

Reconstructing Well-Being for the Millennial Generation: A Phenomenological Study of Palm Sugar Production in Polewali Mandar

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ABSTRACT

Background: The palm sugar sector in Polewali Mandar Regency plays an important role in the local economy, yet there is a declining interest among the millennial generation to work as palm sugar producers. This phenomenon raises concerns about the sustainability of production and rural workforce regeneration.

Aims: This study aims to reconstruct the meaning of well-being among millennials who choose not to work as palm sugar producers, and to understand how their subjective interpretations of work influence career decisions in the traditional agricultural sector.

Method: A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, conducted from July to September 2025 in four sub-districts of Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven purposively selected informants, including millennials and elderly palm sugar producers. Data analysis focused on identifying perceptions of well-being, work preferences, and lifestyle aspirations.

Findings: The results indicate that for millennials, well-being extends beyond basic economic fulfillment to include financial stability, self-development opportunities, lifestyle flexibility, and work-life balance. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, they tend to prioritize higher-level needs such as self-actualization and social recognition, rather than merely meeting physiological needs. Traditional palm sugar production is perceived as physically demanding, monotonous, and socially limiting, whereas formal sector jobs are seen as offering prestige, stability, and personal growth.

Conclusion: The shifting meaning of well-being among millennials reflects broader value changes that challenge workforce regeneration in traditional agriculture. Local governments and the private sector should diversify employment opportunities and modernize the palm sugar sector to make it more attractive to younger generations.

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1. Introduction

Palm sugar, with its sweet flavour derived from the sap of the palm tree, enjoys high popularity. It is not only popular domestically but has also spread to developed countries such as the United States, New Zealand and even Saudi Arabia (Harianto & Wahdah, 2017), thereby having an impact on the national economy (Bakri, Daga, & Samad, 2022). Within the country itself, it is distributed throughout Indonesia, particularly in rural areas. Although it is known as a low-quality product, it offers a variety of benefits. In addition to being used as a daily food staple, it can also be used for health therapies (Aguayo Torrez, 2021; Albafery, 2020). Its distinctive aroma also serves as a unique selling point for consumers. Palm sugar has significant economic value, making it a potential export commodity (Budiman, Sukiyono, & Sumantri, 2013). Polewali Mandar Regency is known as one of the largest producers of palm sugar in West Sulawesi Province. This palm sugar production is capable of supplying several areas within Polman Regency and even as far as Kalimantan.

According to data from the West Sulawesi Plantation Agency, Polewali Mandar Regency is the largest producer in West Sulawesi Province, with a production of 404 tonnes of sugar palm. This high production volume is largely due to the natural conditions that are conducive to sugar palm production in Polman Regency. Palm trees mostly grow wild, not only in lowlands but also in highlands at altitudes of 1,400 metres above sea level. The demand for palm sugar in Limboro Sub-district is estimated to reach 1,000 units per day, with prices that fluctuate constantly; for example, they may be Rp 10,000 per unit and sometimes rise to Rp 12,000, having even reached a peak of Rp 18,000. According to the law of demand, price is inversely proportional to the quantity of goods demanded by consumers (Arwin, Sutrisno, & Nurfitriani, 2023); however, this contradicts the reality that increases in the price of palm sugar do not reduce the demand for it, particularly in the traditional markets found in Polewali Mandar Regency.

There is an interesting phenomenon in Polewali Mandar Regency, particularly in palm sugar-producing areas such as the sub-districts of Limboro, Campalagian, Mapilli and Alu, namely that palm sugar producers are predominantly elderly residents. These elderly residents are those aged over 55. This indicates that the younger generation of the workforce, commonly referred to as the millennial generation in Polman Regency, is no longer interested in working in this sector. The millennial generation comprises those born between the 1980s and the early 2000s, or aged approximately 23 to 43 in 2024. Consequently, there is growing concern among the local population regarding the dwindling number of new palm sugar producers. One cause of the scarcity of palm sugar producers is a shift in the younger generation's career aspirations away from continuing their parents' tradition as palm sugar producers. The decline in the number of young people farming is attributed to a lack of youth working in the sector (Arvianti, Masyhuri, Waluyati, & Darwanto, 2019). They tend to prefer working outside the agricultural sector, both in their home villages and in urban areas (Pinem et al., 2020). Low interest among young people is a classic phenomenon in the agricultural sector. An interest in farming reflects a desire to work as a farmer that is acquired through learning, rather than by chance (Marza, Ismono, & Kasymir, 2020).

Given the lack of new entrants to the industry, there are concerns that this will lead to a reduction in the supply of palm sugar on the market, particularly in Polewali Mandar Regency. Farmers aged 35 are categorised as young farmers (Davis, Caskie, & Wallace, 2013; Katchova & Ahearn, 2016). The scarcity of young palm sugar producers is also linked to the economic benefits of being a palm sugar producer. Given the income generated by the profession, it

holds significant potential for improving family economic well-being. This is based on an initial interview with Mr Hasan (55 years old) on 23 October 2024, a palm sugar producer who revealed that the daily sales volume of palm sugar is 60 pieces, with an average weight of 1 kg per piece, enabling him to achieve a daily sales revenue of Rp. 600,000. The scale of sales received by palm sugar producers represents a fantastic income for those working in the agricultural or plantation sector. The reason is that other agricultural products are only harvested at specific times, such as coconuts which are harvested every three months, whereas palm sugar can be produced daily. It can be said that becoming a palm sugar producer is highly promising as a primary profession, as it offers the potential to improve family economic well-being. A prosperous family is one that is able to meet its various needs and is described as a high-quality family because it fulfils requirements in the areas of education, the economy, health, socio-cultural life, independence and spiritual activities. Income earned from work must be used to meet the family's needs and spent on improving their well-being.

