International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies, 8(3) 2025, pages: 2036-2051

IJIRSS
International Journal of Innovative Research & Scientific Studies

ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com

Sustainable intensification in oil palm smallholdings: Global insights into productivity and welfare gains

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Abstract

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive global synthesis of Sustainable Intensification (SI) practices in the oil palm sector, focusing on their effects on smallholder productivity and welfare. Unlike prior studies that often emphasize localized or fragmented findings, this research integrates bibliometric mapping and thematic analysis to examine SI applications across diverse national contexts. The primary purpose is to assess how SI influences agricultural yields and smallholder income while identifying key contributors, institutional trends, and barriers to adoption. Utilizing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) grounded in the PRISMA framework, the study systematically reviewed thirty-three Scopus-indexed articles published between 2018 and 2024. The findings show that practices such as precision agriculture, organic fertilization, agroforestry, and sustainability certification lead to notable gains in productivity, ranging from 10 to 25 percent, and increases in income between 7 and 20 percent. These improvements are most prominent in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Colombia. However, broader adoption is still hindered by high upfront investment costs, limited access to advanced technology, and inadequate smallholder training. The bibliometric analysis also reveals that Southeast Asian institutions dominate the current research landscape, whereas Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are underrepresented. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the importance of policy support, farmer education, and technological facilitation in advancing SI adoption. It provides critical insights for enhancing the sustainability of the global palm oil sector with implications for climate resilience, rural development, and equitable agricultural transformation.

Keywords: Oil palm industry sustainability, Oil palm productivity, Oil palm smallholders, Smallholder income, Sustainable intensification.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i3.6942
Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
History: Received: 20 March 2025 / **Revised:** 21 April 2025 / **Accepted:** 25 April 2025 / **Published:** 12 May 2025

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.
Acknowledgment: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the editorial board of International Journal of Innovation and Research Studies (IJIRS) for their valuable feedback and support. Special thanks are also extended to Universitas Negeri Padang for partially funding this research through the PPS.293F.BH/X1-2024 grant scheme.
Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

The palm oil industry has become a key driver of economic development in many producing countries, especially in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It plays an essential role in global supply chains as a major ingredient in food, cosmetics, biofuels, and industrial products [1, 2]. These countries play an important role in meeting the global demand for palm oil, which is widely used in products such as food, cosmetics, fuel, and industrial chemicals [3-5]. Each country adopts a distinct methodology for managing oil palm plantations, shaped by factors including plantation size and the involvement of agricultural labor [6]. Plantation management can be carried out by smallholders or large companies, both public and private. Each entity has its own way of managing land, from land clearing to palm oil production [7]. In response to the environmental degradation associated with oil palm expansion, several producing nations have introduced sustainability measures. Indonesia has implemented policies that ban the establishment of new plantations in primary forests and peatland regions vital for biodiversity and carbon sequestration [8]. Concurrently, certification programs like RSPO and ISPO have been established to guarantee adherence to environmental, social, and economic sustainability criteria, integrating High Conservation Value (HCV) and High Carbon Stock (HCS) concepts [9].

Although concerns about its environmental impact persist, oil palm continues to be one of the most land-efficient sources of vegetable oil. In 2021, it achieved an average yield of 3.56 tons per hectare, a figure that significantly exceeds the productivity of other major oil crops, thereby reinforcing its role in meeting global vegetable oil demand with relatively less land use [10-12]. Compared to other vegetable oils, oil palm requires 75 to 90% less land [13]. Large companies in the palm oil industry have generally used more sophisticated technology compared to smallholders, who still use traditional tools. This impacts the productivity and earnings of these smallholders [14]. Consequently, it is essential to offer assistance to smallholders to enhance their productivity and revenue. Statistics from various institutions, such as Statistics Indonesia, MPOB, and RSPO, show the percentage distribution of smallholders in the five major palm oil producing countries [15, 16].

