economic performance, thereby affecting a region's ability to engage in international economic cooperation (Sidiq & Rizqi, 2023). Consequently, it is crucial for local governments to develop adaptive and responsive policies that align with global market dynamics. Some of the key barriers and challenges include:

b.1. Coordination Between the Central and Regional Governments in Policy Implementation.

Coordination between central and regional governments is crucial in implementing economic policies in South Sumatra. According to research by Rosmery Elsy (2014), implementing fiscal decentralization policies in South Sumatra Province faces several obstacles, including less-than-optimal revenue management and macroeconomic stability. In the decentralization policy, regional governments are given greater authority to manage regional resources and expenditures. However, without good coordination between the central and regional governments, fiscal policies implemented by the central government are often not adjusted to existing local conditions. One example is the implementation of Law No. 33 of 2004 concerning Fiscal Balance between the Central Government and Regional



Governments. This law regulates revenue distribution between the center and regions, but differences in priorities between central and regional policies often lead to suboptimal management of funds. In South Sumatra, this can be seen from the limited allocation of funds for sectors that support local economic development, such as infrastructure and education.

In addition, a study by Marudur Pandapotan Damanik (2019) shows that the South Sumatra Provincial Government faces significant challenges in implementing the South Sumatra Smart Province program, which aims to improve the quality of government and public services through digital technology. This program relies on implementing a technology-based system, but without good coordination between the central and regional governments, this program is often hampered. For example, although the central government has launched various smart city and e-government programs, the South Sumatra Provincial Government still has difficulty adjusting to the standards set. In several government sectors, such as the Population and Civil Registration Service (Dukcapil), services are still carried out manually, such as processing changes of domicile or issuing family cards, which starkly contrasts with other regions that have used digital applications in administrative services. The mismatch between more modern central government policies and local conditions that are not yet ready to be implemented shows how important synergy is between the two parties so that technology-based policies can run effectively.

This obstacle shows that without good coordination between the central and

regional governments, the implementation of technology-based policies and innovation can be hampered, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the planned program—the importance of synergy between the central and regional governments in formulating public policies. Lack of communication and coordination can lead to overlapping and ineffective policies in their implementation (Pardosi, 2023). This is relevant to the conditions in South Sumatra, where differences in priorities between the central and regional governments can hinder the implementation of economic policies that should support regional integration within the framework of the ASEAN Economic Community.

In addition, research by Akmal (2006) shows that coordination between related agencies in implementing regional development in Indonesia is not optimal. This lack of coordination can lead to inefficiency and ineffectiveness in implementing development programs related to regional economic development. The agricultural sector is experiencing obstacles in coordination between the central and regional governments. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), South Sumatra has a dominant agricultural sector in the regional economy, especially in rice and plantation production. However, central government policies focusing more on large-scale infrastructure development often ignore the region's specific needs to increase agricultural productivity. Government regulations on fertilizer subsidies, for example, are not always received fairly by farmers in the region, which leads to public dissatisfaction. This uncoordinated policy has led to a mismatch



between more macro central policies and local agricultural conditions that require a more specific approach.

Overall, the coordination problem between the central and regional governments in South Sumatra impacts the economic sector and affects other sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure development. The solution to this problem must involve improved communication and better coordination through coordination forums involving all stakeholders. In addition, it is important to formulate policies that are more focused on local needs and conditions so that policy implementation can run more effectively and positively impact regional development.

b.2. Technical constraints include limited infrastructure, lack of access to technology, and sustainability issues

South Sumatra has excellent potential to develop economic cooperation with ASEAN countries but faces various technical challenges that must be overcome to increase competitiveness and accelerate regional integration. Some of the main obstacles this region faces include infrastructure inequality, limited access to technology, and sustainability issues affecting important sectors, such as agriculture and trade. One of the main obstacles hindering South Sumatra's economic growth is limited infrastructure. One of the main obstacles hindering Sumatra's economic growth is limited infrastructure. According to research by Hamzah (2019),

infrastructure development in South Sumatra from 2014 to 2017 has not been fully effective and efficient in driving economic growth. This study shows that road infrastructure, electricity, and other public facilities still need to be improved to support more productive economic activities. According to data from the Kementerian PU (2023), only around 53.43% of the total national roads in South Sumatra are in good condition, while the rest need repair. This affects the efficiency of the distribution of goods and services. The development of Tanjung Api-Api Port can strengthen trade connectivity between South Sumatra and countries in the ASEAN region. With better port infrastructure, cross-border trade can increase, supporting local economic growth, but until now, the development of Tanjung Api-Api Port has not continued (Bagus, 2024). Suppose the development of this port can be continued. In that case, it is hoped that it can strengthen South Sumatra's position in the ASEAN supply chain and increase export and investment opportunities.

