

Optimization of the Role of Community Service Program (KKN) in Building Civic Awareness and Empowering the Community of Timbang Lawan Village

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the optimization of the Community Service Program (Kuliah Kerja Nyata or KKN) as a transformative model for strengthening civic awareness and empowering the community of Timbang Lawan Village, Langkat Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation involving students, village officials, and community members. The findings reveal that the KKN program serves as an effective platform for promoting civic values, participatory learning, and sustainable development. Religious and social engagement activities such as the Muharram Festival and literacy mentoring enhanced civic consciousness and social solidarity. Economic empowerment through eco-printing, health education via Apotek Hidup, and environmental awareness through village tourism collectively built a culture of cooperation and self-reliance. The study concludes that the success of KKN depends on participatory collaboration, value integration, and institutional sustainability. Therefore, optimizing KKN as a civic empowerment framework strengthens not only academic-community partnerships but also contributes to Indonesia's broader agenda of inclusive and sustainable nation-building.

Keywords: Civic Awareness; Community Empowerment; Participatory Learning; Sustainable Development; Timbang Lawan Village

1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of Indonesian rural society, civic awareness and community empowerment are essential indicators of national development success (Kholil et al., 2024; Sambodo et al., 2023). Despite government efforts to promote community participation through local development programs, many rural areas still face gaps in social awareness, civic responsibility, and sustainable self-reliance (Dalimunthe et al.,

2024; Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024). Timbang Lawan Village in Bahorok District, Langkat Regency, exemplifies this reality. The village, rich in agricultural, environmental, and socio-religious potential, struggles to fully utilize its local resources due to limited environmental awareness, low digital literacy, and weak collaboration between youth and village institutions (Boustani, 2025; Suhendar et al., 2024). The Community Service Program (Kuliah Kerja Nyata or KKN) initiated by UIN Sumatera Utara has emerged as a medium for direct academic contribution to address these social issues through education, training, and empowerment initiatives. Therefore, strengthening civic awareness through participatory community service activities is not only an educational responsibility but also a strategic approach to realizing sustainable village development (Suhendar & Halimi, 2023; Zainuri & Huda, 2023).

The importance of KKN as an academic-community integration program has been widely recognized in the literature. Scholars view community-based service learning as a transformative process that bridges theory and practice while fostering civic engagement and critical awareness among students and citizens (Suhendar & Saragih, 2025; Sutono et al., 2024). According to Dushkova & Ivlieva, (2024), local potential-based community empowerment can strengthen the socio-economic independence of rural residents, provided that participatory methods are employed. Similarly, Creswell (2018) and Yin (2018) emphasize that sustainable development requires contextual understanding and collaboration between academic institutions and local stakeholders (LIKOKO, 2025; Razali & Jamil, 2023). Moreover, Tohari, (2025) highlights that integrating religious and civic values in rural communities enhances social harmony and collective responsibility. In this context, KKN serves as a multidimensional intervention educational, civic, and developmental aligned with the Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi mission of education, research, and community service. Thus, literature supports the notion that the KKN framework can be an effective tool for promoting civic awareness, participatory learning, and local empowerment.

This study aims to analyze the optimization of the KKN program in building civic awareness and empowering the people of Timbang Lawan Village. The need arises from the recognition that many KKN implementations remain limited to short-term activities without measurable civic or social transformation (Joko Purnomo et al., 2023; Suhendar, Syam, et al., 2023). The UIN Sumatera Utara 2025 KKN program in Timbang Lawan presents an empirical case of participatory engagement, including environmental conservation initiatives (apotek hidup), eco-printing training, religious and educational outreach, and local tourism development all designed to strengthen the villagers' sense of belonging, social participation, and civic values. Therefore, this paper explores how the KKN model can be optimized as a civic learning platform that fosters sustainable empowerment and community independence.

The argument proposed in this paper is that optimizing the KKN program requires a paradigm shift from a "project-based" approach to a "partnership-based" civic model (Saragih et al., 2025; Suhendar et al., 2023). When KKN is designed as a reciprocal learning process students learning from society and society learning from students it becomes a sustainable instrument of civic transformation (Dharmawan et al., 2024). The

participatory success of the 2025 KKN program demonstrates that collaboration between students, local leaders, and citizens produces tangible impacts: increased environmental awareness, religious revitalization, and economic creativity. These outcomes align with the principles of empowered citizenship, where individuals consciously contribute to public welfare. The model also resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical education, emphasizing collective reflection and action as foundations for social change (Chen et al., 2025). Hence, this study asserts that the optimization of KKN as a civic empowerment framework not only advances higher education's social mission but also nurtures civic competence, solidarity, and democratic participation within rural Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at analyzing and interpreting the optimization of the Community Service Program (KKN) as a model for civic awareness and community empowerment in Timbang Lawan Village. According to Creswell (2017), qualitative research emphasizes understanding the meaning of social phenomena through the perspective of participants within their natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The approach allows researchers to capture local dynamics, collective participation, and behavioral changes that emerge as a result of the KKN program.