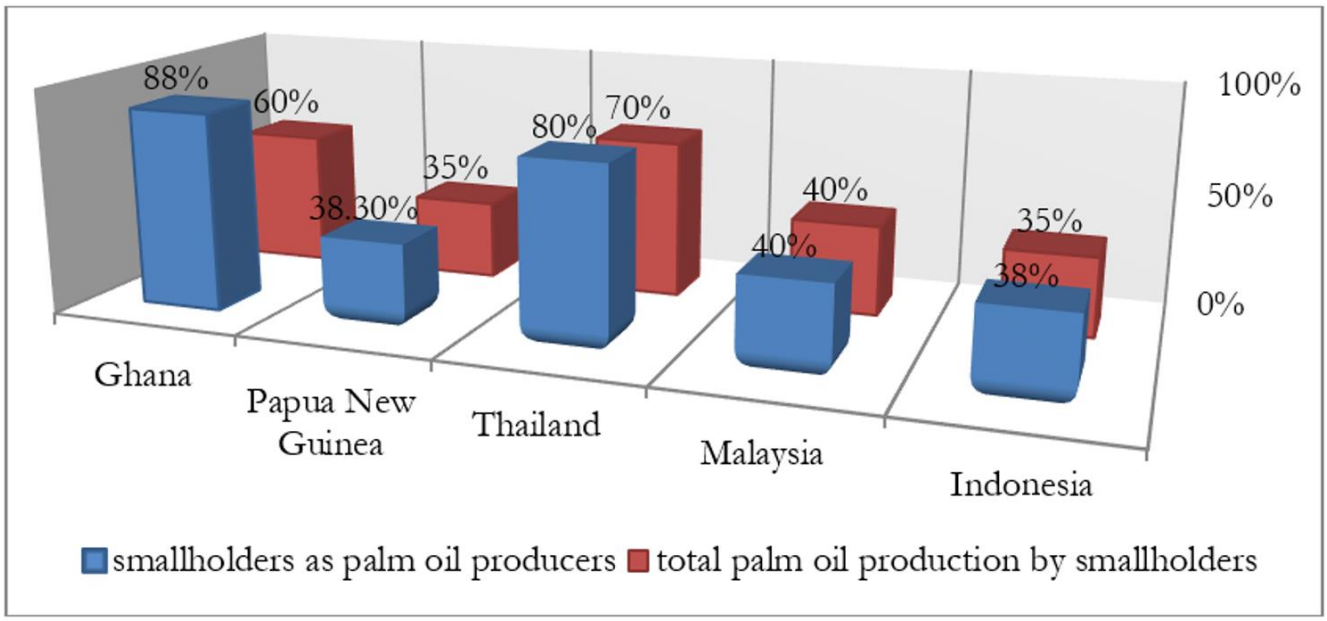

Figure 1.
Overview of Smallholders in 5 Palm Oil Producing Countries.
Source: Central Bureau of Statistics Oil Palm, MPOB, and RSPO (processed).

The palm oil sector in Indonesia enhances state earnings via exports and serves as a livelihood for millions of smallholders [17, 18]. Approximately 40% of Indonesia's oil palm farms are operated by smallholders, whose welfare is significantly reliant on the industry's production and sustainability. Nonetheless, despite the substantial economic contribution, extensive oil palm production practices frequently result in adverse environmental effects [19, 20]. Deforestation, soil degradation, greenhouse gas emissions, and social issues such as unequal distribution of benefits and economic dependence of farmers on a single commodity are some of the issues that threaten the sustainability of this industry [21].

The concept of Sustainable Intensification (SI) has evolved as a viable solution to these difficulties. SI seeks to enhance productivity without augmenting land use or inflicting environmental harm. In the palm oil industry, sustainable intensification aims to enhance production efficiency, elevate farmers' welfare, and mitigate adverse environmental effects [22, 23]. Experts emphasize that sustainable intensification (SI) addresses the social and environmental issues confronting the palm oil sector, including deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions [24] asserted that sustainable intensification (SI) must reconcile the enhancement of agricultural outputs with environmental preservation, while Pretty and Bharucha [25] highlighted the necessity of employing eco-friendly technology to augment yields without exerting further strain on natural resources.

The adoption of Sustainable Initiatives (SI) is essential in the palm oil sector, particularly for leading producers like Indonesia and Malaysia, which frequently encounter international scrutiny about environmental and social repercussions [26]. SI includes the use of technologies such as smart irrigation, organic fertilizers, and agroforestry systems to minimize environmental impacts while increasing land productivity. This approach can meet the needs of sustainably increasing agricultural production while protecting ecosystems [27]. Investigations into Sustainable Intensification in the palm oil industry have demonstrated significant possibilities for enhancing farmers' productivity and profitability. Nonetheless, its execution in the field encounters numerous obstacles, including restricted access to technology and elevated expenses associated with the adoption of innovative developments. Therefore, it is important to identify factors that support or hinder the application of SI so that this approach can be effectively implemented [28-30].

Despite increasing academic interest, there is a paucity of research that has comprehensively examined the effects of sustainable intensification on the productivity and welfare of independent oil palm producers in various national contexts. Many studies are often case-specific or concentrate on technological improvements, neglecting wider socio-economic ramifications and patterns of institutional involvement. Furthermore, the absence of bibliometric analysis has resulted in unresolved inquiries concerning the countries, organizations, and researchers leading SI research in the palm oil industry. This study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) adhering to PRISMA principles to deliver a thorough synthesis of Sustainability Initiative (SI) implementation in the oil palm sector. The study seeks to: (1) analyze the impact of sustainable intensification practices on smallholder productivity and income; (2) identify the countries and institutions most engaged in sustainable intensification-related palm oil research; (3) delineate key contributors and publication trends; and (4) investigate the challenges and opportunities for enhancing sustainable intensification adoption. This study's originality resides in its integrated methodology, merging bibliometric analysis and thematic synthesis to enhance academic discussion and inform policy formulation. The study ultimately advances sustainable agriculture and rural development, impacting food security, climate change mitigation, and inclusive economic growth in oil palm-producing areas.

2. Methodology

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, organized in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to guarantee scientific rigor, transparency, and replicability. The SLR technique effectively synthesizes previous scholarly works in a thorough and structured manner, providing significant insights into current research trends, empirical findings, and knowledge gaps within a certain field of investigation [31-33]. Within this study, SLR is employed to examine the application of Sustainable Intensification (SI) in the oil palm sector, with specific attention to its influence on smallholder productivity and income, as well as the identification of key challenges and opportunities surrounding its implementation.

The review procedure comprised three main stages: identification, screening, and inclusion. A thorough literature search was conducted during the identification phase utilizing Scopus, a multidisciplinary database recognized for indexing high-quality peer-reviewed publications in agricultural, environmental studies, and social sciences. A revised keyword search technique employing Boolean operators (e.g., "AND") was utilized to capture pertinent studies associated with the research objectives, thereby enhancing specificity and relevance. The original search produced 19,355 records, which were then refined using a two-tiered screening procedure. Initially, titles and abstracts were examined for subject consistency, narrowing the selection to 3,564 pieces. A comprehensive evaluation according to inclusion criteria subsequently refined the selection to 149 papers, which were considered methodologically robust and pertinent to the aims of this study.

Table 1.
Data Source Information (Meta-Analysis).

