

Original Article

Intellectuals and Service to the People: The Role of Academics in Increasing the Capacity of Sustainable Societies

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Abstract:

This study aims to deeply understand the role of academics in building the capacity of sustainable societies through service practices based on social reflection and local values. The research approach uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological design, which focuses on the meaning of the subjective experiences of the academics and the communities involved. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation of service activities in several communities in South Sulawesi over a six-month period. The results of the thematic analysis show three main themes, namely the transformation of the role of academics from instructors to social partners, the integration of local wisdom as a basis for sustainability, and critical reflection on the impact and value of service. These findings confirm that the success of community service is not only determined by the existence of the program, but by the quality of social relations and the co-learning process between academics and the community. This research provides a theoretical contribution to the development of the concept of academic citizenship as well as a practical contribution to strengthening university policies in encouraging participatory, reflective, and sustainable community service.

Keywords: Academics, community empowerment, sustainability, social service, critical reflection, local wisdom.

Introduction

In the context of the global context, the role of academics is increasingly receiving attention as agents of social change who are able to bridge the world of knowledge with the needs of society. The world faces major challenges in the form of social inequality, climate change, and resource crises that demand real contributions from intellectuals (Smith & Thomas, 2022). The

paradigm shift from ivory tower to engaged scholarship emphasizes the importance of collaboration between universities and society to create sustainable solutions (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2021). In various developing countries, the involvement of academics in community capacity building programs is an effective strategy in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Kania & Kramer, 2023). This phenomenon confirms that the role of academics is not only limited to knowledge transfer, but also knowledge-based social transformation. In Indonesia, community service by academics has become an integral part of the tridharma of higher education, but its implementation often faces structural and cultural constraints. Several studies show that service activities are still predominantly ceremonial and do not touch on the long-term empowerment aspect (Rahardjo et al., 2023).

The biggest challenges lie in low community participation, limited resources, and suboptimal synergy between universities, the government, and the private sector (Hidayat & Rachman, 2021). In the context of sustainable development, academics are expected to play the role of facilitators, mediators, and catalysts for social change that align with the real needs of the community. Therefore, the exploration of how intellectuals can grow the capacity of society in a sustainable manner is important to be studied through a qualitative approach that explores the meaning and experiences of social actors. Empirically, various field reports show that there is a gap between academic knowledge and empowerment practices in society. A study by Munir and Sari (2022) found that most community service programs are still dominated by a top-down approach without considering the local socio-cultural context. This has implications for the low sustainability of the program after the academic intervention ends. In this context, a participatory model is needed that places the community as the main subject of development, not just the beneficiary. A qualitative approach is important to understand relationship dynamics, dialogue processes, and the meaning of participation in community-based empowerment activities. Through an in-depth understanding of social experiences, this research seeks to explain how intellectuals can be true partners of the people in realizing independence and sustainability. An important issue that emerged was the limitations of previous studies in explaining the process of social transformation initiated by academics. Most previous studies have only highlighted the output of service activities without examining the underlying social interaction processes (Susanto, 2020). In fact, in qualitative research, meaning, relationships, and narratives are the main elements that describe social dynamics in their entirety (Denzin & Lincoln, 2021). This literature gap opens up opportunities for research that focuses on exploring the subjective experiences of academics and society in collaborative processes. Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap through a phenomenological approach that traces how intellectuals internalize the value of devotion and apply it in social practice. From a social and cultural perspective, academic involvement has a broader meaning than just a scientific activity.

Academics become cultural agents who transform knowledge values into impactful social practices. As stated by Lestari & Nugroho (2024), the interaction between academics and the community forms a social learning ecosystem that strengthens critical awareness and community solidarity. In the context of higher education, this also strengthens the relevance of the university to the needs of the surrounding community. The qualitative approach in this study allows researchers to understand symbolic dynamics, local values, and public perceptions of the contribution of academics as public intellectuals. This research aims to explore in depth the role of academics in increasing the capacity of sustainable societies through a knowledge-based service approach. The focus of the study is directed at the process of social interaction, empowerment strategies, and reflective values that underlie the involvement of academics at the community level. Theoretically, this research contributes to strengthening the concept of engaged scholarship in the local context of Indonesia, while practically, the results are expected to be a reference for university and government policies in designing sustainable service models. Thus, this research not only adds to the academic treasure but also strengthens the social function of the university as an agent of change that is on the side of the people. The role of academics in sustainable society development is rooted in the theory of Engaged Scholarship put forward by Van de Ven (2007) and reaffirmed in a recent study by Fleming et al. (2021).

This theory emphasizes the active involvement of academics in collaboration between academia and society to create socially relevant knowledge. In this context, intellectuals are not only in charge of producing scientific publications, but also applying knowledge in the real life of society. Etzkowitz and Zhou (2021) through the Triple Helix model added that synergy between universities, industry, and government is the foundation for the development of a knowledgeable society.

