

## SONGKET GOES GREEN: CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN SUSTAINABLE TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN PALEMBANG

Anggun Patricia<sup>1)</sup>, Poppy Handayani<sup>2)</sup>, Qori Al-Rasyid<sup>3)</sup>, Irayani<sup>4)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> Universitas Tridinanti Palembang

<sup>2)</sup> Universitas Tridinanti Palembang

<sup>3)</sup> Universitas Tridinanti Palembang

<sup>4)</sup> Universitas Tridinanti Palembang

Corresponding Author: [irayani0707@gmail.com](mailto:irayani0707@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Songket Palembang is a traditional Indonesian fabric known for its beauty and cultural value. However, producing songket often uses materials and methods that are not environmentally friendly. This study explores how local MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) in Palembang are trying to implement more sustainable and eco-friendly production methods. This research looks at how local songket producers in Palembang are trying to make their production more sustainable. Through interviews and observations, the study explores the challenges they face, such as high costs, lack of knowledge about green techniques, and difficulty finding natural materials. It also highlights innovations, including the use of natural dyes and eco-friendly packaging. The findings show that some producers are starting to care more about the environment and are trying to balance tradition with sustainability. This study hopes to support efforts to protect both the environment and Indonesia's cultural heritage through better business practices.*

**Keyword:** *Sustainable production, Traditional textile, Green innovation, Local MSMEs and Songket Palembang*

### Introduction

Indonesia is among the top 10 textile and apparel (T&A) producing countries in the world and 12th among leading T&A exporters in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region (Ishaque, 2019). Therefore, the T&A industry is considered one of the mainstays of Indonesia's exports and the creation of jobs in the non-oil and gas sector, behind its large contribution to the economy, the production process in the textile industry is usually accompanied by liquid waste that can pollute domestic rivers and waters. Implementing sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) in the T&A industry in Indonesia is therefore important. Even though the export value of products increased from 2012 to 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2019), some export destination countries have decreased their import of products from Indonesia due to their concern related to sustainability issues (Sarasi et al., 2023).

To increase knowledge, involve, collaborate and empower managers of cultural projects and sites, i.e. local authorities, NGOs and institutions managing cultural heritage assets to carefully consider the topic of durability and self-sustainability of their cultural heritage objects (Jelincic & Glivetic, 2019). In numerous areas, traditional Indonesian fabrics serve not merely as garments for covering the body but are also regarded with great respect as symbols during various traditional ceremonies that are rich in customs aimed at preserving the cultural values of the archipelago. Beyond their cultural significance, traditional Indonesian fabrics play a crucial role in initiatives to enhance the quality of the Indonesian economy (Suzianti et al., 2023).

Handicraft is defined by the employment of basic tools and time-honored methods, resulting in minimal environmental impact. Products made by hand can be reused and recycled over many years without causing harm to the natural surroundings. Urban "conscious consumers," who are shoppers making increasingly mindful purchasing choices, are particularly interested in acquiring handcrafted, eco-friendly items that contribute ethical, environmental, and sociocultural value to the craft industry (Bardhan & Bhattacharya, 2022).

The woven handicraft industry in Bandar Kidul is characterized by its enduring business activities that have persisted through generations. This industry is distinguished by its unique patterns and motifs, many of which have earned the confidence of banking capital. In the Bandar Kidul Kediri area, the production capacity of 139 Alat Tenun Bukan Mesin (ATBM-non-mechanical loom) units is roughly 278 meters of woven fabric each day (Ambarwati et al., 2019). Palembang serves as the capital of South Sumatra Province. The population of Palembang is categorized into two primary groups based on lineage: the descendants of the nobility or rulers from the historical Palembang kingdom, known as "priyayi" or "Wong Jeroo" (the insiders), and the commoners (Wong Jabo), who are individuals not affiliated with the royal family and resided outside the palace of the Palembang Sultanate (Kasuma et al., 2020).

Songket, a traditional handwoven fabric from Palembang, South Sumatra, is renowned for its intricate designs and cultural significance. As a symbol of heritage and craftsmanship, it has been passed down through generations, often worn during ceremonial events and royal occasions. However, the textile industry, including songket production, faces growing environmental challenges due to unsustainable practices. The increasing global demand for eco-friendly textiles has pushed artisans and manufacturers to explore sustainable alternatives while preserving traditional techniques (Widiawati et al., 2012).