Despite the growing discussion on agricultural regeneration, studies integrating the meaning of work perspective with millennials' interpretations of well-being in the traditional agricultural sector remain limited, particularly in the context of rural Indonesia. Furthermore, research specifically examining palm sugar producers from a socio-psychological and phenomenological perspective is still scarce. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by reconstructing the meaning of well-being among millennials who choose not to engage in palm sugar production in Polewali Mandar Regency.

This research contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it expands the study of agricultural regeneration beyond economic explanations by incorporating subjective interpretations of work and well-being. Second, it integrates the meaning of work perspective with Maslow's hierarchy of needs to understand work preferences among rural millennials. Third, this study provides empirical evidence from traditional agricultural communities that can inform policies aimed at sustaining workforce regeneration and rural development. Therefore, this study aims to examine how millennials construct the meaning of well-being and how these interpretations influence their decision not to pursue work as palm sugar producers.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

2.1. Meaning of Work (MoW)

Meaning of work (MoW) is defined as a subjective attribute individuals assign to their work experiences aside from its economic importance. In other words, unlike the job characteristics and objective work context, MoW relates to work providing individuals with a feeling of purpose, personal identity, and congruency with their values and life goals (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). According to Rosso et al. (2010), meaningful work experience results from four main sources, including individu, others, context, and spirituality of one's life. The interplay of these sources determines whether an individual sees his or her work as meaningful.

Wrzesniewski and his colleagues define job, career, and calling orientations in relation to the ways individuals see their work (Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013). Job orientation focuses on the economic side of work and the benefits that can be received in return for doing it. Career orientation relates to using work for promotion and gaining recognition from other people. Calling orientation, on the contrary, implies work being seen by individuals as satisfying and important for the common good.

According to Steger & Dik (2009), meaningful work is made up of three different dimensions, including: positive meaning, where individuals have the perception that their work is important; meaning making through work, which entails making sense out of day-to-day activities; and greater good motivation, which denotes the intrinsic desire to go above and beyond one's self. Previous research has established that the existence of meaningful work leads to improved well-being, job satisfaction and reduced employee turnover even if the financial incentives are relatively low.

In the context of agriculture and rural communities, meaning in work becomes particularly significant since occupations, such as palm sugar manufacturing, are often tied to ancestry, local culture, and knowledge transmission. Nevertheless, when the younger generation (e.g., millennials) starts redefining meaningful work, conflicts might arise between pre-existing roles and individually constructed career paths. Exploring the underlying issues will require incorporating Meaning in Work (MoW) theory into other models of human motivation, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

2.2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One of the most prominent models regarding human behavior is the Hierarchy of Needs by Abraham Maslow. Maslow claimed that all human beings have various needs which are hierarchically placed in a pyramid consisting of five stages which are: (1) Physiological needs (such as food, drink, clothing, housing, and rest), (2) Safety needs (including security, financial stability, good health), (3) Love and belonging (including relationships with friends, relatives, and community), (4) Esteem needs (such as confidence, success, and prestige among other people), and (5) Self-Actualization (realization of one's potential).

According to Maslow, lower-order needs should be largely fulfilled before individuals will be motivated by higher-order needs. This hierarchy, however, is flexible and can be redefined in terms of culture and generation. Those who have enjoyed extended economic stability may place esteem and self-actualization at high levels even before safety needs get fulfilled. Alternatively, lack of economic security may put these higher order needs on the back burner. Since the last few decades, the concept proposed by Maslow has been used in the analysis of career selection, consumption patterns, and motivation among various generations (Sari & Dwiarti, 2018; Bari & Hidayat, 2022). The applicability of the theory is evident from its application in assessing generational changes in work orientation, especially because millennials in the developing world meet their physiological needs through family and societal support, which helps them give importance to other needs while selecting careers.

2.3. Definition of Work Theory

Work definition means the subjective value that people place on work aside from the objective fact of providing income through work. Work can offer identity, social recognition, purpose, mastery, and social ties (Abdillah, 2010). The definition of work varies depending on the generation of individuals concerned. The traditional generation views work as a legacy, obligation, or sheer survival. Meanwhile, the millennials tend to see work as an avenue for self-realization, lifestyle statement, and social contribution (Angela & Effendi, 2015; Arif, 2021).

Agriculture, in the rural setting of Indonesia, is characterized by meanings of belongingness, sustainability, and community contribution. Nonetheless, due to the increased exposure of youth to digital technology, city life, and the discourse surrounding white-collar work, the perception of agricultural and plantation work has changed significantly. If the meaning attributed to agricultural and plantation work goes against the ideals and expectations of

millennials about work, who want flexibility, social recognition, and upward career mobility, they will definitely eschew such types of work even if they pay well (Widayanti et al., 2021; Tampi et al., 2021).

