

Analysis of Export Development Potential for Virgin Coconut Oil as a Flagship Regional Product in the International Market

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the potential for developing the export of Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) from Sulalam Topejawa as a flagship regional product of Takalar Regency. The study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method to deeply explore internal and external factors influencing VCO exports. Data collection methods include in-depth interviews, direct observations, document analysis, and comparative studies with other countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The results show that although global demand for VCO continues to increase, Sulalam VCO still faces significant challenges, including low production standards, lack of international certification, traditional production technology, and weak global branding and marketing strategies. On the other hand, the product has advantages such as abundant local raw material availability, high health value as a natural product, and significant potential for product diversification. Strategies to enhance competitiveness can be carried out through improving production standards and obtaining international certifications such as USDA Organic and HACCP, optimizing global supply chains, implementing aggressive digital marketing, and diversifying products through innovation. Synergy between the government, private sector, and local communities is also essential for the successful development of Sulalam VCO exports. This study provides important recommendations for business actors and the government in developing the VCO industry sustainably, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of local products in the international market and positively impacting the economic well-being of the local community.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Strategy, Export, International Certification, Production Standards, Virgin Coconut Oil

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a tropical country, is endowed with abundant natural resources, one of which is coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). Coconut is known as a versatile plant that can be utilized in almost all parts, from roots, stems, leaves, fruits, to its water (Widodo et al., 2021). One of the high-economic-value coconut derivatives that has been gaining popularity is Virgin Coconut Oil

(VCO). VCO is known as an oil extracted from fresh coconut meat through specific methods without high heating or chemical use. VCO has become increasingly popular both domestically and internationally due to its health benefits, including boosting the immune system, improving metabolic function, and offering cosmetic benefits for skincare and hair care. The global interest in natural-based products further supports the growing demand for VCO as a promising export commodity.

Topejawa Village located in Mangarabombang District, Takalar Regency, South Sulawesi, is one of the VCO-producing areas known for its superior quality, referred to as VCO Sulalam. This product has gained local recognition, yet its potential in the international market has not been fully explored and optimized. The potential for developing VCO Sulalam exports is supported by the abundant availability of coconut raw materials in the area, along with traditional processing techniques that maintain export-quality standards. However, several challenges, such as packaging, product standardization, marketing, and export regulations, remain major obstacles that must be addressed.

Global demand for VCO continues to increase, in line with rising global consumer awareness of a healthy lifestyle and natural products free from synthetic chemicals (Ghani et al., 2018). VCO is considered a healthier alternative to other vegetable oils due to its high lauric acid content, which is beneficial for human health (Rahayu, Widodo & Pratama, 2021).

Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO), or pure coconut oil, is a processed coconut product obtained from fresh coconut meat through mechanical processes without heating or using chemicals, thereby preserving its natural nutritional content (Widodo et al., 2021). VCO is widely recognized for its various health benefits, including antiviral and antibacterial properties, as well as its ability to enhance the immune system. Global demand for VCO continues to rise, particularly in countries with high awareness of the health benefits of natural vegetable oils. The primary export markets for Indonesian VCO include the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, with export volumes consistently increasing in recent years.

Topejawa a village in South Sulawesi, holds great potential for developing VCO production. Local companies such as Sulalam have been producing high-quality VCO by involving the local community in the production process. They employ the Direct Micro Expelling (DME) method, which avoids heat and chemical additives, resulting in high-quality pure VCO (Firdaus et al., 2020).

In addition to economic opportunities, developing VCO Sulalam exports holds significant potential for increasing local community income and creating new job opportunities. This aligns with the agenda of community-based economic development and sustainable regional economic growth (Pratiwi & Arifin, 2020). An essential factor in promoting local product exports such as VCO Sulalam is product innovation and adaptation to international standards. This includes aspects of organic product certification, attractive and hygienic packaging, and compliance with the regulations of targeted export markets (Sukardi & Dwisari, 2021).

However, challenges related to global marketing remain a major barrier, particularly in meeting international certification requirements such as USDA Organic, HACCP, or ISO 22000. These challenges are often faced by small and medium-sized VCO producers, as seen in Topejawa (Widyaningrum & Maharani, 2020). Moreover, the knowledge and understanding of local entrepreneurs regarding effective export marketing strategies are still limited, leading to suboptimal penetration of VCO Sulalam products into international markets that actually have considerable demand (Mariska & Purnomo, 2019).

