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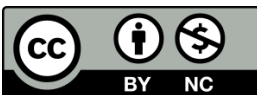
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Community Asset Mapping in Indonesian Local Micro Enterprise Empowerment: Insights from Sukamantri Village

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess community resources for development and to pinpoint the challenges faced by palm sugar micro-businesses. A qualitative approach was used, involving ten participants. Data was gathered through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results reveal a strong sense of community and a significant entrepreneurial drive among residents. However, there is untapped potential in environmental resources for land development that could support the cultivation of sugar palm trees, which are currently endangered. On the other hand, economic resources, such as the palm sugar marketing network, production enhancement, and sourcing of raw materials, are underdeveloped due to community isolation, reliance on traditional markets, and a lack of knowledge about digital marketing. The lack of management institutions, capacity-building programs, social network support, and government assistance greatly hinders the growth of these resources and the micro-businesses. To improve the capabilities of palm sugar micro-entrepreneurs in Sukamantri Village, Indonesia, it is crucial to tackle several key issues, including poor business management practices, weaknesses in local institutions, limited networking opportunities, and challenges related to funding and support. The researchers suggest that local government and the private sector should focus on supporting programs, enhancing the management and production processes of palm sugar micro-enterprises.

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Introduction

The mapping of community-based assets has proven beneficial for numerous developing countries in advancing sustainable development. This is primarily due to its capacity to identify local potential and leverage existing community resources, with a focus on empowering local communities, fostering development, and enhancing sustainable

livelihoods (Daskon & Binns, 2010; Kunjuran, 2022; Thwala et al., 2023). The process typically encompasses several stages, including asset mapping, the formulation of mobilization strategies, and community-led asset management, which are executed through grassroots movements (Izudin et al., 2024; Lindawati et al., 2021; Nurlena et al., 2021). However, the role of asset-based empowerment in the development of microbusinesses at the grassroots level frequently overlooks social participation, which can lead to social loafing in various local contexts in Indonesia (Hartoyo, 2018; Jaya et al., 2024). This oversight suggests that development planning and strategies often exclude indigenous populations from the management of existing assets, resulting in diminished innovation and creativity in micro-enterprise development (Astoria et al., 2024; Benedetti, 2021). Consequently, this situation undermines the local resource potential necessary for promoting community assets as a means of fostering economic development and prosperity.

The significance of asset-based communities in the development of microenterprises has been acknowledged in existing literature, and empirical investigations into this subject continue to evolve. The core components of community-based asset approaches encompass community participation and issues related to community development studies (Ryberg-Webster, 2019; Yang, 2018; Zautra et al., 2008). Furthermore, the contributions of scholars such as Prabawanti et al. (2023), Aini and Wulandari (2021), Greene (2013), and Panek (2015) elucidate that community empowerment through local asset mapping yields positive outcomes for participatory management, strategic planning, and the evaluation of development programs. A systematic approach is essential to ensure the equitable distribution of local assets among all stakeholders involved in the development process, as highlighted by the analysis of this body of literature. Additionally, previous studies have examined the utility of local assets in community development, emphasizing their role in enhancing income, promoting equality, ensuring justice, and safeguarding equal rights in social welfare (Andreas et al., 2020; Ansari et al., 2012; Cardinal, 2020; Rahmat & Izudin, 2018; Teller, 2016). This study aims to further investigate the utilization of local assets as catalysts for development and to address the challenges encountered in the growth of micro and small enterprises.

Previous literature on the role of community-based asset mapping posits that local communities have enhanced their livelihoods through active participation in the development of micro and small enterprises. However, numerous challenges persist in the implementation of empowerment strategies for small business actors following the mapping of assets (Dahles et al., 2020; Izudin & Fittaqiya, 2024; Suyatna & Yuda, 2021). Specifically, these challenges pertain to the social, environmental, and economic assets that are fundamental to the execution of local community development initiatives. Several researchers concur that the difficulties encountered by local communities in empowering business actors often stem from a disregard for prior research as a basis for academic consideration (Asiati et al., 2018; Partanen, 2022). The issue of empowering local communities with asset-based frameworks is particularly evident in the insufficient knowledge regarding the management of economic and environmental assets, which are

essential tools for enhancing social welfare and alleviating poverty and unemployment (Dube & Chisale, 2023; Gohori & Merwe, 2022; Simarmata et al., 2020). Furthermore, the scarcity of case studies in developing countries prompts researchers to investigate asset-based communities in the context of empowering small business actors, emphasizing the necessity for greater representation of diverse stakeholders—including state entities, private sectors, and academic institutions—in community interventions that leverage the multitude of local assets available (Pintossi et al., 2023; Tončinić et al., 2020). Barriers to initiative and innovation in local asset management represent critical concerns within empowerment studies. Concurrently, there have been shortcomings in previous research, which have failed to adequately address these challenges (Quang et al., 2022). Consequently, this study aims to address critiques from existing literature by offering additional insights into assets that are less correlated with access to local community development. To this end, the study selects a specific local asset, namely the palm sugar resources in Ciuncal Kampong, Sukamantri Village, West Java, as a case study to examine asset mapping and the associated challenges. This research builds upon and contributes to the fields of community development and social development, with a particular focus on local contexts in developing countries such as Indonesia.

Community-Based Assets in Local Empowerment: A Theoretical Consideration

The concept of community empowerment emerged concurrently with developmental initiatives that underscored the significance of community participation in the process (Perkins, 1995; Pigg, 2002; Watt et al., 2000). As a mechanism for social development, empowerment is conceptualized as a process that fosters the enhancement of individual capabilities, rather than merely facilitating mobilization. This process aims to enable less empowered community groups, such as small and micro business operators, to improve their circumstances and integrate into a more prosperous collective (Chiodo et al., 2019). In this context, community building entails enhancing the capacity of communities to identify their priorities and opportunities, while also promoting and sustaining positive environmental changes (Bhattacharyya, 2004). The objective of community empowerment is to cultivate community autonomy, thereby reducing reliance on external assistance. Community development is defined as a systematic effort to create resources that bolster the capacity of residents to enhance their quality of life (Green & Haines, 2016, p. vii).

