

Study on the Empowerment of Coastal Women from the Perspective of Sustainable Local-Based Living Strategies in Perlis Village, Langkat Regency, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The floating community in Perlis Village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, faces economic challenges, especially among women. This study explores survival strategies and empowerment opportunities for these women, who play a vital role in supporting their families beyond fishing activities. Most residents rely on small-scale fishing, while women engage in trading during fishing off-seasons to supplement household income. Social cohesion is maintained through cultural and religious activities. Using the asset pentagon theory, the research identifies key resources: human assets (women's education), natural assets (marine resources), physical assets (fishing equipment), financial assets (savings and support), and social assets (community networks like PKK). Recommended empowerment strategies include skills training, better financial access, education, infrastructure development, participation in decision-making, and health and environmental initiatives. These measures aim to strengthen the resilience of Perlis Village's women and improve their living standards sustainably.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, more than half of the world's population lives in cities (Kjellstrom and Mercado, 2008), which shows an increase of 1.1 billion in the last two decades and is expected to grow by another two billion by 2045 (Dorling, 2021). Cities usually offer promises and have their appeal to the local community. One of them is the development of large industries that require labour and provide opportunities for the surrounding community to earn money from the presence of these industries. That attraction triggers the formation of new communities or changes and growth in existing communities. (Schneider et al., 2011).

The phenomenon above encourages people to make the bold decision to leave their hometowns for other places, hoping to also leave behind the poverty they have long endured (Sachs, 2011; Hansen, (2019). However, not all the aspirations and dreams of people moving to the city become reality. This is partly due to the difficulty of finding housing, which brings about new problems with developing slum areas in urban areas (Dorling, 2021). Of course, this problem will arise due to the continuously shrinking land with such rapid population growth, making residential land costly, especially for the poor. Such conditions lead some people to have an alternative: not to move to another land but to seek a better life by moving to the sea. It is not surprising when considering the housing needs in Indonesia, as our country is the largest maritime nation in the world with 17,504 islands and a sea area of 5.8 million km² (consisting of a territorial sea area of 0.3 million km², an archipelagic sea area of 2.95 million km², and an Indonesian EEZ area of 2.55 million km²). (RENSTRA Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan Tahun 2015 – 2019). The coastline is more than 81,000 km long, where 2/3 of its sovereign territory consists of marine waters, and the sea provides significant contributions to the lives of millions of people worldwide and the diversity of biological and non-biological resources. This contribution benefits about 50 per cent of the world's population in coastal and island regions of developing countries.

In Indonesia, floating communities, primarily fishermen, still constitute a community that remains below the poverty line. The number of poor people (living below the poverty line) in Indonesia in 2008 was 34.96 million, and around 63.47% were communities living in coastal and rural areas. Bontang is one of Indonesia's coastal cities, with many floating communities in its surrounding waters. Floating communities are limited to a neighbourhood environment in the middle of the sea with similar characteristics and interests within a social group. They share the same desire, which is to live better than their previous place on land. At least they can meet their most basic living needs. Living at sea is a survival strategy for that community, cultivating seaweed, catching fish, and building fish traps to meet their basic needs.

The economic vulnerability of families is the main reason coastal women, accompanied by their children, engage in fisheries production activities and eventually become very dominant in the post-harvest and marketing sectors (Arifin et al., 2024). In several other regions of Indonesia, women also capture marine resources, such as crab catchers in the mangrove areas of Teluk Bintuni,

Papua (Barri et al., 2019). Women have created various strategies to help their families meet their living needs outside the fishing sector (Harper et al., 2013).

