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## From Socialization to Collaboration: Community Engagement in the UNNES Special Purpose Forest Area (KHDTK), Mount Ungaran, for Conservation and Sustainable Use

S. Martono\*, Margareta Rahayuningsih, Moh. Khoiruddin, Ngabiyanto, Tsabit Azinar Ahmad, Suminar

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author: [martono@mail.unnes.ac.id](mailto:martono@mail.unnes.ac.id)

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### Abstract

The designation of the UNNES Special Purpose Forest Area (KHDTK) at Mount Ungaran has brought new opportunities and uncertainties for communities living adjacent to the forest, particularly in Desa Ngesrebalong, Kendal Regency. Many residents were not fully informed about the change in forest governance, the boundaries of the KHDTK, or their potential roles in its management. This community service program aimed to strengthen local understanding and encourage collaborative engagement in conservation and sustainable utilization of the forest area. The activities were conducted through coordination with local authorities, socialization sessions, field visits, and participatory discussions involving village officials, forest farmer groups, and community representatives. Data were gathered through observation, interviews, and feedback forms to assess changes in knowledge and attitudes. The program found that direct dialogue and joint field supervision of forest boundaries significantly reduced community concerns, particularly among coffee farmers previously involved under the Perhutani scheme. The transition from one-way socialization to participatory collaboration helped build mutual trust and opened pathways for sustainable partnership between the university and local stakeholders. It is recommended that follow-up programs focus on structured community-based forest management schemes, continuous mentoring, and integration of conservation principles into local economic activities to ensure long-term sustainability.

**Keywords:** KHDTK, community engagement, conservation, sustainable forest management, Mount Ungaran

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### INTRODUCTION

Forest governance in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation during the last decade. The state has sought to reform forest management to address environmental degradation, land tenure conflicts, and the growing demand for sustainable development. One of the policy instruments introduced within this reform is the designation of *Kawasan Hutan dengan Tujuan Khusus* (KHDTK), or Special Purpose Forest Areas. Through this scheme, specific forest areas may be allocated for education, training, research, and other strategic purposes under the supervision of universities or research institutions. The regulation aims to strengthen knowledge production, improve forest management practices, and support long-term conservation (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2021).

In 2024, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) received official permission from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry to manage a 68.4-hectare area in Mount Ungaran as a KHDTK. The decision reflects the government's expectation that higher education institutions should contribute not only to academic advancement but also to practical environmental stewardship. As a university that carries a conservation vision, UNNES is expected to integrate education, research, and community service within this forest area. The KHDTK, therefore, becomes more than a physical territory; it represents a meeting point between policy, ecology, academic responsibility, and community life.

Mount Ungaran itself is an important ecological landscape in Central Java. The area belongs to the Western Java Rainforest and Western Java Montane Rainforest ecoregions and still retains significant biodiversity despite pressures from agriculture and tourism (Marin, 2015; Rahayuningsih et

al., 2020). Several villages are located along its slopes, including Desa Ngesrepbalong in Kendal Regency. For generations, local residents have depended on forest resources for livelihoods. Some farmers cultivated coffee and other crops under cooperation schemes with Perhutani, the former state forest enterprise responsible for managing large parts of Java's Forest areas. These arrangements, often known locally as *sanggem*, provided limited but meaningful access to forest land for villagers.

When the management authority shifted and the KHDTK was established under UNNES, many villagers heard about the change through informal channels. However, information regarding the exact boundaries, legal status, and future management plans was not always clear. Interviews conducted prior to the program indicated that a substantial number of residents were unfamiliar with the concept of KHDTK and uncertain about how the new scheme would affect their farming activities. Although many expressed supports for the university's involvement, there were also concerns about losing access to land that had been cultivated for years.

This situation illustrates a common challenge in forest governance: policy change at the national level does not automatically translate into understanding at the local level. Forest management is not only a technical or administrative matter. It is closely tied to social relations, economic survival, and local identity. When information is not delivered clearly, misunderstandings may grow and trust may weaken. Previous studies have shown that effective forest management requires strong community participation and transparent communication (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Larson & Ribot, 2007). Without such participation, conservation initiatives may face resistance or passive non-compliance.

Community engagement is therefore not an optional element but a central requirement in sustainable forest governance. The shift from centralized control toward collaborative management has been widely discussed in environmental policy literature. Participatory approaches are believed to enhance legitimacy, reduce conflict, and create shared responsibility for conservation outcomes (Ostrom, 1990). In Indonesia, social forestry programs have emphasized similar principles by granting communities limited rights and responsibilities within state forest areas. Although KHDTK differs from social forestry schemes, the principle of involving local stakeholders remains highly relevant.

