

Sustainable Empowerment Strategies in Rural Areas: A Qualitative Study on Women Farmer Groups

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Abstract

Background - Community empowerment plays an important role in driving sustainable development, especially in rural areas. The Bejiharjo Farmer Women Group (KWT) is an example of community-based empowerment initiatives that have succeeded in developing social entrepreneurship. Through women's active participation, capacity building, and utilization of local resources, this KWT has been able to generate significant economic and social impacts for its communities.

Research Urgency - It is important to understand the empowerment pattern that KWT Bejiharjo applies in building sustainable social enterprises, in order to replicate similar models in other villages. Identification of key success factors can make a major contribution to the development of local potential-based women's and community empowerment programs.

Research Objectives - This study aims to explore the patterns of community empowerment implemented by the Bejiharjo Women Farmers Group (KWT) and identify the key elements that drive the success and sustainability of community-based social entrepreneurship.

Research Method - A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and focus group discussions. Thematic and narrative analyses were conducted to identify key empowerment patterns, with data triangulation ensuring validity and reliability.

Research Findings - The results of the study show that the empowerment carried out by KWT Bejiharjo has succeeded in increasing members' ownership and sense of responsibility for group activities, along with the growth of collective commitment and social bonds. In addition, intensive training from various partners also improves members' skills and knowledge in the fields of production, marketing, and business management. This effort is supported by the utilization and diversification of local resources, which not only strengthens the household economy but also creates added value through processed products and expands the potential of educational agrotourism in the local area.

Research Conclusion - The empowerment model applied by KWT Bejiharjo has succeeded in creating a sustainable social entrepreneurship ecosystem. Shared ownership, capacity building, and utilization of local potential are the main foundations in building economic and social independence at the community level.

Research Novelty/ Contribution - This research contributes to the development of a community-based empowerment model that is oriented towards social entrepreneurship. The findings in this study can serve as a reference for the development of sustainable empowerment strategies in other rural communities with a participatory and local potential-based approach.

Keywords: women's empowerment, women farmer groups; social entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

Rural community empowerment is one of the most important strategies in sustainable development, especially in efforts to improve economic and social welfare. One effective approach to this empowerment is through strengthening the role of women, which not only increases their participation in the local economy but also strengthens the social structure of the community as a whole. Among many community groups, women have a strategic advantage in promoting food and family economic well-being (Gething, 2012; Schutter, 2013). The Women Farmers Group (KWT) is a great opportunity for young people to contribute to the local economy and the agricultural sector, strengthening the position of women in the local economy, but also opening up space for the younger generation to contribute to agricultural innovation and social entrepreneurship.

KWT serves as a forum for village women to improve their knowledge and skills in agriculture, as well as their ability to manage their businesses. Through KWT, women can actively participate in productive economic activities that improve the welfare of their families and communities. KWT not only contributes to the economic sector through product development and sales activities, but also strengthens its members' social networks and selves (Kencana et al., 2022; Camalin, 2017)

Although it has an important role, women's empowerment through farmer women groups faces various challenges. The main obstacles to women's capacity development in rural areas are limited access to resources, low levels of education, and patriarchal culture. In addition, the lack of knowledge about modern agricultural technology and market accessibility is also an obstacle to increasing productivity and profitability. Entrepreneurial mental problems and capital problems are two factors that contribute to the success of KWT (Adawiyah, 2018; Ode & Rohmiati, 2024). Various measures have been taken to address this issue and encourage sustainable empowerment through KWT. One way is through various training and science transfer about managing agricultural products. Increasing the capacity of KWT in the village through training not only increases the knowledge of participants but also increases the selling value of products.

Women's empowerment is also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Lohani & Aburaida, 2017), specifically Goal 5, which promotes gender equality and women's empowerment (Queisser, 2016). KWT can be used to implement the SDGs at the village level by improving the local economy through the use of local resources and skills training (Lestari et al., 2023). Located in Gunungkidul Regency, Bejiharjo Village is an area that has great potential in the development of agriculture-based social enterprises and local tourism. The Women Farmers Group (KWT) in this village has an important role in managing yard land, processing agricultural products, and initiating innovative forms of agro-tourism. Women's involvement in this sector not only has an impact on improving the household economy, but also on strengthening social networks and the resilience of village communities. However, an in-depth study of the empowerment model applied by KWT in building sustainable social enterprises is still limited. Therefore, a qualitative study is needed to explore the empowerment practices that have been running, the challenges faced, and the potential innovations that arise from local initiatives run by women farmers.