One example is the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a very significant impact, especially on food insecurity in 2020. Global food prices rose nearly 20% from January 2020 to January 2021 (Erokhin & Gao, 2020). The World Bank Group initiated projects in several food-insecure countries, including support for women (India) and households (Pakistan) to withstand the crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Rahman et al., 2021). It needs to be seen whether the same thing also happens in the floating community of Perlis.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand women's difficulties in the floating community, aside from their roles and the influential actors in their lives. Through an in-depth study of the role of women in the strategies they employ to face life, especially during difficult times, it is hoped that a pattern of empowerment can be created that takes into account local wisdom in the management of sustainable development in line with the declaration of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) until 2030. Attention to issues surrounding women is designed in such a way that it fits into most of the predetermined targets up to the regional level (UCLG) and is also reflected in the direction of policies and strategies for marine and fisheries development, namely empowerment aimed at women in marine and fisheries enterprises. (RENSTRA Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan Tahun 2015-2019). Lastly, it is hoped that the research can be published in reputable journals to enhance the quality of the researchers and Universitas Sumatera Utara in general.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Empowerment of Coastal Women

The empowerment of coastal women is a process of enhancing their capacity to access economic, social, and cultural resources to improve their well-being. According to Moser (1993), women's empowerment can be categorized into several aspects, such as access to economic resources, participation in decision-making, and capacity building through education and training. In coastal areas, women often play roles in the fisheries sector, seafood processing, and trade, making capacity-building efforts directly contribute to household and community economies.

Sustainable Livelihood Strategy

A sustainable livelihood strategy (SLS) refers to the approach individuals or communities use to sustain and improve their livelihoods sustainably. According to Chambers and Conway (1992), sustainable livelihood strategies involve optimizing human, social, natural, financial, and physical assets to reduce economic and environmental vulnerabilities. In coastal communities, this strategy is essential as they frequently face challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and limited access to markets and capital.

Local-Based Approach to Empowerment

A local-based approach emphasizes utilizing local potential and resources to support community empowerment. This approach is rooted in the

concept of Community-Based Development (CBD), which highlights the active participation of communities in planning and implementing development programs (Narayan, 1995). In the context of coastal women, a local-based approach includes empowerment through utilizing marine products, enhancing traditional skills, and integrating simple technologies suited to local conditions.

The Link Between Coastal Women Empowerment and Local-Based Sustainable Livelihood Strategies

Empowering coastal women through local-based sustainable livelihood strategies creates a dual effect: improving their economic well-being while ensuring the sustainability of coastal environments. A study by Scoones (1998) indicates that such strategies can strengthen the economic resilience of coastal women by reducing dependence on vulnerable resources and fostering innovation in utilizing local resources. Therefore, local-based interventions that consider socio-economic and environmental conditions are crucial to ensuring the sustainability of empowerment programs.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to understand the role of coastal women in Perlis Village, Langkat, North Sumatra, in survival strategies. The research location was in Perlis Village, a coastal area divided into seven hamlets. The sampling technique used purposive sampling with the main informants consisting of housewives who play a role in fishing activities, key informants including the village head and seafood business actors, and additional informants such as husbands and families of coastal women (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with coastal women using the Langkat Malay cultural approach, observation to observe physical and natural conditions, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with hamlet representatives, and literature studies from related documents and literature. Data analysis was carried out through several stages, namely data management, reading and coding, description of informants' experiences, classification of relationships between themes, interpretation to build a big picture of coastal women's strategies, and representation of results in the form of tables, images, or narratives. This approach aims to produce an in-depth understanding of the local characteristics and survival strategies of coastal women in Perlis Village, as well as to identify a localization-based empowerment model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perlis Village Profile: History, Geography, Demographics, and Social Dynamics

In 1823, Perlis Village, originally known as Tanjung Balai, was inhabited by 50 people. The settlement was founded by Nyak Aris, a political fugitive from Tamiang, who established a relationship with Haji Muhammad Thaif (Haji Mat Thaif), a rice and spice trader from Negeri Perlis, Malaysia. Haji Mat Thaif arrived around 1830-1860 for business purposes, collecting pepper, deras, and nipa roofs, as well as improving his understanding of Islam. His arrival was

followed by his family from Negeri Perlis and Pulau Pinang, creating a new settlement around 1875 (Nabilah & Zuska, 2022).

Subsequently, migration continued with the arrival of Chinese labourers from plantations and oil mines in Langkat, who built a “Chinese mine” in Dusun II, although they eventually left the village. In the 1950-1970 period, Javanese labourers from the Gebang, Securai, and Pelawi plantations, as well as ex-formula from Solo, cleared agricultural land and formed Kampung Jawa (now Dusun VI). In addition, Acehnese migrants from Meureudu who arrived in the 1960s became ship handlers, farmed, and married local Malay women. Other migrants, such as those from Banjar, Minangkabau and Mandailing, also settled, working as fishermen, labourers and civil servants while marrying local women (Nabilah & Zuska, 2022).