The descriptive design was chosen to provide a holistic and detailed picture of community involvement, program implementation, and the transformation of civic awareness. As Yin (2018) notes, this design enables a contextual analysis of real-life events, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are blurred. Therefore, this study does not merely measure the outcomes of the KKN but seeks to explain how and why empowerment and civic awareness are effectively fostered through participatory engagement.

The research was conducted in Timbang Lawan Village, located in Bahorok District, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. The village was selected as a KKN site by UIN Sumatera Utara due to its high potential in agriculture, environmental resources, and socio-religious life, but with limited awareness of environmental management, digital literacy, and civic participation. Participants in this study included:

- Village officials, such as the village head and community leaders.
- Local residents, including youth, women's groups (PKK), and religious figures.
- KKN student participants and field supervisors from UIN Sumatera Utara.

These participants were chosen using purposive sampling, as suggested by Moleong (2021), which allows researchers to select informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives—particularly individuals directly involved in the KKN activities and capable of providing rich, reflective insights.

Data were collected using four main qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation:

- a) Observation – Researchers conducted direct observation of the KKN program implementation, including eco-printing workshops, the *apotek hidup* (medicinal

garden) project, the Muharram Festival, and environmental cleaning activities. Observations focused on patterns of participation, collaboration, and civic behavior in community activities.

- b) **In-depth Interviews** – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with village officials, community members, and students to explore perceptions, experiences, and impacts of the KKN program. The interviews followed an open-ended format to allow respondents to express ideas freely and provide nuanced reflections on empowerment and civic engagement.
- c) **Focus Group Discussions (FGD)** – FGDs were organized with youth and women’s groups to discuss changes in awareness, cooperation, and social values after the KKN implementation. These discussions provided collective insights into the perceived effectiveness and sustainability of the program.
- d) **Documentation Study** – Researchers analyzed documents such as the KKN implementation guidebook, village development reports, activity photos, and community meeting records. These documents were used to validate field data and provide supporting evidence for program effectiveness.

All data were gathered during the 40-day KKN period in mid-2025, ensuring alignment with the official university program and village development schedule.

The data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2018) model, consisting of three interactive stages:

- a) **Data Reduction** – All interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation were categorized into key themes, such as civic participation, community empowerment, environmental awareness, and sustainability. Redundant data were summarized to maintain conceptual clarity.
- b) **Data Display** – The reduced data were organized into narrative matrices, connecting field evidence with theoretical constructs. Visual representations (e.g., thematic diagrams and tables) were used to demonstrate the relationship between KKN activities and civic outcomes.
- c) **Conclusion Drawing and Verification** – The final stage involved interpreting patterns, identifying causal linkages, and verifying them through data triangulation. This ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, as multiple sources confirmed the observed social transformations.

This analytical process allowed the researchers to synthesize qualitative narratives into coherent findings that reflect the real impacts of the KKN program on civic awareness and empowerment.

To ensure credibility, the study employed several triangulation methods (Denzin, 2017):

- a) **Source Triangulation:** Comparing information obtained from students, community members, and village leaders to verify consistency.
- b) **Technique Triangulation:** Using multiple methods—observation, interviews, and documentation—to cross-validate findings.

- c) **Time Triangulation:** Conducting observations and interviews at different program stages (early, mid, and post-KKN) to capture behavioral change over time.

Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors ensured that analytical conclusions were theoretically grounded and free from researcher bias.

The research adhered to ethical standards as outlined by UIN Sumatera Utara's Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM). All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was maintained throughout data collection and publication. The study also respected cultural and religious norms of the Timbang Lawan community, ensuring that every intervention upheld local values and sensitivities. Ethical engagement was particularly emphasized in programs involving women's groups and youth, ensuring that participation was voluntary and culturally appropriate. By maintaining ethical integrity, the research upheld the principle of mutual respect between the university and the community.