2.4. Conceptual Framework

This study integrates Maslow's hierarchy of needs with the theory of the meaning of work to understand why millennials do not want to work as palm sugar producers in Polewali Mandar Regency. The conceptual framework is structured based on the process of constructing meaning rather than causal variables, in accordance with a phenomenological approach. The framework proceeds as follows:

- a. Life Experiences and Social Exposure: Millennials in Polewali Mandar are exposed to alternative lifestyles, career opportunities, and value systems through social media, education, migration, and interactions with urban centers. These experiences shape their perceptions of what constitutes a desirable life and career.
- b. Perceptions of Palm Sugar Production: Based on observations of the work of their parents and older generations, millennials construct perceptions of palm sugar production as physically demanding, monotonous, socially isolating, and offering limited career advancement or personal development.
- c. Construction of Meaning of Work: Millennials assign meaning to work based on criteria including financial stability, social recognition, flexibility, career mobility, and opportunities for self-development. Traditional palm sugar production is interpreted as failing to meet these criteria, while formal sector employment (civil servants, entrepreneurship, education, and trade) is seen as aligned with these meanings.
- d. Reconstruction of Well-Being: Millennials reconstruct the meaning of well-being not only as economic sufficiency but also as security, social esteem, quality of lifestyle, and self-actualization. This reconstructed meaning of well-being influences their career decisions.
- e. Career Decisions: Based on this meaning-making process, millennials choose to reject palm sugar production and pursue formal sector employment, which they believe will fulfill their higher-order needs and provide a more meaningful life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore how millennials construct meanings of well-being and interpret career choices related to palm sugar production. A phenomenological approach is considered appropriate because this study aims to understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and subjective meanings that individuals attach to their career decisions and life aspirations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals experience and interpret their world, making it suitable for exploring how millennials construct meanings around work, well-being, and career preferences.

3.2. Research Location and Duration

This research was conducted in Polewali Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Interviews in October 2024 served as preliminary exploratory interviews, while the main fieldwork was conducted from July to September 2025. The research locations were selected using a purposive sampling technique in four sub-districts: Limboro, Campalagian, Mapilli, and Alu Regencies. These areas were purposefully selected based on several considerations. First, these areas have suitable environmental and agricultural conditions for

palm sugar production. Second, these areas represent the main palm sugar producing areas in Polewali Mandar Regency. Third, the palm sugar production sector in these areas is largely managed by the older generation, indicating a limited job creation process. Fourth, the majority of local youth, particularly millennials, show low participation in palm sugar production activities.

3.3. Informants and Sampling Strategy

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected informants to gain rich and detailed insights into perceptions of well-being, the meaning of work, and work preferences. Informants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide substantial information regarding the phenomenon under study. The selection criteria for millennial informants included: (1) being between 23 and 43 years old (millennial generation), (2) having a family background in palm sugar production or living in a palm sugar-producing area, (3) not currently working as a palm sugar producer, and (4) having knowledge of the palm sugar production process and local agricultural dynamics. Elderly palm sugar producers were included as comparison informants to provide insight into generational differences in perceptions of work and well-being. The inclusion of elderly producers was intended to explain how the meanings attached to palm sugar production have shifted across generations, not to represent the perspectives of all older workers. The characteristics of the research informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Information

No	Name	Age	Occupation	Information Relevance
1	Kaco	28 years	Cocoa farmer	Millennial who left palm sugar work for other agricultural sector
2	Ilham	23 years	Student	Millennial pursuing higher education; family in palm sugar production
3	Budiman	25 years	Postgraduate student/Village-Owned Enterprise Staff	Millennial with village administrative role; social mobility aspirations
4	Tison	29 years	Entrepreneur	Millennial who chose entrepreneurship over inherited palm sugar work
5	Saril	56 years	Palm sugar farmer	Elderly producer; comparative perspective on generational differences
6	Kuyi	55 years	Palm sugar farmer	Elderly producer; long-term experience in palm sugar production
7	Hasan	55 years	Palm sugar farmer	Elderly producer; provides insight on income and work conditions

Source: Data processed by researchers, 2025.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed based on the theoretical framework of the meaning of work and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The interview guide included open-ended questions exploring: (1) the informants' understanding of well-being and what constitutes a good life, (2) perceptions of palm sugar production as a profession, (3) career aspirations and preferences, (4) reasons for choosing or avoiding palm sugar production, (5) comparisons between agricultural and non-agricultural work, and (6) lifestyle aspirations and social values. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and was conducted at a location chosen by the informants, primarily at their homes or workplaces. All interviews were conducted in local languages (Mandarin and Indonesian)

to ensure comfort and natural expression. Interviews were audio-recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim into Indonesian for analysis. Field notes were also taken during and immediately after the interviews to capture contextual observations and researcher reflections.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed the phenomenological analysis procedure outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell & Poth (2018), which involved several steps:

- a. Horizontalization: Each interview transcript was read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding. All relevant statements and expressions regarding the phenomenon (meaning of well-being, perceptions of work) were listed and treated as having equal value. Irrelevant or repetitive statements were discarded.
- b. Meaning Units: Significant statements were grouped into meaning units based on their content and relevance to the research question. For example, statements about income stability, social recognition, lifestyle aspirations, and perceived physical difficulties were grouped into tentative categories.
- c. Theme Development: Meaning units were analyzed to identify emerging themes that captured the essential structure of the informants' experiences. These themes were refined through repeated comparisons between informants and through discussions among researchers to ensure interpretive validity.
- d. Textual and Structural Descriptions: Textual descriptions capture what participants experienced (the content of their perceptions and meanings), while structural descriptions capture how they experienced these phenomena (the context and conditions that shaped their interpretations). These descriptions were integrated to form the key themes presented in the findings.
- e. Epokhé and Researcher Delimitation: The research team engaged in reflective delimitation to minimize researcher bias. This involved written reflections on the researchers' own assumptions and preconceptions about palm sugar production and millennial career choices. These reflections were discussed within the research team to raise awareness of potential bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the informants' accounts.
- f. Theme Validation: Identified themes were presented back to selected informants during follow-up conversations to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and meanings. This member-checking process enhanced the credibility of the findings.