The main focus of this study is to understand the empowerment strategy model carried out by KWT in Bejiharjo Village in the context of sustainable social entrepreneurship development. This research aims to identify how women's empowerment can promote social, economic, and environmental sustainability simultaneously, especially in rural areas. Using a qualitative approach, this study will explore the different forms of best practices, the role of local values, and the participatory dynamics that shape the empowerment process. The experience and narrative of KWT members in designing and running productive businesses based on local resources will be the main data source in developing an adaptive and contextual empowerment model framework. Thus, this research is expected to be able to make a conceptual and practical contribution to the development of inclusive, resilient, and social entrepreneurship-based villages.

METHODS

Research Approach and Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design (Tetnowski, 2015) to understand the pattern of community-based community empowerment applied by the Women Farmers Group (KWT) Bejiharjo. The case study was chosen because the researcher will conduct an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of empowerment that occur in the community. This approach also allows a more comprehensive

understanding of the social interactions that occur, the roles of actors, and the supporting and inhibiting factors in the empowerment process.

Research Location and Participants

This research was conducted at KWT Bejiharjo, a community that focuses on empowering women through the agricultural sector and creative economy. Which is located in Bejiharjo village, Karngmojo, Gunungkidul. The participants in this study consisted of:

KWT members, who play a direct role in empowerment activities, KWT administrators, who are responsible for programme planning and implementation, as well as External parties, assistants or partners involved in supporting empowerment activities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their active involvement in the empowerment programme (Tongco, 2007).

Data Collection Technique

Data collection in this study was carried out using several techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and focus group discussions (FGD). In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions to explore participants' experiences and perceptions (Longhurst, 2009) of the empowerment programme, particularly with KWT members and administrators, to understand group dynamics, empowerment strategies, and their impacts on the community. Participatory observation was carried out by researchers who directly engaged in KWT activities, such as agricultural training, processed food production, and product marketing, to gain a contextualised understanding of social interactions, communication patterns, and programme effectiveness (Walsh, 2009). Documentation in the form of activity reports, training modules, and photos or videos of community activities was also collected to support the findings from interviews and observations. Furthermore, FGDs were organised with small groups of KWT members to identify community social dynamics, assess programme effectiveness, and explore collective perspectives on challenges and opportunities in empowerment.

Data Analysis Technique

The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis techniques (Clarke, 1999; Bennett & Budka, 2019) that allow researchers to identify patterns and key themes in the data, so as to provide in-depth insights into KWT members' experiences and perceptions of the empowerment programme, which consists of several stages: Data reduction, which is the selection, focusing, and simplification of relevant data, Presentation of data, through categorisation based on emerging themes, as well as Drawing conclusions, by interpreting the patterns found.

Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this research applied the triangulation technique (Golafshani, 2015), by comparing findings from various data sources (interviews, observations, documentation, and FGDs). The validity of the research was maintained through member checking (Zairul, 2021), by verifying the findings with the research participants. Research reliability was ensured through detailed documentation at each stage of data collection and analysis, and consistent use of interview and observation guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The utilization of local resources includes various aspects, including natural potential, cultural richness, and local wisdom. The use of these resources is effectively optimized through KWT so that it can open up new opportunities, increase competitiveness, and create sustainable community development strategies. The formation of farmer groups is also expected to maintain the preservation of nature and the quality of agricultural land through local traditions in cultivating land (Margayaningsih, 2020; Turmudi, 2023). However, there are still KWTs that experience various obstacles in optimizing these local resources. These barriers include a lack of member knowledge and limited access to use appropriate technology, as well as social barriers that limit women's role in decision-making. Empowerment through KWT Bejiharjo is not only about increasing agricultural production or the community's economy, but also about how to strengthen the role of women in various aspects of life, build environmental sustainability, and improve the quality of life of the local community as a whole. This study reveals various important findings related to the community-based community empowerment pattern implemented by the Bejiharjo Farmer Women Group, as described in the following results.

Increases Ownership and Sense of Responsibility

A participatory approach is one of the key strategies in the community empowerment process, especially for rural women's groups who often face limited access to resources, training, and decision-making space. In Bejiharjo Village, the implementation of a participatory approach in the empowerment program of the Women Farmer Group (KWT) has shown its effectiveness in increasing awareness, interest, and active involvement of members. Through involvement starting from the stage of identifying needs to evaluating activities, KWT members are not only beneficiaries, but also subjects who help determine the direction of program development. This is in line with the view of Itzhaky and York (2000) who affirm that active participation is able to arouse the intrinsic motivation of individuals to engage sustainably, while strengthening emotional and social attachment to the program.