Within this broader context, the establishment of KHDTK UNNES at Mount Ungaran created both opportunities and responsibilities. On the one hand, the university gained a valuable site for education, research, and innovation in conservation. On the other hand, it inherited a complex social landscape that required careful communication and trust building. The surrounding villages were not empty spaces but lived environments with economic activities and historical relationships to the forest. Any attempt to manage the KHDTK without engaging these communities would risk creating tension.

Desa Ngesrepbalong became a primary partner in this community service program. The village is located at an elevation between 510 and 1,560 meters above sea level and has diverse ecological and tourism potential. With more than 2,700 residents, the community combines agricultural livelihoods with emerging eco-tourism activities. Previous studies have documented the presence of biodiversity knowledge among villagers and community-based conservation initiatives (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). However, knowledge about formal forest governance policies remains limited.

Preliminary assessments conducted through interviews and informal discussions revealed three major issues. First, many residents did not fully understand the recent changes in forest management policy on Java. Second, information about the boundaries and legal status of the KHDTK was not widely disseminated. Third, although villagers were generally open to cooperation with UNNES, they were unsure about the concrete forms of participation available to them. These findings became the foundation for designing the community service intervention.

The present paper is therefore grounded in a practical question: how can socialization and assistance activities facilitate a transition from one-way information delivery to meaningful collaboration between the university and local communities in managing the KHDTK? This question reflects a broader concern about the gap between policy and practice. It also responds to the need for universities to implement the Tri Dharma of higher education in a way that integrates community empowerment with environmental conservation.

The background of this study is also connected to global sustainability agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize quality education (SDG 4), clean water (SDG 6), climate action (SDG 13), life on land (SDG 15), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17). Forest ecosystems play a crucial role in regulating water, storing carbon, and protecting biodiversity. At the same time, sustainable forest management cannot succeed without community partnership. The KHDTK initiative at Mount Ungaran, therefore, provides a concrete setting in which these global goals intersect with local realities.

This paper does not aim to present a large-scale quantitative evaluation. Instead, it documents and reflects upon a structured community service program conducted through coordination meetings, public socialization sessions, joint field visits, and participatory discussions. Observations, interviews,

and feedback responses were used to capture changes in participants' understanding and attitudes. The focus lies on describing the process and identifying lessons learned.

It is important to clarify the meaning of “socialization” in this context. In Indonesian policy practice, socialization often refers to the dissemination of information regarding new regulations or programs. While necessary, socialization may remain limited if it only delivers information rather than fostering dialogue. Collaboration, in contrast, implies mutual engagement, shared responsibility, and ongoing communication. The title of this paper, “From Socialization to Collaboration,” reflects the intention to move beyond a one-directional approach toward a participatory model.

Previous experiences in community-based forest management indicate that trust is built through face-to-face interaction and transparency (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Joint activities such as boundary verification and open forums allow stakeholders to express concerns and clarify misunderstandings. In the case of Mount Ungaran, the involvement of village heads, sub-district officials, forestry agencies, and former Perhutani representatives created a multi-actor environment. Such settings can strengthen legitimacy but also require careful facilitation.

The introduction of KHDTK also carries an educational dimension. As a conservation-oriented university, UNNES seeks to integrate environmental values into its academic culture. The forest area serves as a living laboratory for students and researchers. However, the benefits of this laboratory should not be confined to campus actors. Community members can also gain access to knowledge, training, and partnership opportunities. Therefore, the community service program aimed not only to clarify boundaries but also to explore pathways for sustainable economic utilization within conservation limits.

Coffee cultivation represents one of the central issues. Farmers who previously worked under the *sanggem* scheme feared that the new management arrangement might terminate their activities. During discussions, university representatives clarified that sustainable and non-destructive practices would be maintained. By addressing these concerns openly, the program sought to reduce anxiety and encourage shared stewardship.

The major question guiding this paper is: in what ways can structured socialization and assistance activities strengthen community knowledge, reduce uncertainty, and lay the foundation for the collaborative management of the KHDTK UNNES at Mount Ungaran? Subsidiary questions include: What were the community's initial perceptions of the KHDTK? How did participatory activities influence those perceptions? What lessons can be drawn for future university-community partnerships in forest governance?

Answering these questions is important for several reasons. First, it contributes to practical knowledge about implementing KHDTK policies at the local level. Second, it provides insight into the role of universities as mediators between state regulation and community interests. Third, it offers a reflection on community service as an academic activity that goes beyond short-term outreach.