Perlis Village is located on the east coast of North Sumatra, precisely in the West Berandan Sub-district, Langkat Regency, about 84 km from Medan City. The village can be reached by road for about two hours, followed by sea transportation using a sampan from Brandan Port. Manual sampans cost Rp4,000 per person and take about 10 minutes to travel, while students only pay Rp2,000. Government dock infrastructure is available, but the community more often uses the traditional dock close to the settlement.

Perlis Village covers an area of 611 hectares with an altitude of 4 meters above sea level. The village borders the Malacca Strait to the north, the Pangkalan Susu sub-district, other villages in the West Berandan sub-district to the south, and the Besitang sub-district to the east. The area is a small island of silt with mostly wooden semi-permanent houses or houses on stilts that stand on the water.

The village is inhabited by 5,270 people in 1,518 households. The majority of the population work as fishermen (70%), followed by farmers, MSME traders, and civil servants or sampan rowers at 10% each. The community's education level shows great challenges, with 3,370 people dropping out of school and only 477 people completing junior high school. Meanwhile, a small number are pursuing education at the elementary to high school level.

The research in Perlis village involved active housewives who are members of the PKK group as well as the village head, toke, teachers and community leaders. Information was obtained through interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving participants from nine hamlets, researchers from the University of North Sumatra (USU), and supporting students. The FGD was held at the Perlis Village Office on July 6, 2024, to gather information on village problems and ongoing empowerment programs. The discussion method was combined with games such as "Blind Maps" to encourage active participation.

The FGD results revealed that although women in Perlis Village have skills in processing seafood, such as making shrimp paste, they face obstacles, such as product marketing and environmental issues, including garbage coming from the sea. Social issues such as pornography and child abuse were also a serious concern. One of the participants, a teacher, expressed the importance of educating children about promiscuity (Nasution & Situmorang, 2024). Although

empowerment programs have been carried out, such as training in processing mangrove-based products, the program has not run optimally and sustainably. The FGD ended with a group photo session between participants and researchers.

Potential and Local Characteristics of Perlis Village

Perlis Village has local characteristics that can be seen from the majority of the population working as fishermen. This livelihood has existed since the first settlers arrived in the village. Based on Perlis data (2017), there are around 550 fishermen in the village. The lives of fishermen are influenced by natural factors, the fishing season, limited capital, and low levels of education, which leads to weak socioeconomic conditions (Muallil et al., 2013). Most of the fishers in Perlis Village are small-scale fishers who use nets as their main fishing gear. They usually catch pufferfish, pomfret and shrimp, with fishing locations around 12-15 miles from the coast, near the mouth of the Babalan River. Their boats are generally 7-12 meters, but not all fishermen own their boats. Many work as fishing laborers, earning around Rp. 75,000 - Rp. 120,000 per trip. They work in the morning or at night, with wages varying depending on the catch.

When fishermen are not at sea, some choose to become small traders, such as opening coffee shops or grocery stores (Seran et al., 2024). Coffee stalls are the meeting point for men in the village after they go to sea. Itinerant traders are also prevalent in Perlis Village, selling goods such as snacks, vegetables, fruit, meat, and clothing using carts, bicycles, or strollers. The village's service sector includes laundresses, barbers, electricians, and tailors. The source of clean water in Perlis Village comes from a borehole built by the Sultanate of Langkat in 1925, which is still the main source of water for residents today.

The local wisdom of Perlis Village is reflected in traditions that are no longer practised, such as "jamu laut," a ritual performed by fishermen during difficult fishing times. This tradition has been banned since 1975 because it is considered contrary to Islamic teachings. In addition, the Kenduri Sawah tradition performed by farmers before the rice planting period has also been discontinued, after many farmers switched to planting oil palm due to natural disturbances and pests (Parinduri et al., 2024). However, the wedding and ayun anak traditions are still carried out. Other traditions such as berinai, tepung tawar, and marriage have also experienced cultural acculturation between Perlis Malay and Javanese cultures, changing the marriage process in this village (Pangaribuan, 2023).