In the context of community empowerment, participation not only serves as a means to involve citizens, but also as a mechanism that can produce more contextual, effective, and sustainable programs. Participation allows the community to accept both the success and failure of the program as part of the collective learning process (Anomsari & Abubakar, 2019; Hindsworth & Lang, 2009). This is clearly seen in the experience of KWT Bejiharjo which was able to independently identify the direction of local product development after conducting a simple analysis of market potential. This success is proof that when communities are actively involved in decision-making, the solutions produced tend to be more relevant to local needs and have greater sustainability opportunities.

Furthermore, active participation creates a dynamic collaborative learning environment. KWT Bejiharjo members can share experiences, foster creativity, and strengthen mutual competence. Research by Lestari et al. (2023) shows that opportunities for women to express their feelings in participatory spaces have a significant impact on increased confidence and belonging. In this case, empowerment is not just a technical effort in improving skills, but also builds psychological strength that allows women to appear as agents of change. In line with the view of Crawford et al. (2011), women's rights need to be facilitated through participatory spaces that encourage them to be actively involved in the community, not only as implementers but also decision-makers.

The results of the interview with the Chairman of KWT, LA, confirmed the importance of this approach. He revealed that KWT members are always invited to discuss before the activity starts, so that they feel appreciated and have a real contribution in every decision. This reflects the basic principle of empowerment, namely appreciation for the experience and aspirations of the community. One of the members, NT, also said that at first they only followed the direction of the companion. However, over time and the discussion space became more open, they began to dare to express their opinions, learn together, and feel more confident. A similar impact was also observed by DN as a facilitator, who witnessed the change in members from a passive attitude to a more proactive attitude in proposing ideas and determining the direction of the program. This transformation shows that true empowerment is when people not only accept, but also learn, take initiative, and grow in the process.

The need identification stage is an important foundation in KWT Bejiharjo's participatory approach. Through group discussions, members openly raised the challenges they faced, ranging from limited market access, lack of digital skills, to the need for agriculture-based product innovation. One of the results of the discussion emphasized the importance of digital marketing training so that KWT products can reach a wider market. From here, the facilitator then helps design an appropriate training strategy, ensuring that every member's voice is truly taken into account. Schneider (2019) and Saremi (2015) stated that true empowerment can only be achieved if the community itself designs and implements programs according to their needs, not just following the direction of external parties. This is reflected in KWT's practice of being able to determine superior products after conducting a simple market analysis independently.

At the planning stage, member involvement is reflected in collective decision-making regarding the product to be developed. Considering the market potential as well as the capabilities of members, KWT decided to focus on processed products based on local agriculture. This process not only reinforces a sense of ownership, but also emphasizes the importance of deliberation-based decision-making. At the implementation stage, participation can be seen in various forms of activities, ranging from skills training, processed food production, to marketing. Each member contributes according to his or her capacity; who are more experienced in production guide other members, so that a horizontal learning process between members is created. The Chairman of KWT, LA, emphasized that this collaboration strengthens the sense of togetherness and opens up space for innovation, making the group more adaptive in developing products.

Another important aspect of the participatory approach is program evaluation. At KWT Bejiharjo, evaluations are carried out periodically through group meetings involving all members. This process not only assesses achievements, but also identifies obstacles and formulates new strategies. For example, after a few months of trying to grow chili peppers, members realized the need to increase their knowledge about fertilizer making, so they proposed additional training. This shows the flexibility of the participatory approach that allows the program to evolve according to the dynamics of member needs. In this way, evaluation does not become a purely formal activity, but serves as a means of collective reflection to ensure the sustainability of the program.

Overall, the implementation of a participatory approach at KWT Bejiharjo has resulted in various positive impacts. First, an increased sense of belonging to the program. Members not only feel like beneficiaries, but also owners of the program, so they are encouraged to maintain its sustainability. Second, the growth of confidence. The opportunity to express opinions and make decisions makes women dare to express their ideas and develop their own capacity. Third, the formation of a solid collaborative culture. Through intensive interaction, members support and learn from each other, which ultimately strengthens social cohesion within the group. Fourth, the sustainability of the program is more guaranteed. Since the program is structured based on real needs and is run by the members themselves, its sustainability does not depend on the existence of external companions.