The World Bank defines empowerment as the process of the assets and abilities of poor people to participate, negotiate, influence, control, and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives (World Bank, 2019). In contrast, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) posits that empowerment is deemed comprehensive when it encompasses five primary characteristics: it is locally based, oriented towards enhancing welfare, founded on partnerships, holistic, and sustainable (ADB, 2006). In alignment with the

evolving dynamics of development targeted at marginalized groups, community empowerment aimed at improving welfare has engendered new aspirations, hopes, and demands from the community to enhance their quality of life. These aspirations and demands manifest not only in broader political frameworks but also in the increasing call for community participation in various development initiatives, including the physical development of residential, social, economic, and cultural environments.

Community participation, akin to empowerment, can be regarded as a vital instrument for achieving various objectives within the development process, including democratization, facilitating change, enhancing solidarity, fostering self-esteem and trust, and redistributing power (Heryanda et al., 2023; Stang & Mittelmark, 2010). Participation is not only viewed as a means to an end but also as an essential goal in itself, representing a form of empowerment that contributes to the establishment of a just and prosperous society. The notion of community participation as a developmental vision has been the subject of discourse for over a decade. Nevertheless, its practical application in development and community development programs frequently relies on outdated methodologies that do not fully align with the principles of genuine community participation. Current development initiatives are predominantly characterized by a top-down approach (Carey et al., 2015; Jones, 2012), wherein communities are merely expected to implement or utilize the programs, often relegating them to the status of passive recipients of development efforts. Disregarding community participation risks perpetuating previous failures in development. An approach that prioritizes directives from above tends to be misaligned with the actual needs, aspirations, and hopes of the community, primarily due to inadequate assessments of the existing problems and requirements (Hartoyo, 2018; Morone & Yilan, 2020; Youn et al., 2017). Consequently, community empowerment, both as an objective and a process, is frequently overlooked.

The community empowerment approach seeks to position community members as researchers, planners, and implementers of development programs (Petunia & Selepe, 2020). This paradigm enables society to function as a subject of development rather than merely an object. In alignment with this perspective, Korten and Klaus (1984, p. 176) refer to this methodology as people-centered development, which necessitates that communities actively engage in mutual assistance through self-help and cooperation to address challenges, while also upholding the dignity of each individual. This approach emphasizes the productive utilization of local resources to fulfill community needs (community-based). Korten further characterizes this methodology as a learning process, wherein key elements such as coaching, education, democratization, participation, and the development of community institutions by bureaucrats are prioritized, all while considering the varying capabilities and unique social systems present in different regions. According to Izudin (2021), community development is centered on facilitating collaboration among community members with shared interests, enabling them to identify common needs and subsequently undertake collective action to address those necessities.

A community empowerment approach, which can be conceptualized as both a strategic framework and an overarching objective, presents several notable advantages. One significant benefit is its capacity to foster the emergence of independent initiatives within the community, a factor that is crucial for the support of development programs, particularly given the government's constraints regarding financial resources and capacity. Additionally, this approach enhances individuals' motivation and skill sets related to development, as it acknowledges their contributions and bolsters their self-confidence. Consequently, the development efforts undertaken are more likely to align with the aspirations and needs of the community. Moreover, this approach facilitates a broader scope of development initiatives, even when operating within the same budgetary constraints. It also mitigates the risk of creating dependency on government support among community members. Ultimately, the strategy derived from this approach emphasizes the importance of investment from both governmental entities and care groups to cultivate social capital within the community, which is essential for promoting sustainable development.

One of the key instruments within this approach is the asset-based community development (ABCD) perspective. This framework provides community workers with a lens through which to emphasize the strengths inherent in clients, which can be leveraged to address various challenges, cultivate functional community roles, and adapt to everyday life. According to (Green & Haines, 2016), assets are defined as the skills, and capacities possessed by individuals, organizations, and institutions within a community. These assets serve as the primary catalyst for the development of rural communities. Community development represents a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing various assets to bolster community capacity, thereby enabling improvements in quality of life. Therefore, community-based assets can be cultivated either by the community itself or by external institutions, which act as facilitators to enhance the community's quality of life across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

This approach contrasts with the medical model, which typically seeks to diagnose problems directly. The asset-building approach underscores the significance of recognizing the strengths of individuals and communities, as well as leveraging existing resources to formulate strategies that enhance potential and improve quality of life across economic, social, and physical dimensions. Referred to as the strengths perspective, this methodology concentrates on the assets held by individuals, families, groups, and communities, encompassing various dimensions, including social, economic, spiritual, cultural, and physical environments. In the context of village development through micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), research emphasizes the identification of community-owned assets through participatory methods in the economic, social, and environmental domains, while fostering collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including governmental entities. This approach is grounded in ecological systems theory, which serves as a framework for analyzing the reciprocal relationships between

individuals and their environments, with the objective of supporting and strengthening positive interactions between the two, or assisting individuals in adapting to the demands of their surroundings.

According to this theory, researchers are afforded the freedom to exercise their abilities to fulfill their daily needs. The state's role is to ensure that every individual can engage in social transactions that facilitate the determination of choices and the satisfaction of their needs, thereby institutionalizing poverty reduction strategies as a means of empowerment. An illustrative example of this is found in Western Europe, where anti-poverty strategies are grounded in social democratic theory (Laxman, 2024; Olken, 2019)(references). Social security mechanisms, such as income support and pension funds, can enhance individual freedom by providing a basic income, thereby enabling individuals to meet their needs and make informed choices. Conversely, the lack of these essential services may result in dependency. In discussing the significance of organizations as instruments of empowerment, Wirutomo (2014) asserts that the primary instrument for community empowerment is organization. This implies that individuals must unite within an organization, through which their collective aspirations can be advocated. Furthermore, organizations facilitate the synergy of the potential of all citizens, ultimately resulting in the generation of greater and more robust social capital.

