

# Challenges and Future Directions for Customary Lands Development in Johol, Negeri Sembilan

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, Malaysia has faced a remarkable problem of uncultivated and idle lands. The focus on the manufacturing sector has changed, leading to a shift in the use of production factors - such as land and labor - from agriculture to the manufacturing sector. Considering the idle land problems, this study seeks to analyze the challenges surrounding the development of idle lands, with a primary focus on customary land in Johol, Negeri Sembilan. Using documentation analysis as well as an interview approach, this study provides future directions for the development of customary land in Johol, which will create economic value for the community.

**Keywords:** *Customary land, Johol, Value creation, Adat Perpatih*

## 1. Introduction

Concerns about national food security and the high import dependency ratio (IDR) on food have recently attracted significant attention from the government and academia, leading to requests to undertake measures and policies to secure Malaysia's domestic food needs. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), Malaysia spent RM63 billion on food imports in 2021, as opposed to RM55.4 billion the year before. Thus, a number of initiatives, including the National Agro-Food Policy (2011–2020) and the Food Supply Guarantee Policy (2008–2010), have been implemented to ensure that the country's food supply is always sufficient at reasonable prices. To support these initiatives, the government seeks measures and actions to improve the use of unused and idle agricultural lands. [1] also mention that agricultural land is essential to

support food security and sustainable development goals. In addition to securing the food supply, land - which is a vital factor in production - can generate economic value if it is cultivated and utilized productively. Optimal land use can also help socio-economic development by creating job opportunities and developing economic and social infrastructure. The initiative to develop idle lands, primarily in rural areas, is vital to support economic growth, improve social structures, as well as political stability [2]. According to [3], there are over 35,000 acres of uncultivated and idle lands in Negeri Sembilan, consisting of about 20,458 lots with about 20,346 owners. Due to uncultivated agricultural land, the Government of Negeri Sembilan has lost millions of Malaysian Ringgit. Despite the fact that significant steps and activities have been taken, the number of uncultivated lands

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remains high, causing enormous economic losses to the government. The concentration of the manufacturing sector has led to a shift in the use of production factors, particularly land and labor, from the agricultural sector to this sector. Furthermore, many customary lands are underutilized because landowners believe that agricultural activities do not yield quick returns or significant profits [4].

In the context of idle lands in Negeri Sembilan, [5] emphasized that formal factors such as limitations in cultivating customary land, financial loan terms and terms of land lease agreements, as well as informal factors such as migration factors, age ability, crop enemies, and the owner's attitude, become major constraints to develop customary land. In addition, [6] found that government agencies play an important role in increasing community involvement in the development of agricultural land in Kuala Pilah. In fact, their study also found that the low level of community involvement in the development of agricultural land in this area is also contributed to by the low level of education. From another perspective [4] argues that the shortage of skilled labor, low productivity of paddy land, as well as multiple land ownership, have contributed to the abandonment of paddy land in Negeri Sembilan.

Given the significant impact of underutilized and idle lands, the main objectives of this study are to analyze the major obstacles in developing idle customary lands in Johol, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, as well as to suggest future directions to support the effort in developing uncultivated lands in this area. We chose to study Johol, Negeri Sembilan because it has a significant number of uncultivated agricultural lands.

Additionally, most of these areas are classified as customary land (tanah adat), which is often perceived as low value and uneconomical land for development. However, customary land should not be viewed as a barrier to cultivation but rather as an asset that provides significant returns to its operators or landowners [7]. Therefore, our study aims to better understand the critical factors that may discourage local customary landowners from developing their land, with a particular focus on Johol, Negeri Sembilan.