In writing this introduction, the intention has been to present the background clearly and directly. The shift in forest governance created uncertainty. The KHDTK designation provided opportunity but also required communication. The surrounding community needed information and space for dialogue. Through this program, the university sought to address these needs.

The following sections of this paper will detail the methods employed, the activities conducted, and the findings observed during the program. The discussion will examine how the transition from socialization to collaboration unfolded and what implications arise for sustainable forest management. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key insights and provide recommendations for strengthening the long-term partnership between UNNES and the communities around Mount Ungaran.

## **METHOD**

This community service program was conducted from March to August 2025 in Desa Ngesrepbalong, Kecamatan Limbangan, Kendal Regency, Central Java. The village is directly adjacent to the UNNES Special Purpose Forest Area (KHDTK) at Mount Ungaran. Several coordination activities were also held in Desa Medono and at the UNNES campus, particularly at the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM). The main field activities took place in village meeting spaces and within selected points of the KHDTK area during boundary supervision visits.

The program involved lecturers from Universitas Negeri Semarang with expertise in management, biodiversity, public policy, and information systems. Students supported the activities by assisting with documentation, logistics, and communication with participants. The primary partners were the Village Government of Ngesrepbalong, local coffee farmers (including former *sanggem* farmers), youth representatives, tourism awareness groups (*pokdarwis*), and other community

members. Representatives from the Provincial Forestry Office, Perhutani, and the Forest Area Consolidation Center (BPKH XI) participated in sessions on clarifying forest boundaries.

The activities were organized in four stages: preparation, socialization, assistance, and monitoring and evaluation.

**Preparation Stage (March–April 2025).** The preparation began with informal discussions between the UNNES team and the village head of Ngesrepbalong to understand the community's concerns about the recent change in forest management. These early conversations revealed that many residents had heard about the KHDTK designation but lacked clear information about its meaning and implications.

Following this, formal coordination meetings were held with the Sub-district Heads of Limbangan and Boja, as well as village authorities from Ngesrepbalong and Medono. The purpose was to explain the program's objectives, agree on schedules, and identify participants. During this stage, the team prepared presentation materials covering changes in forest governance in Java, the legal basis of the KHDTK UNNES, boundary issues, and principles of sustainable forest utilization. Simple interview guides and feedback sheets were also prepared to document participants' responses.

**Socialization Stage (May 23–24, 2025).** The main socialization activities were carried out on May 23–24, 2025. On the first day, a joint field visit was conducted to observe the KHDTK area directly. University leaders, forestry officials, village authorities, and community members participated in this visit. The field observation allowed participants to see the forest boundaries in person and discuss issues on site. Farmers used this opportunity to raise questions about coffee cultivation and land access.

After the field visit, a formal socialization session was held in a community meeting venue. The session lasted approximately four hours and combined presentations with open discussion. The speakers explained the ministerial decree that established the KHDTK, the objectives of UNNES in managing the area, and the importance of conservation. Special attention was given to clarifying that sustainable farming activities would not be automatically discontinued, provided they complied with conservation guidelines.

On the second day, the activity continued at the UNNES campus in connection with the signing of boundary supervision documents. Forestry officials presented technical explanations about forest area consolidation and the role of different institutions. This session strengthened transparency and reassured community representatives that the process involved multiple stakeholders.

**Assistance Stage (June–July 2025).** After the formal socialization, the program shifted toward smaller group discussions and informal meetings. These sessions focused on exploring practical forms of cooperation between the university and local farmers. Rather than delivering one-way instruction, the team encouraged dialogue. Farmers shared their experiences managing coffee plantations under previous arrangements with Perhutani.

The assistance also included simple explanations about the ecological importance of upper forest areas as water catchment zones and protection forests. Maps and visual materials were used to support understanding. Through these interactions, the relationship between conservation goals and local livelihoods was discussed openly.

**Monitoring and Evaluation (July–August 2025).** Monitoring and evaluation were conducted through observation, follow-up interviews, and written feedback from selected participants. The evaluation focused on changes in knowledge about the KHDTK, perceptions of UNNES management, and willingness to collaborate in future activities.

The analysis relied mainly on qualitative interpretation of responses and field notes. Initial concerns recorded during the preparation stage were compared with statements collected after the activities. Documentation, including attendance lists, photographs, meeting minutes, and video recordings, supported the reporting process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this community service program are presented by combining field-based findings with reflective discussion. The focus is not only on what was done, but also on how the activities influenced community understanding, attitudes, and willingness to collaborate. The findings are organized into several thematic sections that reflect the main stages of the program and the core issues identified at the outset: knowledge of forest governance change, clarity of KHDTK boundaries, perceptions of land-use security, and emerging collaboration between the university and the community.

