

## Jurnal Pemberdayaan Masyarakat *Media Pemikiran dan Dakwah Pembangunan*

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage:  
<https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/dakwah/JPMI/index>

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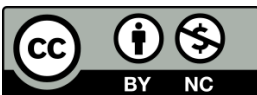
To cite this article: Fadjarini Sulistyowati, MC.Candra Rusmala D, B. Hari Saptaning Tyas, & Condrodewi Puspitasari (2023): Pseudo-Participation in Sustainable Development Programs: A Critical Reflection on Indonesian Local Cases, Jurnal Pemberdayaan Masyarakat: Media Pemikiran dan Dakwah Pembangunan, DOI: 10.14421/jpm.2023.071-05

Type of paper: Research article

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpm.2023.071-05>

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## **Pseudo-Participation in Sustainable Development Programs: A Critical Reflection on Indonesian Local Cases**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is expected that the central government promotes sustainable development goals (SDGs) to enhance social participation and inclusivity in creating sustainable livelihoods at the village level. Although the Indonesian government has implemented policies to increase stakeholder awareness, there are still restrictions on inclusive participation, limiting the democratic process. This paper aims to analyse the promotion of SDGs in Terong Dlingo Village, Bantul Regency, Indonesia, focusing on regulatory aspects and social participation. The research adopts a case study approach using qualitative methods, including observations and in-depth interviews with local practitioners. The findings reveal that the SDGs village program is largely influenced by a top-down approach, despite efforts made by individuals, families, neighbourhoods, and other elements through surveys conducted on SDGs villages. In response, the researchers suggest that greater efforts are needed to effectively socialise and supervise the program to raise awareness among the local population regarding the benefits of SDGs village programs. It is recommended that an effective socialisation and communication strategy be implemented to encourage continuous local participation in this program.

### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 06 September 2022  
Accepted 05 July 2023

### **KEYWORDS**

Pseudo-participation, Sustainable Development Goals, Indonesian Local Cases, Social Solidarity, Communication Strategy

## **Introduction**

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) are of great concern in scholarly work around the globe, as they are essential tools for developing local communities and encouraging their participation in community development programs (Izudin, 2021; Jayasooriya, 2019; Yang, 2018). This has led to efforts in participatory action involving all stakeholders at the countryside level (Panuluh & Fitri, 2016; Sofianto, 2019; Carole- Anne Sé nit, 2020). Although the Indonesian government has issued policies to support the SDGs, there are still restrictions that indicate a top-down approach imposed by the official administration (Henfrey et al., 2023). Data shows that policy-makers have implemented

a social participation scheme that promotes pseudo-solidarity as a core value for improving well-being and economic activities based on natural assets and potential in rural areas (Dai, 2016; Jaya et al., 2022). On the other hand, the Village Law No. 6 of 2014 was enacted to promote independent development of villages and enhance the welfare of villagers, but it has transformed into a form of social care that resembles central government control (Endah, 2020; Lestary & Hadi, 2021). Furthermore, sustainable livelihoods, which are important for creating welfare and production, focus on empowering local people to attract greater social participation in rural areas. In other words, the purpose of village SDGs, which encompass eighteen sustainable advancements, is to contribute around 74 per cent to the realisation of national targets by 2030. However, achieving such development assistance without the involvement of local participation is quite difficult (Mustofa & Dodi Afrianto, 2022).

In 2017, the Indonesian government issued a policy for the implementation of sustainable development goals as a national agenda for welfare production. This policy is integrated into 169 SDGs indicators and is part of a medium to long-term planning process from 2020 to 2040 (Anggraini, 2017; Wijayanto & Nurhajati, 2019). It builds upon the ratification of the millennium development goals (MDGs) under the prevalent United Nations framework (Pratama et al., 2020; David Le Blan, 2015; Omer & Takafumi Noguchi, 2020). The transition from MDGs to SDGs has garnered responses from scholars worldwide. Some academics express concerns that the SDGs' targets may be overly ambitious (Michael Riegne, 2016; Fisher & Fukuida--Parr, 2019), while others appreciate the increased emphasis on social participation and accountability (Breuer & Leininger, 2021).