The effectiveness of governance is contingent not only upon the capacity of the state to administer and the private sector to generate employment and income, but also on the role of civil society, which facilitates social and political interactions and mobilizes diverse groups to participate in social, economic, and political activities (Fransen & Conzelmann, 2015; Thwala et al., 2023). Consequently, universities are instrumental in fortifying civil society institutions, which serve to provide checks and balances on the power of both government and the private sector, while also contributing to the enhancement of these fundamental elements. It is essential to comprehend and promote the government's role in bolstering the economic sector to strengthen civil society organizations, enabling them to effectively channel community participation in social and economic endeavors. The fortification of organizations into more effective collectives will facilitate the influence of public policy, ultimately aiming for shared prosperity (Sriyani, 2021).

Materials and Methods

Study area descriptions

Figure 1 illustrates the research location that serves as the focal point of this study. Sukamantri Village, located in West Java, is comprised of seven hamlets, fourteen community units (RWs), and thirty-two neighborhood units (RTs). The demographic data indicates a male population of 3,204 individuals and a female population of 3,031 individuals, resulting in a total population of 6,235. There are 1,913 heads of families within the village, yielding an average family size of 3.9 members. This average suggests that a typical family consists of two parents and one child, which aligns with the ideal family size recommended by family planning guidelines (Pemerintah Desa Sukamantri,

2021, p. 12). Furthermore, the population density of Sukamantri Village is calculated to be 756.71 individuals per square kilometer.

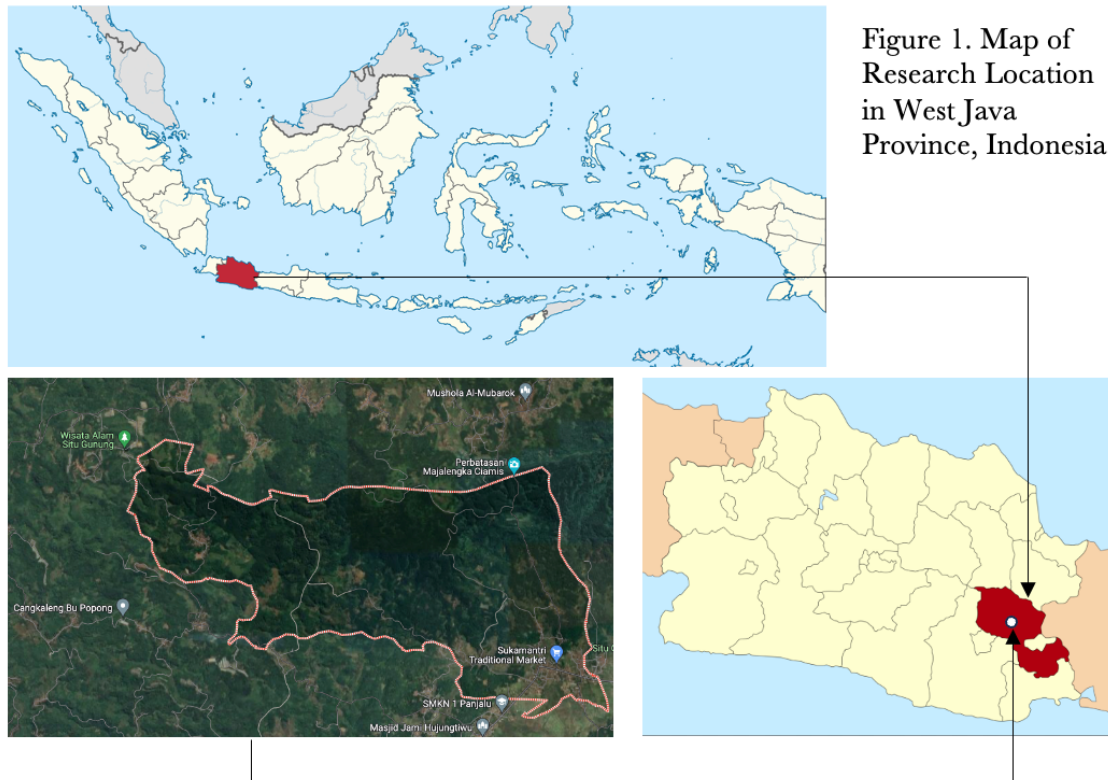


Figure 1. Map of Research Location in West Java Province, Indonesia

The distance from Ciuncal Kampong to the capital of the Sukamantri sub-district is approximately 0.30 km, indicating a relatively close proximity. In contrast, the distance from Ciuncal Kampong to both the village office and the sub-district office is approximately 8 km, traversing through plantations, rice fields, and hilly terrain. Although the transportation route is accessible to four-wheeled vehicles, Ciuncal Kampong experiences a degree of isolation, with an average temperature of 21 degrees Celsius. The distance to the capital of Ciamis Regency is 42 km, while the capital of West Java Province, Bandung, is situated 60 km away. The geographical characteristics of the area, being located in a basin with extensive agricultural land, result in a significant concentration of economic activities in Sukamantri Village within the agricultural sector. Nevertheless, the village also engages in livestock farming, which includes two cattle breeders managing a total of 15 cows, 17 free-range chicken breeders with a total of 255 chickens, five goat breeders with 20 goats, and four sheep breeders with 30 sheep (Observation notes, 2021).

Social assistance provided in Sukamantri, particularly in Ciuncal Kampong, includes the Family Hope Program (PKH), which currently supports 17 individuals out of a total of 34 registered in the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS). Consequently, there remain 17 individuals who have not yet received assistance through the PKH

program. Additionally, all 34 individuals have benefited from welfare rice assistance. The Family Hope Program, administered by the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs, is a conditional cash transfer initiative aimed at enhancing education and health outcomes. Beneficiaries who are partners in the PKM program have received guidance and have been officially recognized as having graduated from PKH. This program is designed to provide short-term income benefits to Very Poor Families (KSM) by alleviating household financial burdens. However, despite the completion of the program, many partners continue to require supplementary support to achieve true independence in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Research design

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative, utilizing a case study approach. The rationale for selecting this method is to provide a comprehensive description and in-depth analysis of community assets that contribute to the empowerment of micro businesses in the palm sugar sector. This approach is grounded in a strengths-based perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 164), wherein researchers collaborate with the community to leverage positive experiences in order to identify and understand the various strengths present within individuals and the community as a whole. It is anticipated that this collaborative effort will enhance community empowerment and facilitate transformative changes to address challenges and foster the development of the village. This process encompasses learning from a diverse array of stakeholders, including faculty members, students, community members, and relevant institutions.