Data Source	**Scopus**
Initial keyword search	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (sustainable AND intensification)) TITLE-ABS-KEY (Palm AND oil) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Palm AND oil AND productivity) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Farmer AND income) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Sustainability AND in AND palm AND oil AND industry) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Smallholder AND palm AND oil AND farmers) AND PUBYEAR >2019 AND PUBYEAR <2024
Keyword search (with restrictions)	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (sustainable AND intensification AND palm AND oil) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (farmer AND income AND sustainability AND in AND palm AND oil AND industry)) AND TITLE-ABS KEY (palm AND oil AND productivity AND farmer AND income) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (sustainability AND in AND palm AND oil AND industry AND smallholder) AND PUBYEAR >2014 AND PUBYEAR <2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "IS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final"))

The literature search was limited to the period between 2018 and 2024, in alignment with the increasing relevance and evolution of the Sustainable Intensification (SI) concept over the past decade. Research released before this period was considered less relevant due to the advent of new trends, technology, and policy frameworks influencing the contemporary landscape of palm oil sustainability. Subsequent to the preliminary database search, a multi-phase selection procedure was implemented to guarantee the incorporation of literature that adhered to rigorous quality and relevance criteria.

A set of inclusion criteria was established to guide the selection process: (i) the study must focus on the application of SI in the oil palm sector; (ii) it must provide empirical data evaluating the effects of SI on productivity and/or the welfare of smallholder farmers; (iii) it must be published in reputable scientific journals or conference proceedings; (iv) the publication must be in English or Indonesian to reflect diverse regional contexts; and (v) it must have been published within the designated timeframe of 2018–2024 to ensure contemporary relevance.

Concurrently, exclusion criteria were implemented. Studies were excluded if they: (i) did not specifically pertain to oil palm or its significance for smallholders; (ii) lacked empirical evidence, being restricted to conceptual discussions or opinion pieces; (iii) concentrated exclusively on technical agronomic aspects without connection to smallholder outcomes; or (iv) were not available in full-text format. The preliminary evaluation comprised an examination of the title, abstract, and keywords of each publication. Upon confirmation of preliminary relevance, full-text materials were manually evaluated to verify inclusion. The comprehensive screening process culminated in a refined selection of 33 articles that met all qualifying criteria for the review.

Subsequent to the study selection, a structured data extraction phase was implemented. Extracted variables included research methodology, study location, documented impacts of sustainable intensification (SI) on productivity and farmer income, identification of contributing researchers and institutions, and contextual challenges and opportunities influencing SI implementation. The gathered data were subsequently analyzed bibliometrically to reveal prevailing topics, authorship patterns, and research trends. Keyword co-occurrence and citation mapping were performed using VOSviewer software to illustrate the intellectual structure and theme development within the field.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. A Critical Review of Sustainable Intensification Approaches in the Palm Oil Industry

This study utilizes a dataset of 33 peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, which jointly form the foundation for the thematic analysis. These academic studies examine many aspects of sustainable intensification (SI) in the palm oil industry, including its implementation obstacles, new prospects, and suggested best practices to improve smallholder productivity and income. A thorough synthesis of the literature has shown some common themes, which are elaborated upon in the following sections.

1) Articles discussing how certifications such as RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) can improve market access for smallholders and encourage more sustainable practices [34].
2) The use of modern technology and agricultural innovations, including precision agriculture, is key to improving productivity and efficiency in oil palm production [6].
3) Articles illustrating the significance of community and stakeholder involvement in establishing sustainable palm oil processes, as well as the advantages of a multi-stakeholder strategy [35].
4) Numerous researchers emphasize the difficulties linked to biodiversity decline and deforestation resulting from oil palm expansion, as well as the potential of agroforestry to mitigate these problems [36].
5) Research shows that the adoption of SI practices not only improves productivity but also farmers' economic welfare, with better access to markets and technology [34].

Table 2.
Main Literature Dataset Supporting the Analytical Framework.

No	Title of Article	Author Name	Year	Country	Journal & Publisher
1	Sustainable intensification of palm oil production: A review	Álvarez, et al. [11]	2021	Colombia	Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (Taylor & Francis)
2	Oil palm economic performance in Malaysia and R&D progress in 2019	Parveez, et al. [37]	2020	Malaysia	Lembaga Minyak Sawit Malaysia
3	Integrating sustainable intensification in oil palm farms	Montalvo, et al. [38]	2020	Colombia	Agricultural Systems (Elsevier)
4	The role of certification in sustainable palm oil	Jelsma, et al. [6]	2018	Netherlands	Agronomy for Sustainable Development (Springer)
5	Climate-smart agriculture for palm oil production	Rahman, et al. [39]	2022	Bangladesh	Environmental Science & Policy (Elsevier)
6	Agroecological approaches for palm oil sustainability	Hoang, et al. [40]	2020	Vietnam	Sustainability (MDPI)
7	Sustainable intensification and biodiversity in palm oil	Gasco, et al. [41]	2021	Brazil	Journal of Environmental Management (Elsevier)
8	Policy frameworks for sustainable palm oil	Toh, et al. [42]	2019	Singapore	Land Use Policy (Elsevier)
9	Environmental benefits of sustainable palm oil	Lee, et al. [43]	2022	Malaysia	Ecological Indicators (Elsevier)
10	Farmer welfare and sustainable palm oil	Ndaye, et al. [44]	2021	Nigeria	Journal of Development Studies (Taylor & Francis)
11	Technological innovations in sustainable palm oil farming	Benitez, et al. [45]	2020	Colombia	Agricultural Systems (Elsevier)
12	The impact of sustainable practices on oil palm productivity	Ng, et al. [46]	2021	Malaysia	Field Crops Research (Elsevier)
13	Sustainable palm oil: A review of practices	Arsyad, et al. [47]	2018	Indonesia	Sustainability (MDPI)
14	The economic viability of sustainable palm oil production	Santosa, et al. [48]	2022	Indonesia	Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems (Cambridge University Press)
15	Implementing sustainable intensification in the palm oil sector	Harun, et al. [49]	2019	Malaysia	Environmental Science & Policy (Elsevier)
16	Impact of agroforestry on oil palm sustainability	Duku, et al. [50]	2020	Ghana	Agroforestry Systems 9Springer)
17	Environmental and economic assessments of palm oil	Sun, et al. [51]	2021	China	Ecological Economics (Elsevier)
18	The influence of climate change on palm oil production	Purnamasari, et al. [52]	2022	Indonesia	Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment (Elsevier)
19	Sustainable oil palm cultivation: Challenges and opportunities	Ashtiani and Ashtiani [53]	2021	Iran	Sustainability (MDPI)
20	Assessing sustainable palm oil certification programs	Chen and Antonelli [54]	2020	Malaysia	Food Policy (Elsevier)
21	The social implications of sustainable palm oil practices	Fakhruddin and Asmarani [55]	2019	Indonesia	Journal of Business Ethics (Springer)
22	Sustainable intensification: A policy perspective	Dias [56]	2022	Brazil	Environmental Science & Policy (Elsevier)
23	Sustainable palm oil production: An economic analysis	Farah [57]	2021	Malaysia	Agricultural Economics (Wiley)
24	The role of smallholders in sustainable palm oil	Tan [58]	2020	Indonesia	World Development (Elsevier)
25	Enhancing resilience in palm oil production	Ali [59]	2021	Thailand	Sustainability (MDPI)