Mapping Localization-Based Survival Strategies Through the Asset Pentagon Concept

This section explores the use of the Asset Pentagon framework to map survival strategies in local communities. By analyzing five key asset dimensions—human, natural, physical, financial, and social—this approach highlights how these assets interact to support the livelihoods and resilience of communities. In the context of Desa Perlis, the framework helps identify localized strategies that address economic, social, and environmental challenges,

providing valuable insights for developing effective empowerment and resilience-building interventions

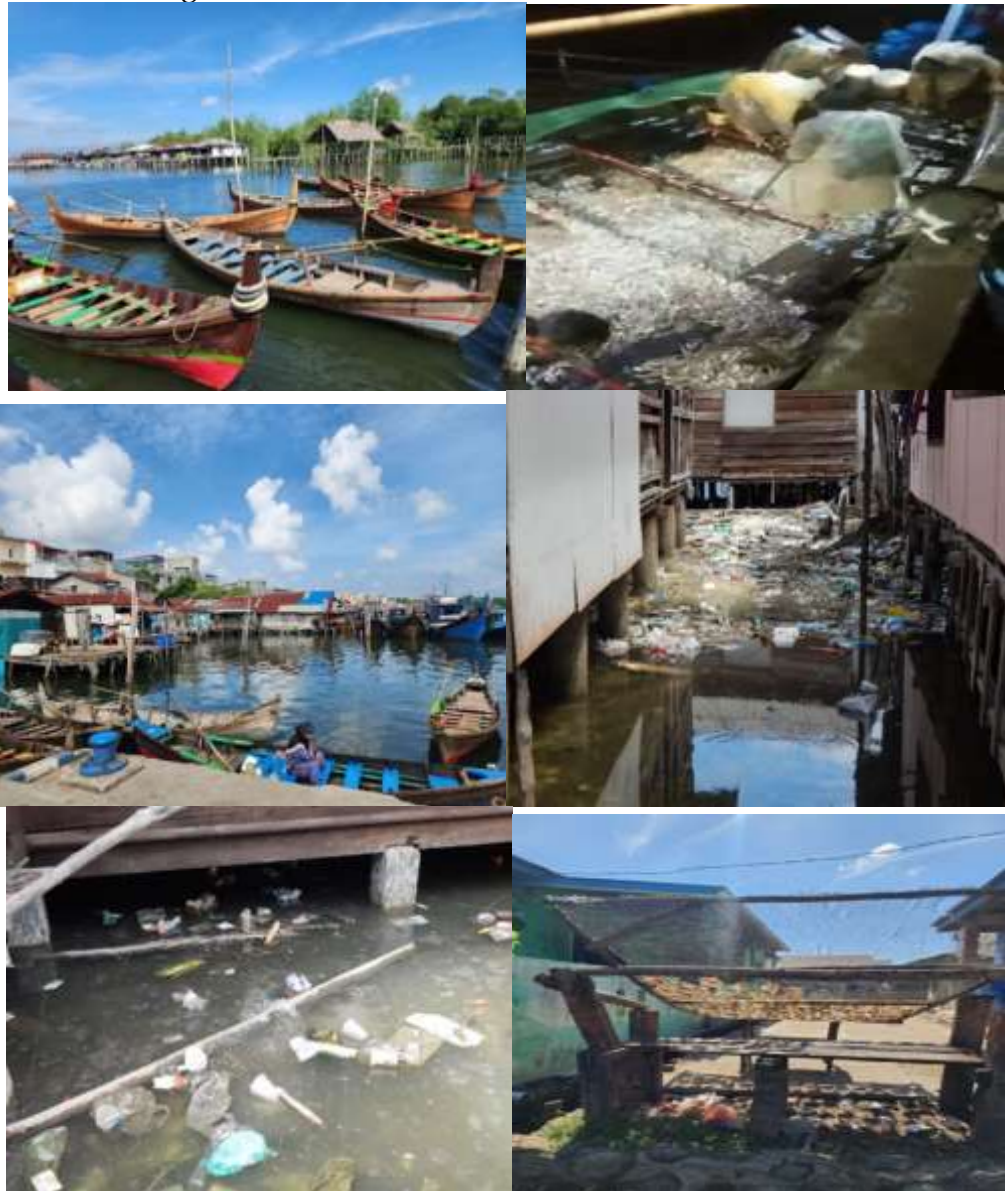


Figure 1. Photos from the research observation

Human Assets

Based on the data, the number of women in Perlis Village (2,749) is greater than that of men (2,521), which indicates the importance of women's roles in village development. Most of the residents work as fishermen (70%), where men catch fish and women manage the household and help clean the fish. The education of women is mostly at the secondary level, although some have reached higher education. However, 50% of women do not continue their education to the high school level due to the lack of further educational facilities. Women in this village are limited to processing cerbung fish, with a small number processing shrimp into terasi. Outside the maritime sector, other skills, such as sewing, are only mastered by a few women. Leadership in Perlis Village is still dominated by men, with women only involved in PKK activities under the leadership of the village head's wife.

Natural Assets

Research findings indicate that the sea remains an important natural resource for the residents of Perlis Village. Marine products found include cerbung fish, pukul shrimp, keep shrimp, and anchovies. Other resources such as clams and shrimp are also available, although small clams ("Siting") can only be found 1-2 km from the village. However, the mangrove conditions that once existed in the village have now been depleted due to illegal harvesting. The issue of clean water remains a significant challenge, with the PAM Tirtanadi pipes damaged in 2023. By 2024, PAM could only meet 50% of the clean water needs, and those who could afford it had to dig their bore wells to obtain clean water.

Physical Assets