These challenges call for urgent innovations to align songket production with modern sustainability standards. Crucial, therefore, to addressing environmental issues in Southeast Asia is the role of environmental activists in formal and informal policy making settings and other related elements of democratic governance, such as a free press. (Ba et al., 2018). Many traditional weavers rely on established methods and may resist change due to cost concerns or unfamiliarity with sustainable alternatives. Furthermore, the supply chain for organic and ethically sourced materials in Indonesia is still underdeveloped, making it difficult for small-scale artisans to procure sustainable inputs at affordable prices (Mishra et al., 2019).

Despite these obstacles, some innovators in Palembang have begun experimenting with sustainable practices. Researchers and local cooperatives are exploring plant-based dyes derived from turmeric, indigo, and other native plants to replace synthetic chemicals. Additionally, efforts are being made to introduce biodegradable metallic threads and promote the use of handlooms powered by renewable energy. These initiatives aim to reduce environmental harm without compromising the fabric's aesthetic and cultural value (stergaard et al., 2020). Another critical aspect of sustainable songket production is the preservation of traditional knowledge. While modernization is necessary for environmental sustainability, it must not come at the expense of cultural heritage. Training programs that educate weavers on sustainable techniques while honoring ancestral weaving methods can bridge this gap. (Chairunissa et al., 2023).

Each province in Indonesia produces unique woven fabrics that reflect the distinct characteristics of the region. For instance, the weaving from Aceh is renowned for its vibrant "songket" colors and intricate patterns. In North Sumatra, the Batak weaving, known as "ulos," is utilized in traditional ceremonies, celebrations, and mourning, featuring subdued colors such as black and brown, rather than bright hues (Suranto & Djunaidi, 2021). The Indonesian government has introduced policies to promote sustainable fashion, including incentives for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) adopting green practices.

## Literature Review

To understand the intersection of traditional textile craftsmanship and sustainability in Palembang's *songket* industry, this study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Sustainable Development Theory, Cultural Preservation Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory. These frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for examining how heritage-based industries respond to ecological, technological, and cultural pressures in a modernizing world.

### 1. Sustainable Development Theory (Brundtland Commission, 1987)

The cornerstone of this study's theoretical framework is the Sustainable Development Theory, as first articulated by the Brundtland Commission (1987), which defined sustainability as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" This broad yet powerful principle has been widely adopted as a guiding philosophy in diverse fields, including environmental studies, economics, public policy, and cultural sustainability (Md. Shafiul Islam, 2022). Within the domain of traditional textile production—such as the *songket* weaving industry in Palembang, this theory provides a compelling framework for critically examining how traditional craft practices can evolve to align with modern sustainability imperatives.

Sustainable development is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In the context of textile production, this theory emphasizes the triple bottom line—environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Lambrechts, 2020). The framework is used to analyze:

The environmental impact of materials used in *songket* production

#### a. Environmental Sustainability: Material Use and Ecological Impact

The production of *songket*, like many traditional textiles, has historically depended on labor-intensive, artisanal processes using natural materials. However, the pressures of commercialization and cost-efficiency have led many artisans to shift toward synthetic dyes and metallic threads. While these alternatives offer affordability and durability, they introduce significant ecological challenges—especially water contamination, chemical residue, and non-biodegradable waste.

Applying the lens of environmental sustainability, the Sustainable Development Theory urges the transition toward eco-friendly materials. Thus, the theory helps interrogate not just the *what* of environmental impact, but the *why* behind artisans' material choices. It invites a holistic assessment of how weavers perceive environmental degradation and whether ecological awareness influences their production decisions (Leal Filho et al., 2019).

#### **b. Economic Sustainability: Viability of Local SMEs and Artisans**

At the economic level, sustainable development is predicated on the idea that long-term prosperity must be inclusive, equitable, and resilient. In Palembang, *songket* production is deeply embedded in the local economy, especially among women-led microenterprises and family-run weaving groups. However, this sector faces considerable threats: rising costs of raw materials, limited access to financial services, fluctuating demand, and competition from machine-made imitations.

Regarding the status of social innovation, particularly in relation to sustainability, it is observed through the conversion of horticultural and food waste from the nearest landfill into dyes, alongside the presence of local heroes who actively engage in group regeneration by sharing knowledge with other community groups stemming from these social innovations (Sari et al., 2024).

Sustainable Development Theory compels us to ask: *Can traditional weaving provide a sustainable livelihood in the modern economy?* It suggests that interventions should not merely preserve the art form but enhance the economic dignity and agency of the weavers. For instance:

- Fair trade practices,
- Government grants or cooperative funding models, and
- Digital marketing platforms can all contribute to building economic resilience.