Data collection

Research data can be categorized into two primary sources. The first category, primary data sources, refers to data collected directly from the original source by data collectors (Silverman & Patterson, 2022, p. 137.) In this context, primary data encompasses information regarding various potentials and assets of the village that are pertinent to the empowerment of micro businesses and their associated institutions. This data was gathered from a range of informants, including small business operators, Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), the Head of Sukamantri Village along with his officials, the Head of the Hamlet, as well as informants from Sukamantri District and representatives of the Family Hope Program. The second category, secondary data sources, pertains to data acquired indirectly, such as through third parties or written documents (Cudjoe, 2023). In this study, secondary data comprises documentation from Sukamantri Village, including village potential data and information provided by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS).

The informants who contributed to this research included the Village Head (LG), the PKH Facilitator (FP), a palm sugar entrepreneur (LE), and the Head of Ciuncal Kampong (LC). The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, which aims

to gather data and information from micro business actors in the palm sugar sector, as well as other informants possessing in-depth knowledge of the palm sugar industry and community assets that can facilitate the development of micro enterprises. This study involved ten primary informants. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with palm sugar business operators, the Head of Ciuncal Kampong, and the Village Head. These interviews took place between August and October 2021, with each session lasting between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Additionally, participatory observation was performed using the Transect Walk method to assess environmental conditions and observe the palm sugar production process. Documentation studies were also conducted by gathering data from various sources of documentation within the village.

Data analysis

The validation of research data was conducted utilizing triangulation techniques derived from multiple data sources, rather than relying on a singular source. This process involved cross-checking and re-evaluating the information obtained from various stakeholders, including the Kampong Head of Ciuncal, palm sugar microbusiness operators, and village administrative officials. In addition to interviews, data collection encompassed focus group discussions and observational methods. Further validation of the data was achieved by categorizing it according to groups, categories, or indicators pertinent to various community assets. Subsequently, all data were thoroughly reviewed, coded, and described. The coding process was based on the indicators established in the research, particularly those related to community asset indicators. The study aimed to analyze the relationships among themes or indicators, with the findings being interpreted accordingly.

Findings

Mapping Community Assets for Local People Empowerment

Approach Utilized in the Study This research employs the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework, which emphasizes the identification and evaluation of the fundamental assets possessed by communities for the purpose of community development. The study was conducted in Ciuncal Kampong, a remote area encircled by hills. Despite its isolation, Ciuncal Kampong appears to possess a variety of potential assets across social, physical, environmental, and economic dimensions, in accordance with the concepts proposed by Green and Haines (2016). The ABCD approach is predicated on leveraging the existing potential and assets within the community, with the objective of empowering its members. This methodology stands in contrast to traditional approaches that predominantly concentrate on community problems and needs. In this study, the focus is on three types of assets: environmental, social, and economic (see Table 1). The findings of this research are presented in a detailed manner to enhance understanding of the potential for development among the residents of Ciuncal Kampong.

Assets	Indicators	Explanations
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesiveness • Network Social • Palm Sugar Enterprise Institution 	The availability of social assets facilitates the optimal management of public asset-based development, enabling external parties to engage effectively in the local community engagement process aimed at enhancing awareness and well-being.
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Palm Sugar Tree • Plantation • Protected forest 	Several environmental assets can positively contribute to the development of stakeholders' palm sugar businesses, particularly in the context of ongoing development, alongside the influence of regulations and external parties.
Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Palm Sugar Industry • Nira Productions • Turnover Sale • Coconut Palm Oil (CPO) 	Economic assets are essential components in the production and enhancement of other assets, thereby facilitating the achievement of prosperity and the improvement of income through optimal management.

Table 1. Mapping Asset Communities for Empowering Local People. *Source:* Authors' elaboration.

Theme 1: Social Assets. It can be categorized into three indicators: cohesiveness, social networks, and palm sugar enterprise institutions. Firstly, cohesiveness is an essential component of social capital. Several studies (see, Coleman, 1994; RogoÅ & BaranoviÅ, 2016; Sandefur & Laumann, 2009) indicate that the community in Ciuncal Kampong exhibits strong and robust cohesiveness. The interactions and relationships among residents are characterized by associative behaviors, mutual assistance, and a spirit of reciprocity, which are typical of rural communities that have not succumbed to the influences of individualism. The local government of Sukamantri Village, particularly the head of Ciuncal Kampong [LG2], maintains a close relationship with the community. Principles of togetherness and egalitarianism guide the management, protection, and nurturing of partnerships within the society. This sense of unity facilitates the organization of palm sugar entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing their collective energy and potential for business development. Community participation and social support play a crucial role in addressing needs and resolving various challenges within the social environment by leveraging available resources and potential (Community-Based Development). This approach encourages active involvement from diverse societal pillars, including the community, the business sector, and academic institutions, in initiatives that foster change and progress within their environment (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020).

Second, social networks can be categorized into bonding, bridging, and linking networks in Ciuncal Kampong, the bonding network among residents is notably well-developed, as evidenced by their cohesiveness and sense of community. However, there are identifiable deficiencies in the bridging and linking networks. An informant [LC2] noted, between residents and various organizations is almost non-existent, except with the Mosque DKM and village administrators. Furthermore, interactions between residents and external institutions remain limited. The only existing connection with government entities is through the PKH social assistance program, which currently serves 17 individuals, while collaborations with the business sector and non-governmental organizations have yet to be established. Nonetheless, there exists potential for fostering cooperation (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020; Zastrow, 2023), particularly with increased opportunities for support to micro-enterprises from the national budget (APBN) via Ministry of Social programs such as PKH, as well as initiatives from the West Java Province budget (APBD) through the Desa Mandiri Sejahtera and Overtime Raharja programs, in addition to village funds. The Sukamantri Village Head [LG1] has expressed a commitment to allocate a budget for 2022 aimed at supporting palm sugar entrepreneurs, as articulated in his statement below.