Thus, it can be concluded that the participatory approach is not just a method, but a paradigm in community empowerment. It places the community as the main actor, recognizes local capacity, and opens up space for individual and collective transformation. In the case of KWT Bejiharjo, this approach succeeded in changing the dynamics of the group from initially tending to be passive to an independent, creative, and innovative community. As confirmed by various studies (Itzhaky & York, 2000; Lestari et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2011), women's active participation is an important step in encouraging them as agents of change, who fight not only for personal interests but also for the well-being of the community. Therefore, the experience of KWT Bejiharjo can be used as an example of good practice that true empowerment lies in the active involvement of the community in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs in accordance with their local context.

Increased Skills and Knowledge

The improvement in the skills and knowledge of the members of the Bejiharjo Women Farmers Group (KWT) is a tangible result of a series of training programs designed to address their needs. The program not only focuses on theoretical knowledge transfer, but also provides hands-on practical opportunities relevant to field conditions. Through a combination of theory and practice, KWT members can understand new concepts as well as apply them directly in agricultural activities and organizational management.

Prior to the training program, most KWT members only relied on hereditary farming traditions that were often less efficient. The old ways can still produce harvests, but they have not been able to answer modern challenges, especially in terms of productivity and sustainability. With the targeted training, KWT members began to understand the importance of sustainable agriculture, farm management, and agricultural product marketing strategies. One of the tangible results is the skill of making organic fertilizer independently, which is then applied directly by the members. This has an impact on increasing crop yields, reducing production costs, and increasing profits. In addition to the technical aspects of agriculture, the training received also includes strengthening the managerial capacity and management of the KWT organization. Members are trained to build stronger, transparent, and competitive organizational structures. A good organizational structure allows them to manage the division of tasks more effectively, optimize existing resources, and improve coordination between members. This makes the group more solid and able to achieve common goals in a more targeted manner.

Observations made during the training showed that KWT members had high enthusiasm in absorbing the material given. They are not only passive participants, but actively ask questions, try new techniques, and discuss the application of practices in their respective gardens. After the training, the changes were evident in their work patterns. For example, the use of organic fertilizers produced by ourselves has begun to be applied consistently so that the quality of plants increases and is more environmentally friendly. Group dynamics have also experienced positive development. Cooperation between members is getting stronger, characterized by the emergence of solidarity and a higher sense of togetherness. They support each other when facing obstacles in managing land or marketing crops. Regular discussions in KWT meetings are used as a space to share experiences, exchange marketing strategies, and discuss innovations that can increase the economic value of

their agricultural products. This kind of interaction not only strengthens social bonds, but also creates a sustainable learning ecosystem within the group.

Another impact that emerged from this training program was the increase in the confidence of KWT members. They began to realize that the new skills acquired were able to make a real contribution to the family economy. With the added income from a more productive farm, members can help with household finances and even set aside some for future savings. This success is a source of motivation to continue to innovate and expand business opportunities, both in agriculture and in the marketing of processed products. In addition to providing economic benefits, training also plays a role in social empowerment. KWT members who previously had limited access to learning opportunities now have the opportunity to grow. An inclusive group environment makes each member feel valued and empowered, making them more excited to participate. This kind of women's empowerment program has been proven to provide wider opportunities to develop skills, improve the quality of life, and encourage positive contributions to society as a whole (Pramesti & Hendrik, 2022; Kencana et al., 2022).

More broadly, the success of this program shows the importance of support from various parties, both government, companion institutions, and local communities, in encouraging positive transformation at the community level. Continuous collaboration allows KWT Omah Pasinaon to continue to grow and become a model for other groups in the surrounding area. With this support, women's empowerment programs in the agricultural sector not only improve individual welfare, but also strengthen community resilience to face economic challenges (Scheuler et al., 2014). Through structured and continuous training, KWT Omah Pasinaon members now have a better capacity to manage agricultural businesses. They are able to optimize the use of resources, access a wider market, and build a more effective marketing strategy. This skill improvement shows that women's empowerment is not only limited to providing knowledge, but also creates real opportunities to improve the quality of life.

This pattern of empowerment that touches various aspects of life not only has an impact on increasing income, but also strengthens social solidarity between members. Thus, the success of KWT Omah Pasinaon can be seen as a real contribution to sustainable development at the local level. Empowerment that is carried out in a participatory, sustainable, and integrated manner with the needs of the community, can be an important foundation in creating economic independence while improving social welfare.