In this context, a comprehensive academic study is needed to examine the potential, opportunities, challenges, and strategies for developing VCO Sulalam exports. Such a study will

provide a scientific basis for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and stakeholders in further developing this product.

Previous research shows that VCO offers significantly higher added value compared to other coconut derivatives such as copra oil or coconut milk, which are more commonly produced in the region. The emergence of digitalization and information technology presents a great opportunity to expand the VCO export market. Digital marketing strategies enable broader global market access at relatively low costs, especially for small and medium-sized producers (Nugroho & Sarjono, 2021).

Government support through export policies and MSME empowerment is also a crucial factor in advancing local products like VCO Sulalam. Assistance programs, training, and facilitation of global market access are essential to enhance the capacity of local producers (Hartati & Dewi, 2019).

The development of Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) exports is crucial considering the high global demand for natural, health-promoting coconut-based products. VCO is known for its lauric acid content, which benefits human health by boosting immunity and providing high antioxidant properties. As global awareness of a healthy lifestyle continues to grow, VCO demand is rising, particularly in developed countries such as the United States, Japan, and European countries (Ghani et al., 2018). When properly managed, VCO exports can provide substantial economic benefits for local producers and contribute to national foreign exchange.

Apart from economic benefits, VCO export development also plays an important role in empowering coconut farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Indonesia, as one of the largest coconut producers in the world, has a significant opportunity to expand its market share through VCO exports. However, many farmers and small entrepreneurs still face various challenges, such as limited production technology, lack of international quality standards, and minimal access to export markets. With government and private sector support through training programs and capacity-building efforts, VCO entrepreneurs can better compete in the global market (Pratiwi & Arifin, 2020).

This research also aligns with the global agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 on sustainable, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production (United Nations, 2015). VCO Sulalam Topejawa has a unique character as it is produced through traditional methods that preserve the fresh coconut aroma, giving it strong branding potential in the international market (Sitorus et al., 2020).

Therefore, enhancing production capacity and business management in Topejawa is essential to meet international quality standards and compete with similar products from other countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and India.

Lastly, VCO export holds a strategic role in promoting the diversification of national export products and increasing the competitiveness of the Indonesian coconut industry. So far, most Indonesian coconut products are still exported in raw or semi-finished forms, such as copra and ordinary coconut oil. By increasing VCO exports as a high-value-added product, Indonesia can achieve better selling prices compared to raw coconut products. Furthermore, enhancing VCO exports aligns with sustainable development policies, as this industry supports the green economy principle by utilizing renewable natural resources with a lower environmental impact compared to other vegetable oils (Widodo et al., 2021).

METHOD

This study examines the potential for developing Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) exports from Sulalam Topejawa using a case study method. This method enables an in-depth investigation of a specific analysis unit, namely the VCO Sulalam business in Topejawa, with a focus on export strategies, challenges encountered, and international market opportunities. The research employs a descriptive-qualitative approach with a case study method aimed at understanding how VCO Sulalam can be developed to penetrate the export market. The case study will focus on an in-depth analysis of VCO business actors in Topejawa, including issues related to production, distribution, marketing, and export regulations.

The study utilizes two types of data: primary and secondary. Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews with VCO Sulalam business owners, exporters, local government officials, and potential overseas consumers. Secondary data consists of export reports, international trade regulations, global VCO market trends, and academic studies from journals and reports of relevant institutions.

To obtain comprehensive information, several data collection techniques are employed, including in-depth interviews, direct observations, document analysis, and comparative studies with other countries. In-depth interviews are conducted with the VCO Sulalam business owner, exporters, industry and trade department representatives, and VCO producer associations. The interviews focus on production challenges, certification processes, export marketing, and strategies to enhance competitiveness. Direct observations involve monitoring the VCO production process, from raw material processing to packaging, while evaluating product quality based on applicable export standards. Document analysis involves gathering secondary data from export reports, international trade data (from FAO, UN Comtrade, BPS), and export-related policies on VCO. Comparative studies are conducted to compare VCO export strategies in Topejawa with those of successful countries in the industry, such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, in order to analyze best practices that can be applied to the development of VCO Sulalam exports.

