



Empowering the Community or Corporate Image Building?: Analysis of Rengganis Agro Tourism (WAR) in Gunung Gambir Area by PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII

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Abstract: PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII, as part of its corporate social responsibility, aims to enhance economic activity in the Mount Gambir area through Agro Rengganis Tourism (WAR), with the primary goal of fostering image development through empowerment. This qualitative study seeks to identify the various motives underlying empowerment initiatives in the Mount Gambir region, employing the theory of legitimacy as its perspective. The research reveals that PTPN XII employs an independence model in its empowerment process, focusing on improving community welfare via Rengganis Agro Tourism. This model involves providing the community with the autonomy to identify and harness the potential of their natural surroundings. PTPN serves as a facilitator, offering necessary developmental support such as training and education. This approach proves effective in elevating the standard of living for the local population. However, the study highlights a notable gap in the sustainability aspect of the empowerment process. The current program tends to prioritize image-building and maintaining positive relations between PTPN XII and the community, potentially overlooking long-term sustainability efforts.

Keywords: Community empowerment, agrotourism, social welfare

Abstrak: Peningkatan aktivitas perekonomian di kawasan Gunung Gambir melalui Wisata Agro Rengganis (WAR) yang difasilitasi PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII sebagai bagian dari tanggung jawab sosial perusahaan mengindikasikan motif pembangunan citra dalam bentuk pemberdayaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi beragam motif yang muncul dari kegiatan pemberdayaan di kawasan Gunung Gambir dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif. Perspektif yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini menggunakan teori legitimasi. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa proses pemberdayaan yang dilakukan PTPN XII untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan masyarakat melalui Wisata Agro Rengganis ditempuh dengan model kemandirian. Masyarakat diberikan ruang terbuka untuk menentukan dan mengembangkan potensi alam. PTPN berperan sebagai fasilitator yang menyediakan kebutuhan pengembangan, seperti pelatihan dan pendidikan. Mekanisme ini merupakan langkah efektif yang dapat meningkatkan taraf hidup masyarakat sekitar. Meskipun demikian, upaya keberlanjutan tidak menjadi bagian dari



proses pemberdayaan, sehingga program yang dijalankan bertendensi pada pembangunan citra yang tujuannya hanya untuk menjaga hubungan baik antara PTPN XII dengan masyarakat demi keberlanjutan perusahaan.

Kata Kunci: *Pemberdayaan Masyarakat, agrotourism, kesejahteraan sosial*

INTRODUCTION

PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII's Gunung Gambir Estate, which is responsible for managing plantations in the Gunung Gambir area with a profit-oriented approach, directs its social responsibility towards community empowerment. PTPN XII chooses to develop the plantation area into an agro-tourism area to enhance the local community's standard of living through the construction of Agro Tourism Rengganis (WAR). The effectiveness of converting plantations into tourism has led to increased economic opportunities for residents, correlating with improved supporting infrastructure, making Agro Tourism Rengganis a popular new natural attraction in Jember Regency (Seno & Ardhi, 2021). The popularity of agro-tourism in the Gunung Gambir area involving PTPN XII as a provider and development facilitator tends to enhance the company's image among the surrounding community.

Previous researchers did not examine other motives for community empowerment by companies within the legitimacy framework. Two researcher tendencies are observed in viewing corporate empowerment efforts, especially by PTPNs in Indonesia. Firstly, empowerment contributes to employee performance. Feby Milanie et al. (2020), Arga Malona et al. (2023), and Andri P. Panjaitan et al. (2023) found a positive relationship between improved employee performance and corporate empowerment efforts. Strengthening relations between PTPNs and the community relies on effective communication patterns identified as impactful and positive (Rasyid, 2020; Rasyid & Nasution, 2021)—secondly, forms of empowerment. Empowering the local community focused on plantation workers' families is conducted through partnership programs (Purboyo, 2021), skills training (Miranti et al., 2022), and creativity enhancement (Tulus et al., 2023). Exploring other motives beyond its connection to performance enhancement has been neglected by various studies.

This research aims to address the shortcomings of previous studies that have attempted to explore the presence of motives beyond improving the relationship between companies and communities alongside economic improvement. To achieve this goal, the study focuses on three discussion aspects.

The first aspect relates to program implementation. This section explains the position of PTPN as a manager analyzed to observe the business models employed. The second aspect analyzes various ongoing efforts to review the empowerment models used. This section identifies advanced programs as a link to explanations of specific motif findings, which are part of the explanations in the third aspect. Three explanatory models are employed to examine the existence of other motifs beyond economic empowerment for implementing PTPN XII's social responsibilities towards the surrounding community.