## 2. Customary Land in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Compared to other states in Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan has a very distinctive tradition that derives from its tradition of Adat Perpatih (or Perpatih Laws). From the land administration perspective in Negeri Sembilan, it is governed by three enactments [8]. The first enactment is Enakmen Tanah Adat Bab 215 (Customary Tenure Enactment, Cap 215), which is applied to administer customary lands in Kuala Pilah, Jempol, Jelebu, Rembau, Tampin and Gemas Sub-districts. Next is the Enakmen Pegangan Adat (The Customary Tenure Enactment) and Enakmen Rembau (Rembau Enactment) 1949, which allow for land to be registered in the name of women. According to [3], approximately 35,000 acres of land in Negeri Sembilan are registered as customary land. The distribution of customary lands in Negeri Sembilan districts as of 1983 is depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1: Customary Land by District in Negeri Sembilan as at 1983 (acres)**

	Jelevu	Kuala Pilah	Jempol	Rembau	Tampin	Total
No of Lots	64	9950	809	8261	1103	20097
No. of titles	63	9973	751	8587	992	20366
Total size	96	18000	1669	12698	2072	34565

Sources: Adapted from Maidin (2013)

In Table 2, we can see the current statistics of idle lands in Negeri Sembilan as at 2019. Based on Table 2, it shows that Kuala Pilah district is the largest district that has idle land in Negeri Sembilan, which recorded 2,636.71 hectares compared to other districts in Negeri Sembilan. Therefore, this study will focus on uncultivated and idle lands in Johol. Johol is a *mukim* or sub-district in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Figure 1 depicts the Map of Kuala Pilah District.

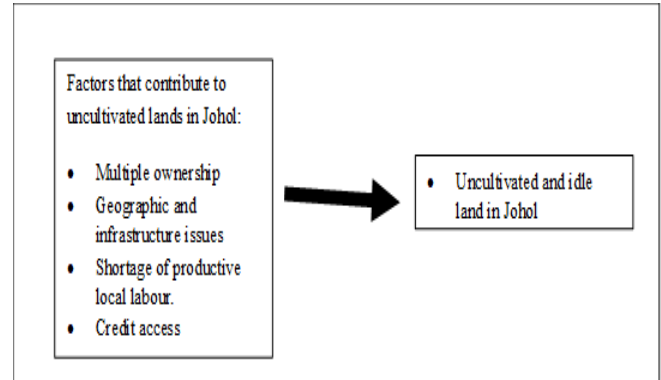
**Table 2: Idle Lands in Negeri Sembilan as at 2019**

District	Total	
	No. of lots	Size (hectares)
Jelevu	627.00	1,864.50
Jempol	350.00	298.99
Kuala Pilah	2,463.00	2,636.71
Port Dickson	599.00	2,308.07
Rembau	989.00	1,646.08
Seremban	585.00	2,108.21
Tampin	272.00	461.23

Source: Department of Agriculture



**Figure 1: Map of Kuala Pilah District**  
Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johol>



**Figure 2: Determinants of idle land in Johol, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia**  
Source: Author's summarization from prior studies and field research.

### 3. Research Methodology

The objective of this study is to analyze the factors that may affect the development of idle customary land in Johol and propose potential measures to support its development. To achieve this aim, we employed a methodology that involved analyzing previous studies and carrying out fieldwork to assess the geographical factors of the proposed area. Additionally, a qualitative approach was used to collect data by interviewing local landowners.

### 4. Factors Influencing the Development of Idle Customary Land

Idle lands have the potential to provide economic benefits to society if managed properly. From a community's perspective, the development of idle lands is believed to lead to job opportunities and income generation for households. Meanwhile, the policy goal of cultivating empty agricultural lands is to serve as a buffer for food security and to reduce the government's dependence on food imports. When looking at idle customary land in Johol, location factors and multiple land ownership are critical issues for land development. In addition to these issues, another challenge in developing idle customary land in Johol is the constraint of capital. Figure 2 illustrates the factors that influence uncultivated land in Johol, Negeri Sembilan.

#### 4.1 Multiple Ownership of Customary Land

One of the main features of customary land is that multiple owners own the land. [9] argue that multiple ownership on the land has adverse implications primarily in development effort resulting from co-owner's behavior and the existence of small portions in the multiple ownership. Meanwhile, [2] suggested that multiple land ownership of the inherited land influenced the farmer's decision to abandon their paddy land. As a result, even though the government has taken numerous measures to develop the land, the development endeavor may be challenging when the co-owners do not cooperate and refuse to develop the lands. The multiple ownership also happens in customary land in Johol thus becoming one of the main constraints in developing idle customary land in this area.