By applying this theory, the study positions *songket* production not just as a cultural act, but as a strategic contributor to local economic development, especially when linked to ethical fashion markets or eco-tourism initiatives.

#### **c. Social Sustainability: Cultural Heritage and Intergenerational Knowledge**

Social sustainability, as one of the three pillars of the Sustainable Development Theory, emphasizes the preservation of societal values, cultural identity, social cohesion, and equitable participation across generations. In the context of *songket* production in Palembang, social sustainability goes beyond preserving economic livelihoods—it encompasses the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, identity, and intergenerational knowledge systems embedded within the weaving tradition (Wijayanti et al., 2019).

*Songket Palembang* is more than a textile product; it is a symbol of identity, a repository of ancestral memory, and a tool of social storytelling. The patterns, motifs, and colors are imbued with local cosmology, Islamic influence, and Malay symbolism, often representing nature (e.g., bamboo, rice stalks, rivers) and traditional values such as patience, balance, and community.

Vázquez-Villegas et al., (2022) stated the third dimension social sustainability emphasizes the preservation of values, relationships, and cultural identity that support cohesive and adaptive communities. In the context of *songket*, this means safeguarding not only the physical artifact but also the intangible knowledge systems that underpin its creation: oral traditions, symbolic motifs, gendered labor roles, and community rituals. Through this lens, Sustainable Development Theory advocates for:

- The institutionalization of traditional knowledge via cultural schools, public exhibitions, and curriculum inclusion,
- Ensuring that future generations have both the skill and incentive to continue these practices.

In this way, sustainability becomes not only a technical goal but a social commitment—to uphold identity, memory, and pride.

## **2. Cultural Preservation Theory**

The Cultural Preservation Theory provides a critical lens for examining how Palembang's Songket producers balance tradition and sustainability in response to environmental challenges. This theory emphasizes the protection of intangible cultural heritage such as weaving techniques, motifs, and communal practices while adapting to modern ecological demands. The title "*Songket Goes Green*" inherently reflects this tension, as it juxtaposes cultural continuity (Songket as a centuries-old art form) with environmental adaptation ("Green" initiatives). Below is how the theory aligns with the study's focus: Cultural Preservation Theory emphasizes

the importance of maintaining intangible cultural heritage, including traditional knowledge, language, and craftsmanship. UNESCO (2003) identifies traditional weaving practices like *songket* as part of a community's living heritage (Setiawan, 2018). This theory is crucial in understanding:

- Why *songket* production is more than an economic activity, it is an act of cultural continuity,
- How external forces such as modernization and globalization threaten the cultural identity embedded in traditional crafts,
- How local actors strategically adapt traditional practices to modern market demands without losing authenticity.

This perspective supports qualitative investigation into how weavers articulate identity, pride, and belonging through their craftsmanship. By applying Cultural Preservation Theory, the study positions Songket's ecological shift not as a threat, but as a necessary evolution to sustain cultural relevance.

### 3. Innovation Diffusion Theory (Rogers, 2003)

To deepen the analysis of how sustainability-oriented changes are adopted in the traditional *songket* weaving industry of Palembang, this study draws on Everett Rogers' Innovation Diffusion Theory (2003). Everett Rogers' Innovation Diffusion Theory explains how new ideas and technologies are adopted within a social system. It outlines five key stages—knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation—which guide the process of adopting sustainable innovations (e.g., eco-friendly dyes, digital marketing, ethical sourcing) in the *songket* ecosystem.

This theory helps assess:

- The level of awareness among artisans regarding sustainable methods,
- The factors that encourage or inhibit the adoption of green innovations (e.g., cost, tradition, peer influence),
- The role of early adopters or "innovation champions" in the weaving community.

By integrating this theory, the study can map the pathways and barriers to innovation within the traditional textile sector. In the context of sustainable *songket* production in Palembang, for example, early adopters may include younger artisans or creative communities who have begun using natural dyes or organic threads. In contrast, laggards tend to persist with conventional chemical-based methods due to limited knowledge, resources, or access to innovation.

The competitive landscape for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Palembang, South Sumatra, encompasses not only upper-class entrepreneurs but also those from the middle and lower classes, including the small businesses involved in Palembang *songket*. The competition faced by *songket* small businesses in Palembang compels entrepreneurs to engage in critical thinking to enhance their product innovations and to sustain market prices within acceptable limits, ensuring they do not surpass the maximum thresholds for their offerings (Abdillah et al., 2024).

The Diffusion of Innovation theory helps explain that change towards sustainability in *songket* craft is not just about new technology, but also about communication, beliefs, cultural values and social structures. Innovations will be accepted more quickly if they are culturally appropriate, not too complicated, can be tried on a small scale, and the benefits can be seen immediately.

### Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how traditional Songket producers in Palembang are responding to environmental sustainability challenges. As a handwoven textile deeply rooted in Sumatran culture, Songket production faces modern pressures to adopt eco-friendly practices while preserving its heritage. The qualitative method is particularly suited for this research, as it allows for an in-depth examination of weavers' experiences, cultural values, and local innovations. By focusing on narratives and lived realities, this approach captures the complexities of balancing tradition with sustainability in a rapidly changing industry.

The research centers on key stakeholders, including master weavers, small-scale artisans, government agencies, and environmental advocates, to understand their perspectives on sustainable Songket production. Through semi-structured interviews, the study investigates the challenges artisans face, such as the scarcity of natural dyes, the high cost of organic materials, and resistance to changing long-established techniques. These qualitative interactions reveal not only obstacles but also grassroots innovations, such as the revival of traditional plant-based dyes or collaborations with eco-conscious designers.

Ethnographic fieldwork supplements interview data by providing firsthand observations of Songket workshops, documenting daily practices, and assessing the environmental impact of current production

methods. Researchers engage in participant observation, weaving communities to gain trust and uncover tacit knowledge that may not emerge in formal interviews.

Ultimately, this qualitative inquiry contributes to the broader discourse on cultural sustainability and environmental stewardship in traditional crafts. By documenting both challenges and innovations, the study offers actionable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and artisans striving to make Songket production more sustainable. The findings may also serve as a model for other traditional textiles facing similar pressures, demonstrating how heritage industries can adapt without losing their cultural essence.

## Results

These findings suggest that successful sustainability initiatives must be culturally grounded, recognizing that for songket weavers, environmental consciousness is inseparable from cultural identity. This study reveals significant findings about the transition toward sustainable practices in Palembang's traditional songket textile production. Through in-depth interviews and field observations, four key themes emerged that illuminate both the challenges and opportunities in this cultural sustainability journey.

This study revealed several key findings related to the shift toward sustainability in Palembang's songket textile production. The results are organized into four main themes: environmental awareness, challenges in adopting sustainable practices, local innovations, and institutional support.

### 1. Growing Environmental Awareness Among Weavers

Many traditional weavers expressed a growing concern over the environmental impact of chemical dyes and textile waste. Several older artisans admitted that such awareness had only emerged in recent years, influenced by community workshops, younger generations, and NGO outreach. Younger weavers, especially those involved in artisan cooperatives or university programs, showed a stronger commitment to eco-friendly practices.

### 2. Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Practices

Despite rising awareness, most weavers face significant obstacles in applying green methods. The main barriers include limited access to natural dye materials, lack of technical knowledge, and the higher cost of eco-friendly alternatives. Some participants shared concerns about the color durability of natural dyes and customer preferences that still favor synthetic color vibrancy. Additionally, there was little to no access to waste management systems or clean energy solutions in home-based production units.

### 3. Local Innovations and Eco-Friendly Initiatives

Despite the limitations, innovation is emerging at the grassroots level. A few weaving groups have begun experimenting with natural dyes made from mangosteen skin, indigo leaves, and turmeric. Some artisans have adopted zero-waste patterns, minimizing fabric cut-off during weaving. Collaborations with local universities, including Universitas Tridianti, have resulted in training programs and small-scale research on biodegradable packaging for songket products. These efforts show that small, localized innovation is possible when knowledge-sharing is present.

### 4. Institutional and Community Support

Support from institutions remains limited but slowly growing. Local government has launched pilot projects promoting traditional crafts with sustainability elements, but these are not yet widespread. Most artisans rely on informal networks, such as family-based cooperatives or NGO-led training, to receive guidance on sustainable practices. Participants expressed a need for continuous education, funding support, and inclusion in formal green economy strategies at the regional level.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex intersection between tradition, innovation, and sustainability in Palembang's songket industry. While there is a noticeable increase in environmental awareness among weavers, this awareness does not automatically translate into sustainable action due to several socio-economic and structural challenges. Firstly, the growing concern among younger weavers about environmental



impacts reflects a generational shift in values. This supports previous studies that emphasize the role of youth in promoting eco-conscious practices within traditional industries.