3.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, this study used four criteria following Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through sustained engagement throughout the fieldwork period, triangulation of data sources (millennial and elderly informants), and member checking as described above. Transferability was addressed through providing rich and in-depth descriptions of the context and participants, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts. Reliability was addressed through maintaining a detailed audit trail of data collection, analysis decisions, and interpretation processes. Confirmability was maintained through reflective delimitation and ensuring that the findings emerge from the data, not from the researcher's biases.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Result

Phenomenological analysis reveals five important themes that describe how the millennial generation in Polewali Mandar constructs the meaning of well-being and their subsequent career decisions. These themes are: (1) Well-being as Financial Stability Beyond Daily Income, (2) Well-being as Social Mobility and Prestige, (3) Well-being as Freedom, Flexibility, and Work-Life Balance, (4) Palm Sugar Production as a Physically Demanding and Socially Restrictive Job, and (5) Formal Employment as a Symbol of Recognition and Self-Development. Each theme is presented with supporting interview excerpts and interpretive analysis.

4.1.1. Well-being as Financial Stability Beyond Daily Income

Millennials in Polewali Mandar do not view well-being merely as the ability to meet daily subsistence needs but conceptualize it as long-term financial security, predictability, and the capacity to plan for the future. While some palm sugar producers can earn substantial daily income, millennials perceive this income as unstable, unpredictable, and insufficient for long-term economic planning. This perception reflects a shift in understanding of economic well-being from daily survival to financial sustainability.

Ilham (23 years, student) articulated this perspective in the following statement:

"Although income from palm sugar production can reach IDR 600,000 per day, this work requires a lot of time and energy. Many of my friends prefer working outside the region because of the lower risk and more stable income. But for me, prosperity is not just about meeting daily needs but also about being able to meet long-term economic needs." (Interview, 2025)

This excerpt reveals that millennials recognize the potential for high daily income from palm sugar production but evaluate this income against criteria of stability, risk, and sustainability. The reference to "friends working outside the region" indicates a peer influence effect, where social comparison with others in different employment sectors shapes their evaluation of agricultural work. Ilham's distinction between "daily needs" and "long-term economic needs" suggests that well-being is understood temporally it is not about immediate consumption but about building a secure future. This temporal orientation is significant because traditional palm sugar production, with its daily income cycles and vulnerability to market fluctuations and climatic factors, is perceived as incompatible with long-term financial planning.

Similarly, Tison (29 years old, entrepreneur) emphasized the stability dimension of well-being:

"I feel prosperous when I have an income that not only covers my daily needs, such as food, but also goes beyond that. As an entrepreneur, I really enjoy this job because the income is more stable than working like my father as a palm sugar producer, especially if the palm sugar is of poor quality, which would certainly affect my income." (Interview, 2025)

Tison's statement explicitly compares his entrepreneurial work with his father's work as a palm sugar producer. The phrase "more stable income" is central to his definition of prosperity, and he attributes income instability to factors beyond an individual's control, such as quality variations. Perceived vulnerability to uncontrollable factors (weather, market prices, quality fluctuations) makes palm sugar production seem risky compared to formal sector employment where income is regular and predictable. The intergenerational contrast is also clear: Tison acknowledges his father's work but has chosen a different path, suggesting that the meaning of economic well-being has shifted from accepting income fluctuations as a normal feature of agricultural life to seeking the stable and predictable income common in formal employment.

4.1.2. Well-Being as Social Mobility and Prestige

Social well-being, defined as opportunities for social interaction, community recognition, and occupational prestige, emerged as an important dimension of how millennials conceptualize well-being. Unlike older palm sugar producers who may derive social satisfaction from community contributions and family continuity, millennials expressed a strong desire for social mobility and careers that confer social status and recognition.

Budiman (25 years old, postgraduate student) provided an interesting explanation of how social aspirations influence career decisions:

"I enjoy, and even really enjoy, the social relationships I have now. If I were a palm sugar producer, my opportunities would be very limited. Also, I used to be a goat herder. But I couldn't go anywhere. Socializing with the local community is important to me. I probably wouldn't have reached this point if I were a palm sugar producer or a goat herder. Now I also focus on community organizations." (Interview, 2025)

Budiman's narrative reveals a clear connection between work and social mobility. His past experience as a goat herder was described as restrictive—"I couldn't go anywhere"—suggesting that traditional agricultural work is seen as limiting social mobility. His current positions in community organizations and education contrast with his past, suggesting that career development for millennials involves not only economic advancement but also social mobility and expanding social networks. The emphasis on "social relationships" and "community organizations" suggests that well-being encompasses involvement in diverse and active social networks, not just limited to a narrow community of fellow farmworkers.

The prestige dimension is highly visible in how informants talk about formal employment, particularly civil service positions. Budiman explains:

"I think many of my peers prefer jobs outside this sector, such as becoming civil servants (PNS) or working in other sectors that are considered more prestigious. The PNS profession is still highly respected in the village and is considered the highest-ranking profession. It is certainly something to be proud of and can provide high social status." (Interview, 2025)

The civil service profession symbolizes achievement, respect, and social advancement. By calling it "highly respected," Budiman suggests that social status is a collective assessment not just of individual satisfaction but of how society at large views and values various occupations. This is important because it illustrates how well-being for millennials is not solely individual but socially embedded; achieving well-being means occupying a position recognized by society as successful and prestigious. In contrast, traditional agricultural work is implicitly positioned as lacking this social recognition.

4.1.3. Well-Being as Freedom, Flexibility, and Work-Life Balance

Freedom manifested as time flexibility, the ability to engage in a variety of activities, and opportunities for personal growth emerges as a fundamental component of millennials' well-being. Unlike palm sugar production, which requires a daily routine that lasts from dawn to dusk, formal sector employment is perceived as offering greater time flexibility and a better work-life balance, allowing time for social activities, personal interests, and self-development.