The village development index (IDM), in line with SDGs regulations, aims to increase knowledge and skills among practitioners to sustain local empowerment. It aligns with the 17 development goals to be achieved by 2030 (Burford et al., 2016). In response, the Ministry of Village Development issued an SDGs regulation in 2021. Its objective is to integrate village development with national SDGs through Law No. 13 of 2020, which pertains to the village budget. This regulation serves as a fundamental tool for village officials to create a budgetary roadmap for advancing development in each rural area. This policy was then followed by Law No. 7 of 2021, which outlines the priority of funding villages by 2022. The promotion of the central government aims to encompass all aspects, symbolised by an icon and a label that resonate with local people. The implementation of a holistic approach is guided by the village icon as a means to popularize convenience (Iskandar, 2020). There is significant concern, as highlighted by Tremblay et al (2021), regarding the need for an integrated and systemic approach to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

In terms of practical implementation, the SDGs village program is designed by IDM to provide detailed information on the welfare status of local people. It serves as a comprehensive process to gather data on community workers, families, and residents at the village level. This data collection effort aims to obtain a better understanding of the village landscape and facilitate effective village development planning. The activities encompass various aspects of rural life and follow the principle of providing necessary

budget-based assistance (Blair et al., 2008). However, the actual level of participation in the SDGs village program by stakeholders remains questionable. Therefore, this study aims to re-examine the restricted social participation in the development of SDGs villages. The researchers specifically focus on Terong Dlingo Village in Bantul Regency, Indonesia, as a primary project objective to promote sustainable development goals. This village has an independent status within the Ministry of Village Development index, with a national score of approximately 48.86 (Pajar et al., 2022; Raharjo et al., 2016).

### **Involving local people and promoting sustainable development goals**

The SDGs play a crucial role in involving local people and promoting development at the landscape level. They serve as a framework for engaging communities in sustainable development initiatives and empowering them to contribute to positive change (Giampiccoli et al., 2016; Sharma, 2020). By embracing the SDGs, local people become active participants in shaping their own development trajectory. The involvement of local people is vital for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that development efforts are aligned with the needs, aspirations, and unique context of the community. Local knowledge and perspectives are valuable resources that can inform effective decision-making and implementation strategies. Secondly, involving local people fosters a sense of ownership, pride, and accountability, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes (Adiputra et al., 2018; Shahib et al., 2020). To effectively involve local people in the development landscape, inclusive and participatory approaches are essential. This entails creating platforms for dialogue, consultation, and collaboration, where the voices of different stakeholders are heard and respected. It also requires providing opportunities for capacity-building and skill development to empower local communities to actively participate in the planning and implementation of development projects. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that involving local people in the development landscape is not without challenges (Raharjo et al., 2016). Issues such as unequal power dynamics, limited resources, and varying levels of awareness and capacity can hinder meaningful participation. Therefore, efforts should be made to address these barriers and ensure that marginalised groups and vulnerable communities are included in the decision-making process.

The main principle of sustainable development goals is to ensure that no one is left behind and to actively support the advancement of all practitioners in the village. Afifuddin and Hanip (2022) explore the use of SDGs platforms in village development planning to build resilience in the face of contemporary challenges. They emphasise that all villages on Madura Island are transforming in line with government guidelines for rural development. On the other hand, Mustofa and Dodi Afrianto (2022) criticise the problematic SDGs village data in the Riau province, focusing on the role of village practitioners in communicating with the local government to provide accurate data on poverty status. They discovered a lack of skilled capacity in program implementation,

difficulties in reaching remote areas, and weak internet access in villages. Saner et al. (2020) also mention that the methodological approach to supervising SDGs programs is still unclear. This contrasts with the principles of the SDGs, which promote inclusivity, participation, and accountability, highlighting the need for clearer guidelines on participation, inclusivity, and transparency in SDGs promotion.

