

Community Involvement in Strengthening the Tolaki Tribe Konawe District

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the forms of participation of the Tolaki people in empowerment programs and identify factors that support and hinder such participation in Konawe District, Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. The method applied is a qualitative descriptive method, with data collection techniques in the form of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of eight informants, including traditional leaders, community leaders, and local residents. Analysis using Participation Theory (Arnstein) shows that community involvement is at the level of partnership and delegation of authority, although not yet complete. Empowerment Theory (Chambers) emphasizes that active involvement can strengthen the capabilities and independence of the community. Meanwhile, Social Interaction Theory is used to explain the causes of the non-involvement of some communities, especially due to minimal social communication and alienation in participatory networks. The study findings indicate that community empowerment is carried out in several aspects, such as economic, educational, and cultural aspects. Community involvement typically increases when programs are tailored to local needs and involve the community directly.

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of community empowerment is to empower them, especially vulnerable groups who feel powerless. This powerlessness can arise from internal factors, such as how they perceive themselves, or from external factors caused by unfair social structures. After undergoing the empowerment process, it is hoped that communities will become more prosperous and have the ability to meet their basic needs, thus creating a self-sufficient society. This independence encompasses economic, social, and cultural aspects, as well as the right to speak and express opinions, including the ability to determine their political rights (Rahmat & Mirnawati, 2020).

The process of strengthening community capacity doesn't happen by itself. It requires active community participation to ensure the results are truly meaningful. Success in community empowerment depends not only on community participation and an understanding of science and technology, but also on the development of human qualities. This is crucial so that each individual can change their way of thinking and acting in accordance with the changes taking place, develop a sense of responsibility, and participate in maintaining and preserving the results of implemented programs and activities (Riyanto & Kovalenko, 2023)

In Kolaka Regency, there are two main ethnic groups that are indigenous: the Kolaki and the Bugis, as well as five other related tribes, such as the Tolaki Mekonga and the Tolaki Konawe. This research focuses on poverty alleviation issues related to the Tolaki Tribe, as they are the largest group living in Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, the center of Kolaka Regency. Initial studies found that community development efforts in the Kolaki Tribe were not based on the needs of the local population, but rather on priorities determined by the District Head, Village Head, and Tribal Chief. The closed planning process excluded residents from participating, thus making the planning a means to implement the agendas of government or tribal elites. Decision-making in planning was heavily influenced by a paternalistic culture, where the District Head, Village Head, and Tribal Chief were the primary decision-makers (Wulandari, 2022).

Implementing community empowerment programs that do not involve members of the community demonstrates a lack of understanding of the importance of public involvement. The persistent influence of power on the community continues to shape their attitudes and actions, leading them to refrain from participating in every step of community empowerment activities.

Kendari City is the center of economic activity in Kolaka Regency, but its tourism potential remains underutilized. Although many natural attractions are attractive, these sites are not well managed. Furthermore, the culture of the Tolaki people living in this area has not been seriously developed, even though their arts, such as carving and dance, are very attractive to tourists. The Tolaki people are one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Southeast Sulawesi Province. They are renowned for their expertise in traditional farming, reading natural signs to predict the weather, arts such as the Lulo dance and carving, and their ability to use traditional weapons such as the ta'awu and kinia. The carvings they create often have deep symbolic and spiritual meaning. There is a Tolaki Festival that showcases the

diversity of Tolaki arts and culture, but the event is quite remote and difficult to reach from the center of Kendari City. As a result, this art and culture remains relatively unknown to the wider public, including visitors to Kolaka. One reason for this is the lack of facilities to introduce this culture to a wider audience (Wulandari, 2022).

When the author explained about the changes in the water in the river, the author found that during the day when the water rose, many residents began to return home after looking for food in a location they called "the water head". For the Tolaki people, the water head is a very fertile area with lots of food available, including sago which is the main food for the Tolaki people. The author saw that there are many swamps and wide rivers in this area, where people look for various types of food such as karaka clams, white snapper, and various types of snails. The following is a chart showing the population growth of the Tolaki tribe spread across Southeast Sulawesi Province:

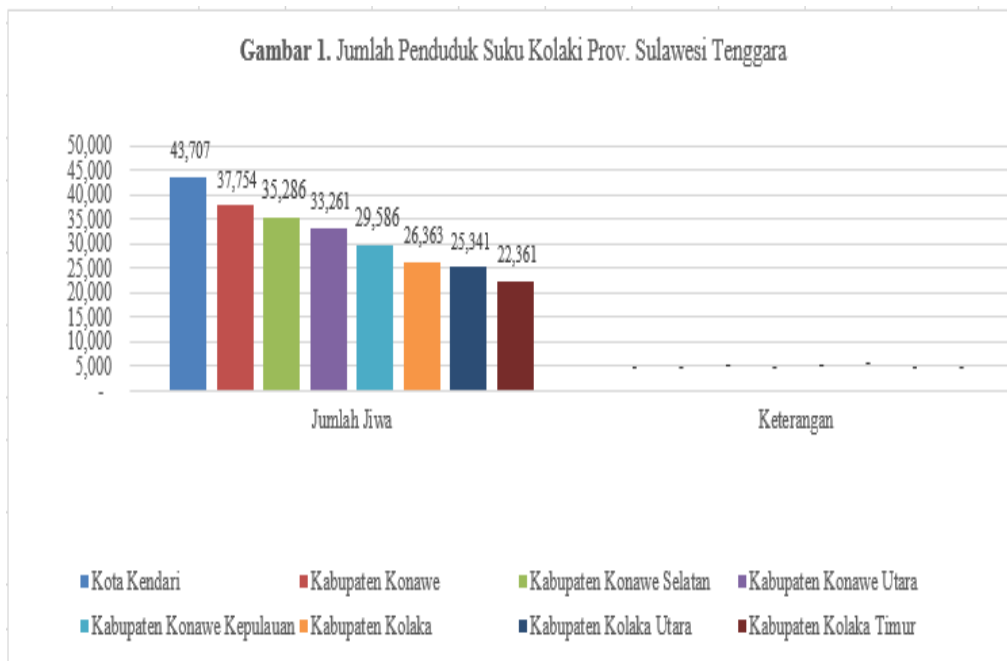


Figure 1. Distribution of the Tolaki Tribe Population in Southeast Sulawesi Province

Source: BPS Southeast Sulawesi Province, 2025

From the chart above, it can be explained that the distribution of the Tolaki tribe population in Southeast Sulawesi Province includes Kendari City with a total of 43.707 million people, Konawe Regency with a total of 37.754 million people, South Konawe Regency with a total of 35.286 million people, North Konawe Regency with a total of 33.261 million people, Konawe Islands Regency with a total of 29.586 million people, Kolaka Regency with a total of 26.363 million people, North Kolaka Regency with a total of 25.341 million people and East Kolaka Regency with a total of 22.361 million people (Goma et al., 2021).

Meski While Indonesia boasts abundant natural resources, these conditions do not guarantee the well-being of the local population. Minimal health and

educational facilities mean their lives are far from the modernization enjoyed by other communities in general.

In the author's observations, the Tolaki people are a group that still lives as farmers and gatherers. They obtain their food from nature, both from natural resources and from the rivers surrounding their settlements. Food is usually obtained from farms and forests, while fish and snails are collected from river estuaries.

Interestingly, women's role in economic life is very prominent. They not only take care of the household and children, but are also responsible for providing daily food. Women are involved in various activities, from planting and harvesting sago, fishing, gathering shellfish, and preparing gardens. Although men do help, such as fishing or netting, their roles are not routine and are merely supportive of the women's primary activities.

In line with several studies that have been conducted, such as measuring the level of participation of local communities consisting of women, landless people, illiterate people, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST), youth, and elderly involved in participatory forest management programs in India (Basu, 2021). Then there are the empowerment programs for isolated tribal or indigenous communities. Empowerment programs for isolated indigenous communities have not been considered effective in empowering indigenous communities. Using Anthony Giddens' structuralism theory, this study aims to analyze how communication is structured in community empowerment activities for isolated tribes (Rasyid et al., 2022). And the role of Tolaki traditional leaders in community empowerment and health in Mimika Regency. Innovative traditional leaders who integrate traditional values teaching programs into various aspects of life, increasing community interest in formal and informal education (Tebay & Mallongi, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Empowerment Participation

According to Craig and Mayo, participation is key to the growth of community independence and empowerment. Participation includes the voluntary involvement of the community in the planning, implementation, decision-making, and evaluation of development programs, which in turn encourages a sense of responsibility and increases the community's independent capabilities ("Book Reviews," 1996).

Community participation in development can be seen as close cooperation between the community, government, and other stakeholders with the aim of improving the conditions and standard of living of the community. Forms of participation include planning, implementation, enjoying the results of development, and evaluation. This participation is important because it builds community ownership of the programs being implemented and encourages sustainable development. In addition, community empowerment is closely related to increasing the capacity and opportunities for communities to play an active role, make decisions, and control resources and development outcomes (Makhdum et al., 2022).