Ilham described how limited working hours directly impact social interactions:

"I see my parents happily producing palm sugar. Although my father's palm sugar provides for their daily needs, his income tends to be unstable. I need to make friends with people from other countries and communicate with people not only around me. Furthermore, I hope to become a lawyer in the future, but I certainly can't live here. Imagine if I were a sugar farmer, I certainly

wouldn't enjoy the relationships I have now due to time constraints. I have to go to the forest in the morning and evening to collect sap for the palm sugar I produce now." (Interview, 2025)

This rich quote connects several dimensions of well-being. First, Ilham acknowledges his parents' happiness and the daily economic contribution of palm sugar production. However, he soon shifts to aspirations for broader social connections ("making friends with people from other countries") and a professional career ("becoming a lawyer"). The palm sugar production work schedule collecting sap in the morning and evening is presented as incompatible with these aspirations. The phrase "I definitely can't stay here" reflects aspirations for spatial and social mobility: well-being requires leaving one's immediate environment to access broader social and professional networks. Ilham's vision of well-being is rooted not in the sustainability of local communities but in national and even international connectivity, facilitated by formal professional employment.

Kaco (28 years old, cocoa farmer) expressed similar sentiments about how rural life and agricultural work limit growth opportunities:

"Social well-being is very important to me and greatly influences the sector I choose to work in. Living in the village felt very difficult for me to develop. This social self-development influenced my career decisions. Ultimately, I decided to leave my hometown and look for work elsewhere, where I felt I would have more opportunities to interact, develop personally, and build good social relationships with others." (Interview, 2025)

Kaco's narrative frames well-being as a process of "development" and "growth" that is spatially constrained by rural life. The decision to leave his hometown is presented as a strategy to access opportunities for personal and social development. This aspiration for mobility geographical movement toward perceived opportunities is a hallmark of millennial career strategies and reflects a view of well-being as dynamic and aspirational, rather than static and rooted in tradition.

This theme of lifestyle aspirations was further elaborated by Budiman, who described the differences in experiences between rural and urban life:

"I have a different lifestyle. For example, the Passari area is just a village, so it's ordinary. Interacting with the outside world is different from outsiders. Clothing styles are more diverse. We already know that in big cities, we can understand the outside world more broadly, for example, following clothing trends, different ways of communicating, and daily life, which automatically influences the way we speak." (Interview, 2025)

Budiman draws a sharp contrast between rural and urban life, associating the former with limited and homogenous experiences ("ordinary") and the latter with diversity, exposure, and cultural enrichment. This is not just about consumption patterns (clothing styles) but also communication styles and worldviews. Millennials view well-being as encompassing the cultural and social enrichment that comes from exposure to the wider world enrichment that traditional agricultural work, tied to rural locations and repetitive routines, cannot provide. Therefore, well-being is understood as a holistic lifestyle package, not just economic conditions or employment.

4.1.4. Palm Sugar Production as Physically Demanding and Socially Limiting Work

The millennial perception of palm sugar production is predominantly negative, constructed as physically arduous, socially isolating, monotonous, and lacking in opportunities for personal and professional development. This perception was consistently articulated across all millennial informants, forming a unified interpretive framework that makes the rejection of this occupation intelligible.

Kaco described the repetitive nature of agricultural work and its effect on his sense of personal development:

"In the village, life felt monotonous. Every day was the same routine: working in the fields and producing palm sugar. I felt like I wasn't making any progress, and I wanted to try something different. In Mamuju, I have many friends, and interacting with them has opened my mind. I've learned many new things from my interactions, including more interesting job opportunities, such as cocoa harvesting. Furthermore, working outside the village has given me the opportunity to expand my social network." (Interview, 2025)

The term "monotonous" is significant it captures not just the physical repetition of daily tasks but the psychological experience of stagnation. Kaco equates monotony with lack of progress, suggesting that well-being for millennials is associated with a sense of forward movement and development. Palm sugar production is perceived as static, offering no trajectory of improvement or advancement. By contrast, interaction with friends outside the village is associated with learning, exposure to new opportunities, and social network expansion. The reference to cocoa harvesting as "more interesting" indicates that some agricultural work may be perceived more favorably if it offers variety, social interaction, or less demanding routines. Ilham elaborated on the social limitations of palm sugar production:

"Imagine if I were a sugar farmer, I certainly wouldn't enjoy the relationships I have now because of the limited time. I have to go to the forest in the morning and evening to collect sap for the palm sugar I now produce." (Interview, 2025)

Here, the temporal demands of palm sugar production are explicitly linked to social isolation. The morning and evening sap collection schedule consumes the times when social interactions would typically occur, leaving limited opportunities for building and maintaining relationships. This perception frames palm sugar production not just as physically demanding but as structurally incompatible with social well-being.

The elderly informants provided an instructive contrast. While they acknowledged the physical demands of their work, they did not describe it in terms of monotony or stagnation. Their accounts emphasized family continuity, daily sustenance, and satisfaction from providing for their households. This intergenerational difference in meaning-making is crucial: the same work is interpreted differently across generations because the criteria for evaluating work what constitutes a good life have shifted.

Through the lens of meaning of work theory, palm sugar production fails to provide the sources of meaningful work identified by Rosso et al. (2010). It is perceived as limited in individual growth potential, lacking recognition from others, offering restricted social context, and disconnected from spirituality or purpose beyond economic survival. The meaning millennials attach to agricultural work is therefore impoverished compared to the richer meanings associated with formal employment, which offers career progression (individual growth), social status (recognition), professional networks (social context), and contribution to development (purpose).