The purpose of local participation involvement is to empower and engage individuals and communities at the local level in decision making processes, development initiatives, and policy implementation. It aims to ensure that the voices, needs, and aspirations of local residents are taken into account, and that they have a direct role in shaping their own communities (Kunjuraman, 2022; Mayaka et al., 2020). Local participation involvement helps to foster a sense of ownership, inclusivity, and accountability, as well as promoting sustainable development and addressing local challenges effectively. It recognizes that local knowledge, expertise, and perspectives are valuable resources in finding context-specific solutions and creating positive social and economic outcomes (Amy, 2017; Cornwall, 2008; Putra et al., 2019). By involving local stakeholders in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes, local participation can lead to more effective and sustainable development outcomes that better reflect the priorities and aspirations of the community.

Building on previous studies, this research focuses on the implementation and participation of the SDGs village program in Terong Dlingo, where there are restrictions in building collaboration and supporting social participation. The study examines the viewpoints of stakeholders in ensuring that no one is left behind. It specifically addresses the vital role of local people as key actors in village development, considering their participation through a democratic process.

## **Research Methods**

This article employs a qualitative approach aimed at understanding specific situations, events, roles, groups, and social interactions (Creswell, 2019). The qualitative research is conducted to uncover meanings and present them descriptively, thus falling under the category of thick description, where researchers strive to capture all details within the social context with thorough and subjectively engaging descriptions (Neuman, 2017). Data collection techniques include Focus Group Discussion (FGD), interviews, observation, and documentation. The selection of research informants utilizes purposive sampling, a technique for selecting informants based on their capacity in SDGs Village implementation. FGD activities involve gathering SDGs Village data collection volunteers, village officials, and relevant stakeholders. The results of the FGD are then followed up with in-depth interviews. The data analysis technique used is inductive analysis employing the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification (Sutopo, 2006).

## Results

### *Implementing SDGs Village: Pseudo-Participation?*

In 2017, the Indonesian government issued a presidential instruction, Law no. 59, aimed at promoting sustainable development. This initiative was designed to involve local communities in the social, economic, and environmental aspects of development (Pratama et al., 2020; David Le Blan, 2015; Omer & Takafumi Noguchi, 2020). It aligns with international agreements on globalisation and climate change. As mentioned earlier, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were initially established to improve the quality of human life while promoting environmental equality. Moreover, this regulation provides guidance to villages for prioritized development, focusing on data collection, developing tourism, ensuring food security, and promoting women's participation.

In practice, the Terong village apparatus collected data for measurable development indicators during the three months (from March to May) in 2021. This activity aimed to promote sustainable development through hybrid meetings in Bantul Regency. However, there were still limitations in addressing various questions about sustainable livelihoods, despite the “*Sapa Desa*” campaign being adopted as the village SDGs. As of now, the program has faced restrictions due to technical problems in uploading data to the website, which is published by the Ministry of Village Development of the Republic of Indonesia. Interestingly, the promotional database had a significant budget of approximately IDR 42,000,000, which is comparatively higher than that of other villages around Yogyakarta. Nevertheless, according to the volunteers involved, they feel that “*the budget lacks supervision and assistance in promoting economic growth in rural areas,*” as stated by the informants during the interview session. In addition, the informants also responded to this situation, stating that “*budgeting only covers a few activities related to sharing questionnaire instruments, and local people are expected to respond to each question as outlined in the paper*”. Therefore, it is necessary for the volunteers to directly upload data into their smartphones as a more efficient method for upgrading the development indicators.

Following the presidential instruction, the law no. 13 of 2020, aimed upgrading at the rural development status, the Terong apparatus also went to involve a socialisation venue at the Regency conference, as allowing to seminar on online meeting. After that local people are built the volunteers group to upload data, it received the assistant operator to help the villagers and their obligation are going to action as catalyst person, which communicated among the village, the regional operator and the central government. In field of these events, many villagers are not capable to implement on online program so that they are just under pressure from the central government. As stated by informants, “*We feel that the program is quickly response to finish the data uploaded, while we did not prepare it very well*”. In contrast, the village government was planned to the scale priority program following basic necessity of local people, and it is looked at as the pseudo-participation of the bottom-up development. As follows:

Following the presidential instruction and Law No. 13 of 2020 aimed at upgrading rural development, the Terong apparatus also participated in a socialisation event at the

Regency conference, which included an online seminar. Subsequently, the local people formed a volunteer group to upload data, with the assistance of operators who were responsible for helping the villagers. These operators acted as catalysts, facilitating communication between the village, the regional operator, and the central government. During these events, many villagers faced difficulties in implementing online programs, leading to pressure from the central government. As stated by the informants, *“We feel that the program is rushing us to finish uploading the data, without proper preparation”*. In contrast, the village government had planned to prioritise programs based on the basic needs of the local people, but it appears to be a pseudo-participation in bottom-up development idea. As follows:

“This SDGs program started in earlier March, 2021, while planning for village development did not accommodate into the budgetary element for inquiring of sustainable livelihoods.”