An important element in participation is the opportunity, willingness, and ability of the community to get involved. Community empowerment is more than just involvement; it is a process that leads to an increase in the capacity of community groups to take actions that improve their quality of life and reduce their dependence on external assistance. Through empowerment, communities become active subjects in sustainable and democratic development (Konesko, 2016).

In summary, the literature emphasizes that community participation and empowerment are two interrelated concepts that are vital for achieving effective, inclusive, and sustainable development. They require the direct involvement of the community in every stage of development, from planning to evaluation, in order to generate positive social and economic impacts for the community itself ("Companion to Dev. Stud.," 2014).

Tolaki Tribe, Konawe District

The Tolaki tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups inhabiting Southeast Sulawesi, particularly in the Konawe district and its surroundings. The Tolaki tribe is believed to have existed since prehistoric times and are descendants of a group of people who came from North Sulawesi. This tribe is known to be related to the To Mori, Toraja, and To Bungku tribes, and has similar biological characteristics such as skin color and height (Wulandari, 2022).

The Tolaki tribe also founded the Kingdom of Konawe in the 10th century, which was formed from the merger of three Tolaki communities, namely Wawolesea, Besulutu, and Padangguni. This process was initiated by a female figure named Wekoila, who succeeded in uniting the three groups and laying the foundations for a government based on customary law. The Konawe Kingdom reached its heyday during the reign of Sangia Inato or King Tebawo, who developed the kingdom's governmental structure and territory (Idaman, 2019).

In terms of culture, the Tolaki tribe still preserves traditional houses called Laika, the Tolaki language which has several dialects depending on the region, as well as traditional customs and ceremonies such as Kalosara which are still performed at weddings. Traditional Tolaki communities adhere strictly to customary law and have a social structure that influences their daily lives. Today, despite the onset of modernization, efforts to preserve Tolaki customs and culture continue through education and cultural festivals in Southeast Sulawesi (Wulandari, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the Tolaki Tribe Community located in Konawe District, Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. This location was chosen based on the fact that the Tolaki Tribe in Konawe District, Kolaka Regency, has unique characteristics that require increased direct community participation to strengthen tribal customs and traditions so that they can run effectively. Informant identification was carried out using interview and documentation methods through purposive sampling, where informant selection was carried out deliberately based on criteria relevant to the research objectives.

The research objects in this study included community leaders from the Tolaki Tribe and residents of Kolaka Regency. The data analysis method applied in this study was a literature study approach, by studying books, articles, and journals related to the theme raised, and aligned with analysis regarding community empowerment in various aspects such as economics, education, and culture (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022).

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

How to Empower the Tolaki Tribe

The empowerment of the Tolaki community in Konawe District is carried out using a diverse approach, encompassing economic, educational, and cultural aspects. This process represents an inclusive and comprehensive method for enhancing the capabilities of individuals and groups within the community, in accordance with Robert Chambers' concept of empowerment, which emphasizes the importance of development rooted in community and locality (Thompson & Cannon, 2023).

a. Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is reflected in skills development and business diversity, such as entrepreneurship training and business management, as well as the development of local products such as Tolaki carvings. This initiative encourages a shift from a subsistence economy to a more productive and market-oriented one. Cooperatives and corporate social responsibility programs significantly contribute to opening up opportunities for community access to capital and market share.

Informants' testimonies indicate that skills training has successfully improved the quality of community products and expanded marketing networks, even to national and international markets. This indicates a significant increase in capacity and access to the economy.

This condition is also in line with the participatory approach explained by Arnstein, which shows that the higher the level of involvement (in this context, the community is not only a recipient of training but also participates in the production and distribution process), the greater the community's control over development outcomes (Habib, 2021).

b. Education Empowerment

Education plays a crucial role in the empowerment process. Efforts to increase parents' understanding of the value of education, provide learning resources, and participate in school activities are examples of empowerment models rooted in the family and community.

Educational approaches that are contextually relevant and integrated with local culture have also proven to be effective in fostering children's interest in learning and engagement with their local identity. Non-formal education programs such as skills training and adult literacy programs play a role in enhancing understanding, especially for parents.

Statements from informants emphasized that support in education comes not only from educational institutions but also from families and communities. This demonstrates that empowerment in education is more than just the transfer of formal knowledge; it's about creating a holistic and mutually supportive learning ecosystem.

c. Cultural Empowerment

Culture is a vital element in the lives of the Tolaki people. Through the preservation of carvings, the use of regional languages, and the observance of traditions, cultural strengthening not only protects identity but also creates economic opportunities (such as cultural tourism and artistic products).