In addition to physical infrastructure issues, digital constraints are also a significant challenge. Research by Juairiyah (2019) revealed that the digital gap between urban and rural areas in South Sumatra is quite significant, with internet access in rural areas still limited. This has led to low adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) in the education and economic sectors. These



limitations greatly hinder people from taking advantage of the digital economy's opportunities, which is now one of the main pillars of global economic development. Not only that, the lack of digital infrastructure also impacts the ability of local business actors to access international markets and improve the quality of digital-based public services. (Damanik, 2019).

The issue of sustainability is also a serious concern, especially in the agricultural sector. South Sumatra has a dominant agricultural sector in the regional economy, especially in rice and plantation production. According to data from the BPS (2022), the planting pattern is still dominated by conventional systems, and dependence on chemical fertilizers has led to a decline in soil quality. This leads to a decline in agricultural yields in the long term, which affects regional food security. Implementing more environmentally friendly policies is still limited, and in some areas, existing regulations regarding environmental management have not been fully implemented consistently. For example, the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and the lack of sustainable agricultural practices such as agroforestry or crop rotation must be overcome so that the agricultural sector remains productive without damaging the environment.

In addition, the forestry sector also faces sustainability issues. According to the Forest Watch Indonesia report

(2021), deforestation in South Sumatra is still relatively high, with most forests converted to agricultural land and plantations. This deforestation contributes to climate change and threatens the sustainability of the nature tourism sector, which has great potential in South Sumatra. Better forest management and implementing policies involving local communities in conservation are steps that need to be taken to ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem in this area.

The implementation of the South Sumatra Smart Province program, which aims to improve the quality of government and public services through digital technology, faces significant obstacles related to technological readiness, human resources, and effective governance. Damanik (2019) noted that the lack of data integration between government agencies and poor coordination hamper efforts to achieve it, thereby reducing the program's effectiveness in supporting sustainable and efficient development.

b.3. Changes in International Market Standards: Demands for Product Quality and Sustainability

Globalization has pushed international markets towards higher standards of quality and sustainability. Countries and international organizations increasingly set strict rules regarding product quality, environmental impacts, and business ethics in global trade. In the context of international relations, this reflects the dynamics of economic interdependence



between countries influenced by economic, political, and environmental interests. For example, the European Union (EU) has implemented strict regulations on palm oil to ensure that the product is free from deforestation practices, creating challenges for exporting countries such as Indonesia, including South Sumatra (Curzi et al., 2018; Liu, 2022).

In the ASEAN region, countries such as Singapore and Thailand are starting to follow the EU trend in demanding sustainability in imported products. Data from the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) reveals that ASEAN member countries are increasingly adopting sustainability policies similar to European regulations, creating challenges for agricultural-producing countries such as Indonesia that have not fully met these standards. According to the theory of institutionalism in international relations, the rules set by international actors will encourage countries to adapt to maintain access to the global market (Gulcemal, 2021). This explains how international market regulations shape domestic policies in developing countries.

From an international relations perspective, increasing product quality standards can be a soft power for developed countries. Developed countries can influence the policies of developing countries through strict trade rules. This can be seen from implementing non-tariff measures (NTMs) regulations, which often challenge countries like Indonesia to meet their export products' quality and sustainability standards. Implementing NTMs regulations by developed countries often focuses on sustainability issues and quality standards that are difficult for

developing countries like Indonesia to achieve (Oosterveer et al., 2014).

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly dominant issue in international relations. Developed countries use sustainability policies to demonstrate their commitment to controlling climate change while encouraging developing countries to adopt the same principles. In this context, products from South Sumatra, such as palm oil and rubber, must meet sustainability certification standards such as ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) in order to remain competitive in the international market (Apriyanto et al., 2022; N. K. Hidayat et al., 2018). In international relations theory, economic diplomacy is a country's primary tool to strengthen its position in the international system. By meeting international standards, South Sumatra can increase the competitiveness of its products and expand export markets to countries with strict regulations, which not only increases competitiveness but also provides economic benefits for local communities (Eka Sintha et al., 2023; Maretna et al., 2021). This not only strengthens trade relations but also creates a positive perception of Indonesian products in the global market.