Fishermen in Perlis Village heavily rely on canoes and motorboats for fishing. About 50% of families own a boat, while the number of canoes in the village reaches around 200 units. In one family, more than one boat is often owned because not only the head of the family goes to sea but also the grown sons.

The sampan is the main asset for Perlis fishermen to survive due to its low cost, requiring only money for fuel. In contrast, large-scale fishers need larger boats. Other physical assets include the Jami Mosque in Dusun 5, which serves as a centre for religious activities, seven prayer rooms and a TPQ managed by 16 households. Desa Perlis also has several sports facilities, such as a soccer field and a badminton court, as well as private elementary, Islamic elementary, and junior high schools. However, to continue their education to the high school level, residents must cross over to the town of Brandan.

Although land is limited, small stalls in each hamlet provide household necessities and food. Many women in Perlis also sell food and snacks to supplement the family's economy. Some houses are made of wood, and the litter scattered everywhere disturbs the condition of the roads and the cleanliness of the village. The community often lazily throws trash in provided places because they think others do it, too.

Financial Assets

Research findings indicate that the strength of financial assets is crucial in enhancing coastal women's economic resilience and can support their businesses' sustainability. However, from the field conditions, financial assets are one potential area that receives less attention. This is almost the same as the condition of other coastal communities in developing countries. This means that their money will be spent on daily living expenses, and they do not have any savings. They cope with it by joining a savings group or, in Perlis, known as "Tarikan."

"Tarikan" has become one of the alternative savings methods that are considered capable of providing a solution when needing goods or other urgent necessities, as explained by Mrs Cut Meutia below:

"Tarikan here becomes an alternative to having our own money, ma'am... besides using my husband's money for basic needs, it can also be used to buy clothes." The admin takes the collection daily, ma'am... who is called Mrs. Khalizah, consisting of 20 people from each hamlet. There is one for each village, ma'am...

we are from village three only. We have to pay every day, ma'am. If we do not pay, we will have to pay double tomorrow. The money is collected daily, 10 thousand, ma'am... and will be finished in 10 months."

