

# Model of community empowerment in utilizing Purun (*Eleocharis dulcis*) resources for sustainable handicrafts in Indonesia's rural peatland communities

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**Model of community empowerment in utilizing Purun (*Eleocharis dulcis*) resources for sustainable handicrafts in Indonesia's rural peatland communities**

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**Keywords:** community empowerment; handicraft; peatland; *Eleocharis dulcis*.

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**Abstract.** Peatlands have served a crucial ecological and economic purpose for a very long time. Purun (*Eleocharis dulcis*) is a common plant that grows

in peat bogs and contributes to the community. Its population is diminishing, however, due to changes in land management and environmental damage. The concept of communal empowerment was inspired by the sustainability of Purun weaving as a craft enterprise. We adopted a qualitative research methodology with a descriptive approach, comprising interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation, for data collection. Community craft activities have become a "safety valve" for rural community economies, according to our research. Nonetheless, by overcoming the difficulties, these advantages might be utilized again. A cross-generational approach to sustainable craft practices can provide a forum for discussion of the values and perspectives of cultural heritage and the environment. As a result of these findings, the Social, Ecology, and Regulation model is the community empowerment paradigm for the use of resources as sustainable handicrafts, in which the community, affiliated organizations and agencies, and local governments define the total decision-making process. In the areas of ecology, education, and regulation, the government works as a supporter and enforcer.

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## 1. Introduction

Indonesia has the third largest peatland in the world, particularly in the tropics, behind the Amazon and Congo Basin, covering around 8.2% of its land area (Xu, J., Morris, P.J. Liu, J & Holden 2018). Wetland areas in Indonesia, such as Sumatra and Kalimantan, have been logged, drained, and converted into plantations (Giesen and Sari 2018; Miettinen and Liew 2010) by corporations or small-scale plantations (Miettinen and Liew 2010) or abandoned in a decrepit state for more than three decades (Giesen and Sari 2018; Miettinen and Liew 2010).

Approximately 3,1 million hectares of peat swamp have been occupied by industrial plantations of timber and palm oil. The result was an increase of 4.1% in the rate of deforestation between 2007 and 2015 (Miettinen and Liew 2010). The government feels that timber companies and oil palm farms promote economic growth. However, the development of peatlands has ecologically detrimental effects, such as a substantial increase in emissions and widespread

peatland fires, which are the major cause of poor economic quality and public health (Giesen and Sari 2018).

Local populations who had previously depended on peatlands have been disrupted because of the management of vast peatlands for oil palm plantations, mining, and industrial forest plantations. Local communities' interests are frequently deemed incompatible with those of large-scale plantation and mining enterprises. Purun Plant (*Eleocharis dulcis*) is one of the locals' interests that reside near peatlands.

Purun is an economically valuable plant that is typically found in peat bogs (Giesen and Sari 2018). Since the 1970s, Purun has been used as a raw material for woven crafts by the community (Wildayana et al. 2017). In the rural parts of South Sumatra, Indonesia, the practice of purun crafts has become a formidable economic weapon (Azni et al. 2021). As a secondary source of income, Purun weaving has risen to prominence among women. Since the 1970s, the Pedamaran (Pedamaran and Pedamaran Timur) people of Ogan Komering Ilir Regency, South Sumatra Province, have used purun as a source of income to prevent forest fires on peatlands (Armanto. et al. 2017). In the local community, the production of purun mats is an inherited trade. Therefore, purun crafts must be protected, given that purun mats fall under the category of indigenous knowledge regarding peatland utilization.

However, the community is currently protesting that purun raw ingredients are becoming increasingly difficult to get. One explanation is the decreased amount of Lebak Purun land as a result of land conversion to oil palm plantations, wildfires, and intense flooding (Goib et al. 2019). Therefore, it is vital to expand market access and other aspects, such as resource usage, access to community resilience, and inheritance for future generations (Poulton et al. 2006). The mechanism for utilizing purun resources is still somewhat constrained due to risks such as enormous corporate activity, lax restrictions, and adverse weather conditions (Azni et al. 2022).