No	Title of Article	Author Name	Year	Country	Journal & Publisher
26	The contribution of technology to sustainable palm oil	Janjua and Ali [60]	2019	Pakistan	Technology in Society (Elsevier)
27	Barriers to implementing sustainable practices in palm oil	Suharto and Suryadi [61]	2020	Indonesia	Land Use Policy (Elsevier)
28	Biodiversity conservation in oil palm landscapes	Yap [62]	2021	Malaysia	Biodiversity and Conservation (Springer)
29	Sustainable palm oil and food security	Lau [63]	2022	Singapore	Food Security (Springer)
30	The future of sustainable palm oil: A global perspective	De Jong [64]	2021	Netherlands	Global Environmental Change (Elsevier)
31	Stakeholder engagement in sustainable palm oil governance	Lopes [65]	2019	Brazil	Journal of Environmental Management (Elsevier)
32	Impacts of sustainable intensification on rural livelihoods	Vargas [66]	2020	Colombia	Rural Sociology (Wiley)
33	Evaluating the sustainability of palm oil production	Choudhury [67]	2022	India	Environmental Science & Policy (Elsevier)

3.2. Impact of SI Practices on Farmer Productivity and Income

Sustainable Intensification (SI) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for enhancing oil palm productivity while simultaneously promoting environmental sustainability and improving the socio-economic conditions of smallholder farmers. Numerous leading palm oil-producing nations have used various sustainable intensification strategies, resulting in varied outcomes shaped by local agroecological conditions, governmental frameworks, and technology capabilities. Between 2018 and 2024, various studies and policy publications have recorded the significant effects of SI implementation on smallholder production and income in diverse national contexts.

In Indonesia, the world's leading producer of palm oil the adoption of improved oil palm varieties and precision agriculture technologies, including drone-based plantation monitoring, has led to an estimated 15% increase in average yield per hectare between 2018 and 2022. Improved nutrient management, especially using organic fertilizers, has led to a reduction in production costs by about 10%, yielding significant income increases for farmers. In Malaysia, a significant palm oil producer, sustainability initiatives like the acceptance of Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) accreditation have facilitated smallholders' access to premium markets. Evidence demonstrates that certified farmers have income gains between 20% and 30% relative to their non-certified peers. In Latin America, Colombia the region’s largest palm oil producer, has demonstrated success with agroforestry-based SI models that integrate oil palm with food crops like cacao. This approach boosts plantation productivity and offers varied revenue streams for smallholders. In Nigeria, a leading producer in Africa, community-oriented sustainable intensification projects have concentrated on educating farmers in sustainable agriculture technologies. From 2019 to 2023, participants in these programs documented an average productivity enhancement of 12%.

To provide a more systematic understanding of the effects and modalities of Sustainable Intensification (SI) adoption on smallholder performance across the ten leading palm oil-producing countries, the following table presents a synthesis of key findings. This tabular summary highlights the practical outcomes of SI implementation on productivity and income during the 2019–2024 period. A comprehensive discussion ensues, clarifying the context-specific mechanisms through which SI practices facilitate sustainable agricultural development.

Table 3.
Impact of Sustainable Intensification on Productivity and Income of Oil Palm Smallholders in 10 Countries (2019-2024).

Country	Forms of IS Practice	Increase in Productivity (%)	Increase in Revenue (%)	Data source
Indonesia	Agroforestry, water and nutrient management	15%	10-15%	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Malaysia	High-yielding varieties and RSPO certification	20%	12-18%	Nara, et al. [34] and Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Thailand	Training in precision agriculture technologies	12%	8-12%	Jelsma, et al. [6]
Colombia	Utilization of bioenergy derived from palm oil waste	18%	14%	Pardo, et al. [69]
Nigeria	Land diversification and pest-resistant crop varieties	10%	7%	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Pantai Gading	Nutrient management technologies and organic fertilization	13%	9%	López-Orozco, et al. [36] and Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Guatemala	ISPO and RSPO certification schemes	25%	15-20%	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Honduras	Crop rotation and integration with food crops	17%	13%	Méndez, et al. [70]
Ekuador	Application of organic fertilizers and improved varieties	14%	10%	Khatun, et al. [5]
Brasil	Valorization of palm oil waste for bioenergy production	16%	12%	Hassan, et al. [14]

The table above delineates the effects of adopting sustainable intensification (SI) strategies on agricultural output and revenue for farmers in ten principal palm oil-producing nations, utilizing data from 2018 to 2024. Each nation has a distinct methodology for implementing SI, influenced by regional factors, technological availability, and governmental policies.