The discussion above highlights the sudden emergence of the SDGs Village program, emphasizing its importance in village development planning. The program’s implementation impacts the allocation of village funds and is characterized by a top-down approach lacking consultation and dialogue with the villages. Despite efforts to disseminate information online, it has been perceived as ineffective, with limited face-to-face communication. The SDGs Village data collection form is noted for its stringent requirements and detailed questions, leading to varied interpretations and posing challenges for the data volunteer team in explaining the questions’ meanings to the community. The program’s urgency in policy implementation and the absence of meaningful dialogue with villages have resulted in insufficient village participation. Additionally, while the program aims to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, its planning did not commence since the launch of SDGs in 2016.

The SDGs Village program is a public policy initiative implemented by the government with community participation. As defined by E. Anderson (2003), policy entails a series of actions taken to address issues, with public policy specifically referring to policies issued by government institutions or officials. In formulating public policy, community involvement is crucial as its effects are felt by society. Therefore, it is essential to engage in open dialogue with the community to socialize public policies effectively. Dialogue enables community voices to be heard, facilitating adjustments to policies based on local conditions and community needs. However, this process is often overlooked, with dialogue serving as a mere administrative formality lacking constructive feedback.

Rapid data collection processes can lead to inaccurate data, as noted by Chambers (1987). The use of questionnaires in data collection has limitations, unreliability, and may provide less insight than anticipated by researchers. Therefore, meticulous preparation and execution of data collection are imperative. Data collection processes are critical as SDGs data necessitate high quality, accessibility, and timely delivery. The extensive 12-page data form with stringent requirements poses challenges for data volunteers, with

varying competencies among volunteer groups identified as a weakness in the SDGs Village data collection program, as highlighted in the study by Mustofa and Dody Afianto (2022).

#### *Critical Issue on Socialisation for Implementing SDGs Village*

Community engagement is a pivotal aspect of policy implementation, involving the active participation of individuals or social groups in the planning, execution, and oversight of development program policies. The anticipated impact of such programs on societal transformation has been underscored by scholars such as Sjaifudian (2002) and Iskandar (2017). In the specific context of SDGs Village data collection, the involvement of the community and various village components is instrumental in the program's success, necessitating their engagement in the planning and execution phases. The effectiveness of the SDGs Village data collection initiative is contingent upon the enthusiastic involvement of community members and volunteers. Rural communities, renowned for their robust social capital, exhibit a propensity for active engagement in village development endeavours, as noted by Hardianti et al. (2017). Field (2018) elucidates that social capital encompasses networks, norms, and trust that foster collaborative efforts towards shared objectives. These networks serve as valuable resources in fostering social cohesion and facilitating mutually beneficial cooperation, a concept supported by Field (2018) and Fathy (2019). This notion aligns with Fukuyama's perspective on social capital, characterizing it as a collection of informal values and norms utilized collectively within a group to enhance cooperation, as articulated by Dwiningrum (2014).

The significance of community involvement in the SDGs Village data collection initiative is exemplified in Terong Village, where a data volunteer expressed, "For us, obtaining data from the community is not difficult. The community is always open and welcomes the data collection team warmly. Perhaps this happens because we have a close relationship with them, thus there is trust among us" (FGD, June 14, 2022). The establishment of trust and adherence to norms that cultivate trust within the community have expedited the data collection process, culminating in its completion within three months. The community's trust in the data collection volunteers, comprising village officials, youth organizations, and women's groups, serves as a catalyst for their active participation. Despite limited comprehension of the data collection's purpose, both within the rural community and among the data volunteers, the challenge of elucidating the detailed questions to residents persists. This challenge is exacerbated by time constraints, varying levels of understanding among data volunteers, and inadequate socialization of the SDGs Village program. Moreover, a prevailing belief within the community that data collection may lead to a reduction in aid poses a hurdle for data collection volunteers, reflecting past experiences where government aid programs followed data collection efforts.