Therefore, sustainable purun crafts as traditional local knowledge and abilities with deep historical origins must be acknowledged as a significant cultural heritage for modern society. Sustainable handicrafts anchored in social construction are an essential component of cultural heritage (Auclair, E.; Fairclough 2015). The Faro Convention, which addresses the Value of Cultural Heritage, has urged local people to have a pivotal role in establishing the worth of their indigenous knowledge. This strategy is intended to strengthen the dedication of local actors to work towards a sustainable future (Council of

Europe 2005). As authors, we concur that purun craft is one of the cultural heritages and that local wisdom is a process by which history and traditions are transmitted from one generation to others generation.

This study aims to find the most suitable community empowerment model for utilizing purun in peatlands to encourage sustainable handicrafts as an alternative to state-led environmental conservation program practices. In the results and discussion, we first describe the causes of the purun artisans' community's helplessness due to ecological damage, then develop strategies that the community can implement, and finally find the most suitable empowerment model for purun utilization at the research site.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Community Empowerment

The term 'empowerment' is brought into the global analysis of community development to describe the process through which people (collectively or individually) control the resources they utilize to enhance their quality of life. (Craig, G., May 1995). Community empowerment is utilized to acquire knowledge, self-assurance, and command over local events and developments (Bebbington et al 2006). In addition, empowerment helps government agencies and organizations to extend, assist, and create more effective meeting and empowerment opportunities (Chavis 2001).

Empowerment is also a concerted effort to aid local communities in planning, deciding, and managing local resources via collective action and networking. In the end, the community can have economic, ecological, and social capacity and independence (Mardikanto, Totok dan Soebiato 2012). Community empowerment is a method that can increase community engagement in natural resource management while decreasing environmental impact concerns and access to natural resource management. This is because empowerment can prioritize a bottom-up approach, a praxis-emancipatory orientation, and the preservation of humanist principles. It is also consistent with the most recent social science and humanities approach (Susilo 2017).

Empowerment is associated with resilience and the capacity to make decisions and transform those decisions into desired outcomes (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Empowerment is also an effort to increase the capacity of individuals (intrinsic elements of strength) who are united in society to develop economic capacity and resilience through kinship, cooperation, and struggle. Thus, empowerment

resides in decision-making to create adaptation options for social and environmental changes (Ali 2007).

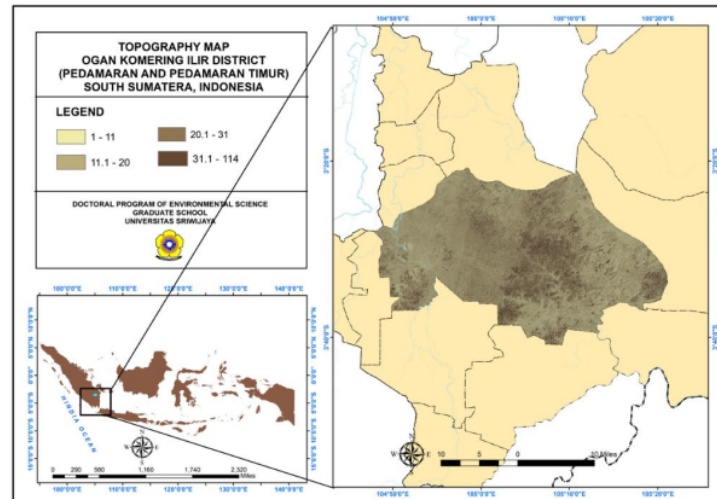
Therefore, it exceeds mere participation. It can participate in decision-making and initiate change. Community empowerment is a systematic effort to enable communities to acquire and exercise (more) control through a collaborative process of defining problems, identifying assets, and designing solutions (Reininger, B, D Martin, M Ross, P Sinicrope 2006).

Thus, this study refers to a group-based participatory process in which members receive improved living and environmental conditions. (Stoeffler 2018). Members of marginalized communities collaborate to identify, plan, implement, and evaluate interventions to address the fundamental causes of their powerlessness in this approach (Sianipa 2013).

### 3. Research Methodology

The research was conducted in OKI District between November 2021 and March 2022. This study constructs a theory inductively, beginning with the collecting of empirical data in the field utilizing a constructivist paradigm and qualitative methodology. Using these paradigms and approaches, researchers can generate subjective meanings based on each individual's experience rather than reducing implications to categories and ideas (Cresswell JW 2016). This places human economic engagement with nature at the center of historical development, citing Durkheim (Gollbatt D 2015).