This methodological framework supports the study's main objective: to explore the optimization of the KKN as a civic and empowerment model. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture not only tangible outcomes such as skill acquisition or program participation but also intangible transformations, including changes in civic consciousness, social solidarity, and environmental responsibility. By situating this research within the lived experiences of Timbang Lawan residents, the methodology bridges the academic and societal spheres, offering an empirically grounded foundation for evaluating the civic effectiveness of community service programs in Indonesia.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Strengthening Civic Awareness through Religious and Social Engagement

One of the most significant findings from the implementation of the 2025 KKN program in Timbang Lawan Village is the reinforcement of civic awareness through religious, educational, and social activities. These activities include the Muharram Festival, religious gatherings (wirid and maghrib mengaji), and community-based social actions such as donations and educational outreach for children.

The festival not only served as a celebration of the Islamic New Year but also as a participatory civic event. Through competitions such as tilawah, azan, and Islamic speech contests, youth and children learned about religious discipline, cooperation, and respect for diversity within the community. According to Syam et al., (2024), strengthening religious values in rural communities can serve as a foundation for civic ethics, as religiosity often shapes the collective consciousness of moral and social obligations. The program's success in involving multiple generations children, teenagers, and adults demonstrated how religious engagement can act as a social adhesive for community solidarity.



Figure 1. Muharram festival

From a civic education perspective, these activities reflect the civic knowledge and civic disposition dimensions described by Kemendikbud (2020). The community began to exhibit greater awareness of shared responsibilities, public participation, and mutual assistance core aspects of civic virtue. The Muharram Festival thus functioned as a civic-learning platform where social cohesion, moral identity, and participatory values converged.



Figure 2. Quran donation to tahfiz quran boarding school

This outcome also aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical action, in which education becomes an instrument for liberation and social consciousness. The process of preparing and executing the festival involved dialogues between students, local leaders, and citizens, creating horizontal relationships rather than hierarchical instruction. In

essence, KKN became a dialogic space that encouraged reflection and collective decision-making an essential condition for nurturing civic awareness in rural Indonesia.

Empowering the Local Economy through Eco-Printing Initiatives

The eco-printing program emerged as one of the most innovative and impactful empowerment initiatives within the KKN project. Designed primarily for women's groups (PKK) and young people, this program introduced environmentally friendly textile production techniques that combined artistic creativity with economic potential.

The initiative generated three major impacts:

- 1) **Skill Development**, where participants learned new sustainable crafting techniques using local flora;
- 2) **Environmental Awareness**, as participants began to value natural resources as renewable and sustainable assets; and
- 3) **Economic Creativity**, as the products cloth, scarves, and decorative fabrics opened small-scale entrepreneurial opportunities.

According to Dushkova & Ivlieva (2024), community empowerment rooted in local potential enables economic independence and social resilience. The eco-printing program exemplified this theory, as it utilized easily accessible natural resources (leaves, flowers, tree bark) and transformed them into products of economic value. Participants also internalized the principle of sustainability an essential component of both civic responsibility and environmental ethics.

Moreover, this initiative operationalized the empowerment cycle described by Moleog, (2004):

- a) Awareness-building through workshops on environmental sustainability,
- b) Capacity strengthening via practical training sessions, and
- c) Institutional sustainability through community collaboration and local marketing plans.

By the end of the program, several participants expressed intentions to continue eco-printing as a micro-business, showing early signs of sustainable entrepreneurship. In civic terms, this reflects what Putnam (2000) calls social capital formation the creation of networks, trust, and cooperation among community members that facilitate collective action (Rispoli & Vannucci, 2025).

Thus, the eco-printing program transcended its artistic dimension and became a civic-economy laboratory, integrating creativity, ecology, and citizenship. It not only empowered individuals economically but also encouraged them to act responsibly toward their environment and society.

Promoting Health and Environmental Responsibility through “Apotek Hidup”

The Apotek Hidup or “Living Pharmacy” program represents another vital pillar of community empowerment. It was initiated to promote health literacy, self-reliance in herbal medicine, and ecological sustainability. The community was trained to cultivate medicinal plants such as turmeric, ginger, lemongrass, and aloe vera in their household gardens.

Empirically, the program produced visible social and environmental outcomes:

- 1) Many households created their own herbal gardens,
- 2) Green open spaces became more widespread, and
- 3) Waste reduction increased due to composting and the reuse of organic material.