Multilateral cooperation, such as within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework, is essential for member countries to adapt to changing international market standards. ASEAN serves as a forum for harmonizing regional regulations, which can reduce the burden on countries such as Indonesia in meeting international standards. For example, ASEAN actively achieves the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through South-South and Triangular



cooperation, which involves Southern countries and third parties to optimize the development agenda (Dinnata & Nuraeni, 2020; Suhandi, 2018). In addition, this cooperation also creates opportunities for member countries to collaborate on global challenges, including in trade and investment (Suhandi, 2018).

However, domestic challenges such as lack of infrastructure, access to technology, and farmer education are significant barriers to meeting international market standards. Indonesia often faces a dilemma between national policies and international commitments in this context. Developing countries often have to compromise between domestic needs and global demands, reflecting the complexity of international relations (Tekunan, 2014). Developing countries often struggle to balance domestic development and meeting international standards, leading to a mismatch between national policies and international market requirements.

Changing international market standards can also be seen as a geopolitical tool by developed countries to maintain their dominance in global trade. By setting high standards that are difficult for developing countries to meet, developed countries can maintain their position as major producers of high-quality products while limiting market access for other countries, as seen in sectors such as palm oil and other agricultural products (Nasution et al., 2022). High standards imposed by developed countries can limit developing countries' access to global markets, even if their products meet the highest quality standards.

c. Local Government Strategy and Policy to Enhance Economic Cooperation

To overcome challenges and take advantage of existing opportunities, the South Sumatra regional government must formulate a clear policy strategy to enhance economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. Strategic steps need to be implemented to improve the quality and sustainability of export products from South Sumatra, requiring a comprehensive approach involving various parties, from the government to business actors to local communities.

One of the strategic steps that has been taken is strengthening infrastructure, which aims to support the export sector, especially in the agricultural and plantation sectors. The development and improvement of transportation infrastructure, such as roads, ports, and processing facilities, are significant in ensuring the smooth distribution of products to international markets (Sulistiyorini, 2021). The development of Tanjung Api-API Port is an important example of a place where better infrastructure can facilitate the distribution of products to international markets. However, this project is constrained by limited funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and a lack of coordination between the central and regional governments. This slows down the realization of the port's potential as a primary link to strengthen trade connectivity with ASEAN. The revocation of the Tanjung Api-API Special Economic Zone (KEK) status in January 2022 due to the failure to meet investment targets and delays in development illustrates the significant challenges in developing extensive infrastructure connecting Indonesia



to international markets (Laksono, 2022). Despite its great potential, this decision shows that infrastructure development requires better synergy between the central and regional governments and a more efficient resolution of bureaucratic and funding issues.

In addition, improving sustainability certification is very important to ensure that South Sumatran products can be accepted in the global market, which increasingly prioritizes environmentally friendly products. For palm oil, for example, certification such as ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) can be the key to opening up international market (N. K. Hidayat et al., 2018). Export destination countries, especially those with strict regulations on product sustainability, such as European countries, prioritize products with this certification. Implementing this sustainability certification ensures higher product quality and enhances Indonesia's reputation as a producer that cares about the environment and social sustainability. In this case, ISPO-certified palm oil has a competitive advantage over products that do not have such certification because the international market prefers products that meet sustainability standards (Suroso et al., 2021). South Sumatra has made efforts to obtain ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) certification to meet international market standards, especially in countries that implement strict regulations regarding product sustainability. There are at least 82 companies that have ISPO certification in South Sumatra (Ditjenbun, 2024). However, adoption among smallholders is still limited. Research shows that smallholders often face obstacles in meeting strict certification requirements due to a lack of knowledge and resources. This reflects the challenges in policy

implementation that need to be further encouraged with education, training, and technical support to increase farmer awareness and capacity.

In the context of economic diplomacy and paradiplomacy theory, the efforts of the South Sumatra regional government can be seen as a step in strengthening the region's trade position through policies that support international market access. Economic diplomacy, which involves state and non-state actors in advancing national economic interests, can help South Sumatra establish better relations with ASEAN countries by reducing trade barriers within the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) framework. Implementing AFTA in this region provides benefits by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers that can facilitate exporting products from South Sumatra, such as palm oil and rubber, to ASEAN countries' markets. However, the success of this cooperation is highly dependent on the ability of local business actors to take advantage of wider market access, which has so far been limited due to a lack of understanding of international trade procedures and applicable regulations.