Pedamaran and East Pedamaran Districts, OKI Regency, were the research sites (Figure 1). The choice of research places was influenced by a variety of factors. First, the research location is a peatland region with the physiographic type of lowland peat swamp that is unaffected by river or ocean tides. Peatlands at the study site are found in the Sibumbang River Peat Hydrological Unit and the Komereng River, the broadest portion of which is located in Pedamaran District and East Pedamaran District (Wildayana, Adriani, and Armanto 2017). Second, the location of the research is a place with a disproportionate number of active artisans compared to other locations, hence it is known as the "Town of Mats." Thirdly, from 2018, the study site has been a participant in the Peat and Mangrove Restoration Agency of the Republic of Indonesia's effort to revitalize local livelihoods.



**Figure 1.** The study area in South Sumatera, Indonesia

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and focus group discussions. Observations were conducted to directly observe the craft activities of the community at the research site. The author also documents several photographs and audio recordings and conducts focus group discussions (FGDs) to find a suitable empowerment model for utilizing purun on peatlands that originates from the community so that it can be implemented in practice.

Purposive sampling is utilized to determine the informants. In this instance, we have established specified qualifications for those who would serve as research participants. One of the criteria is purun artisans who reside in the research location, have knowledge and expertise regarding the usage of peat and purun lands, are over the age of twenty, and are willing to participate. We also consulted community organizations and government authorities, including the Environment Agency, the Regional Peat Restoration Team, and the Community Empowerment Service. All participants in this study have consented to be

interviewed. In addition, we have an official study authorization from the local agency that is registered as a research method.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 *Due to ecological damage, Purun craftsmen are powerless.*

The peat ecology that sustains Purun life is increasingly threatened by numerous extractive economic activities, placing Purun artisans in a precarious position at the site of the study (Azni et al. 2022; Goib et al. 2019). The existence of purun is not just a source of income, but also a cultural emblem and a long-held custom passed down from their ancestors (Wildayana et al. 2017).

The existence of numerous extractive corporations, followed by the shrinking of land suitable for purun livelihood, has compelled some purun artisans to become part of the means of production for poor wages and without proper health insurance. Craftsmen also acknowledge that they require more and more labor to collect purun in lebak purun as the place becomes further away from the hamlet.

“... if the lebak purun on peat soil is exploited for oil palm plantations, then we locals will no longer be able to subsist on this purun ...” (B, 2022).

It is evident that the interaction between women purun craftspeople and the peat ecology is founded on multiple claims. First is the epistemological claim (Sari, N., Yunus, R. 2019) which asserts that purun craftswomen at the research site have historically been acknowledged as advocates for the sustainable use of peatlands. Dependence on purun, which only grows in intact peat ecosystems, indirectly reinforces their function as guardians, preservers, and stewards of peat ecosystems in the face of widespread peatland exploitation. The second is an empirical claim (Eaton, H., & Lorentzen 2003), that disruption to the peat ecosystem will have direct economic and ecological effects on women as artisans.

Not only do they have trouble acquiring raw materials for handicrafts, but their income from the handicraft industry has also declined. In addition, those who change careers to become laborers for oil palm and mining enterprises do not necessarily ensure their welfare and safety on the job. This occurred because of a transition in the mode of production from subsistence to exploitation, when capitalist interests, which were the result of the development of modern science, began to exert hegemony over the human race.



Additional findings came from FGDs with purun craftspeople from the Pedamaran and East Pedamaran districts. Each subdistrict is attended by approximately ten artisans' representatives. The South Sumatra Regional Peat Restoration Team was among the invited parties. The Community Empowerment Service, the Environment and Forestry Service, the Cooperative Office, Small and Medium Business Units, and the Culture and Tourism Office, in addition to community leaders such as village heads and local youths as the next generation of culture. Each participant's position in the discussion was equal. The holding of FGD produced the following results: (1) The majority of communities surrounding peatlands in the research area already had purun management and handicraft groups, but the activities of the groups varied from village to village. (2) The government has employed initiatives from linked agencies to overcome obstacles, as mentioned. The issue of diminishing raw materials and the absence of a conservation program remain unresolved. (3) Handicraft results are less diverse; therefore, there must be a greater market demand. (4) There is no special regional rule governing the use of purun in peatlands within the research area. (5) Stakeholders in the field have attempted to overcome roadblocks. (6) The lack of inclination among the younger generation to carry on the purun craft enterprise.