The study also reaffirms that transitioning to sustainable textile production in a traditional context is far from straightforward. Barriers such as cost, lack of access to resources, and limited technical know-how are common in craft-based economies. Similar to other artisanal sectors in Southeast Asia, the songket industry faces constraints in sourcing and applying natural dyes that are both effective and affordable. These challenges highlight the need for innovation that is not only environmentally sound but also culturally and economically viable. Despite these difficulties, the presence of grassroots innovations is a promising sign. The use of local plants for dyeing and the adoption of zero-waste techniques demonstrate that small-scale, low-cost solutions are possible when weavers are empowered through collaboration and education. The involvement of Universitas Tridinanti in providing technical knowledge shows the potential role of academic institutions in bridging the gap between tradition and sustainability.

The findings of this study present a complex interplay between cultural preservation and sustainable innovation in Palembang's songket textile industry. Our research demonstrates that the transition toward environmentally friendly production methods is not merely a technical challenge, but rather a socio-cultural process deeply rooted in traditional knowledge systems and community values.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored the emerging relationship between traditional songket weaving and sustainable textile production in Palembang, Indonesia. The research shows that while environmental awareness is increasing among weavers, especially the younger generation, significant challenges continue to hinder the widespread adoption of eco-friendly practices.

The songket artisans' experiences demonstrate that sustainability and tradition need not exist in opposition, but can instead enter into a dynamic relationship where ecological practices become vehicles for cultural innovation and revitalization.

Key barriers such as limited access to natural materials, lack of technical expertise, and the higher cost of sustainable alternatives have created a gap between intention and action. Nonetheless, grassroots innovations—such as the use of natural dyes and zero-waste weaving patterns—demonstrate the potential for sustainable transformation when supported by knowledge-sharing and collaboration.

The research highlights several critical insights for the future of sustainable cultural practices.

- First, successful sustainability initiatives must be rooted in local knowledge systems and traditional values, as evidenced by the greater acceptance of natural dyes when framed as heritage revival rather than modern imposition.
- Second, the generational tensions around sustainable practices point to the need for inclusive approaches that honor elders' expertise while creating space for younger artisans' ecological consciousness.
- Third, the material challenges underscore the importance of developing context-specific solutions that account for Palembang's unique geographic and economic realities.

Academic institutions like Universitas Tridinanti play a vital role in facilitating this transition through research, training, and partnerships. Meanwhile, government and NGO support remains critical in scaling up these efforts and integrating sustainability into the broader craft and textile policy landscape.

In conclusion, the greening of songket is not just a technical or economic shift it is a cultural transformation that requires synergy between tradition, innovation, and policy. Moving forward, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential to ensure that sustainability becomes a core value in preserving and evolving this rich cultural heritage.

## **Acknowledgement**

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the completion of this study. Special thanks go to the traditional weavers and songket artisans in Palembang who generously shared their time, stories, and insights throughout the data collection process. Their experiences and knowledge form the heart of this research.

The researcher also wishes to thank Universitas Tridinanti Palembang for the academic support and resources provided during the course of this study. Appreciation is extended to the faculty advisors for their valuable guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback. Gratitude is also given to local government officers, NGOs, and community organizations involved in sustainable craft initiatives for their openness and collaboration.

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## Authors' Bibliography

### Anggun Patricia

**Place and Date of Birth:** Pagaram, May 07, 2006

Anggun Patricia is a dedicated fourth-semester student at Tridinanti University Palembang, majoring in Management. Known for her enthusiasm for learning, she enjoys exploring literature through novels, expressing herself through writing, and staying active by swimming. Her diverse interests reflect a balanced personality with both intellectual curiosity and a passion for personal development.

### Qory Al-Rasyid

**Place and Date of Birth:** Tulang Bawang, January 22, 2002

Qory Al-Rasyid is a fourth-semester student at Tridinanti University Palembang, majoring in Management. He is passionate about personal growth and intellectual pursuits, with particular interests in playing football, engaging in productive work, and expressing ideas through writing. His dedication and curiosity make him a promising individual in both academic and professional settings.

### Poppy Handayani

**Place and Date of Birth:** Bandu Agung, June 06, 2000

Poppy Handayani is an eighth-semester student at Tridinanti University Palembang, majoring in Management. She is a cheerful and thoughtful individual who enjoys reading novels, finding joy in laughter, and expressing her creativity through writing. Her warm personality and passion for learning reflect her positive approach to both academic and personal life.

### Name of Corresponding Author: Irayani

**Place and Date of Birth:** Palembang, July 07, 1979

Irayani is a dedicated lecturer at Tridinanti University Palembang, specializing in the Management program. With a strong academic background, she teaches Economics and is known for her commitment to student development and research. Beyond her professional role, she enjoys reading, traveling to explore new perspectives, and writing as a form of expression and scholarly contribution.