From a civic awareness standpoint, this activity nurtured civic responsibility citizens’ sense of duty toward maintaining communal health and environmental balance. As Wong et al., (2022) suggests, practical engagement is more effective in shaping civic values than abstract instruction. When individuals directly participate in ecological activities, they learn through experience the ethical consequences of their actions.

The program also aligns with the Islamic perspective on stewardship (*khalifah fil ard*), which emphasizes the moral obligation to protect nature. Hence, civic education and religious ethics merged within this initiative, forming a dual awareness of both environmental and spiritual accountability.

In theoretical reflection, the Apotek Hidup model exemplifies Freire’s praxis the union of reflection and action. Villagers reflected on their dependency on commercial medicine, acted by cultivating herbal plants, and then collectively discussed strategies to sustain these efforts. This process represents a bottom-up model of civic empowerment, where critical awareness leads to self-directed, sustainable action.

Civic Solidarity and Local Governance through Village Tourism Development

Another strategic outcome of the KKN program was the development of a community-based tourism model in Timbang Lawan Village. Given its proximity to Bukit Lawang, a well-known ecotourism destination, the village possesses high potential to develop its own local tourism attractions. The KKN team collaborated with youth organizations (*karang taruna*) and the local government to identify natural sites, clean riverbanks, and install directional signs for tourist routes.

This initiative had multidimensional implications:

- 1) Socially, it strengthened solidarity as villagers collectively cleaned and improved their surroundings.
- 2) Economically, it laid the foundation for potential income sources through tourism services and local product sales.

- 3) Environmentally, it improved waste management and encouraged ecological mindfulness.

These developments resonate with the concept of sustainable communities in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11) framework, which emphasizes participatory development, inclusiveness, and long-term viability.

The formation of tourism awareness groups (*pokdarwis*) after the KKN period signified institutional sustainability. The collaboration between students, community members, and local authorities fostered a sense of shared ownership (sense of belonging), which Putnam (2000) identifies as a core element of civic capital.

Furthermore, this initiative embodied participatory governance, where decision-making and implementation were carried out collectively. In practice, villagers contributed ideas and labor, while students provided technical knowledge and coordination. Such synergy mirrors the triple-helix collaboration model linking academia, government, and society to accelerate local development.

From the perspective of civic education, the village tourism program served as a field laboratory for active citizenship. It exemplified democratic participation, environmental accountability, and cultural preservation, thus translating civic ideals into concrete, localized practice.

Integrative Impact: Interrelation of Religion, Economy, Health, and Environment

A notable feature of the KKN program in Timbang Lawan Village is its integrative character. Each program religious festival, eco-printing, Apotek Hidup, and tourism was not implemented in isolation but interconnected to build a holistic civic ecosystem.

- a) The Muharram Festival fostered moral and religious awareness.
- b) Eco-printing developed economic creativity and environmental awareness.
- c) Apotek Hidup improved health literacy and ecological responsibility.
- d) Village tourism linked all previous programs into a sustainable community framework.

This integration is consistent with the systems theory of community development, which views empowerment as a web of interrelated domains (economic, social, cultural, and environmental). The practical result was a community more conscious of mutual dependence and collective welfare.

From a theoretical lens, this integrative approach demonstrates the operationalization of civic education through social participation. As Banks, (1997) explains, effective civic education integrates values, knowledge, and action within community contexts. KKN at Timbang Lawan thus served as a model of applied civic pedagogy learning citizenship through practice.

Furthermore, the integrative model aligns with Freire's (1970) emancipatory education, which insists that empowerment cannot occur in fragmented forms. Civic awareness arises when individuals critically perceive the interconnectedness of life domains and act collectively to improve them. Through the synergy of religious,

economic, health, and environmental programs, the community experienced a form of collective conscientization—a shared awakening of civic consciousness.

Challenges and Strategic Implications

Despite its success, the study identified several challenges that must be addressed to optimize future KKN implementations:

1. **Limited Duration** - The 40-day period restricted deeper behavioral transformation. As Creswell (2018) notes, sustainable change requires long-term intervention cycles that allow follow-up and evaluation.
2. **Resource Constraints** - Financial limitations affected the scale of initiatives such as the number of eco-printing tools or signage installations. This indicates the need for institutional partnerships and resource mobilization.
3. **Program Continuity** - Sustainability depends on post-KKN follow-up by village institutions. Without structured maintenance, physical outcomes (like herbal gardens or signage) risk deterioration.
4. **Variability of Civic Engagement** - While enthusiasm was high among youth and women, some residents remained passive due to limited understanding or skepticism toward external programs.