Community participation that lacks a thorough comprehension of the underlying purpose and goals of an initiative may be considered as pseudo-participation rather than



authentic engagement. Merely having active and collective involvement from the community does not necessarily indicate genuine participation. The distinction between genuine and pseudo-participation is subtle and requires a critical assessment, such as through a relaxation of oversight. Genuine participation can be identified when community organizations and grassroots programs persist over time. According to Hamijoyo (2000), the determination of genuine participation can be made based on the continuity of such initiatives.

Participation can be viewed through various levels, as per Arnstein's framework, which suggests a spectrum ranging from manipulation by those in power to citizens having control over decisions that impact their lives (Ife et al., 2008). Nelson further categorizes participation into horizontal and vertical forms. Horizontal participation involves collaboration among individuals or groups to solve issues collectively, while vertical participation entails engagement between the community and the government, with the community acting as clients (Tangkilisan, 2005). In the context of the SDGs Village data collection program, the community's involvement can be classified as vertical participation, given that it is a policy mandated by the central government for implementation at the village level.

In the case of community participation in the data collection process in Terong Village, it is primarily driven by trust in volunteer officers. However, due to the top-down nature of this government policy, the community lacks a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the data collection initiative. This lack of thorough preparation and socialization of the program by the government aligns with Arnstein's concept of tokenism, where communities are merely consulted without substantial influence on policy decisions (Ife et al., 2008). Disparities in participation in village development, from planning to implementation, and the government's efforts to achieve sustainable and inclusive development that benefits marginalized groups in Indonesia, remain inadequately addressed (Damayanti & Syarifuddin, 2020).

Participation is a specific form of interaction and communication that pertains to the allocation of authority, responsibility, and benefits. It also signifies a sense of concern, awareness, and accountability among all stakeholders involved (Theresia et al., 2015).

## **Discussion**

The implementation of SDGs in villages should adhere to the principle of "SDGs no one left behind," which means it should involve participation from the community. Participation and collaboration from all parties are key to implementing SDGs, including village-level SDGs. The purpose of conducting SDGs data collection in villages is to serve as a guide in village development planning, making SDGs a roadmap or master document for village planning. Thus, through SDGs data collection, it is hoped that villages can engage in data-driven development planning and improve their data management systems. The realization of SDGs at the village level, as stipulated in Regulation No. 13 of 2020 by the Ministry of Villages, prioritizes the use of village funds to expedite SDGs

implementation. However, the lack of preparation and dissemination of SDGs village policies requires villages to adjust their development plans and adapt to SDGs policies. Consequently, villages need to prepare funding and human resources within a short period for data collection activities.

The SDGs data collection program in Terong Village has been successfully completed on schedule. This program serves as the initial step in implementing SDGs at the village level, aiming to provide comprehensive and complete data for village development planning based on real data. Consequently, village development can be more focused and address specific issues in each village. However, insufficient socialization of the SDGs village program has led to a lack of understanding among villagers regarding its purpose and objectives. Although the residents of Terong Village participated in data collection by answering questionnaire questions, they were unable to provide adequate answers when questioned about the SDGs village program and why they were required to fill out the questionnaire.

Data collection is crucial for rural communities. However, to implement a program effectively, understanding its purpose and benefits for the community is essential. When participation is limited to merely filling out questionnaires without comprehension, it indicates superficial involvement. Such superficial participation may occur in many other villages across Indonesia due to the diverse conditions of villages, while the SDGs Village program is launched nationally and must be implemented in all villages. The government should consider village diversity, necessitating dialogue with villages in SDGs Village implementation. Without thorough socialization and consultation with villages, community participation may lead to mass mobilization, which entails mobilizing people through leadership mobilization and supervision. One of the weaknesses in SDGs implementation, as highlighted by Wijayanto & Nurhajati (2019), is the lack of socialization about SDGs through both online and conventional mass media. This also applies to SDGs Village implementation in Riau Province, where optimal results haven't been achieved in SDGs Village data collection. Therefore, the government needs to emphasize to village heads and facilitators the importance of data collection as the basis for village development planning.