The data collected will be analyzed using data triangulation techniques to enhance the validity of research findings. The SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat) approach will be employed to identify strengths and opportunities that can be utilized for VCO export development, as well as weaknesses and threats that need to be addressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Table 1. In-depth Interview Results

Respondent	Key Findings	Expected Output
Sulalam VCO Business Owner	Difficulty meeting export standards and international certifications	International certification assistance and training for SMEs
Eksportir VCO	Lack of access to global distribution network	Creation of distribution networks and partnerships with global buyers
Industry and Trade Office	Strict export regulations hamper local SMEs	Simplification of export procedures for coconut and VCO SMEs

VCO Producers Association	Lack of product promotion and branding in international markets	More aggressive digital marketing and branding strategies
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Table 2. Direct Observation Results

Aspects Observed	Findings	Expected Output
Production Process	Still using traditional methods with simple tools	Modernization of production equipment and training on production efficiency
Product Quality	Quality is good, but hygiene standards need to be improved.	Implementation of international production standards
Packaging	Packaging is less attractive and does not meet international standards	More attractive packaging design that meets global standards
Distribution and Logistics	No strong global distribution network yet	Improved export access and partnerships with distributors

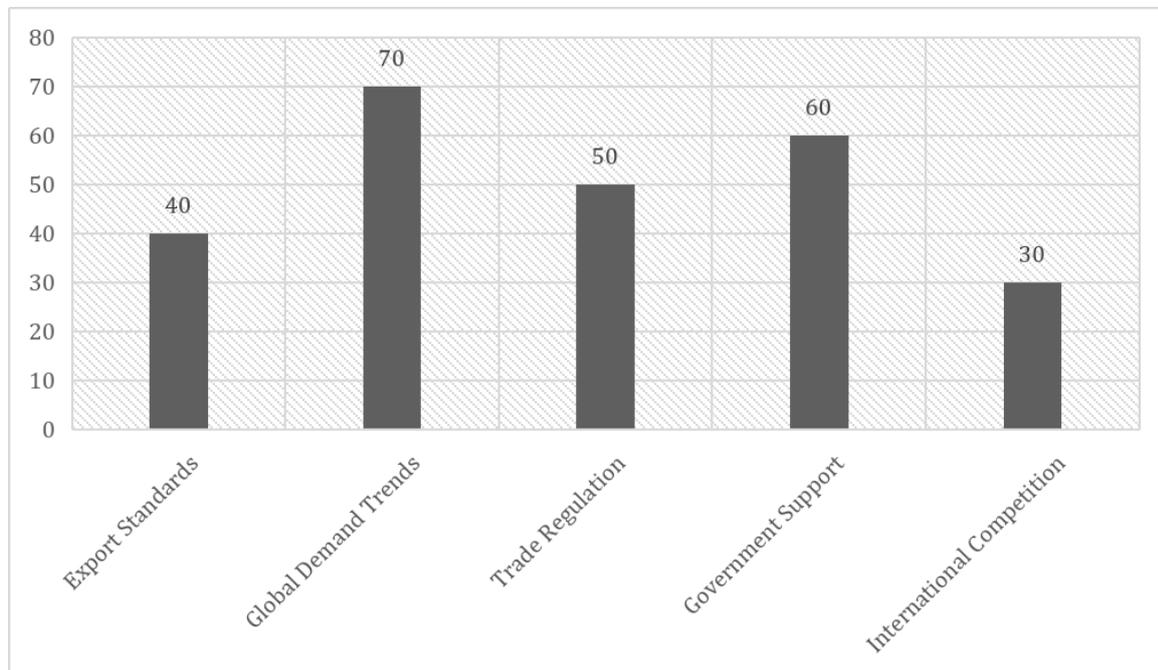


Figure 1. Document Analysis of VCO Readiness Level for Export

The results of the Document Analysis of VCO Readiness Level for Export indicate that the readiness of VCO Sulalam to meet international export standards remains relatively low, with approximately 40% of business operators lacking the necessary certifications, such as USDA Organic, HACCP, or ISO 22000. This condition poses a major obstacle to entering the global market, especially in countries with strict regulations such as Europe and the United States.

On the other hand, the high global demand for VCO, reaching around 70%, presents a significant opportunity for VCO Sulalam to expand in the export market. This demand is driven by the rising trend of healthy lifestyles and increased public awareness of the benefits of Virgin

Coconut Oil. Trade data shows that countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, and several European nations have experienced an increase in VCO imports over the past five years, indicating a promising market expansion potential for VCO Sulalam.