4.1.5. Formal Employment as a Symbol of Recognition and Self-Development

In sharp contrast to palm sugar production, formal sector employment particularly civil service positions, but also entrepreneurship, teaching, and professional roles is constructed as offering recognition, self-development, career progression, and alignment with modern identity. The prestige of formal employment was emphasized by multiple informants. As Budiman stated:

"I think many of my peers prefer jobs outside the sector, such as becoming civil servants (PNS) or working in other sectors considered more prestigious. The PNS profession is still highly revered in the village, and it is considered the highest-ranking profession, certainly something to be proud of and capable of conferring high social status." (Interview, 2025)

This statement indicates that formal employment offers something that agricultural work cannot: social recognition and a sense of pride. The civil service is described as conferring "high social status," meaning that working in this sector positions the individual in a socially respected category. This recognition is not merely an individual benefit but a family and community benefit it brings pride to the family and signals achievement to the community. For millennials, whose definition of well-being includes social esteem, formal employment is attractive not primarily for income (though income may be similar) but for the social identity it provides.

Tison's account of entrepreneurship similarly emphasizes the development and control dimensions of formal work:

"I feel prosperous when I have an income that not only covers my daily needs, such as just food, but goes beyond that. As an entrepreneur, I really enjoy this job because the income is more stable than working like my father as a palm sugar producer, especially if the palm sugar is of poor quality, which would certainly affect my income." (Interview, 2025)

Entrepreneurship is presented as providing not just stable income but also a sense of agency and control. The entrepreneur's income is not subject to the same uncontrollable factors (quality variation, weather) as palm sugar production. This sense of agency the ability to determine one's economic outcomes through skill and strategy is a dimension of meaningful work that is absent from palm sugar production, where outcomes are perceived as dependent on uncontrollable natural and market forces.

The construction of formal employment as offering self-development was implicit in statements about career aspirations. Ilham's desire to become a lawyer, Kaco's move to Mamuju for broader opportunities, and Budiman's pursuit of postgraduate education all indicate that formal careers are seen as pathways for personal growth and achievement. Unlike palm sugar production, which is perceived as static and finite, formal careers offer progression, learning, and expansion of capabilities dimensions central to millennials' conception of well-being.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Reconstructing the Meaning of Well-Being: A Generational Shift

The findings indicate that for millennials in Polewali Mandar, well-being is not just about meeting basic economic needs or achieving sufficient income, but also encompasses financial stability, social recognition, lifestyle flexibility, and opportunities for self-development. This reconstructed meaning of well-being fundamentally shapes their career decisions, leading them to reject palm sugar production despite its substantial daily income potential and seek formal sector employment as a more fulfilling path to well-being.

This shift can be understood through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Millennials in Polewali Mandar appear to be oriented toward higher-level needs security (in the form of long-term financial security), belonging (through a broader social network), esteem (through a prestigious career), and self-actualization (through personal growth and development) rather than focusing solely on physiological needs, which are already met through family support systems and the potential daily income from agricultural work. In Maslow's framework, progression toward higher-level needs is possible when basic needs are adequately met. For

this generation of millennials, the economic base provided by family farming activities (including palm sugar production) may be sufficient to ensure basic survival, allowing them to pursue work that meets higher-level needs. In contrast, older palm sugar producers appear to be more focused on physiological and safety needs, finding satisfaction in meeting daily needs through their work. This generational difference in need orientation explains why the same job palm sugar production is considered sufficient by the older generation but inadequate by millennials.

However, Maslow's hierarchy alone does not fully explain these findings. The meaning of work perspective, as articulated by Rosso et al. (2010), provides a complementary lens for understanding why millennials assign different meanings to agricultural work compared to formal sector work. In palm sugar production, sources of meaning are perceived as limited: opportunities for individual growth are few, social recognition is minimal (or negative, associated with low status), the work context is isolating and physically demanding, and the work is not perceived as contributing to broader goals beyond simply household survival. In contrast, formal sector employment is perceived as offering growth, recognition, social connection, and purpose sources of meaning highly valued by millennials.

The alignment between Maslow's higher-order needs and sources of meaningful work explains the career preferences observed in this study. Millennials are not simply avoiding hard work or seeking higher incomes (as the income from palm sugar production can be substantial); they are seeking work that provides meaning, recognition, and opportunities for self-actualization that agricultural work, as currently structured, does not offer. This suggests that interventions aimed at addressing the regeneration crisis in traditional agriculture need to address not only economic factors but also the meaningful and symbolic dimensions of agricultural work.

4.2.2. Reevaluating the Income Attractiveness Assumption

A significant contribution of this study is the finding that income level alone does not determine job attractiveness. This challenges the common assumption that high daily income from palm sugar production will attract young workers. Informants consistently indicated that despite the potential daily income reaching IDR 600,000, palm sugar production was unattractive due to income instability, physical demands, and a lack of social recognition and career progression.

This finding contributes to a growing body of research documenting how job choices among rural youth are shaped by factors beyond income (Arvianti et al., 2019; Widayanti et al., 2021; Tampi et al., 2021). This study extends this literature by demonstrating that the perceived meaning of work and its fit (or misfit) with individual aspirations for social status, career mobility, and self-development are determining factors. The implication for theory is that economic models of agricultural labor supply that assume rational, income-maximizing behavior require additional socio-psychological models that incorporate meaning, identity, and status considerations.

This study also highlights the role of peer influence and social comparison in shaping occupational preferences. Informants frequently referenced their friends' choices working outside the region, pursuing formal education, or engaging in entrepreneurship as factors influencing their own career decisions. These social influences operate through normative pressure (the expectation of achieving similar success) and aspirational modeling (seeing others' careers as examples for one's own). Consequently, occupational decisions are not made

in isolation but within social networks where certain occupations are normalized and others are devalued.