1) Indonesia and Malaysia, the foremost palm oil producing nations globally, have spearheaded the implementation of sustainable intensification (SI), particularly through the advancement of superior varieties, sustainable certifications like RSPO, and the utilization of more efficient technologies in water and nutrient management. In Indonesia, productivity increased by 15%, whilst in Malaysia it rose by 20%, attributed to enhanced technology capabilities and more rigorous training.
2) Colombia had notable outcomes with an 18% rise in productivity and a 14% gain in revenue, primarily attributable to improvements in the utilization of palm oil waste for bioenergy. This facilitated a reduction in production costs and generated supplementary cash for farmers.
3) Guatemala and Honduras have successfully implemented ISPO and RSPO accreditation, enhancing the marketability of their palm oil goods internationally. Guatemala specifically experienced a 20% surge in revenue, ranking among the highest in comparison to other nations.
4) Gading Beach and Nigeria, two African nations with considerable potential for palm oil industry expansion, have commenced the implementation of nutrient management strategies and organic fertilizers to enhance their crop yields. Despite lower productivity and income growth relative to Asian and Latin American nations, both countries exhibit a favorable and durable rising trajectory.
5) Ecuador and Brazil have seen notable advancements in productivity and profitability, particularly through the exploitation of palm waste for bioenergy and the adoption of enhanced cultivars that exhibit greater resilience to climate change.

The Sustainable Intensification (SI) practices implemented in different oil palm producing countries share some common characteristics, although they vary in their form of implementation. Some of the successful SI practices include.

1) Many countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Ecuador, are utilizing oil palm varieties that are more productive and resistant to pests and climate change. The use of these improved varieties has been shown to significantly increase productivity, with increases ranging from 12% to 25%.
2) The effective administration of fertilizer application, particularly organic fertilizer as implemented in Gading Beach and Nigeria, enhances yields while preserving soil fertility. The efficient utilization of fertilizers decreases production expenses, hence directly enhancing farmers' income.

3) In nations like Guatemala and Malaysia, the adoption of sustainability certifications such as RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) and ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) has enhanced product reputation in global markets and substantially increased selling prices. These certificates promote environmentally and socially sustainable agricultural methods, hence enhancing farmer revenue.
4) In Colombia and Brazil, innovations in the use of palm oil waste for bioenergy production have helped increase productivity while reducing dependence on fossil energy. In addition, farmers gain an additional source of income from the sale of energy produced from this waste.
5) In Honduras and Nigeria, the practice of crop diversification, where oil palm is combined with other food or perennial crops not only enhances ecological sustainability but also provides additional financial security for farmers through income from multiple crop sources.

The impact of Sustainable Intensification (SI) practices on the productivity and income of oil palm farmers in 10 major palm oil-producing countries shows significant results. Productivity increases ranged from 10% to 25%, depending on the form of SI practices implemented and technology readiness in each country. On the other hand, farmer incomes increased between 7% and 20%, with countries more advanced in technology adoption and sustainability certification showing higher results. The successful implementation of SI in these countries emphasizes the importance of technology support, training, and effective policies. These factors are critical to achieving economic and environmental sustainability in the palm oil industry while improving the welfare of farmers in the sector.

Based on the comparative analysis of Sustainable Intensification (SI) practices across ten major palm oil-producing countries, it can be concluded that SI has a measurable positive impact on both productivity and farmer income, with results varying according to the level of technological adoption, policy support, and local implementation strategies. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Colombia demonstrated the most substantial gains due to the integration of high-yielding varieties, sustainability certifications, and innovations such as bioenergy from palm waste. While African countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria showed more modest improvements, their adoption of nutrient management and crop diversification practices indicates a promising trajectory toward sustainable growth. Overall, this study underscores the critical role of tailored SI strategies, supported by training, infrastructure, and enabling policies, in advancing both the economic and environmental sustainability of the global palm oil sector.

3.3. Countries Most Active in SI Research in the Oil Palm Sector

The results of the publication analysis focusing on the number of documents and citations show that out of the 10 countries studied, there are authors or researchers who are very productive in publishing works related to Sustainable Intensification (SI) in the palm oil sector. This analysis considers a minimum threshold of forty citations per article. In total, these countries have accumulated more than 1,403 citations. Malaysia and Indonesia emerged as the two most active countries in research on SI practices in the sector, showing their dominance in the number of publications and citations. The results of the publication analysis focusing on the number of documents and citations show that out of the 10 countries studied, there are authors or researchers who are very productive in publishing works related to Sustainable Intensification (SI) in the palm oil sector. This analysis considers a minimum threshold of forty citations per article. In total, these countries have accumulated more than 1,403 citations. Malaysia and Indonesia emerged as the two most active countries in research on SI practices in the sector, showing their dominance in the number of publications and citations.

Indonesia and Malaysia dominate SI-related research in the palm oil sector due to their position as the world's leading producers and the growing international pressure to adopt more sustainable practices [71]. Malaysia's contribution is marked by the development of smart farming technologies through institutions such as the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) and strong private sector involvement in enhancing crop yields [72]. In contrast, Indonesia's SI research, evidenced by 285 citations focuses on smallholder productivity, supported by key institutions like Institut Pertanian Bogor and collaborative efforts between government, industry, and NGOs to develop inclusive, sustainable models [73, 74]. The United States also shows notable influence with 215 citations, reflecting its role as a key reference in global SI research. These patterns highlight increasing global engagement in SI, driven by the rising demand for sustainable palm oil. Using bibliometric methods and VOSviewer analysis, 479 keywords were identified from 33 documents, with 43 core terms selected for further thematic exploration [75].