Mrs Cut's explanation was clarified by Mr Suriadi, who said that this "pull" becomes important if someone needs to buy something. Most of the men in Perlis Village agree to have their wives participate in "Tarikan" because it meets not only the wives' needs but also the family's needs. Once, Mr. Suriadi and his wife wanted to buy fishing equipment, and in the end, they joined the "Tarikan" with Mrs. Khalizah. Furthermore, Mr. Suriadi provided information from the interview as follows:

"Yes, ma'am... so I once needed something, that is why my wife joined the 'Tarikan' with Mrs Khalizah, because it allows for instalments, ma'am. So this 'Tarikan' is considered very helpful for families here as a form of savings." If you save money, ma'am... it can run out unpredictably. So, ma'am, Mrs. Khalizah could organize a few savings groups according to the needs of the mothers in the hamlet in Perlis Village.

Besides "Tarikan," most people in Perlis borrow from close relatives, such as siblings, if there is an urgent need, such as sudden illness or other pressing needs. Relatives are still very much needed in financial matters within the kinship environment in Perlis Village. In addition to the family, the toke or collectors, whom they follow in fishing groups, become another alternative for borrowing money if needed.

There are several toke in Perlis Village, around ten people who are in hamlet 1 (3 people), hamlet 2 (2 people), hamlet 3 (2 people), hamlet 4 (1 person), hamlet 5 (1 person), and hamlet 7. (1 orang). They have savings to keep their money. Their group needs each toke to be one of the alternatives for borrowing money if they need funds for family needs, repairing fishing equipment, and other necessities. Debts can be paid in instalments or deducted from the wages of the fishermen who catch the fish.

Mothers in Perlis and young girls have become one of the main assets that contribute to the family's finances and support them by helping to process cerbung fish (pakang) or freshwater salted fish. Women are needed to process cerbung fish, starting from cutting/scaling the fish, splitting it, and washing it clean. If they reach this stage, weigh the fish, and sell it to the trader or collector, they earn Rp. 3000/kg. It is called wet cerbung fish. The fishermen do the same thing to their wives to provide wages, which they can no longer do when they finish fishing. However, if further drying is done using a manual drying tool called "bidai," the price of cerbung fish skyrockets to Rp 70,000/kg.

Large-scale collectors who obtain seasonal cerbung fish (March-November) greatly rely on the labour of Perlis women to process the cerbung fish. Usually, each collector already has around 30 regular customers, mostly housewives. So, whenever a collector catches cerbung fish in the sea, he will deliver the cerbung fish to the customers' houses through a courier. (buruh nelayan pengepul).

It is interesting to observe the phenomenon of cerbung fish in Perlis Village. When husbands ask their wives and daughters to help process the cerbung fish until the drying is complete, the money from the wet cerbung fish

(up to the point of being clean and ready for drying on the drying rack) belongs to the wife or daughter, and the money can be used for personal needs. The proceeds from the sale after the final drying become the family's money. (untuk kebutuhan keluarga). This illustrates that the women of Perlis also play a significant role in the survival strategies in the village of Perlis.

Social Assets

Social assets have become an important issue in the potential of coastal women. The research results show that the networks within the community in Perlis Village are divided into two types: external and internal. The external approach focuses on the women's groups formed by the government through the Family Welfare Movement (PKK). In contrast, the internal approach comes from fishermen and social groups such as the "Tarikan" group and religious gatherings or family events.

The PKK group officially formed by the government is considered good because it has many agendas that become the official programs of the village government to facilitate the programs from the central government. Stunting, one of the programs being implemented, is carried out by the women under their leader, Mrs. Junaidi. Research results show that the Village Head and the Chairwoman of the PKK still find it difficult to motivate members to participate in the programs being implemented. The women are often reluctant to participate and gather at the village head's office to attend the activities (Bilbi, 2024). The head of the PKK and her team must exert extra effort and patience to encourage their members. The reasons are often related to household matters, such as cooking or caring for children.

However, during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), many mothers complained about the social issues their children face, such as smoking, drugs, and sexual harassment. This has become a significant concern, especially for the village teachers involved in the children's education. The reasons mothers focus on their families are powerful. However, on the other hand, many recognize the importance of education for children, considering the conditions of free association and drug use in the village. For example, in Hamlet 9, many residents are aware of the drug trafficking, but no one dares to take action. The community's response is often limited to complaints due to their inability to address the issue.