“We are fully committed to the allocation of village funds, particularly for community empowerment programs in Ciuncal Kampong, which possesses significant potential and local resources, notably coconut trees. This resource can be processed into palm sugar, which has a high market demand. It is anticipated that this initiative will positively impact the livelihoods of the local population.”

Third, social institutions is fundamentally rooted in organization. Community organizing plays a crucial role in harnessing the potential and strength of various resources that are otherwise dispersed individually. The process of organizing and mapping community assets is particularly urgent in contexts where governmental support for empowerment programs is lacking. Opportunities for external assistance often necessitate that recipients belong to a collective, typically comprising ten individuals. In a scenario where fifteen individuals are registered as palm sugar entrepreneurs, it is feasible to form two groups, with the expectation that additional members from the local community will join. The formation of these groups should take into account the proximity of members, such as by organizing them based on the geographical location of their residences. Once the groups are established, the subsequent step involves providing support in the development of operational guidelines that will serve as both a framework and a commitment for the members. It is essential that both the group formation and the establishment of rules be entrusted to the residents themselves. The facilitator’s role is to guide discussions, ensuring that they are conducted in a participatory manner and foster a familial atmosphere.

The aforementioned institutional capital seeks to address the organizational and institutional challenges that continue to function in isolation, resulting in a lack of synergy among the various stakeholders. This issue warrants further investigation. Factors such

as the robustness of social capital, the spirit of mutual cooperation, the sense of community and closeness among residents, as well as economic capital and the physical environment, serve as vital drivers for societal advancement in mitigating the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in rural areas, through a sustainable approach. Enterprises that have been sustained over generations, yet have not significantly improved living standards, necessitate resources that can be synergized to transform business development practices and cultural norms in a more innovative and creative manner.

The institutional assumptions that underpin the collaborative development of the palm sugar industry encompass several critical elements. Firstly, the establishment of the group is intended to ensure that stakeholders within the palm sugar sector can reach a consensus on selling prices, thereby preventing any individual from underpricing their products to the detriment of the collective. Secondly, the formulation of group regulations serves as a framework for technical implementation and provides an operational foundation. The focus group discussion method has continuously facilitated to reinforce the group's cohesion, thereby addressing genuine needs. This collaborative approach aims to mitigate destructive price competition, fostering instead a spirit of cooperation and synergy that promotes collective advancement. Thirdly, the enhancement of palm sugar product quality is more readily achievable through group solidarity, particularly concerning product hygiene and visual appeal. For instance, a palm sugar production facility located in proximity to a goat pen may compromise hygiene standards and overall product quality. Consequently, it is imperative to consider the establishment of more suitable and sanitary production facilities, enabling palm sugar business groups to collaborate effectively and support one another in the production process.

Theme 2: Environmental Assets. Palm sugar is derived from the sap of palm trees, which is subsequently cooked until it reaches a boiling point, thickens, and is then molded. Consequently, palm trees serve as the primary raw material in the production of palm sugar. However, the declining population of sugar palm trees presents a significant opportunity for further development of this resource. In discussions with the Head of Sukamantri Village and several residents of Ciuncal Kampong [LG1 and LC3], there was a consensus that government intervention is necessary to foster the growth of the palm sugar industry, given its considerable potential. The demand for palm sugar is on the rise, driven by the proliferation of cafes and home-based industries both within Ciamis and beyond. The village head noted that difficulty in sourcing palm sugar from residents in Ciuncal Kampong, with a waiting period of approximately two weeks or more, poses a significant challenge. To address this issue, the expansion of palm tree cultivation on larger tracts of land—such as benthic land, village land, community forest land, or PTP land within the Ciuncal and Sukamantri Village areas—represents a viable solution.

According to data from Sukamantri Village (2021), the development of a home industry, particularly in the production of palm sugar, presents significant prospects. The region encompasses a plantation area of approximately 140.00 hectares, alongside 10.85 hectares of benthic land, and a total of 264.77 hectares designated as community forest, which remains underutilized and is classified as idle land. This land possesses considerable potential for the cultivation of sugar palm trees. Additionally, 17 hectares have been allocated for the production of animal feed. Currently, microenterprises within the livestock sector are operated by 26 families, while 24 families are engaged in the production of palm sugar and ant sugar. The home industry in this area holds substantial potential for further development, given the availability of raw materials on fertile land. Furthermore, the region includes 400 hectares of forest, 440 hectares of production forest, and 20 hectares of protected forest, with an additional 7 hectares available for animal feed production, yielding 10 tons of forage per hectare, as well as 7 hectares designated as grazing land.

The potential utilization of assets, such as the availability of land for development, necessitates the subsequent legalization of permits at both the sub-district and district levels, or through the issuance of business use rights for the cultivation of palm trees. Data pertaining to Sukamantri Village indicates the presence of 140.00 hectares of plantation land, 10.85 hectares of benthic land, and 264.77 hectares of community forests that have not been optimally utilized (references). If the processes of legalization and licensing are executed effectively, these lands could be productively employed for palm tree cultivation. This initiative would not only bolster the palm sugar industry but also serve as a natural form of “green building”. palm trees plays a significant role in mitigating the adverse effects of environmental degradation and pollution by enhancing carbon absorption, reducing soil erosion, and safeguarding biodiversity. Consequently, this endeavor aligns with the principles of sustainable development, which seeks to enhance the quality of life for communities over the long term, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Furthermore, the establishment of clear legal frameworks provides legal certainty for both the community and investors, thereby attracting additional financial and technical support for the advancement of the palm sugar industry in the region.