Statements from informants emphasized that culture serves as a pathway for inclusive participation, uniting communities around shared values. Cultural empowerment encourages involvement across ages and genders and serves as a tool for increasing social solidarity.

In this case, the theory of social interaction is very relevant because it shows that cultural preservation becomes a forum for interaction that strengthens social relations among members of society and increases social cohesion.

Supporting Actors and Inhibiting Factors in Tolaki Community Participation

1. Factors Supporting Tolaki Community Participation

a. Local Wisdom and the Value of Mutual Cooperation

The value of cooperation embedded in the Tolaki community illustrates a significant level of community involvement within Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, particularly at the partnership level, where the community plays an active role in the development process. This collective spirit demonstrates the strong internal strength of the community to support each other without having to rely entirely on external assistance. In accordance with Chambers' Empowerment Theory in (Nelson, 1995), mutual cooperation becomes a manifestation of strength that comes from within namely strength that arises from local potential, not from external intervention.

Informant MM's statement emphasizing that limited financial resources can be overcome through collaboration and unity reflects the community's sense of control and ownership over the development process. This form of participation demonstrates that the community is not merely an object but also an active subject in the empowerment process.

b. Support from Institutions and Government

Community participation increases when traditional institutions and the government actively contribute. Belief in traditional institutions reflects the continued strong recognition of the existing social system within the Tolaki community. Within the context of Social Interaction Theory, this demonstrates the importance of the presence of significant others (influential individuals within a social community), with traditional leaders serving as figures who can guide the collective thinking and actions of residents. Support from government

agencies such as the Village Empowerment Agency and the Social Services Agency also demonstrates a supportive form of empowerment, as explained by Chambers. When formal and informal structures work together, community participation becomes more active and sustainable. (Thompson & Cannon, 2023).

c. Existence of Relevant Empowerment Programs

The relevance of this initiative to local culture, such as the development of handicrafts and weaving, demonstrates a contextual empowerment approach, where the program is tailored to the social and economic circumstances of the community. This aligns with the concept of meaningful participation in Arnstein's Theory, which suggests that participation involves more than just presence, but also contributing to and having a sense of ownership of program outcomes (Octaviani et al., 2022).

The source's statement that the program continues due to the government's consistency reflects the continuity and strengthening of institutional structures within the empowerment process. This builds community confidence, demonstrating their ability to continue working within their cultural framework.

2. Factors Inhibiting Participation of the Tolaki Tribe

a. Inconsistency in Program Manager Responsibilities

Individual failure to continue the program reflects a lack of internal management capacity and a lack of accountability. Within the framework of Participation Theory, this situation equates to tokenism, where the community appears to be involved, but decisions and program continuity are not taken seriously. This indicates that community participation is not supported by a robust institutional system.

Meanwhile, based on Social Interaction Theory, individual failure to fulfill roles can lead to social distrust, which can lead to a decline in collective participation. If interactions between program implementers and the community are not well-maintained, the social trust that has been built up can potentially fade (Karim, 2020)

b. Delayed Funds and Financial Issues

Financial issues are a technical barrier that can have structural impacts. When funds aren't available on schedule, field activities are hampered, negatively impacting community trust in ongoing projects. This weakens the enabling environment dimension of the empowerment process, which should include adequate and timely resource support.

According to Chambers, empowerment requires a combination of capacity building and access to resources. Delays in funding indicate a failure in the latter. As a result, community participation is inactive, as they lack the tools to empower themselves (Thompson & Cannon, 2023).

c. Lack of Socialization from the Implementing Agency

The lack of interaction from implementing agencies indicates a fundamental communication problem. This creates an information gap, which,

according to Social Interaction Theory, results in a lack of collective meaning-making. As a consequence, the community feels alienated from the start and lacks a sense of ownership in the program.

In Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, this situation merely reflects the level of information dissemination or even manipulation, where the flow of information is not two-way. The public is not involved in the dialogue, but is merely informed or even left completely in the dark. When the principles of transparency and openness are not applied, public trust and enthusiasm are very low.

This review of supporting and inhibiting factors indicates that Tolaki community participation is influenced by traditional social structures, interactions with modern institutions, and the quality of communication between stakeholders. The theories applied illustrate that successful empowerment requires meaningful participation (Arnstein), support appropriate to the local context (Chambers), and constructive and communicative social interactions (Social Interaction Theory). (Thompson & Cannon, 2023).