Further information from the key informant, Mr. Iwan, shows that the Perlis mothers can become agents of social change in their village. This was proven by an incident where the Perlis mothers acted together to visit the house of a drug courier in one of the hamlets. Although successful, the drug problem recurs due to the lack of attention from the relevant authorities and the weakness of the regulations.

Social assets in Perlis Village are critical to pay attention to. The existing social networks, both internal (fishermen's groups and study circles) and external ones, need to be strengthened (seperti "Tarikan"). The women of Perlis heavily rely on the social networks around them to improve their family's economic well-being and strengthen community bonds in the village.



Figure 2. Pentagon Asset

Pentagon Asset's proceeds will then be linked to sustainable empowerment deemed appropriate for Perlis women to help improve their and their families' standard of living. Figure 2, which shows the Pentagon Asset, illustrates five key interrelated elements in enhancing community welfare, particularly for women in Perlis Village. The five elements include financial, social, physical, human, and environmental assets, which are important for women's empowerment. In this context, sustainable empowerment based on utilising these assets can help the women of Perlis improve their living standards and those of their families. Women's empowerment mainly focuses on strengthening their economic and social independence by utilising existing assets. With a holistic approach, this empowerment is expected to create sustainable positive changes in their community (Lubis & Nasution, 2024).

Empowerment Strategy for Coastal Women in Perlis Village

Based on the results of the research conducted in Perlis Village, it was found that there are several key issues affecting the community's welfare, particularly related to social and economic conditions. In addition to economic problems, drug use is a significant social issue, with around 70% of teenagers in the village having been exposed to drugs, making the village vulnerable to becoming a child-friendly environment. In order to empower women sustainably, this research proposes the following strategies:

1. Skills Trainin

Skills training is conducted to teach environmentally friendly fishing techniques and seafood processing into value-added products. One of them is training in making shrimp paste, which can be an alternative product to replace ikan cerbung when it is not in season.

2. Financial Access

Empowering coastal women through basic financial management training, including saving and investment. In addition, small business management training is essential to provide an understanding of how to start and manage a small business, as well as business planning and market analysis.

3. Education and Awareness

Women's empowerment strategies also include training on the sustainable use of local natural resources. Education on the importance of marine ecosystem conservation and the impact of climate change on coastal life needs to be introduced, along with raising social awareness to keep the younger generation away from the influence of drugs.

4. Participation in Decision-Making

Training in communication, negotiation, and conflict management skills is needed to strengthen women's participation in decision-making at the community level. Interactive techniques such as problem analysis and solution brainstorming can increase women's capacity in this process.

5. Network Strengthening

The empowerment of fisherwomen can be strengthened by training on building networks between fisherwomen and other local business actors. This training aims to expand collaboration opportunities, introduce product marketing and branding, and use media to access the market more broadly.

6. Infrastructure Development

Training on water treatment for safe consumption, such as using sunlight and settling techniques, is urgently needed. In addition, coastal women need to be trained on the sustainability of water supply systems in their communities.

7. Environmental Health and Hygiene Program

Education on environmental sanitation and hygiene is essential, especially regarding plastic waste management. The empowerment program also includes training on waste recycling techniques, involving women to create pro-environmental behaviour and support the creation of a clean and healthy environment.

By implementing these empowerment measures, Perlis Village is expected to become a prosperous, healthy, environmentally friendly and drug-free village, supporting sustainability for future generations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research results, Perlis Village has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other coastal areas. Its local potential is seen in the majority female population who are Muslim and of Malay origin, which is an important asset to the village. The characteristics of small-scale fishermen who use nets as their main tool are also an integral part of the community's life. The life strategies of women in Perlis Village were analyzed using the Pentagon Asset approach, which shows the order of assets from lowest to highest, namely physical assets, financial assets, social assets, human assets, and natural assets. The results of this study show that the people of Perlis Village still need empowerment programs that are relevant to their local potential and specific needs. Recommended programs include skills training, access to finance, education and awareness raising, strengthening participation in decision-making, social network development, infrastructure development, and environmental health and hygiene programs.

FURTHER STUDY

Every research is subject to limitations; thus, you can explain them here and briefly provide suggestions to further investigations.

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