The cultivation of palm trees is undertaken to address the declining population of these trees. Presently, the availability of palm trees is diminishing due to their slow growth rate, which necessitates approximately 8 to 9 years before the trees can be tapped for palm sugar production. Historically, the propagation of palm trees has predominantly depended on natural growth facilitated by animals that consume palm fruit. Non-productive palm trees are typically sold for prices ranging from IDR 200,000 or USD 12.91 to IDR 300,000 or USD 19.37. However, in instances where tree owners face financial difficulties or urgent needs, there is a tendency to sell productive palm trees. The kolang kaling fruit derived from the sugar palm tree is generally sold for around IDR 400,000 or USD 25.82 per open tub colt prior to processing. Annually, palm trees

typically do not yield sap for a duration of three months. The timing of sap depletion varies among individual trees, allowing tappers to continue extracting sap from other trees during this period. When the production of palm sugar is perceived as lacking significant added value to the livelihoods of local residents, there is often a turnover in business activities. A notable trend is the transition of many farmers from palm sugar production to coffee cultivation, which has contributed to the reduction in the number of palm trees. To enhance their income and diversify their livelihoods beyond palm sugar production, residents may consider expanding into sectors with substantial potential for development, particularly in relation to environmental assets or natural resources, such as animal husbandry. As previously indicated, there are 7 hectares of land available for animal feed, with a forage production capacity of 10 tons per hectare, in addition to 7 hectares designated for grazing. Livestock farming has already been initiated and developed by numerous residents, indicating that this potential is strategically significant for further development.

Theme 3: Economical Assets. Management of palm sugar in Ciuncal Kampong has been a longstanding tradition, passed down through generations. Local residents acquire the skills necessary for palm sugar production not through formal education, but rather through the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. One informant [LE1] noted, been producing palm sugar for 25 years without ever receiving training or guidance to develop the business. The production process occurs throughout the day, specifically in the morning and evening, after the completion of tasks in other agricultural areas. The cooking of sap requires approximately 4 to 5 hours for each batch. This process is conducted using traditional cooking equipment, including a large frying pan with a diameter of approximately 75 cm and a tray. The sap, known as Nira, is cooked without any additives, with only a few drops of coconut oil incorporated as a component of local wisdom inherited from their ancestors. Although the specific benefits of this oil are not articulated, its application is preserved as a cultural tradition. However, the number of individuals engaged in palm sugar production is on the decline. Five years ago, in 2016, there were 26 family heads involved in this industry; currently, this number has diminished to only 16 family heads. Despite the manual nature of the production process, these individuals remain highly skilled in the art of palm sugar making, operating without the assistance of modern machinery.

The Local Problems of Developing Palm Sugar Business

The challenges associated with the development of the palm sugar business include issues related to packaging and product variations, marketing competition, product certification, and management models. Firstly, the Ciuncal community continues to face difficulties regarding packaging and product diversity. Currently, palm sugar producers in Ciuncal Hamlet exclusively manufacture a single type of palm sugar, characterized by a circular shape with a diameter of approximately 15 cm and a weight of 250 grams per stick. The relatively large size of this product hinders its ability to penetrate broader

markets, as it does not align with consumer preferences. Additionally, the packaging utilized by palm sugar producers in Ciuncal Kampong presents a significant concern. The use of black plastic for direct packaging is not only unhealthy but also visually unappealing to consumers. Consequently, palm sugar producers in this region struggle to compete effectively in the market, as they are unable to enhance the perceived value of their products. To address these issues, it is recommended that black plastic packaging be replaced with standing pouches. Standing pouches offer greater durability and aesthetic appeal, and they are constructed from PETE or PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic, which is safer and more hygienic than black kerosene plastic.

Initially, the production of palm sugar in Ciuncal Kampong was limited to a single, relatively large size. Manufacturers utilized bamboo molds with a diameter of approximately 10-15 cm and a height of 2 cm to shape the palm sugar, resulting in one type of palm sugar and one type of ant sugar. This size configuration yielded four sticks of sugar per kilogram, which posed challenges for marketability. Consequently, it is essential to reduce the size of the palm sugar to enhance its market appeal and to introduce more interesting and diverse product variations. Currently, producers have the capability to create palm sugar using various molds made from factory-produced materials or aluminum. The raw materials for these molds are readily available in the market, including cake molds that can be tailored to meet market demands while ensuring production hygiene. As an innovative approach, the carabikang cake mold, constructed from aluminum steel, can be employed for molding palm sugar. This mold is characterized by its non-stick properties, ease of cleaning, and smaller round size, making it particularly appealing to consumers seeking palm sugar in more manageable portions. Furthermore, the consideration of milling machines for palm sugar production is crucial for enhancing production efficiency, particularly in the manufacturing of ant sugar. Producers frequently express concerns regarding the labor-intensive nature of the production process for ant sugar, despite its higher market price compared to regular palm sugar.

Second, market competition presents a significant challenge in the development of the palm sugar industry. The competition in the marketing and sale of palm sugar is intense, both within Sukamantri Village and in external markets. Various other regions also engage in palm sugar production, thereby increasing the competitive landscape. For instance, in Ciuncal Kampong, there is frequently fierce price competition. During the period of research, the price of palm sugar in Ciuncal was IDR 18,000 or USD 1.16 per kilogram, which coincides with the total production cost per kilogram. This indicates that producers are not generating a profit at these price levels; rather, they are merely receiving compensation for management, which should have been accounted for as part of the production costs. Consequently, it is advisable for the selling price of palm sugar to be established at a level above the production cost. It is crucial for all producers to recognize and concur on a fair selling price to ensure adequate profits and to prevent the occurrence of price gouging. The palm sugar market is, in fact, relatively expansive and

has not been fully capitalized on by numerous producers.

The marketing potential for palm sugar in Ciuncal Kampong is considerable, as the demand for this product continues to rise, particularly with the growth of the culinary and café industries that utilize palm sugar. Ciuncal Kampong, which is administratively part of Sukamantri Village in Sukamantri District, is recognized as a center for palm sugar production, boasting approximately 100 palm trees. Given this potential, Ciuncal Kampong has the capacity to become a primary supplier of palm sugar for various markets within Ciamis Regency. However, the current levels of sales and productivity in palm sugar production remain low, and the industry faces several challenges typical of small-scale enterprises. The productivity of individual producers is constrained, and the reliance on conventional production and marketing methods hinders the competitiveness of their products against other producers. Additionally, the relatively low prices and limited product variations present further obstacles. Moreover, the practice of individual marketing by sugar craftsmen restricts the opportunity for broader market expansion.