Rank	Country	Document	citations
1	Malaysia	22	333
2	Indonesia	26	285
3	United States	7	215
4	United Kingdom	7	118
5	Netherlands	5	107
6	Switzerland	4	92
7	Australia	3	86
8	Colombia	2	75
9	Brazil	2	46
10	Sri Lanka	2	46

Figure 2.
Top Countries by Number of Documents and Citations.

Figure 3 visualizes frequently used keywords in SI research on palm oil, with central terms like “Smallholder,” “Oil Palm,” “Sustainability,” and “Productivity” highlighting key research focuses. Recent themes, shown in yellow, include “Oil Production,” “Sustainable Intensification,” “Income,” and “Farms.”

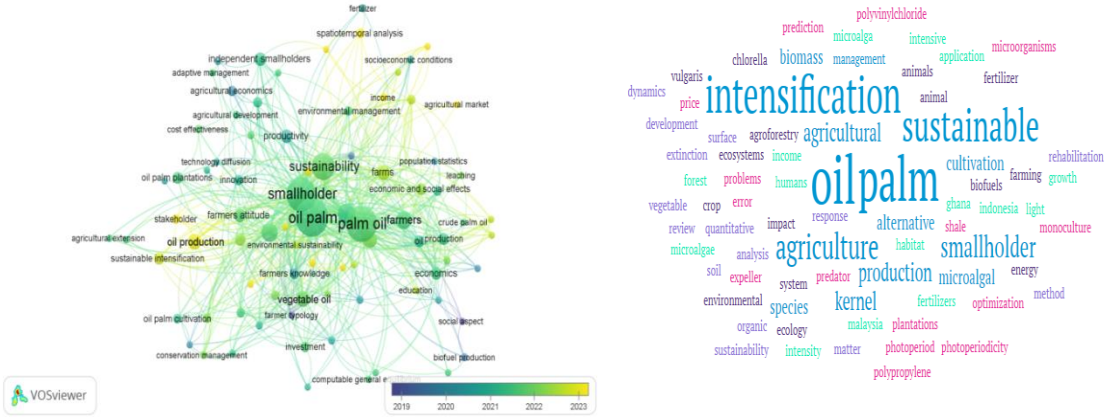

Figure 3.
Visualization of Network and Word Cloud for Terms and Keywords in Sustainable Intensification Oil Palm.

This network visualization shows five groups of closely interconnected keywords, with the main focus on the impact of SI practices on smallholder productivity and income in the palm oil sector. SI implementation in this sector aims to increase palm oil productivity while improving farmers' welfare through better income as shown in Figure 4.

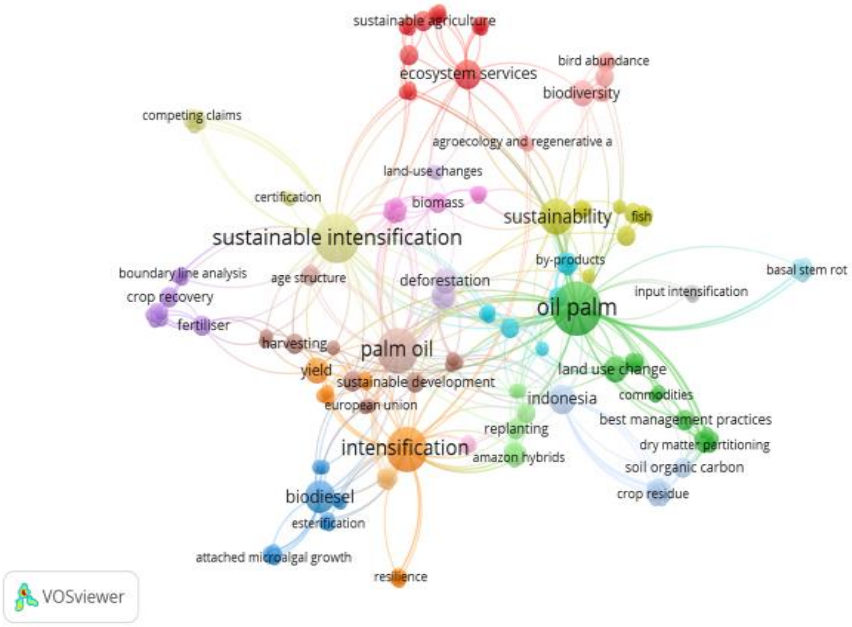

Figure 4.
Visualization of Author Keywords from 2019 to 2024.

3.4. Researcher Who Most Contributed to SI Research

Several researchers and institutions have made significant contributions to the development of research related to Sustainable Intensification (SI) in the palm oil sector. Institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia dominate publications related to the application of SI in this sector. Research conducted in both countries covers various aspects, ranging from agroforestry techniques and agricultural technology innovation to the socio-economic impact of SI implementation on smallholders. The International Center for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) also plays an important role in the development of agroforestry concepts in oil palm plantations, with researchers developing various agroforestry models to improve land sustainability and productivity.

Table 4 shows the ten most cited researchers in SI research in the palm oil sector. The top research article was published by Woittiez et al. [76], who are from the Netherlands, collaborating with authors from Kenya and Indonesia. The article was published in the European Journal of Agronomy by Elsevier and has 307 citations on Scopus and 537 citations on Google Scholar, showing its significant impact in the field of oil palm agriculture. Another researcher who made a major contribution was Khatun et al. [77] from Malaysia, whose article was published in Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews by Elsevier. The article obtained 162 citations on Scopus and 291 citations on Google Scholar, reinforcing its position as one of the influential studies in this field. Purnomo et al. [78] from Indonesia, with collaboration from the Netherlands and the United States, also produced important research published in Forest Policy and Economics by Elsevier. The article received 111 citations on Scopus and 188 on Google Scholar, emphasizing its contribution to the scientific community. Rhebergen et al. [79], in collaboration with researchers from Kenya, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany, and Razak et al. [80] from Malaysia and Australia, although with fewer citations, still made valuable contributions to the literature on oil palm agriculture. Additionally, research from Singapore also appears in this list, reflecting the global interest in SI implementation in the palm oil sector. Table 4 highlights the importance of SI implementation in increasing the productivity and income of oil palm farmers around the world.