This research is grounded in the argument that the empowerment status obtained by a community from a company is based on considerations to minimize the company's legitimacy gap towards residents. Maintaining this gap is achieved by utilizing the surrounding community as a potential source to continue, providing them benefits as part of a social contract (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Maintaining good relations with the surrounding community to achieve corporate stability makes empowerment programs related to corporate image development (O'Dwyer, 2002), thus aiming orientation solely to emphasize the company's interests by disregarding other environmental impacts (Neu et al., 1998). The orientation toward corporate image as the primary goal in empowerment programs provides the basic argument to discover other motives for PTPN XII's empowerment towards the Gunung Gambir community.

METHODS

The investigation into the motives of PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII Gunung Gambir Estate conducted in this study employed a qualitative method. This method was chosen based on its emphasis on processes and emerging meanings (Williams, 2011). The selection of the Gunung Gambir plantation location in this research was based on purposive sampling, indicating that the researcher had a deeper understanding of this area. Another reason for choosing Wisata Agro Rengganis (WAR) as the object of study was its popularity.

Regarding data collection, this research utilized observation techniques and interviews. In the interview process, the researcher employed purposive sampling to select primary and additional informants. Meanwhile, the study utilized a three-step model in the data analysis process: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (verification). This research also applied a legitimacy theory approach, which posits that the distribution of benefits by a company aims to maintain its stability and continuity (Shocker & Sethi, 1973).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Socio-Economic Reality of Communities in the Gunung Gambir Area

The natural potential of the Gunung Gambir area benefits the surrounding community. The climate is conducive to cultivating crops that thrive in highland areas, such as tea, rubber, and coffee, making the region a plantation area initially managed by the Dutch government and later taken over by PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII. The presence of a State-Owned Enterprise (BUMN) around the Gunung Gambir area provides livelihood opportunities for the local population. Most residents of Sumberbaru choose to work as employees, either in administrative functions or as field workers on the plantations. The diverse plant varieties in the Gunung Gambir area also support animal husbandry in the local community.

The dependency of the Gunung Gambir community on natural commodities affects economic stability, which relies on the availability of plantation yields. The seasonal availability of plantation products impacts payment mechanisms based on daily workloads and piece-rate systems. Tea pickers earn Rp. 850 per kilogram, and rubber tappers receive Rp. 5,700 per liter based on their work results. The total wages earned are below the Regional Minimum Wage (UMR) in Jember Regency. Moreover, their work depends on the tea and rubber harvest seasons, which only occur during the year. Limited economic conditions make the community in the Gunung Gambir area economically vulnerable, affecting the stability of their well-being.

The Gunung Gambir area's remote geographic location further exacerbates the community's partially self-reliant economy. Situated 48 km away from the city center, the area experiences uneven development access. This is evident in limited street lighting, rocky

roads, and the absence of electricity generation. Another issue affecting the community in the Gunung Gambir area is the limited capacity for independent environmental management, leading to economic dependence solely on the presence of PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII. In this context, PTPN XII aims to provide opportunities for the Gunung Gambir community to build resources by fostering knowledge and skills to develop natural potential.

Wisata Agro Rengganis (WAR) effort in Gunung Gambir Areas: A Friend relationship development

The reality of a community relying on the economy of plantations managed by PTPN XII Gunung Gambir Estate has driven the search for collective solutions to create alternative sources through agro-tourism development. Utilizing the natural potential of plantations to boost the local economy is part of the empowerment process (Suharto, 2014). The drive to enhance the economy within the empowerment framework includes community involvement to ensure the sustainability of welfare improvement models. Michal Lyons et al. (2001) provide the foundation for this concept by defining empowerment as activities that engage the community to achieve sustainable empowerment. Involving the community in empowerment activities is a primary concern recognized by PTPN XII to enhance the economic value of the plantation and thereby improve the welfare of the surrounding community.

PTPN is enhancing the economic value of the plantation by maximizing the natural scenery of the tea plantation area and transforming it into an agro-tourism destination. The creation of the Agro Tourism Rengganis site involves two critical efforts, which are detailed below:

Involving the Local Community in the Development of Agro Tourism Rengganis

The development of the Gunung Gambir area into a tourism destination aims to improve the welfare of the local community, which relies on PT's management of plantations. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII. This activity has been ongoing since the colonial Dutch administration. The community has actively welcomed the economic development process through the utilization of natural potential via agro-tourism. The

locals initiated efforts to promote the area through sports activities, enhancing residents' skills and knowledge, and participating in providing infrastructure that supports tourism activities. Various structures, such as gazebos, sales stands, and other ideas, were proposed to PTPN XII as the landowner.

Residents' involvement in the agro-tourism area's development process was carried out by accommodating the desires of the local community. This process was conducted through discussions involving 15 residents. The selection of meeting participants was based on various considerations. Representatives from the local community were chosen based on their creative potential to provide constructive input, criticism, and suggestions. Meanwhile, representatives from the community who were employees of PTPN XII were selected based on performance evaluations by the PTPN XII manager. The meetings considered the reasons for empowerment, resource identification, and action plans. The meeting resulted in an agreement on the urgency of establishing an agro-tourism area to boost the local economy. The follow-up to this agreement was implemented in a second meeting, which produced a management structure for the Gunung Gambir agro-tourism project.