However, trade regulations in Indonesia still present challenges for small and medium-sized producers, with approximately 50% of the barriers stemming from the complexity of documents such as the Trade Business License (SIUP), BPOM distribution permits, and customs documents. This situation hampers the smooth flow of export processes, necessitating guidance and simplification of procedures to support the distribution of products to international markets.

The government has indeed provided several assistance programs and training for SMEs engaged in exports, including the coconut oil sector. However, this support, which currently reaches around 60%, still needs to be enhanced in the form of market access facilitation, certification assistance, and export funding. With stronger and more targeted interventions, the competitiveness of VCO Sulalam in the global market can be further strengthened.

Moreover, intense international competition also poses a challenge for VCO Sulalam. Indonesia remains at a disadvantage compared to countries like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and India, which have long dominated the global market through production efficiency, competitive pricing, and more aggressive promotion. Therefore, VCO Sulalam needs to strengthen its branding strategy, diversify its products, and improve supply chain efficiency to compete effectively in the export market.

Table 3. Comparison of Sulalam Topejawa VCO with Other Countries

Comparison Aspect	Indonesia (Sulalam Topejawa VCO)	Philippines	Sri Lanka
Production Standards and Certification	Standards do not meet global certification	Has complete international certifications (USDA Organic, HACCP)	Meet global standards with international certifications
Product Quality	Good enough, but less consistent	Excellent and consistent	Good and consistent
Production Technology	Traditional methods	Semi-modern to modern	Modern and semi-modern
Promotion and Branding	Not aggressive yet	Very aggressive with strong global branding	Active in international branding
Global Distribution Network	Limited	Spacious and established	Good and fast growing
Product Pricing in the Global Market	Less competitive	Competitive	Quite competitive
Government Support	In development	Strong, intensive and consistent	Strong and proactive

The comparison results show that VCO Sulalam Topejawa (Indonesia) still lags significantly behind the Philippines and Sri Lanka in terms of production standards and international certification. The Philippines has already obtained comprehensive global certifications such as USDA Organic and HACCP, while Sri Lanka has also met international standards. This weakness in certification represents a significant barrier for VCO Sulalam to enter and compete in highly regulated export markets like Europe and North America.

The quality of VCO Sulalam products is actually quite good; however, they still face challenges in maintaining consistent quality. This contrasts with VCO products from the Philippines and Sri Lanka, which consistently maintain high quality. This situation highlights the need for enhanced quality control and stricter implementation of quality standards for VCO Sulalam producers in Topejawa to be able to compete globally.

The production technology used by VCO Sulalam is still very traditional, relying on simple equipment, which results in low production efficiency and difficulties in meeting large market demands. In contrast, the Philippines and Sri Lanka have implemented semi-modern to modern technology, allowing them to produce stable-quality products on a larger production scale. Upgrading production technology in Topejawa is essential to increase the global competitiveness of the products.

In terms of promotion and branding, VCO Sulalam is still less aggressive compared to the Philippines, which already has a strong global branding presence, and Sri Lanka, which actively participates in international promotional activities. This lack of branding results in Indonesian products being less recognized in the international market. An intensive digital promotion strategy and strong branding efforts are urgently needed to gain better international recognition for VCO Sulalam products.

Government support for the VCO industry in Indonesia has indeed begun to develop, but it is still not as strong as the support provided by the governments of the Philippines and Sri Lanka. These two countries proactively provide incentives, training, market access assistance, and clear export facilities for their VCO business operators. By increasing government support, including training, certification, and opening access to international markets, Indonesia has great potential to enhance the global competitiveness of VCO Sulalam products.

The following is a table of complete, structured, and scientific SWOT analysis results related to the development of Sulalam Topjawa Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) exports:

Table 4. SWOT Analysis of Sulalam Topejawa VCO Export Development

SWOT factor	Aspect	Scientific Description
Strength	Raw Material Availability	Topejawa has an abundant supply of superior quality coconuts as the main raw material for making VCO (Widodo et al., 2021).
	Natural and Healthy Products	Sulalam VCO is naturally produced without chemicals, has a high lauric acid content, and is in high demand in the global healthy lifestyle (Hartati & Dewi, 2019).
	Local Support	The existence of farmer groups and local communities that are actively involved in the traditional VCO production process, thus maintaining the authenticity of the product.
Weakness	Low Production Technology	Still using traditional technology, low productivity, and difficult to meet export demand on a large scale.
	Export Certification and Standards	It has not yet met international certifications such as USDA Organic, HACCP, ISO 22000 which