Table 4.
Top ten most cited authors' documents on sustainable intensification oil palm.

Author References	Countries and collaborations	Journal & publisher	Cited by Scopus	Scholar citation
Woittiez, et al. [76]	Netherlands, Kenya & Indonesia	European Journal of Agronomy (Elsevier)	307	537
Khatun, et al. [77]	Malaysia	Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews (Elsevier)	162	291
Purnomo, et al. [78]	Indonesia, Netherlands & United States	Forest Policy and Economics (Elsevier)	111	188
Rhebergen, et al. [79]	Kenya, Netherlands, United Kingdom & Germany	Agricultural Systems (Elsevier)	72	66
Razak, et al. [80]	Malaysia & Australia	Environmental Research Letters (Institute of Physics Publishing)	32	35
Khatun, et al. [5]	United Kingdom & Ghana	Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems (Frontiers Media S.A.)	27	49
Tao, et al. [81]	Malaysia, Germany & Indonesia	European Journal of Agronomy (Elsevier)	12	15
van Noordwijk, et al. [82]	Indonesia & Netherlands	GCB Bioenergy (John Wiley & Sons)	12	22
Zhao, et al. [83]	United States & Singapore	Agricultural Systems (Elsevier)	10	17
Bremer, et al. [84]	Australia	Agronomy for Sustainable Development (Springer Nature)	9	14

Furthermore, analysis was conducted to map the networks and collaborations among 302 researchers worldwide who are actively contributing to SI research and oil palm agriculture as a whole.

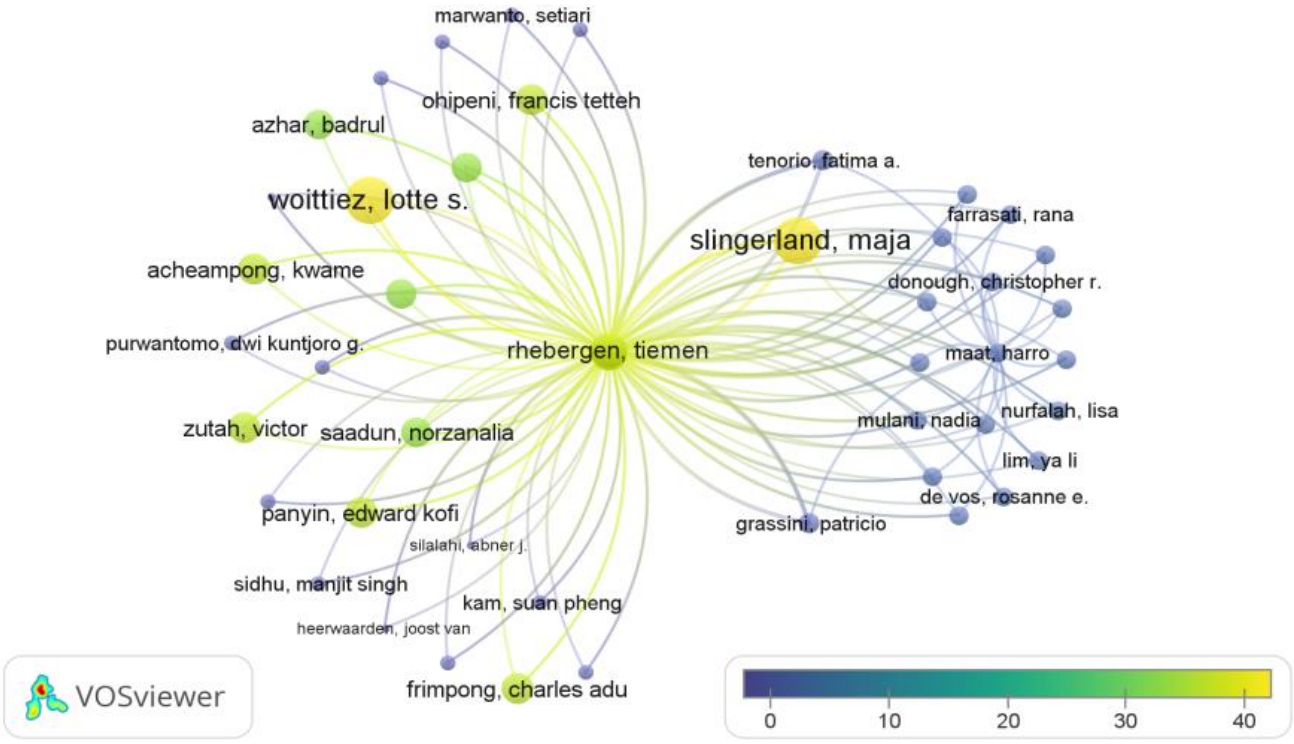

Figure 5.
Shows researchers with the highest number of citations, between 0 and 300 citations, in research focused on oil palm plantation management.

This study offers a novel contribution through a targeted bibliometric and citation analysis focusing on Sustainable Intensification (SI) research within the palm oil sector. Distinct from previous studies, it identifies the most influential authors, highlights international collaboration patterns, and underscores the dominant roles of institutions from Indonesia and Malaysia in advancing SI, particularly in areas such as agroforestry, agricultural technology innovation, and socio-economic impacts on smallholders. By analyzing 302 active researchers and linking citation impact to thematic research focus, this study provides fresh insights into global knowledge dissemination and cross-country scientific collaboration in sustainable palm oil intensification.