Third, product certification presents a significant challenge for palm sugar producers in Ciuncal Kampong. A notable concern is the absence of Household Industry Food (*Pangan Industri Rumah Tangga - PIRT*) Certification. To acquire a PIRT certificate, a product must adhere to specific criteria. Currently, palm sugar products from Ciuncal Kampong are ineligible for this certification due to their production methods, which are characterized as simple and unsanitary, ultimately resulting in subpar product quality. Many palm sugar production facilities are situated in close proximity to goat pens, leading to inadequate cleanliness standards. Despite the fact that palm sugar is derived from 100% sap, the production process neglects both environmental hygiene and the quality of the product itself. To assist this group of producers in obtaining PIRT certification, we propose to supply modern palm sugar production equipment and enhance production facilities by constructing a suitable production house. It is anticipated that a cleaner and more spacious production environment will not only provide greater comfort for palm sugar craftspeople during the production and molding processes but also foster collaboration among them in the production activities.

Fourth, product management. One piece of information obtained indicated that an informant [LE3] has been engaged in the production of palm sugar for 25 years, during which time their economic and social living conditions have remained largely unchanged. The income generated from palm sugar production is insufficient to cover more than basic daily necessities. Consequently, palm sugar production can be characterized as subsistence-level, as it only provides enough resources to meet immediate living requirements. The following narrative illustrates this situation,

“Palm sugar management is conducted collaboratively with the his spouse, characterized by a clear division of responsibilities. The informant begins climbing palm trees at 6 a.m. and continues until approximately 11 p.m. The palm trees are situated at a considerable distance from their residence, and on average, they ascend two trees each day. The activity of climbing sugar palm trees is fraught with significant risks; tragically, two individuals have fallen and lost their lives, and the informant himself experienced a fall from a tall sugar palm tree,

resulting in a fractured spine that incapacitated him for an extended period. Following his recovery, he resumed climbing due to the absence of alternative business opportunities. Meanwhile, his wife undertakes cooking duties in the afternoon and begins molding palm sugar around 8 p.m., with the cooking process lasting approximately four hours and yielding around 5-7 kg of molded sugar. Additionally, limited knowledge regarding hygiene practices and the simplicity of the production processes further impacts the operation of this business.”

“In the assessment of palm sugar production costs, the methodology remains consistent with that employed in the subsistence sector, neglecting to account for the labor involved in the production process. An additional challenge encountered is the conflation of business finances with personal finances; in instances of urgent need, informants frequently withdraw funds from palm sugar sales. Although they perceive their modest sales of palm sugar as sufficient to meet their daily needs, the income generated is minimal and undervalued, particularly due to the low valuation of labor. The informants sell palm sugar at a price of IDR 18,000 or USD 1.16 per kilogram, whereas the retail price in Ciamis can reach IDR 27,000 or USD 1.73 per kilogram.”

The limited production of palm sugar creates opportunities for intermediaries, often referred to as *gembel* who seek to capitalize on this scarcity. These intermediaries may provide initial capital or assist in marketing efforts to attract customers. In this social context, it is imperative to establish a favorable bargaining position for palm sugar producers through collective negotiations to mitigate the risk of exploitation. Furthermore, fostering opportunities for capital development is essential, particularly with support from governmental and business sectors, which may include assistance with business financing, production, marketing, and packaging. The four challenges identified in the development of small-scale palm sugar enterprises in Ciuncal Kampong highlight the necessity for enhanced management strategies that warrant attention from various stakeholders. This necessity arises from the fact that business acumen and marketing proficiency are significant concerns for palm sugar artisans. As a form of asset mapping within community development, these factors should serve as foundational elements for future business growth. Consequently, innovative ideas and strategies aimed at supporting local small business operators require collaborative efforts from all involved parties.

Discussion

Sukamantri Village serves as the hub of the palm and ant sugar industry, characterized by manual management, simplicity, limited marketing, and a lack of capital. Despite the promising market demand for high-quality palm sugar, production remains low at around 5-8 kg per day due to the simplistic management approach. Micro-business assistance in Ciuncal Kampong has been insufficient, perpetuating poverty among palm sugar producers, despite their generational tradition in palm sugar production. According to Green and Haines (2016), mapping the problem should not only focus on

impoverished groups, as this might result in dependency, lack of confidence, and inability to achieve self-reliance rather than empowerment (see Figure 2). Thus, the mapping needs to be holistic. The ABCD approach, advocated by García (2020) and Ibrahima (2017) emphasize leveraging positive community assets as a start for transformation. Yuda (2018) argues that social development does not deal with individuals by means of treatment or rehabilitation with existing structures, but should aim at affecting a larger group, namely community or society. Social development needs growth, and social change through deliberate human action, planning, removing obstacles, and using existing potentials or assets to meet the needs of society.

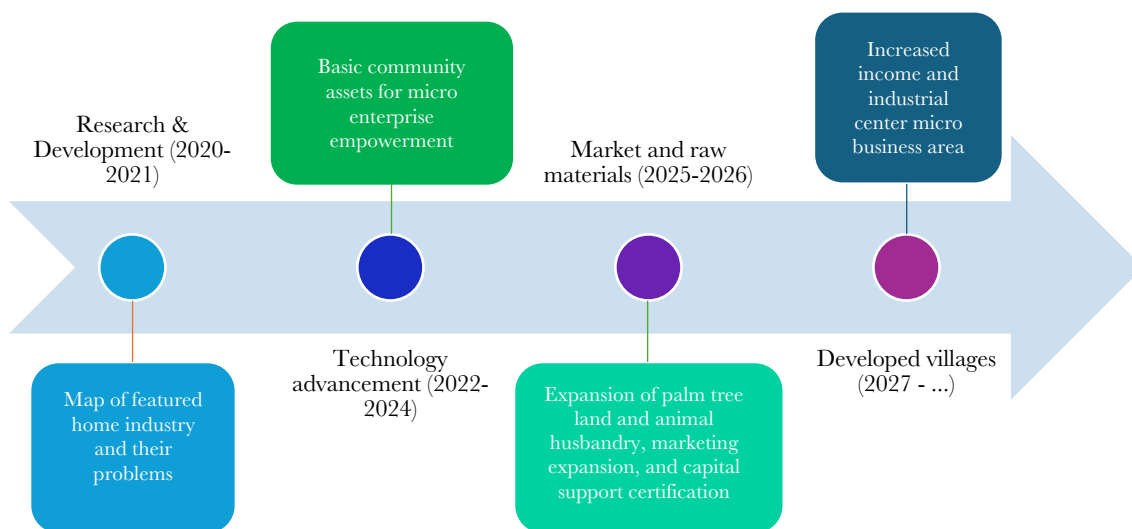


Figure 2. Road Map Recommendation for Village Community Empowerment via Micro Enterprises. *Source:* Authors' elaboration.