		are the main requirements of the international market (Widyaningrum & Maharani, 2020).
	Less Aggressive Product Promotion	International marketing strategy is not maximized, product branding is not strong, causing low global market awareness.
Opportunity	Positive Global Market Trend	Demand for VCO continues to rise as the global trend shifts towards the consumption of natural and healthy products, especially in developed countries such as the United States, Europe, and Japan (Ghani et al., 2018).
	Government Policy Support	There are opportunities for government support through training programs, certification, market access, and local product promotion assistance (Hartati & Dewi, 2019).
	Product Diversification Opportunities	Potential development of VCO-based derivative products such as cosmetics, health food, and VCO capsules that have a wide market.
Threat	High Global Competition	Intense competition from large producers such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka that are well-established in the global market, with modern production technology and aggressive marketing strategies.
	Strict Export Regulations	Increasingly stringent international trade regulations, especially in the aspects of quality and safety of food products, make it difficult for small and medium SMEs to compete globally (Widyaningrum & Maharani, 2020).
	Global Market Price Fluctuations	VCO prices in the international market are highly volatile due to global competition, world economic conditions, and rapid changes in demand.

Discussion

Enhancing Production Standards and International Certification

Enhancing production standards and obtaining international certifications are essential to increasing the competitiveness of Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) products in the global market. Products with international certifications such as USDA Organic, HACCP, and ISO 22000 have a significant advantage when penetrating export markets, particularly in developed countries that place great emphasis on quality and food safety (Wijaya & Prabowo, 2021). However, small and medium-scale VCO producers, including those in Topejawa, often face technical and financial challenges in obtaining international certifications. These challenges limit access to international markets despite the high potential quality of their products.

Capacity building through technical training and assistance is crucial to meet global quality standards. Such support helps producers understand and comply with the technical requirements of certification, directly enhancing the competitiveness of their products in the international market (Hutapea et al., 2021).

Government support is also vital, especially in terms of funding facilities and technical production guidance, to assist local producers in achieving certification. This approach has proven effective in countries like the Philippines, which actively promotes the VCO industry through international certification (Guerrero & Barroga, 2022).

By improving production standards and obtaining international certification, VCO Sulalam Topejawa has the potential to penetrate the global market more competitively and sustainably, while simultaneously increasing the added value of local products in the international market (Wijaya & Prabowo, 2021).

Digital Marketing and Branding Strategy

The implementation of digital marketing strategies is key to promoting VCO products in today's international market. Platforms such as social media, international marketplaces, and e-commerce websites have become essential tools for expanding market reach at a relatively lower cost compared to conventional marketing methods (Nugraha & Handayani, 2022). Moreover, effective branding is crucial to enhancing product appeal and building consumer trust in VCO products. Recent studies indicate that health-based narrative branding successfully attracts the global market, which is increasingly health-conscious (Putri et al., 2022).

Utilizing influencer marketing or collaborating with global health figures also proves to be an effective strategy for introducing VCO products in international markets. The right influencer can significantly boost product visibility and strengthen the positive image that producers aim to build (Wahyuni & Pramono, 2021). Global e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, Alibaba, and local platforms in export destination countries should also be optimized. These platforms enable VCO entrepreneurs to reach global consumers directly without going through lengthy and costly distribution chains (Putri et al., 2022). By adopting effective digital marketing strategies and strong product branding, VCO producers in Topejawa have a great opportunity to strengthen their position in the international market, expand market reach, and sustainably increase export volume (Putri et al., 2022).

Product Diversification and Innovation

Product diversification is one of the best ways to enhance the competitiveness of VCO products in the global market. Producers in the Philippines and Sri Lanka have successfully implemented diversification by creating derivative products such as cosmetics, beauty products, and dietary supplements from VCO, contributing significantly to increased exports (Arifin & Saputra, 2022). Through product diversification, VCO producers can capture a wider market segment. For example, VCO-based beauty and health products currently have a rapidly growing market in Europe, America, and East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea (Lubis et al., 2022).