### **Initial Community Understanding of KHDTK**

Before the socialization activities were conducted, preliminary interviews and informal

discussions indicated limited knowledge among residents regarding the KHDTK status. Many villagers had heard that the forest area was no longer under Perhutani management and that a university would take over. However, few understood what KHDTK meant in legal and operational terms.

Data from earlier interviews showed that approximately 57% of respondents were unaware of KHDTK, and 67% did not understand its benefits. At the same time, 90% agreed that UNNES should manage the forest, and 77% expressed willingness to cooperate. This pattern is important. It suggests that the main issue was not resistance, but lack of information. The community was generally open, yet uncertain.

In several conversations, farmers expressed simple but direct concerns. One farmer said, “We only want to know whether we can still take care of our coffee plants. That is our main question.” This statement captures the practical orientation of villagers. The issue was not ideology or politics. It was about daily livelihood and the clarity of rules.

The literature on participatory forest governance emphasizes that uncertainty often arises when policy changes are not communicated clearly (Larson & Ribot, 2007). In this case, the absence of structured information created space for rumors. Some villagers believed they might be prohibited from entering the forest entirely. Others assumed that new restrictions would be imposed immediately.

Therefore, the first important result of the program is the identification that the gap was informational rather than oppositional. The socialization activities were designed accordingly.

### **Field Visit and Boundary Supervision as a Trust-Building Moment**

One of the most significant moments during the program was the joint field visit conducted on May 23, 2025. Instead of starting with a formal indoor presentation, the team and participants went directly to the forest area. University leaders, forestry officials, village heads, and farmers walked together to observe selected boundary points.

This activity had symbolic and practical value. Symbolically, it demonstrated transparency. Practically, it allowed villagers to see that the KHDTK area did not suddenly erase their presence. The physical landscape remained the same. What changed was the governance structure.



Figure 1. Field Visit

During the field visit, several farmers pointed to their coffee plants and asked whether these plots were included within the KHDTK boundary. Forestry officials explained the consolidation process and clarified that ongoing cultivation would not be abruptly terminated as long as conservation principles were respected.

Trust-building often depends on visible processes. Ostrom (1990) argues that cooperation in common-pool resource management emerges when actors share information and develop mutual monitoring. The joint visit functioned as an initial step toward shared understanding.

Participants later reported that seeing the boundary markers directly reduced confusion. The activity also corrected exaggerated assumptions about the size and scope of the KHDTK. Some villagers had imagined that the entire surrounding forest had been taken over. The field visit clarified that the designated area covered 68.4 hectares and had specific limits. This stage illustrates those technical processes, such as boundary supervision, can become social processes when conducted openly.

### **Socialization Session: From Explanation to Dialogue**

After the field visit, a formal socialization session was held. The session included presentations

about the Ministerial Decree No. 1134/2024, the objectives of KHDTK, and UNNES' conservation vision.

However, the most meaningful part was the discussion. The session lasted about 4 hours, with almost half devoted to questions and responses. Community representatives asked about the future of *sanggem* farmers, potential tourism development, and the possibility of community involvement in research or conservation programs.

The university leadership's response emphasized continuity rather than disruption. It was stated that farmers who had cultivated coffee responsibly would be allowed to continue, under agreed conditions that support conservation. This clarification directly addressed the main anxiety expressed earlier.

The shift from one-way explanation to interactive dialogue marked an important turning point. According to Pretty and Ward (2001), participatory engagement requires space for local voices. In this session, villagers were not passive listeners. They spoke openly and received direct answers from decision-makers.

The effect of this dialogue became visible in subsequent informal conversations. Several farmers stated that they felt more confident after hearing the explanation directly from the rector and forestry officials. One village representative commented, "Now we understand that this is not about taking the forest away from us, but about managing it better." Such statements indicate a change in perception from uncertainty to cautious optimism.



Figure 2. Socialization session

### **Changes in Knowledge and Perception**

Monitoring conducted after the socialization showed noticeable improvement in understanding. Although this program did not employ a large-scale statistical survey, follow-up interviews indicated that participants could now explain what KHDTK stands for and why it was established.

Before the program, many respondents associated the change only with "new management." After the activities, they referred to education, research, and conservation as central purposes. This conceptual shift is important. When people understand the rationale behind a policy, they are more likely to accept it. The improvement in knowledge did not eliminate all concerns. Some farmers still asked about long-term agreements. However, the tone of the discussion shifted from fear to negotiation. This difference matters in community-based resource management.