Structurally, the management team for the agro-tourism project consists of 14 individuals. In addition to the structural managers, a total of 60 people from the Gunung Gambir community are involved as operators. The decision-making system within this management is coordinated, meaning that decisions are made based on the approval of the PTPN XII manager. The management team is responsible for developing areas of the Gunung Gambir agro-tourism site. In forming the management structure, PTPN XII entrusted the community according to their skills and appropriate roles. PTPN XII is responsible for overseeing the project and providing both financial and moral support throughout the development of the Gunung Gambir plantation area.

Mapping the Gunung Gambir Area: Between Agro Tourism and Conservation

The planning for agro-tourism development began with mapping the Gunung Gambir plantation area, which would be used as a tourist destination. The planning and decision-making process involved the local community of Gunung Gambir, who are already part of the administration. Mapping the tourism area aims to maintain environmental

balance, ensuring that the new areas supporting the economy through tourism do not damage productive plantation land. One informant explained that the mapping process was a collaborative effort between the residents and PTPN XII, considering the balance of nature, economic improvement, and alignment with tourism potential. These various considerations marked the beginning of agro-tourism development in the Gunung Gambir area.

The primary considerations in mapping the area and converting the plantation into a tourist attraction involved assessing the suitability of the location to tourism needs. A 22-hectare area in Gelang Village was chosen based on its natural beauty and the fact that it would not disrupt the plantation yield. Several supporting facilities were built in the area, including a wooden bridge as a raised pathway over the tea plantation. Other facilities were also constructed to support tourism activities, such as various photo spots with rainbow ornaments, stars, the iconic "Pesona Gunung Gambir" signage, and viewing platforms. Swings and a suspension bridge were also built to enhance the tourism experience. An educational tourism area also became part of the Rengganis Agro Tourism (WAR) facilities.

The community's involvement in identifying their needs and potential to improve welfare reflects an empowerment model in the PTPN XII Gunung Gambir environment characterized by assistance. This assistance model works in synergy with maximizing the community's potential by identifying their own needs, which are genuinely felt (Ife, 2000). The complete delegation of the identification of potential and the development of the tourism area in Gunung Gambir demonstrates PTPN XII's trust in the community's capabilities. Trust becomes a fundamental asset in forming an empowerment model based on friendship, which enhances solidarity and confidence (Mayaka et al., 2020). Luisi and Hamel (2021) and Hardina (2021) found that trust, which leads to the entire delegation of the community empowerment process, can increase community participation.

The full involvement of the community, leading to increased participation, is part of PTPN XII's success in building good relationships with the community. Building a positive image by giving direct roles to the community is one way the company publicizes its contributions to society (Maama & Mkhize, 2020), allowing the community to overlook

various limitations they experience as company workers. Maintaining good relations with the surrounding residents can ensure the company's increased legitimacy in the community, leading to more excellent corporate stability (Eabrasu et al., 2021). This dynamic results in the community placing complete trust in the company, viewing it as a partner (friend) contributing to economic growth.

Making Self-Sufficiency Empowerment in Gunung Gambir Areas: PTPN's Efforts

Community empowerment through maximizing natural potential by transforming plantations into agro-tourism destinations with the involvement of PTPN XII Kebun Gunung Gambir is strengthened by developing skills and knowledge. Establishing a support system through skill-building and knowledge transfer is part of the sustainable empowerment process (Eitzel et al., 2018). PTPN XII acts as a facilitator, positioning itself not as an intervening subject but instead allowing the community to be the subject that empowers itself. This self-potential enhancement model ensures the sustainability of community development (Milford, 2015). The increase in creativity through training and education conducted by PTPN XII at Gunung Gambir is part of its role as a facilitator in improving the community's economy.

The improvement of the community's economic status through agro-tourism in Gunung Gambir is supported by the provision of support systems to ensure that development efforts proceed sustainably. According to one informant, PTPN XII provides education and training to enhance the community's knowledge and tourism management skills. These programs aim to help the community explore and utilize their natural potential so that agro-tourism can grow. The development of the tourism area offers an economical alternative for the community, reducing their reliance on plantation activities. Knowledge transfer is carried out systematically, from managers to employees, agro-division heads, and the Gunung Gambir community.

The community's knowledge development is complemented by skill-building to increase creativity for tourism area development. The creation of various facilities from recycled materials is proof of the sustainable management of the tourism site. According to DE, the knowledge provided focuses on increasing creativity in repurposing unused items to support tourism activities. This approach has led to the sustainable management and

development of new facilities made from recycled materials, such as rides created from unused metal scraps from PTPN. The community's creativity is further maximized by involving women, which is organized in the PTPN XII Workers' Wives Association (IKBI).