In addition, the diversification of export products is an important strategy South Sumatra has tried. Developing agricultural sectors other than palm oil, such as coffee and cocoa, is a positive example, although expanding export markets is still limited. This diversification aims to reduce dependence on one commodity vulnerable to fluctuations in global market prices (A. Hidayat, 2023). However, to achieve success, there needs to be strengthening in the downstream sector, namely processing products with more added value. This is in line with the theory of



international relations, which emphasizes interdependence in cooperation between countries, where ASEAN members can share knowledge and technology to improve the quality of their products and their respective competitiveness (Mustofa & Choir, 2021). To achieve sustainability in production, modern agricultural technology has also been introduced in several regions to increase productivity and sustainability (Setkab, 2025). Advanced technologies, such as automated irrigation systems, drone crop monitoring, and data-based fertilization, can improve the efficiency and quality of agricultural products (Boutraa et al., 2011; Kalandarov et al., 2023). This technology not only helps increase production yields but also reduces negative impacts on the environment, such as deforestation and excessive use of pesticides. This environmentally friendly technology is also increasingly becoming a determining factor in international trade, where export destination countries increasingly prioritize products that meet quality standards and are environmentally friendly (Denisenko et al., 2021).

The South Sumatra regional government must be more proactive in formulating policies aligning with central policies while ensuring that these policies support the development of leading sectors with great potential in ASEAN economic cooperation (Abdul Gani & Taufiq A. Ra, 2021). International cooperation, especially with ASEAN countries, also plays an important role in increasing the competitiveness of South Sumatran products. Through ASEAN economic integration, as stated in the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), South Sumatra can take advantage of tariff reductions and trade

barriers to facilitate exports to neighboring countries. In addition, this collaboration opens up opportunities to share knowledge and technology that can improve the quality of local products. Research conducted by Hatta shows that partnerships within the ASEAN framework support regional economic integration and enable wider market access for member countries (Hatta, 2020). Therefore, strengthening relations with ASEAN countries can accelerate the process of increasing production capacity and product quality and open up greater market access for South Sumatra.

Although South Sumatra has taken strategic steps to increase economic cooperation and the competitiveness of its export products in the international market, its needs must be met. In South Sumatra's Opportunities to access the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), more coordinated strategic steps based on local strengths are essential. Strengthening economic relations with ASEAN countries within the AEC framework opens up great opportunities for South Sumatra to take advantage of tariff reductions and trade barriers and share knowledge and technology. To fully tap into this potential, South Sumatra must ensure that existing policies and infrastructure support better integration into the ASEAN economy, focusing on increasing production capacity, meeting international standards, and implementing more structured sustainability. South Sumatra's success in seizing this opportunity depends largely on its ability to strengthen synergies between the central and regional governments, the private sector, and the community. With more focused policies and strong support from all parties, South Sumatra can become a major



player in the ASEAN economy, increasing the competitiveness of local products and strengthening its position in the global market.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study reveals that the strategies and policies implemented by the South Sumatra Regional Government play an important role in strengthening economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. Leading economic sectors, such as palm oil, rubber, renewable energy, and trade infrastructure development, such as Tanjung Api-API Port, are the main pillars in supporting economic integration with ASEAN. Although these steps show great potential in expanding export markets and improving cross-country trade connectivity, the main challenge is the less-than-optimal coordination between the central and regional governments. Inconsistencies in policies and implementation between the two levels of government can slow down the development of leading sectors essential in increasing regional competitiveness.

In addition, developing skilled human resources (HR) with global competence is also a key factor in facing competition in the international market. Skills-based education and training programs following industry standards are critical in increasing the competitiveness of South Sumatra products, especially in the agriculture and plantation sectors. By collaborating with the private sector and educational institutions and strengthening the capacity of local business actors, South Sumatra can create a competent

workforce that is ready to compete in the global market.

To achieve better economic integration with ASEAN, South Sumatra needs policies that focus on developing leading sectors, improving infrastructure, and developing human resources. With better coordination between the central and regional governments and more substantial support from the private sector and the community, South Sumatra can take advantage of existing opportunities to strengthen its economic position internationally and become a major player in the ASEAN economy.

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