### **From Socialization to Early Collaboration**

The assistance phase, conducted in June and July 2025, focused on smaller group discussions. In these sessions, farmers described their experience under the previous Perhutani scheme. They explained how coffee cultivation was combined with certain tree species and how local knowledge guided planting decisions.

Rather than imposing a new model immediately, the university team listened. This listening process fostered mutual respect. Conservation was framed not as a restriction but as a shared responsibility. The ecological role of upper forest areas as water catchment zones was explained in simple language, with maps.

During one discussion, a farmer stated, "If we are involved, we will also help protect the forest." This statement reflects the emergence of shared ownership.

The literature suggests that collaboration emerges when stakeholders perceive benefits and fairness (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). In this case, collaboration began with recognition. The university

acknowledged the presence and contribution of farmers. The farmers acknowledged the university's legal mandate.

Although formal cooperation agreements were not finalized within this program period, informal commitments were expressed. Village leaders proposed establishing a communication forum to coordinate future activities. This proposal itself is a result. It indicates movement beyond mere information sharing.

### **Discussion: Lessons for University–Community Partnership**

The findings of this program highlight several lessons. First, policy legitimacy at the local level depends on the quality of communication. The Ministerial Decree provided legal authority, but, in practice, legitimacy required a face-to-face explanation.

Second, field-based engagement is more effective than formal announcements alone. The joint visit and open discussion allowed participants to ask questions directly. This method aligns with participatory governance principles.

Third, community willingness should not be underestimated. Despite limited knowledge at the outset, the majority of villagers agreed with UNNES management. This suggests that openness already existed. The main task was to bridge the information gap.

Fourth, collaboration requires continuity. One socialization session is not enough. The transition from socialization to collaboration is gradual. The program created a foundation, but long-term sustainability will depend on follow-up activities, structured agreements, and shared monitoring.

The KHDTK UNNES at Mount Ungaran represents a new model of forest governance that involves a university as the manager. This model carries potential advantages. Universities can provide research-based innovation, educational outreach, and long-term institutional presence. However, they must also adapt to local realities.

The experience in Desa Ngesrepbalong demonstrates that when dialogue is prioritized, initial uncertainty can transform into constructive engagement. The phrase “from socialization to collaboration” is therefore not rhetorical. It describes a process observed in the field.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper examines how the establishment of the UNNES Special Purpose Forest Area (KHDTK) at Mount Ungaran was introduced to the surrounding community and how the process evolved from simple socialization to early forms of collaboration. The findings show that the main challenge at the beginning was not rejection, but limited information. Many residents of Desa Ngesrepbalong were unfamiliar with the KHDTK's meaning, boundaries, and objectives. At the same time, they expressed openness to cooperation, provided that their livelihoods, especially coffee cultivation, were not abruptly disrupted.

The structured program consisting of coordination meetings, joint field visits, public socialization sessions, and follow-up discussions helped reduce uncertainty. The field visit to observe the forest boundaries directly became a key moment in building trust. The open discussion forum allowed villagers to express concerns and receive clarification from university leaders and forestry officials. As a result, participants demonstrated improved understanding of the KHDTK's legal basis and conservation objectives. More importantly, the tone of community response shifted from anxiety to constructive engagement.

The transition “from socialization to collaboration” was reflected in the emergence of mutual recognition. The university acknowledged the historical presence of *sanggem* farmers and their role in maintaining the landscape. The community acknowledged UNNES's legal mandate and conservation responsibilities. Although formal long-term cooperation mechanisms are still in development, the program laid a foundation for participatory management and future partnership.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, follow-up programs should focus on developing a structured community-based management framework within the KHDTK, including clear agreements regarding sustainable cultivation practices. Second, regular communication forums between the university, village authorities, and farmer groups should be institutionalized to maintain transparency and prevent future misunderstandings. Third, future studies may examine the long-term social and ecological impacts of university-managed forest areas, including how community involvement influences conservation outcomes.

From a broader perspective, this experience suggests that policy implementation in forest governance must prioritize dialogue and trust-building. Legal authority alone is insufficient without social legitimacy. Universities that receive mandates to manage forest areas should view community engagement not as an additional task, but as an integral component of conservation practice.

On a personal level, this program reminds us that conservation is deeply human. Forests are ecological systems, but they are also social spaces. When communication is open and respectful, uncertainty can turn into cooperation. The future of the KHDTK at Mount Ungaran will depend not only on regulations, but on the continued willingness of all actors to work together in caring for the forest and sustaining the livelihoods connected to it.

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