Training for the wives of PTPN workers focuses on recycling waste, particularly plastic bottles (eco-bricks). These bottles, collected by the workers' wives under the leadership of the plantation manager's wife, are recycled into items with economic value. Culinary and tourism business training also supports the skill development of the workers' wives. To facilitate this, PTPN XII collaborates with the Tourism Department of Jember Regency and several hotel chefs in Jember as mentors. This initiative aims to boost the local economy by establishing culinary businesses near tourist attractions. Other activities to improve IKBI members' skills include utilizing medicinal plants to make herbal drinks (jamu) and learning flower arrangement (ikebana), with an expert artist from Surabaya leading the ikebana workshops.

Ecotourism as Sustainable Development? Balancing Promotion and Community Improvement

The improvement of community welfare in the Gunung Gambir area, as implemented by PTPN XII, represents a mechanism of self-sufficiency empowerment for sustainability. This empowerment model is evident from the development and management of the agro-tourism site in the Gunung Gambir area. PTPN XII, as the area manager, grants the community the full opportunity to plan, execute, and manage the process of converting the plantation into a tourist destination. However, a critical flaw that undermines this self-sufficiency empowerment stems from PTPN XII's neglect in monitoring and evaluation to ensure sustainable empowerment. The data reveals that PTPN XII's performance assessments are only related to plantation activities, without addressing the processes and management of agro-tourism.

The presence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for all aspects of agro-tourism management is essential for providing solutions and preventing various challenges that may arise. Muhamad Khair et al. (2020) claim that monitoring is a critical element in sustainable empowerment as it serves as a tool for consideration in planning and development. The monitoring activities evaluations assess a program's effectiveness and

alignment with its intended goals (Achmad W, Kunyanti, & Mujiono, 2021), enabling predictive actions to sustain agro-tourism's existence. Furthermore, Juan E. Núñez-Ríos et al. (2020) argue that monitoring is crucial in forming decentralization and cohesive governance, which can respond to dynamic changes to establish sustainable empowerment.

PTPN XII's neglect of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in managing Rengganis Agro Tourism (WAR) suggests that the empowerment process is built on a promotional framework to maintain good relations between the company and the surrounding community. This approach risks positioning the community as objects, wrapped in self-reliance, serving the company's interests (Suhadi et al., 2014). While, in essence, PTPN's actions reflect its responsibility to improve the quality of life for its workers and their families, the absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms shows that these efforts lack a sustainability focus. The sustainability and economic improvement of workers, their families, and the surrounding community are key constructs of corporate social responsibility through empowerment (Holme & Watts, 2000). Without proper oversight and evaluation, the goals of PTPN XII's empowerment efforts fail to align with the pursuit of sustainable empowerment.

Many studies have yet to track post-program activities. Researchers tend to focus solely on program implementation, which results in findings related only to the mechanisms PTPN applies to the surrounding communities, such as improving community welfare through partnership programs (Purboyo, 2021), skill training (Miranti et al., 2022), and enhancing creativity (Tulus et al., 2023). These actions have generally been effective and positive in fostering good relations between PTPN and the local community (Malona et al., 2023; Milanie et al., 2020; Panjaitan et al., 2023). The positive relationships with the community highlight PTPN's image-building orientation in every empowerment program directed at its workers' families and the surrounding residents.

CONCLUSION

This study does not reflect the improvement of the welfare of employees, their families, and the surrounding community, which has long been regarded as part of corporate social responsibility and seen as a process of sustainable economic development. PT. Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) XII, responsible for managing the plantation area in

Gunung Gambir, has made efforts to increase the local community's income—most of whom are plantation workers—by converting the plantation into agro-tourism. The transformation of the plantation into Rengganis Agro Tourism (WAR), which involved the community through various training and knowledge-sharing initiatives, has been tainted by the absence of proper monitoring and evaluation of the management mechanisms. Monitoring and evaluation, which are critical elements for ensuring the continuity of the program, were neglected by PTPN. These processes were only applied to the performance of plantation workers to improve company outputs, indicating that the establishment of Rengganis Agro Tourism serves more as a promotional mechanism for PTPN to maintain a dynamic relationship with residents and employees.

The promotional orientation identified in this study is understood through the application of a legitimacy theory analysis, which emphasizes the adequacy of corporate social behavior. This theory sheds light on the underlying connections between the company's actions toward the local community and its image-building efforts, suggesting that specific interests drove PTPN XII's facilitative actions. However, the findings of this study are limited to the development of Rengganis Agro Tourism (WAR), excluding other programs facilitated by PTPN XII. These limitations provide opportunities for future research to either reinforce or critique the conclusions of this study.

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