Indonesia's Rubber Industry Is Shrinking but Its Smallholders Are Still Tapping

- *Indonesia, once a top global rubber producer, faces a nearly 10% production drop in 2025 due to ageing trees, disease, and low prices, driving many farmers to abandon rubber for palm oil or other work.*
- *Despite industry contraction and factory closures, smallholder farmers like Tuminah, Ari, and Yensi continue tapping rubber, motivated by tradition, practicality, or the flexibility rubber offers in balancing farm work with family life.*
- *For some farmers, rubber represents stability, cultural heritage, and a manageable livelihood—even if not highly profitable. Their persistence preserves continuity and could pave the way for a future revival.*

The road to Tuminah's farm winds through narrow paths beside rice fields and overgrown plants. The land shifts between farmland and forest edges. We rode motorbikes for about 15 minutes before reaching her rubber plot. The sun was beating on our backs with its morning rays, and the road curved again and again. We had four bikes, each carrying two people. But when we arrived, only three had made it. One of the riders had taken the wrong turn. With its complicated bends and side paths, it was easy to get lost.

While we waited, I thought about how this was not just the road we used to get in. It is also the road farmers use each day to get to their farms and to carry the latex out, one trip at a time. Some use motorbikes. Others go on foot. Tuminah walks to her farm everyday. "There is a short way," she told us. "I use it every day. It takes only five to ten minutes." Rubber farming does not begin with machines or trucks. It begins with people who move quietly through narrow paths at dawn, tapping tree by tree, and bringing their harvest home.

Tuminah discusses her motivations to continue growing natural rubber. Photo credit: GPSNR

We were there to observe the implementation of GPSNR's Indonesia Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Coaching Project, designed for smallholder farmers in South Sumatra. The project is supported by Goodyear and General Motors. The goal of the visit was to see how the project is progressing and how it is helping farmers on the ground. What we found went beyond training results. We heard quiet stories from farmers who have chosen to stay with rubber, even as many others, especially in Indonesia, have walked away.

Indonesia is one of the world's top rubber-producing countries, but its production has declined in recent years. A majority of the rubber grown in the country is cultivated by smallholder farmers who often work with ageing trees and face low yields. They also continue to face challenges such as falling prices and widespread rubber disease. According to a 2025 report by the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries (ANRPC), Indonesia's rubber production is expected to drop by 9.8 percent compared to the previous year.

With stronger support and better returns from crops like oil palm, many farmers have switched or stopped tapping altogether. Some of our members told us that many rubber factories have closed in Indonesia due to a lack of raw material. Those that remain in operation report growing difficulty in securing supply. During our field visit, we saw the signs for ourselves: many rubber plots were left untapped or had already been converted to palm. For now, the outlook of the rubber industry in Indonesia remains uncertain and far from encouraging.

Yet in this part of South Sumatra, some farmers are still showing up to tap. Their reasons are different, but together they serve as a quiet reminder that not every story in Indonesia's rubber sector is one of departure. During my time here, Tuminah, Ari and Yensi's stories served as a glimmer of hope amid uncertainty.

Tuminah: Tapping in Harmony with the Land

Tuminah, 58, has been tapping her rubber trees for 25 years. She greeted us in Javanese, sitting under the canopy of trees she inherited from her parents. Just a few steps away, one of the rubber trees had fallen. "White root disease," she explained. It is one of the major problems affecting rubber in this region.

She still taps daily, except during the rice planting season when she can be found hunched over in her rice paddies nearby. When asked if she had considered switching to another crop, she shook her head. "Paddy is more work," she said. "It gets pests and diseases more easily. Rubber is easier to manage."

Her farm feels alive. Monkeys, squirrels, and wild boars often pass through. When we asked if the monkeys disturbed her while she tapped, she laughed and said no.

"They're my companions," she told us. "When I come early in the morning, they are here with me." Sometimes, she said, the monkeys play tricks on her by moving her latex cups. "But when I yell at them, they put the cups back."