4.2.3. Intergenerational Dynamics and the Transformation of the Meaning of Work

An intergenerational comparison between millennials and senior palm sugar producers reveals a fundamental transformation in understandings of work and well-being. For senior producers, well-being is rooted in daily survival, meeting family needs, and continuing traditions. This work is physically demanding but accepted as a normal condition of life, and satisfaction is derived from meeting household needs and maintaining the family farming heritage.

In contrast, for millennials, well-being is oriented toward future-oriented stability, social mobility, lifestyle quality, and personal fulfillment. The physical demands of agricultural work are not accepted as inevitable but rather perceived as a negative factor to be avoided. Continuing tradition is less valued than opportunities for career advancement and social recognition. This intergenerational shift in values and meanings reflects broader societal transformations, including urbanization, expanded education, media exposure, and the spread of global value systems that emphasize individual achievement and modern lifestyles (Inglehart, 2018; Twenge, 2023).

This generational transformation has significant implications for workforce regeneration in traditional agriculture. Interventions that appeal to the values of older generations, such as emphasizing family traditions and community contribution, are unlikely to appeal to millennials. Instead, effective interventions must address the values and aspirations prioritized by millennials: stability, recognition, flexibility, and growth. This could include modernizing farm work to reduce physical demands (through technology), improving the job's image (through branding and certification), providing clear career progression pathways, and integrating digital and social elements into farming activities.

4.2.4. Integration of Maslow's Hierarchy and the Theory of Meaning of Work

The integration of Maslow's hierarchy and the theory of meaning of work provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the findings. Maslow's hierarchy explains the development of need orientations across generations: as physiological needs are met, higher-order needs for self-esteem and self-actualization become prominent. The theory of meaning of work explains how work is evaluated based on these higher-order needs: work that provides growth, recognition, and purpose is deemed meaningful, while work that lacks these dimensions is rejected.

In this study, palm sugar production failed to meet the higher-order needs of millennials because it was perceived as offering limited growth (no career advancement), minimal recognition (low prestige), and insufficient purpose beyond economic survival (contribution primarily to household maintenance). In contrast, formal sector employment met these higher-order needs because it offered career advancement, social recognition, and a connection to broader organizational goals. This integrated framework can be represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Reconstructing Well-Being among Millennials

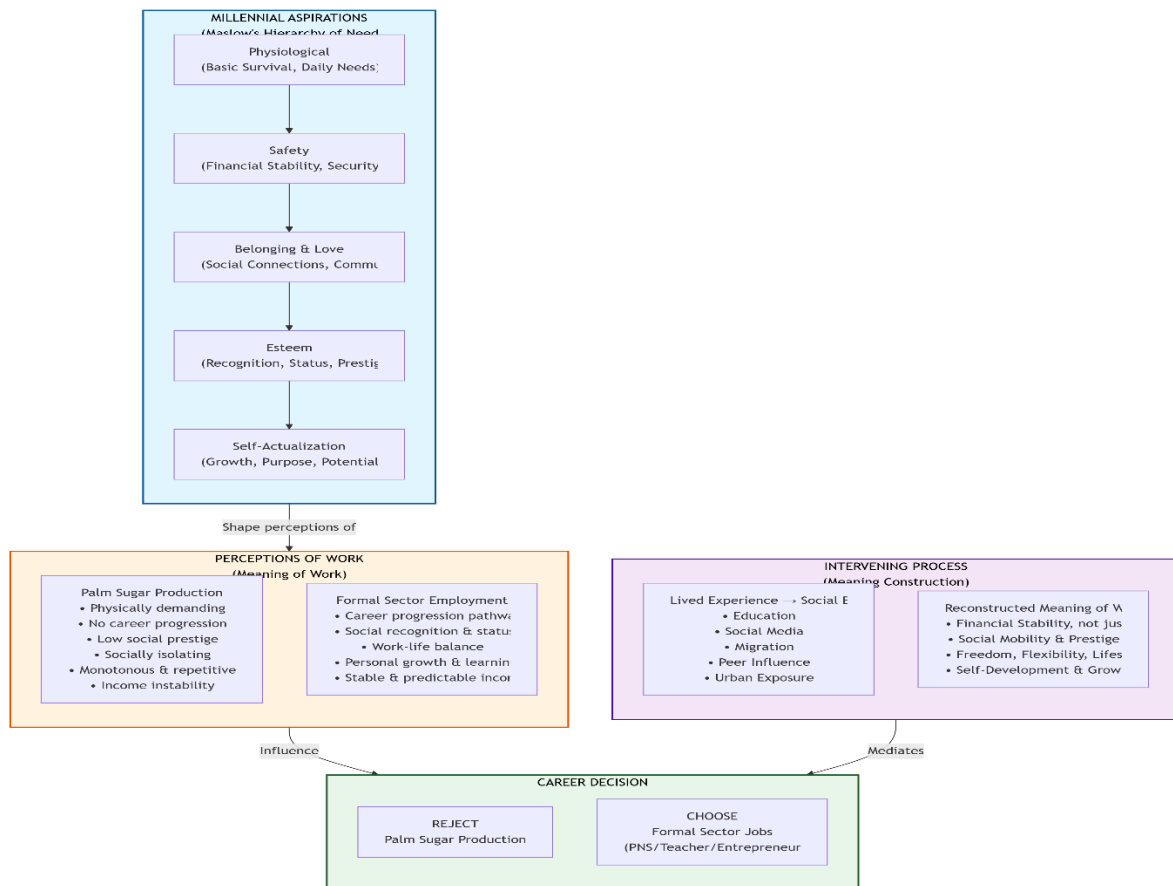


Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between millennials' hierarchical needs and their perceptions of work. When palm sugar production is perceived as incapable of meeting higher-order needs (self-actualization, self-esteem, and belonging), the job is rejected and replaced with formal sector employment, which is perceived as fulfilling those needs. This process of meaning-making is central to the phenomenological approach and explains the observed job choices.