#### *4.2 Purun Community Empowerment Strategy*

Based on the above evidence of the purun craftsmen's helplessness, it can be argued that measures for empowering the community may include rules, group organizations, community education, funding, and advocacy (Palutturi et al. 2021).

##### Regulation

A sustainable handicraft business like Purun employs regulation as one of its methods. Reviewing the regulations regarding permits for the management of peatlands for plantation companies and industrial forest plantations where purun grows, in accordance with the expectations of the purun craftsmen at the location of the research, can ensure the sustainability of the purun craftsmen's business.

“Unfortunately, the local government has not provided clear regulations, and we believe that the purun area is diminishing. We require a regulation or statement from the regent in order to preserve our purun” (S-2022).

Explaining the limits and condition of the area between existing oil palm concessions and land that can be utilized by the community helps improve peatland governance based on field data. Coordination between related agencies

is required to prevent a mountain of regulations and land permits. This should be done to prevent further disputes between communities and corporations.

In addition, the community requires more serious supervision, as the potential of this region is still extremely great. Continuous development would enhance family welfare and minimize the number of poor people living in peat areas. The government must also establish price guidelines for handicrafts created from these natural resources. The general people should also value the outcomes of their handicraft creation, which is healthier than modern plastic goods.

#### Institutional

The purun craft industry at the location of the study needs to be more organized. Most of these enterprises have not yet been merged into a new company group. If artisans collaborate, it is believed that their businesses would be better organized, resulting in increased profits and the ability to compete on local, national, and even international markets. Craftsmen of the Purun language must also conduct sufficient business planning and administration, such as in the system for documenting cash flow, raw materials, and labor, among others.

Additionally, access to marketplaces is still facilitated by traditional means, namely by collectors who visit them. Only word-of-mouth is utilized for promotion, as the use of technology to reach the market is considered strange. Some of them are aware that technology is limited to the use of basic cell phones, such as telephone calls, which causes the craftsmen's annual income to fluctuate.

“... We are old and not tech savvy. Only how full our tummies are occupying our thoughts ...” (T, 2022).

#### Training and education

Specialized education and training related to the handicrafts created by purun artisans are not ideal in the field, as seen by the lack of variety in handicraft items and product development, which must be enhanced. This creates a paradox, since prospective consumers will grow increasingly critical of products that meet their needs.

“... We rarely receive instruction, which reduces the variety of our handicrafts; we require additional abilities ...” (F, 2022).

According to the preceding quote from the informant, the demand for craftsmen in terms of skill training is due to the limited product range available to artisans. In this situation, the artisans are solely skilled at weaving purun to create mats, even though purun can theoretically be incorporated into various items.

Handbags, memento boxes, wallets, tissue boxes, and wastebaskets are among the derivatives. In addition, artisans do not have a set production time; instead, they rely only on the time they spend willingly.



**Figure 2.** A craftsman and some handicrafts from purun

In addition to improving product quality, education for the younger generation must also be a focus. The sustainability of the younger generation is also a threat, according to field data. There is a tendency for the next generation to lose interest in continuing the culture of purun weaving and grow resistant to doing so. Likewise, purun artisans feel this.

“... We don't want our children to be like us, but we don't want to lose our traditions, either ...” (F, 2022).

However, the local village authority admits that it has taken efforts so that purun woven crafts can continue to exist and that the younger generation is still interested in perpetuating the culture that has been passed down from generation to generation in their region.

“We have visited schools and created synergies between purun and the world of education, including the implementation of local content education in order to maintain local cultural values ...” (R-2022).

### Income

The only source of revenue for all craftspeople is their craft. They do not invest in other prospects for business in their neighborhood. Occasionally, they acknowledge that the income they make is insufficient and that they must rely on their children's social aid to support the family. When asked how much money they would spend on themselves, the majority responded that it would depend on meeting the family's needs first.