Innovation in product packaging is also essential. Attractive, hygienic, and informative packaging designs can enhance the product's selling value in international markets, especially among middle- and upper-class consumers who are sensitive to the aesthetic quality of the products they consume (Lubis et al., 2022). Product innovation can also be developed through collaboration between VCO entrepreneurs and research institutions or universities. Recent studies indicate that such collaborations can generate new products that align with international market demands (Hutapea et al., 2021). Therefore, product diversification and innovation—both in terms of products and packaging—are strategic steps to enhance the competitiveness and added value of VCO Sulalam Topejawa in the global export market (Lubis et al., 2022).

Supply Chain Optimization and Global Distribution

Supply chain optimization plays a strategic role in enhancing the competitiveness of VCO Sulalam in the global market. Supply chain efficiency significantly determines export success, particularly for coconut-based agricultural products like VCO. An efficient supply chain can reduce production costs, shorten distribution time, and maintain product quality until it reaches international consumers.

One of the main challenges in the local supply chain of VCO Sulalam is the limited access to established global distributors. This limitation often hinders the entry of products into international markets, especially in primary export destination countries. Local producers need to establish strategic partnerships with international distribution agents that already have extensive marketing networks to make global market penetration more effective.

Moreover, building logistics facilities and storage warehouses that meet international standards is crucial to consider. Warehouses that comply with global standards help maintain product quality during storage and shipping abroad. This is vital because VCO quality is highly sensitive to inadequate storage conditions.

The adoption of information technology in supply chain management is also a key factor that needs to be embraced. Digital logistics information systems can improve inventory management efficiency and expedite export administration processes, allowing for faster product distribution to target markets (Purnamasari et al., 2021).

By strengthening the supply chain and global distribution system, VCO Sulalam Topejawa will be better positioned to compete in increasingly tight international markets. This step will also promote overall production efficiency, reduce operational costs, and enhance the bargaining position of the product in the export market (Purnamasari et al., 2021).

Strengthening the Role of Government and Synergy with Private Sector

A proactive government role is crucial in supporting the export development of local products like VCO Sulalam. Government support through strategic policies, such as tax incentives, export training assistance, and subsidies for international certification, can enhance local producers' ability to penetrate global markets.

Synergy between the public and private sectors also plays a significant role in developing the coconut-based industry in Indonesia. Such collaboration can include providing modern production facilities, access to capital, and technical assistance in production and marketing processes. Public-private cooperation has proven effective in increasing the competitiveness of agro-industrial products in global markets (Prasetyo & Supriyadi, 2022).

Moreover, collaboration between the government and the private sector can increase promotional efficiency in international markets through trade fairs, international business forums, and joint digital marketing initiatives. This synergy allows local producers to expand their international market networks more easily while promoting Indonesia's flagship products more broadly.

The establishment of community-based VCO industry clusters is also an effective synergy between the government, private sector, and local communities. These industrial clusters can accelerate technology transfer, increase production capacity, and enhance the competitiveness of products in the global market. Some regions in Indonesia, such as Sumatra and West Java, have successfully implemented this community-based cluster model.

With strong synergy between the government, private sector, and local communities, the export development of VCO Sulalam Topejawa is expected to proceed optimally. This collaboration

not only promotes export growth but also enhances the sustainable welfare of the local community (Prasetyo & Supriyadi, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research findings, the export development of Virgin Coconut Oil (VCO) Sulalam Topejawa has significant potential for expansion, although it still faces several substantial challenges. The study findings indicate that to enhance competitiveness in the global market, it is essential to improve production standards and obtain international certifications such as USDA Organic, HACCP, and ISO 22000. Meeting these certifications is crucial to expanding access to more competitive global markets, particularly in developed countries that demand high standards for food and cosmetic products.

In addition to improving production standards, digital marketing strategies and branding also play a vital role in the international expansion of VCO Sulalam products. Utilizing digital platforms such as social media, international marketplaces, and partnerships with influencers has proven effective in significantly increasing product exposure. On the other hand, product innovation through the diversification of VCO-based derivative products, such as beauty products, cosmetics, and health supplements, can create greater added value while simultaneously expanding the export market for VCO on a global scale.

Furthermore, optimizing the supply chain and fostering synergy between the government and the private sector are essential to support the successful export of VCO Sulalam. This collaboration includes enhancing production technology, establishing efficient international distribution networks, and providing policy incentives from the government. With this integrated strategy, it is expected that VCO Sulalam Topejawa will not only compete successfully in the global market but also deliver sustainable positive impacts on local community welfare and the national economy as a whole.

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