Supporting factors need to be strengthened through planning that involves communities from the outset, as well as strengthening institutional capacity and resources. Conversely, inhibiting factors must be addressed through improvements in program management, accelerated financial administration, and the implementation of more inclusive and transparent communication strategies.

In line with several previous studies on community participation in local community empowerment, including Forest participation of local communities: a study of a tribal-dominated region in India, the research results showed that participation rates were higher in Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups, landless households, and illiterate households. Overall household participation was influenced by gender, family size, occupation, land ownership, forest income to total income, distance from residence to forest, distance from residence to market, and cooperation from the forest department. This article has important policy implications for social and economic development. (Basu, 2021); (AMR Maidin, Rajamemang, Putera, Baharuddin, et al., 2023). next Communication Structuring in Aisyiyah's Empowerment Activities in Isolated Tribal Communities with research results showing that social reproduction occurs through the duality of structures in 'Aisyiyah's empowerment activities among the indigenous Loinang community. This is in accordance with Giddens' idea of duality, which states that structure and agents work together and influence each other. (Rasyid et al., 2022); (Wangu et al., 2021). Then The role of Kamoro traditional leaders in community empowerment and health in Mimika district with research results showing the role of Kamoro traditional leaders in community empowerment and health in Mimika Regency. Innovative traditional leaders who incorporate traditional values teaching programs into various aspects of life, increase community interest in formal and informal education. These traditional leaders also serve as bridges between the government and the community as well as with companies, in this case PT. Freeport. Social

interactions between traditional leaders with the government and other community leaders in the context of empowerment and improving community health in rural areas, are carried out through social contact and communication through various channels, both formal and informal, both with the community and with other regional leaders such as the government. These traditional figures have played a role in providing an understanding of the concept of empowerment to the community, where they are also involved as members of the Angmume community organization and the Kamoro community development institution that functions as an institution for community empowerment and health protection. The understanding of empowerment is conveyed within a conceptual framework in accordance with the Kamoro cultural approach. Related to empowerment, it is related to the issue of stages in customary representation in the form of programs, and the higher the stage (local, regional, and national), the perspective of empowerment becomes broader and does not directly lead to technical issues (Tebay & Mallongi, 2020); (AMR Maidin, Rajamemang, Putera, Wahyuti, et al., 2023). The research *Assessing Rural Community Empowerment through Community Internet Center: Using Asset Mapping and Surveys Method* with the research results produced three areas of community empowerment: (1) community participation, (2) ownership, and (3) information services. However, community participation determines the outcome of the role played by the center in empowering the community. Further studies need to be conducted on other sample groups and obtain other perspectives from internet center management to get a different view of the internet center program. (Halim & Noor, 2023); (A. R. Maidin, 2017). And *Enacting Community Development Principles in Women Empowerment Projects: a Case Study in Ondo State, Nigeria* with research results showing that when women beneficiaries are actively and integrally involved in the design and implementation of programs aimed at improving their well-being, the impact becomes exponential, and results are achieved quickly. This article advocates that planners and implementers of community development programs view women beneficiaries as active contributors and participants in their development, rather than as passive recipients or consumers of palliative interventions (Olaniran & Perumal, 2021); (Putera et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Economic empowerment is implemented through skills training, business support, and strengthening local cooperatives, creating opportunities for communities to achieve financial independence. In the education sector, public awareness of the value of both formal and informal education is growing, driven by scholarships and training programs. Furthermore, in the cultural realm, communities demonstrate dedication to preserving local identity through carving, traditional dance, and participation in various cultural festivals.

Community involvement in this empowerment effort was quite significant, as evidenced by the participation of seven out of eight respondents. This involvement reflects a functional and interactive form of participation, as explained in Arnstein's theory of participation. However, one respondent was

not actively involved, and when analyzed using social interaction theory, it was shown that weak social networks and lack of communication can be barriers to individual involvement in the empowerment program.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

For future research, it is recommended to focus on how the practical participation mechanisms of the community in Konawe District can be optimized, including training, socialization of customs, and the role of local government in supporting the existence and development of a sustainable Tolaki culture. Indigenous peoples' participation in the preservation of indigenous culture and the strengthening of social values and community solidarity. This involvement is manifested through various activities such as traditional hearings, training of prospective members of indigenous communities, and the development and preservation of customs carried out by Tolaki tribal institutions. The younger generation of the Tolaki tribe has also begun to actively participate in education and social activities to support the continuity of their culture. The strengthening of the Tolaki tribe community is also supported by the customary rights of indigenous peoples, despite undergoing social changes that affect their implementation, thus requiring evaluation and adaptation to the times for the sake of cultural continuity and community rights.

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