The people of Ciuncal already have valuable business assets, namely the skillset required for palm sugar production, which serves as an economic resource to fulfill their needs. Economically, individuals don't acquire expertise in palm sugar manufacturing solely through formal training; Rather, this knowledge is passed down through generations. They are experts because of the continuous experience accumulated over time despite operating at a simple, traditional level. The production process takes a full day, namely in the morning and evening, after attending other plantations. The limitation of human resources managing/producing palm sugar is a problem in itself because so far, despite the need for palm sugar, they have not been able to promise themselves a decent living from it. Over the past five years, the number of people working with palm sugar businesses has decreased from 56 to just 16. Therefore, with intensive assistance, it is expected that residents will regain their passion for producing palm sugar, especially considering that resources are still available. Micro Enterprise Development is

a proven way to strengthen viable, small businesses, resulting in increased household income and savings, and thus alleviating the crunch of economic poverty. This approach is very powerful in lifting communities from economic poverty, ultimately leading the community to be self-reliant (Schön et al., 2021; Singh, 2015).

Another environmental asset concerns the planting of palm trees as a solution to the issue of their dwindling numbers. Currently, the availability of palm trees is depleting due to the slow growth of palm sugar, which takes about 8-9 years to mature and can only be collected. Historically, palm tree propagation has relied solely on natural growth through the dissemination of seeds by animals that consume palm sugar fruits. As a result, palm tree owners, facing financial constraints and urgent needs, are forced to prematurely sell their productive palm trees. To address this decline, some palm sugar farmers have transitioned to coffee cultivation, further reducing palm tree cultivation. Consequently, a large-scale replanting initiative for palm trees has been undertaken in the village. The village possesses considerable assets, including uncultivated land and community forests, totaling around 10 hectares. This available land holds potential for development or leasing opportunities within the community. The willingness to lease this land has been officially endorsed by the Sukamantri Village and Sukamantri district. Meanwhile, social-related assets, such as cohesiveness, have never been a problem because residents are very friendly, tolerant, helpful, and strong attachment to religion. This illustrates the network at the bounding level is very strong, but the network at the bridging and linking level is still far from what is expected. The isolation of Ciuncal Kampong indicates that the network is very limited, whether with fellow sugar entrepreneurs outside Sukamantri village, other organizations, or the government in business development.

Although community organization is a necessity to unite the potential, the strengths of various sources have been spread only among individuals. Building communities through organizations is an effort to enhance community capacity by identifying priorities and opportunities to encourage and sustain positive environmental change (Afonso & Negash, 2024; Ranta et al., 2023). Community empowerment is an activity to develop communities to be more independent, not dependent on assistance when it is not given. Community development is defined as a planned effort to generate assets by increasing the capacity of citizens and their quality of life. The perspective by Green and Haines (2016) can be used to build communities in a sustainable manner. In Ciuncal Kampong, palm sugar producers, organized under a “Neighborhood Association”, are provided with resources for economic management. This collaborative effort aims to foster solidarity in business, optimize learning experiences, and recognize the strengths within their community. Through such initiatives, communities become more empowered and capable of addressing challenges, thereby enhancing the local community development process. Community empowerment has a significant impact on the sustainability of community-based organizations called Citizen Community (Patel et al., 2012; Zaki et al., 2022). The penta-helix approach involving business, academia, media, government, and society can accelerate welfare change even faster. To

complement this approach. participation and a strengths perspective must be considered to enhance and advance the empowerment approach. An integrated intervention model that links empowerment, participation and a strengths perspective is essential (Izudin & Fittaqiya, 2024).

The community-based approach by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020) is geared toward assisting communities in planning, building, and solving problems. Communities are expected to have stable institutional structures to solve problems and be proactive. Such tight business competition must be anticipated with preparation and synergy so that customers are not left behind and easily developed. Assistance is provided continuously until the business group can establish itself as a sustainable livelihood, incorporating product variations, adhering to hygiene standards, obtaining various product certifications, securing halal certificates, acquiring necessary business licenses, enhancing packaging, and expanding marketing efforts. The results of the research were followed up with the next research how to be assisting revolving fund loans for business strengthening and development, along with intensive assistance from various programs aimed at enhancing both the quality and quantity of palm sugar business.

Conclusion

In order to empower micro businesses, it is essential to understand and analyze the various assets that surround them, which can be utilized to address the diverse challenges faced by the community. Community empowerment can be facilitated through the mapping of strengths as assets inherent to the community. This mapping process encompasses social, economic, and environmental assets, as well as institutional resources. These assets are sourced collaboratively and synergistically from multiple stakeholders to ensure the optimal and sustainable development of palm sugar producers. By adopting a comprehensive and participatory approach, a stronger foundation for collaboration within business groups is established, fostering accelerated development based on the actual assets possessed by the community. This research, conducted in partnership with stakeholders, aim to provide direct assistance, while business development initiatives focus on expanding marketing efforts by promoting palm sugar production at various events. Furthermore, ongoing support is extended to business groups in securing home industry and halal certifications, alongside institutional assistance to empower palm sugar entrepreneur communities in effectively establishing and sustaining their production enterprises.

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The authors, namely Siti Anah Kunyati (author 1), Jaziar Radianti (author 2), affirm that this manuscript has been meticulously prepared and endorsed for submission to the journal. The collaborative efforts of all authors in the completion of this article.

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