4.2.5. Implications for Agricultural Regeneration Policy

These findings have several implications for policies and practices aimed at addressing workforce regeneration in traditional agriculture. First, efforts to attract young people to the agricultural sector must address the symbolic and social dimensions of agricultural work, not just economic incentives. Enhancing the prestige of agricultural work through branding, certification, and public recognition campaigns can increase the perceived meaning and attractiveness of agricultural work.

Second, interventions should address the specific perceptions that make palm sugar production less attractive: physical hardship, social isolation, lack of career paths, and income instability. This could include technology transfer to reduce physical demands, the formation of producer cooperatives to reduce social isolation and enhance collective marketing, the creation of professional training and certification pathways to provide career advancement opportunities, and the development of value-added processing and direct marketing strategies to stabilize incomes.

Third, these findings suggest that agricultural regeneration must engage with young people's aspirations for modern lifestyles and broader social connectedness. This might include integrating digital technologies into agricultural production and marketing, linking

agricultural activities with tourism and the creative economy, and providing opportunities for young producers to connect with national and international networks.

Fourth, rather than attempting to reverse the trend of youth moving into formal employment, policies can support young people leaving agriculture while simultaneously modernizing the agricultural sector to make it more attractive to those who remain. This dual approach acknowledges the structural transformations occurring in the rural economy while seeking to sustain the agricultural sector through innovation and professionalization.

5. Conclusion

The meaning of well-being for the millennial generation in Polewali Mandar Regency who do not work as palm sugar producers has undergone a significant shift, encompassing three main dimensions: economic well-being (defined as financial stability rather than daily income), social well-being (defined as social mobility, recognition, and broad networks), and lifestyle (defined as flexibility, cultural enrichment, and personal growth). These findings contribute to understanding how younger generations in traditional agricultural communities reconstruct the meaning of work and well-being, moving beyond economic explanations to incorporate socio-psychological and cultural dimensions.

The intergenerational comparison between millennials and elderly palm sugar producers reveals a fundamental value transformation: older producers define well-being through daily survival, family provision, and tradition, while millennials define well-being through stability, recognition, growth, and modernity. This generational value shift is a key driver of workforce regeneration challenges in traditional agriculture. The problem is not simply that millennials dislike agricultural work, but that the meaning of well-being has shifted across generations, making traditional agricultural occupations incompatible with contemporary aspirations.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that local governments and the private sector collaborate to develop strategies that address the regeneration crisis in traditional agriculture. Specifically: 1.) Modernizing Agricultural Work: Introduce technology-based production tools to reduce physical demands, create producer cooperatives to enhance social interaction and collective marketing, and develop training and certification programs to provide career progression pathways for young producers. 2.) Diversifying Employment Opportunities: Develop creative industries, agro-tourism, and technology sectors in rural areas to provide alternative careers that meet millennials' aspirations for financial stability, social recognition, and personal development, while maintaining the agricultural economic base. 3.) Improving Occupational Image: Enhance the prestige of agricultural occupations through branding, public recognition campaigns, and linking agriculture to modern and innovative identities, addressing the symbolic devaluation that makes agriculture unattractive to younger generations. 4.) Digital and Social Integration: Integrate digital technologies into agricultural production and marketing, provide platforms for young producers to connect with broader networks, and link agricultural activities to tourism and creative economy sectors to align with millennials' preferences for connectivity and modern lifestyles.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it uses a qualitative phenomenological approach focusing on the subjective experiences and perceptions of millennials in Polewali Mandar Regency. While this approach provides rich contextual insights into how millennials construct the meaning of well-being and work, the findings may

have limited generalizability beyond the specific socio-cultural and geographic context studied. Different rural areas with different economic structures, cultural values, and agricultural traditions may result in different interpretations of well-being and work preferences.

Second, this study relies on a relatively limited number of informants and primarily explores the perspectives of millennials who have chosen not to pursue work as palm sugar producers. As a result, the perspectives of millennials who remain engaged in traditional agricultural work, as well as other relevant stakeholders such as policymakers, local communities, and agricultural entrepreneurs, are not comprehensively examined. Incorporating these actors could provide a more balanced understanding of intergenerational work transitions.

Third, this study largely interprets the findings through the framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. While this perspective facilitates understanding of changing well-being aspirations among millennials, relying on a single theoretical lens may not fully capture the complexity of the occupational decision-making process. Factors such as social identity, perceived social status, technological orientation, cultural values, and labor market dynamics may also shape millennial career preferences.

Future research should address this limitation by adopting mixed-methods or quantitative approaches involving larger samples across multiple regions to enhance external validity and comparative understanding. Cross-regional and cross-cultural studies could investigate whether shifts in the meaning of well-being among millennials represent broader structural transformations occurring in rural communities. Future studies could also integrate alternative theoretical perspectives, such as the Meaning of Work Theory, Social Identity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, or Career Construction Theory, to provide deeper explanatory insights into occupational preferences among younger generations. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are encouraged to examine how technological developments, rural modernization, and changing labor market conditions influence millennials' perceptions of traditional occupations over time.

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Declaration of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted technology solely to improve the language, grammar, and readability. The authors did not use AI to generate research findings, analyze qualitative data, interpret interview results, or draw scientific conclusions. After using AI, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the content and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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