However, these challenges offer strategic lessons. First, the institutionalization of KKN results within the Village Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMDes) can ensure program continuity. Second, empowering local champions—villagers who can independently sustain initiatives enhances ownership and long-term impact. Finally, universities must strengthen monitoring mechanisms to support graduates' return visits or online mentoring systems. In the broader theoretical context, these findings reaffirm Putnam's (2000) idea that civic capital grows through trust and repeated cooperation. Sustained engagement—not one-off interventions is the key to civic transformation. Therefore, the KKN program should evolve into a longitudinal civic partnership rather than a temporary student assignment.

Theoretical Reflection: From Service Learning to Civic Transformation

The findings substantiate the theoretical proposition that KKN functions as a transformative civic-learning model. The programs in Timbang Lawan Village illustrate a transition from service learning (students serving the community) to participatory co-learning (mutual exchange of knowledge).

This aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of education as praxis, combining reflection and action. Students did not merely "teach" villagers; instead, they co-created solutions through dialogue, observation, and shared labor. This process embodies critical pedagogy in practice, transforming both the learners (students) and the community.

Furthermore, from the lens of civic education theory (Banks, 2019; Kemendikbud, 2020), the KKN program successfully nurtured three pillars of citizenship:

- a) Civic knowledge: villagers gained new insights into health, environment, and economics.
- b) Civic skills: they learned practical competencies—organizing events, managing eco-projects, and marketing products.
- c) Civic disposition: they internalized social responsibility, cooperation, and tolerance.

Hence, the optimization of KKN as a civic transformation model lies in integrating experiential learning, participatory governance, and value-based education.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study affirm that the Community Service Program (KKN) implemented by UIN Sumatera Utara in Timbang Lawan Village functions not merely as a community outreach initiative but as a transformative civic-learning framework that successfully integrates education, empowerment, and social change. The program strengthened civic awareness through participatory religious, educational, and social activities such as the Muharram Festival, environmental clean-up, and children's literacy mentoring. These initiatives fostered civic values—mutual cooperation, tolerance, and social solidarity—that are essential for building cohesive and responsible communities.

Economically, the eco-printing project empowered women and youth by introducing sustainable creative industries rooted in local potential. Environmentally and health-wise, the Apotek Hidup program encouraged villagers to cultivate medicinal plants, promoting ecological balance and self-reliant health practices. The village tourism development initiative further enhanced civic participation and local governance by transforming community collaboration into sustainable economic opportunities. Collectively, these programs created a multi-dimensional empowerment ecosystem that elevated civic consciousness and fostered a shared sense of responsibility for local development.

This holistic transformation validates the theoretical foundation of participatory development (Fauzi, 2021) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), in which empowerment emerges through dialogue, cooperation, and reflection. The synergy between students, local leaders, and villagers demonstrated that education can serve as an engine of social transformation when rooted in local realities. Ultimately, the KKN program in Timbang Lawan exemplifies how higher education can actualize the Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi by translating academic knowledge into civic action and community advancement.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on civic education and community empowerment by conceptualizing KKN as an integrated model of civic transformation. The findings confirm that service-learning programs, when designed with participatory and dialogical approaches, can produce measurable social outcomes beyond traditional academic metrics. It extends Freire's (1970) notion of praxis the unity of reflection and action by showing that civic awareness develops not through indoctrination but through experiential participation and co-learning. Furthermore, the study reinforces Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital, demonstrating how trust, reciprocity, and collaboration within a community can evolve into collective empowerment when facilitated by structured civic programs.

Practically, the study provides an evidence-based model for optimizing university-community partnerships. It highlights that KKN can move from being a routine academic activity to becoming a sustainable civic movement if guided by three core principles:

- a) Integration of values and practice – combining moral, ecological, and economic dimensions of empowerment;
- b) Participatory governance – involving local stakeholders in decision-making and program implementation; and
- c) Institutional sustainability – embedding KKN outputs into local policies, such as the Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Desa (RPJMDes).

In addition, this research underscores the importance of contextualized learning—that students' civic competencies grow when exposed to real social complexities, while communities benefit from the infusion of academic knowledge. Hence, the KKN program not only strengthens student character but also elevates the civic capacity of society. This dual transformation redefines higher education's social mission: from producing graduates with theoretical excellence to nurturing citizens with ethical, ecological, and civic intelligence.

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