#### 4.2 Geographic and infrastructure issue

To support the development of idle lands in Johol, strategic location and access to basic infrastructure such as water and roads are essential factors. The field study found that many customary lands are located in areas with limited infrastructure access, particularly water. In addition, idle land is often overgrown, making it uneconomical for farmers and developers to cultivate as it requires more capital and is more complicated. This finding is consistent with [2] who studied developing agricultural lands in Negeri Sembilan. She argues that the remote location and limited accessibility and infrastructure of idle agricultural land make it expensive to develop.

#### **4.3 Shortage of productive local labor to develop the land.**

Another problem that affects the development of idle customary lands is the lack of labor to develop the lands. The main reason for this issue is the high proportion of older people in Johol. [2] argue that most landowners are elderly and incapable of developing their land. Additionally, the younger generation is moving to cities for better quality of life, financial stability, and job opportunities due to urbanization and the lack of employment opportunities in Johol. Younger generations are also less interested in farming, and parents are less motivated to support their children in this endeavor.

#### **4.4 Financial constraint for credit access**

Another essential factor in promoting the development of idle customary lands in Johol is the ability to access credit. From a financial institution's perspective, the low acceptance of credit facilities is driven by the notion that customary lands have lower market value and that the majority of landowners are unable to obtain loans due to their age. Financial institutions also establish several requirements for granting funding for the project. Meanwhile, the non-strategic location of the site and high development costs have a detrimental impact on the developer's incentive to invest in and develop the land. Thus, the developer is less motivated to develop idle lands due to the uncertain return on investment.

### **5. Future Direction of developing Idle Customary Land**

According to [3], proper planning and arrangement are necessary for the development of idle customary land. Thus, this section presents potential directions that can be utilized to develop such lands in Johol.

- ***The role of local institutions to support the development:*** [6] conducted research on local engagement in agricultural development in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. Their findings suggested that local agencies play a vital role in supporting the development of idle land in Kuala Pilah due to the low level of education among locals. For the case of customary land in Johol, support from local organizations such as the agricultural department and other local government bodies will incentivize the development and cultivation of the land. We believe that the government and local agencies' approach will encourage the development of idle land by providing incentives and training to local residents.

- ***Developing strategic collaboration between landowners or trustees and private developers:*** The current challenges related to financial, human resources, and knowledge factors require private investors to support the use of idle lands in Johol. Collaboration between landowners and potential investors may be beneficial in expanding the extent of customary lands for agricultural use by matching underutilized and unproductive lands with potential joint venture partners to promote the development of idle lands. [6] argued that joint ventures can be an effective means of combining human, material, and financial resources. However, landowners and private investors may have competing interests. Thus, the proposed joint-venture agreement must be able to persuade the land's multiple owners and provide them with appropriate profits. Therefore, the role of local customary institutions in balancing the interests of potential investors and landowners is critical

- ***Developing agriculture product collection center:*** Since customary land farmers typically produce a small-scale agriculture production, there are limitations in marketing their agriculture products. This can create bottlenecks in the supply system, resulting in a significant amount of stock being stored at the farmers' place. To protect retail farmers, a proper channel for marketing agricultural products is essential. Therefore, we believe that establishing an agriculture product collection center in Johol is crucial to sustain farmers' income and minimize the risk of these retail farmers becoming victims of middlemen who buy their produce at much lower prices. Besides supporting local farmers, the opening of this center is planned to create career opportunities that would entice younger groups to stay in Johol. Koperasi Perdana Johol (Primary Cooperative of Johol), for example, can play an important role in supporting the development of this center.

### **6. Conclusion**

In summary, Johol has a vast amount of idle customary land. The development of this land raises concerns among policymakers to ensure that this production factor can be utilized in a proactive manner, thereby reducing the country's dependency on imported food-based products. Additionally, this creates economic value through job creation and income generation for the local population. Based on this study, land ownership, geographical factors, and capital are fundamental issues for the development of idle land in Johol

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