3.5. Challenges and Opportunities for Implementing SI to Improve Farmer Productivity and Welfare

Drawing on the findings discussed in RQ1 through RQ3, it is evident that Sustainable Intensification (SI) holds significant promise in enhancing both the productivity and livelihoods of oil palm smallholders. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of SI is shaped by a complex interplay of country-specific challenges and enabling opportunities. Table 5 presents a synthesized overview of key barriers and prospects encountered by ten major palm oil–producing nations that adopted SI practices between 2018 and 2024. While each country contends with unique constraints influencing the scalability and effectiveness of SI, there also exist strategic opportunities that, if leveraged appropriately, can support long-term gains in yield and farmer welfare.

Table 5.
Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Intensification Practices in 10 Palm Oil Producing Countries (2018-2024).

Country	Challenge	Opportunities	Data source
Indonesia	Deforestation and land tenure conflicts	Adoption of RSPO and ISPO certification schemes	Aziz, et al. [15]
Malaysia	High production costs	Development of modern agricultural technologies	Nara, et al. [34]
Thailand	Limited access to technology for smallholders	Enhancement of training and education programs	Deng, et al. [85]
Colombia	Social and security-related challenges	Utilization of agricultural waste for bioenergy production	Pardo, et al. [69]
Nigeria	Political instability and governance uncertainty	Crop diversification and improved market access	Aziz, et al. [15]
Pantai Gading	Biodiversity loss due to deforestation	Implementation of agroforestry initiatives	López-Orozco, et al. [36]
Guatemala	Inadequate financial resources and investment	Strengthened integration into global markets	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]
Honduras	Insufficient infrastructure development	Support from international institutions and organizations	Méndez, et al. [70]
Ekuador	Lack of awareness and knowledge on sustainable practices	Farmer extension services and capacity-building programs	Rodríguez, et al. [86]
Brasil	Heavy dependence on global market dynamics	Innovation in agricultural technologies and sustainable practices	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (R.S.P.O.) [68]

This table highlights that although Sustainable Intensification (SI) implementation presents diverse challenges across palm oil–producing countries, it concurrently reveals substantial opportunities to enhance the productivity and welfare of oil palm smallholders. For instance, Indonesia grapples with critical issues such as deforestation and contested land tenure, yet the adoption of RSPO and ISPO certification systems provides a pathway to strengthen sustainable practices and expand international market access. Malaysia's high production costs can be mitigated through the application of modern agricultural technologies aimed at improving efficiency and reducing long-term expenditures. Similarly, Thailand's limitations in smallholder technology access may be addressed through targeted education and training programs that enable technology adoption. In Colombia, social instability and security concerns remain key barriers, but the integration of bioenergy strategies, particularly the conversion of agricultural waste, offers dual benefits of improving both energy efficiency and farmer income.

Likewise, Nigeria's political uncertainty may be offset by promoting crop diversification and broader market access to enhance farmer resilience. Côte d'Ivoire (Gading Beach) contends with deforestation and biodiversity loss; however, agroforestry-based sustainable intensification (SI) models have the potential to reconcile conservation goals with economic benefits. In Guatemala, limited financial capacity remains a challenge, yet increasing the market share of certified sustainable palm oil can attract investments. Honduras, facing infrastructure deficits, could benefit from international institutional support to strengthen its agricultural backbone. Ecuador's knowledge gap regarding sustainable practices can be addressed through comprehensive extension services and farmer training programs. Meanwhile, Brazil's dependency on volatile global markets may be managed through innovation in agricultural practices and technologies, thereby increasing competitiveness. The novelty of this study lies in its comparative assessment of both constraints and enabling factors for SI adoption across ten key palm oil–producing nations from 2018 to 2024. By integrating country-level analysis with actionable policy and technology insights, this research provides a holistic framework for advancing SI in diverse socio-political and ecological contexts, laying the groundwork for a more sustainable and resilient global palm oil sector.

4. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive synthesis of Sustainable Intensification (SI) practices in the palm oil sector, using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to evaluate their impact on smallholder productivity and welfare. SI has proven effective in increasing yields and income through practices such as precision agriculture, organic fertilization, efficient water management, and crop diversification, all without expanding land use, thereby supporting environmental sustainability. Indonesia and Malaysia dominate SI research, supported by strong institutional frameworks and international collaborations. Other countries, including Colombia, Nigeria, and Guatemala, exhibit varied levels of adoption, shaped by local socio-

political and agroecological contexts. Despite demonstrated benefits, implementation faces critical barriers such as limited access to technology, high upfront costs, and insufficient training for smallholders. However, international certification schemes (e.g., RSPO, ISPO), policy interventions, and donor support present key opportunities to promote broader adoption. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of bibliometric mapping and thematic analysis, linking SI practices with measurable improvements in productivity and income across ten producing countries. Nevertheless, limitations include a focus on major producers and English-language sources, potentially excluding local knowledge and smaller-scale studies. Future research should involve field-based evaluations and extend to underrepresented regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. A holistic policy framework emphasizing capacity building, access to finance, and long-term sustainability monitoring is essential to accelerate SI adoption and ensure a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable global palm oil industry.

5. Recommendations

To enhance the adoption of Sustainable Intensification (SI) in the palm oil sector, several strategic actions are recommended. First, increasing access to modern agricultural technologies and training is essential to empower smallholders. Second, policy incentives such as subsidies, microfinance, and targeted extension services should be expanded to reduce adoption barriers. Third, promoting sustainability certification (e.g., RSPO, ISPO) can improve market access and income. Finally, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, including government, research institutions, and international agencies, is vital to ensure inclusive, scalable, and context-specific SI implementation. These efforts collectively support both environmental sustainability and improved livelihoods for oil palm smallholders.

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