During our visit, we saw some of them climbing and playing in the trees.

Tuminah pointed to the ground beneath the rubber canopy. “These plants were not planted by me,” she said. “They grow from seeds carried in by the monkeys. They just grow on their own.” Her farm is a quiet space of coexistence with rubber trees, scattered vegetation, and wildlife moving freely between them. She told us that in her grandparents’ time, even Sumatran tigers had once been seen near here.

When asked about her plans for the future, she said she hopes to replant but needs help accessing good quality clones. “I want to pass this farm to my children,” she said. “Just like my grandparents passed it to my parents, and my parents passed it to me.”

Ari: Rubber as Steady Ground

Ari at the rubber farm he inherited from his family. Photo credits: GPSNR

Ari, 35, also inherited his rubber farm from his parents. His plot is just a quarter of a hectare, and he also grows durian and rice nearby. Many of his peers have already switched to palm or left farming altogether. But Ari has decided to stay with rubber.

“Palm trees only last about 20 years, then you have to cut and replant,” he said. “But rubber can last longer. I can manage it, replant when needed, and one day pass it on to my children.”

To him, rubber is more than a crop. It’s a kind of safety net. Even if prices are low, he says the income is still there.

“As long as you tap, you get something,” he said. “Sometimes I don’t sell right away. I keep the latex until the price goes up, or when I need extra money.”

His quiet confidence speaks to a different kind of value. Rubber may not bring big profit, but it brings something steady which is the ability to plan, adapt, and keep working the land on his own terms.

Yensi: Staying for Work That Still Fits

Yensi smiles at her farm. Photo credit: GPSNR

Yensi is 24 and the youngest rubber farmer we met during this trip. She is also a mother. While most of her peers have switched to palm oil or left for jobs in the city, Yensi is still tapping.

Her rubber plot was also passed down from her parents. She taps early in the morning, and by the time the sun is high, she's already back home caring for her child. "It works for me," she said. "The work is in the morning, then I go home. Sometimes my husband and my parents help too."

But not all of her plot is tapped. She said she simply cannot manage it alone, and has struggled to find help even when offering to share half the profit. "The price is too low," she explained. "People are not interested."

Many people, she added, have already moved on. The plot next to hers has been converted to palm. The one behind it has been left untapped and overgrown. "The price is not good," she admitted. "So they don't want to do it."

Still, for Yensi, walking away would feel like a loss, not only of income, but of something handed down through generations. Her decision to stay is not just about waiting for better prices. It's about a way of life that still fits.

Rubber allows her to remain close to home, raise her child, and continue a family tradition, even if most others have moved on.

Staying, Quietly

In Indonesia, the path ahead for the natural rubber industry remains uncertain. Government support is often lacking. And yet, farmers like Tuminah, Ari, and Yensi are still here. Their reasons are not always the same. For some it is tradition, for others it is practicality, or simply what fits their life best. But they've made the same quiet yet bold decision by not walking away. . Their commitment is not loud. It is made in the early morning hours, in quiet groves under the rustling shade of trees passed down through generations. These stories don't often make the headlines. But they matter.

Because even as the rubber industry in Indonesia faces one of its most difficult periods, there are still people showing up to tap. People who believe it's still worth trying. And maybe, if the right support reaches them - training, tools, better planting material, they won't just stay - they might help others find their way back too.

Through GPSNR, companies continue to support farmers like Ari, Tuminah and Yensi. The GAP Coaching Project's goal is to help smallholders improve their practices, tackle disease outbreaks, and manage old trees. In this area, we have also established agroforestry demonstration plots to explore how rubber can grow alongside other crops, creating new income streams and greater resilience.

We know these efforts are not quick fixes.They offer solutions whose impacts may not be visible in the short term. Yet, because of these initiatives, these farmers may do more than survive the downturn. They may become the ones who pass knowledge on, help others adapt, and keep natural rubber alive in the landscapes where it began.

Because sometimes, the ones who stay quietly are also the ones who make it possible for others to return.

About the author

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