Utilization and Diversification of Local Resources

One of the main empowerment strategies carried out by KWT in Bejiharjo Village is the use of yard land and the diversification of local products. This strategy was born from efforts to optimize the potential of the village which has been underappreciated, especially through the use of narrow land around the house to plant vegetables, spices, and family medicinal plants. Through this initiative, KWT members are able to strengthen household food security while reducing dependence on markets outside the village. This not only has an impact on meeting daily food needs, but also builds small-scale economic independence (Widiastuti, 2022; Kencana et al., 2022).

Field findings show that most of the KWT members have utilized yard land with simple or modern methods, such as vertical systems and household-scale hydroponics. This innovation is widely supported by universities through community service programs and by the local agriculture office. This model of local resource utilization is in line with previous research which emphasizes that optimizing local potential is able to strengthen food security while increasing the socio-economic sustainability of village communities (Yuliana, 2018; Ode & Rohmiati, 2024). Furthermore, the diversification of agricultural products into value-added processed products is one of the important achievements of KWT Bejiharjo. Food crops such as cassava, green vegetables, and spices are not only sold in raw form, but also processed into creative products such as cassava chips, fried meatballs, and various processed vegetables. This processing process is supported by entrepreneurship, business management, and food safety training organized by partner institutions and universities. Thus, this activity not only produces products of economic value, but also provides a forum for members to channel creativity while expanding family business opportunities.

Diversification of agricultural products into processed forms can increase the selling value of products while expanding market access. This shows that community-based business development strategies encourage women to play an active role in strengthening the family economy, as well as driving local economic development in a sustainable manner (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022; Assmaa et al., 2012). Processed products developed with good standards are able to compete in a wider market, including marketing through social media which is starting to be driven by KWT members. This activity also fosters the entrepreneurial spirit of

village women, which has implications for increasing household economic independence. In addition to yard utilization and product diversification, the success of KWT Bejiharjo is also marked by the integration of agricultural potential with tourism. Bejiharjo Village is widely known as a natural tourist location, especially Pindul Cave, which is a magnet for tourist visits. KWT utilizes this potential by developing a community-based agro-tourism concept. Agricultural products and processed foods developed by KWT are marketed to tourists, as well as packaged in the form of agricultural educational tour packages. The tour package targets students and general tourists who want to get hands-on experience on sustainable agriculture management.

The integration between local agriculture and tourism provides dual benefits. On the one hand, KWT members get a wider market through tourist visits; On the other hand, tourists gain valuable educational experiences. The presence of agro-tourism strengthens KWT's position as a local creative economy actor who is able to connect the agricultural sector with tourism. Collaboration between KWT, tourism managers, and tourism awareness groups also shows that there is synergy between communities in encouraging inclusive and participatory economic development. Empowerment based on the use of local resources has several important impacts. First, there is a strengthening of household food security through the use of yards. Second, product diversification increases the added value of agricultural products and opens up new household-based business opportunities. Third, integration with tourism expands market access while strengthening local identity as an educational tourism village. Socially, this process also contributes to women's empowerment because the active involvement of KWT members in managing their businesses makes them more confident, independent, and recognized for their role in society.

In terms of sustainable development, this strategy shows that women's empowerment through the optimization of local resources is able to create mutually reinforcing economic, social, and cultural impacts. KWT Bejiharjo's efforts are not only limited to land use, but also the transformation of local knowledge into an inclusive creative economy force. With the support of training, institutional collaboration, and the spirit of mutual cooperation, this initiative is an example of how villages can manage their potential to create economic independence while improving community welfare in a sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the pattern of community-based community empowerment carried out by the Women Farmer Group (KWT) Bejiharjo is in line with the theories of empowerment and community development that emphasize the importance of active community participation in all stages of the empowerment process. The participatory approach applied is able to increase the sense of ownership and responsibility of community members. Direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program encourages the growth of a shared commitment to the success of the initiatives carried out. In addition, improving skills and knowledge through training and educational activities has proven to be effective in strengthening individual and collective capacity. This is an important foundation in encouraging the independence and sustainability of empowerment programs. The utilization and diversification of local resources is also one of the main strengths in the KWT Bejiharjo program. Optimizing the yard of the house for family food cultivation, diversifying agricultural products into creative products, and integrating the agricultural sector with tourism (agrotourism), show innovative efforts that are able to strengthen the economic and social resilience of the community in a sustainable manner

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