SDGs implementation, directly or indirectly, depends on efforts to address human resource and infrastructure disparities. SDGs Village data collection is conducted through a Google Play Store-based application accessible via individuals' smartphones. Data entry volunteers in Terong Village conduct interviews and enter data directly via their smartphones. However, there are challenges in this process. Not all volunteers' phones can access the application, and their abilities to explain questions vary. Consequently, there are individual interpretation differences in each questionnaire, resulting in incomplete validity of the collected data. Additionally, technical difficulties prevent village devices from accessing data through the Ministry of Villages' village information system application. This may be due to incomplete data synchronization on the central server,

rendering some data unupdatable. As a result, data collection can be completed promptly, but the outcomes cannot yet be utilized by the village.

Data plays a crucial role in becoming information. With comprehensive village data, villages will have accurate information for development planning. According to Callaos & Bekis Callaos (2002), information is interpreted data, and a set of data can be interpreted differently by different individuals. Therefore, information can be considered as “*data plus meaning*.” The importance of information is also highlighted by Gregory Bateson, stating that information is “the difference that makes a difference in future events,” influencing events after the information is conveyed. Niklas Luhmann also emphasizes the importance of information, stating “*No information, no communication*” (Wahyuni, 2020). Based on this understanding, it can be concluded that SDGs Village data collection is crucial, but data can only become useful information for villages if the gathered data is accurate and precise. Furthermore, data utilization is only possible if the data is consistent and can be interpreted as information for village development planning. Technical challenges in data uploading, such as unsupported servers, hinder data from becoming useful information. Village data collection not only serves as information for the central government but also holds deeper significance as information for village development planning.

## **Conclusion**

The village government has issued a policy to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the grassroots level, aiming to increase well-being. This program is closely an essential part of targeted development progress, promoting sustainable livelihoods for local people. Collecting measurable data for beneficiaries is an initial step to empower individuals, families, and communities, which leads to the implementation of SDGs at the villager’s scale. However, many aspects of SDGs indicators are still restricted, leading to pseudo-participations and fostering a top-down approach to rural development without considering the variety of local asset across Indonesia, especially in Terong village in Bantul Regency. In addition to that, the lack of promotion does not effectively address the welfare needs of residents in the village areas. This results in a deficiency in village development plans aimed at increasing well-being and local prosperity. As such, the village SDGs program faces challenges for local residents, contributing to drawbacks in rural development in this field study.

To ensure the success of this program, it is important to enhance socialization across all villages so that communities can provide valuable input. Additionally, more effective communication strategies are needed to avoid the perception that this policy flows in only one direction. With the right actions, the SDGs Village program can have a tangible impact on advancing sustainable development at the village level.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to Sekolah Tinggi Pembangunan Masyarakat Desa “APMD” for providing us with funding to conduct research on this subject. We also extend our appreciation to all the members of the managing journal, including the editors, reviewers, and staff, for their valuable assistance in making this paper more meaningful and facilitating its publication. Last but not least, we are thankful to all the members of the Terong village government who supported us in gathering material data during the fieldwork. Their facilitation of the data collection process was invaluable to our study.

### Author's declaration

The authors, namely Fadjarini Sulistyowati (author 1/A1), MC. Candra Rusmala Dibyorini (author 2/A2), Hari Saptaning Tyas (author 3/A3), and Condrodewi Puspitasari (author 4/A4), affirm that this manuscript has been meticulously prepared and endorsed for submission to the journal. The specific contributions of each author are delineated as follows: A1 and A2 formulated the research methodology; A3 conducted the literature review analysis; A3 oversaw the data collection process, while A4 managed the archival of data acquisition outcomes. The collaborative efforts of all authors culminated in the completion of this article. This study offers valuable insights for informing future policies and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in rural communities.

### Funding

The research endeavour received financial support from the Institutional Grant of the School of Village Community Development “APMD” for the year 2022.

### Availability of data and materials

All data are available from the authors.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interest.

### Additional information

No additional information from the authors.

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