“... Sometimes the government supports it, sometimes it doesn't, and sometimes the finances are unavailable. We will participate in external events if they occur ...” (E, 2022).

Aside from that, the artisans also continue their business with personal cash and engage in other informal sectors, such as creating a modest shop in front of their homes. In a manner like that of women, the craftsmen juggled their domestic and professional responsibilities.

### Advocacy

Advocacy is the act of reminding and urging the government and state to be responsible for the protection and prosperity of all its residents. Advocacy is a deliberate and planned effort to affect and encourage progressive changes in public policy (Fakih 2007).

In this instance, environmental advocacy is carried out through the community's power to place demands on the local government. Advocacy will create new opportunities for them to implement orientations and strategies and reflect on improvements based on their expertise and knowledge.

“... the objective of the community's united lobbying agenda is to ensure that rules are not handled by third parties. We prioritize upstream concerns ...” (G, 2021).

#### *4.3 Model of Empowerment for Purun Utilization in Peatlands*

Given the weakness of the purun artisans' community, characterized by diminished purun land on peatlands and other factors, as described previously. Therefore, we propose the socio-ecological-regulatory empowerment model, created, and mutually agreed upon by the government and the community in implementing FGDs. After being analyzed and negotiated, this model is regarded as an endeavor to promote community welfare by maximizing the potential of existing resources and bolstering it with local regulations. This model is also

expected to become one of the supporting initiatives for sustainable village development. The summary is as follows:

1. Reactivate and fortify purun artisan groups in peatlands and develop new groups in regions where they are still needed.
2. The government is willing to encourage group activities by routinely allotting funding to each hamlet to maintain peatlands and ensure the viability of craftsmen's endeavors.
3. The government conducts training, the development of product variants, and the construction of infrastructure for purun-based product manufacturing centers.
4. The government establishes regional rules and laws for the protection and use of purun ecosystems. It educates the community on the significance of peatland management to the local economy.
5. Providing education to the younger generation in order to preserve and sustain local knowledge.
6. Working with other agencies to manage and utilize additional peatlands for sustainable operations.

Crafts made from peat-native plants, such as purun, have played a significant part in the life of rural communities, as evidenced by our presentation of research findings. Additionally, the craft can be used to generate economic prospects for themselves and their families. According to (Rogerson 2010), handicrafts may serve as a gateway into the individual economy.

Research (Dhurup, M., & Makhitha 2014) indicates that difficulties in securing government financing and support can impede the development and sustainability of handicrafts. These findings are consistent with these findings. In addition, the use of technology is difficult in rural populations, together with low levels of literacy and education.

In addition, this study demonstrates that the community's lack of business skills is a barrier to the sustainability of traditional arts and crafts. According to (Rogerson 2000) a lack of business abilities can limit the sustainability of craft initiatives. This can be evident in the products made by huge craftspeople whose tastes are distinct from market preferences. Therefore, artisans must ensure that the things they create satisfy the needs of diverse local and global markets.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the study indicate that rural communities, particularly those located near peatlands, have a very good opportunity with potential benefits for their artisan enterprises. However, their participation had insufficient effect on the obstacles they had to overcome.

Through interviews and focus groups, we have discovered that rural people who work as purun craftsmen have a sufficient awareness of and desire to preserve their skill as part of their local culture for it to endure. To maintain the sustainability of handicrafts, we advocate the Social, Ecological, and Regulatory model as a form of empowerment based on resource management and consumption. Because, in this instance, purun requires peatlands for survival, and craftspeople require them to preserve their traditions and culture. If peat land does not exist, there is no purun. The conservation of peatlands is an issue of ecology, culture, and custom.

We propose that the government and relevant stakeholders investigate community initiatives to preserve cultural practices to ensure their continued viability. In addition, the government is anticipated to release a special regulation regarding the management and usage of resources in peatlands, specifically purun plants. Moreover, sustainability for the younger generation is also crucial. A further recommendation is that local governments incorporate materials on the protection and utilization of peatlands as local content subjects at all educational levels.

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The authors hereby state that there are no financial or non-financial competing interests.

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