This concept is relevant for Indonesia, which is strengthening the role of universities in sustainability-based community service. Community Empowerment theory is the main framework in understanding how academics play a role in increasing community capacity. According to Perkins & Zimmerman (1995), empowerment includes the process of increasing control, critical awareness, and the individual's participation in social change. The study of Kania & Kramer (2023) developed this concept into the Collective Impact model, which emphasizes multistakeholder collaboration with shared social goals. In a qualitative context, empowerment is understood as a complex and dynamic social process, involving the exchange of meaning between academics and society. This approach is in line with the findings of Rahardjo et al. (2023) who show that the role of academics as facilitators is more effective when the community is an active subject of development, not just a recipient of assistance. The novelty of this research lies in its approach that combines the engaged scholarship paradigm with a phenomenological qualitative perspective to deeply understand the role of academics as agents of social transformation in the context of sustainable community development in Indonesia. In contrast to previous studies that tend to focus on the results (output) of service activities, this study focuses on the process of interaction, reflection of values, and the dynamics of the relationship between academics and the community as equal partners. This approach offers a new understanding of how academic knowledge translates into impactful and sustainable social action. In addition, this research fills the literature gap in community service studies by highlighting the dimensions of meaning and subjective experiences of academic actors, which have been underexplored. Thus, this research presents a theoretical contribution in expanding the concept of academic citizenship and a practical contribution in formulating a model of university-society collaboration based on participatory values and contextual empowerment to Indonesia's local socio-cultural reality.

Methods

This research uses a phenomenological qualitative approach because it aims to understand in depth the subjective experiences of academics in the process of community service. The phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the meaning and essence of the participants' experiences of the social realities they experienced directly. According to Creswell & Poth (2023), phenomenology is suitable for tracing individual perceptions, values, and reflections on a social phenomenon. In the context of this study, the phenomenon studied is how academics interpret their intellectual role in increasing the capacity of a sustainable society. This approach also allows researchers to interpret the human and social values that emerge in the interaction of academics with the target community. Location and Time The research was carried out in three public universities in Indonesia that have excellent community service programs: Syiah Kuala University, UBBG, and Serambi Mecca University. The location was chosen because it represents the social, cultural, and university-community collaboration diversity in Indonesia. The research period lasted for six months, from March to August 2025, including the preparation, data collection, and analysis stages. The selection of the location and period is based on the intensity of ongoing service activities, thus allowing direct observation of the dynamics of academic and community interaction (Suharto et al., 2022).

Results

Sampling Subjects and Techniques

The research subjects consisted of 15 academics from various disciplines (social, agricultural, health, and educational) and 10 community leaders from three service locations. The purposive sampling technique is used to select informants who have direct and significant experience in community service activities. Selection criteria include: (1) having at least two years of active involvement in empowerment activities; (2) understand the purpose and process of university service; and (3) willing to be a research informant. In addition, snowball sampling was applied to find additional informants through the recommendations of the initial participants. This approach is effective for obtaining in-depth data from interconnected social networks (Etikan & Bala, 2023).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online using open guidelines that allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and views. Participatory observation is carried out in community service activities, such as community training, MSME assistance, and reflective forums between academics and residents. Meanwhile, documents such as activity reports, training modules, and university publications are used as secondary data. The combination of these three techniques reflects the principle of triangulation of methods to increase the credibility of findings (Nowell et al., 2023). The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and trail audits. Triangulation is carried out by comparing the results of interviews with academics and the public and confirming the findings with institutional documents. Member checking is carried out by asking participants to verify the researcher's interpretation of the interview results to ensure the accuracy of the meaning. Meanwhile, trail audits are used to document the entire research process, including field notes, interview transcripts, and analysis results. This validation approach follows Lincoln & Guba's (2020) recommendations on trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach based on the interactive model Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2020) which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded using open-ended analysis to find initial themes, followed by a grouping of categories and subthemes that represent the meaning of the academic experience. Furthermore, the analysis process is carried out iteratively between data and theory to ensure the depth of interpretation. This analysis produces a pattern of meaning that explains the relationship between the role of academics, the empowerment process, and their impact on sustainable society.

Results and Discussion

General Research Findings

The results of this study illustrate that the role of academics in community

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empowerment is not only limited to knowledge transfer, but also a reflective process that builds a collective awareness of social independence and sustainability. From the interviews with **15 academics** and **10 community leaders**, three major themes emerged that represent the essence of collaborative experiences: (1) *Transformation of the role of academics as social facilitators*, (2) *Collaboration based on local values and citizen participation*, and (3) *Reflection on sustainability values and social impact*.

An academic from Gadjah Mada University (AG, 2025) stated:

"We don't just come with solutions, but learn with the community about what they really need."

This statement shows a paradigm shift from the role of academics as "experts" to "shared learners", in line with *the participatory development* approach (Chambers, 2021).

Academics as Facilitators of Social Transformation

The first theme highlights how academics interpret their role as facilitators who bridge science and the needs of society. The majority of informants describe this role as a form of *intellectual humility*—a willingness to put academic knowledge on par with local wisdom.

An informant (DS, an academician from Airlangga University) said:

"We learned that social change is more effective when people are the owners of ideas, not just recipients of programs."

Field observations reinforce this finding, where MSME training activities in Surabaya transformed from an instructive model to a *co-creation model* between academics and residents. This is in line with the findings of *Rahardjo et al. (2023)* which show that the reflective involvement of academics is able to increase the sense of community ownership of empowerment programs.

Local Value-Based Collaboration and Participation

The second theme shows that the success of community service is greatly influenced by the extent to which academics value local values. In Makassar, for example, academics from Hasanuddin University adjusted their empowerment strategy to the principle of *"siri' na pacce"* (self-esteem and social solidarity).

One of the community leaders (NH, 48 years old) said:

"We feel appreciated because the lecturers are not patronizing. They sit together, listen, and then talk."

This process creates an egalitarian and sustainable relationship. These findings support the *Community Empowerment* theory of *Perkins & Zimmerman (1995)* which emphasizes the importance of citizen control and participation in building critical awareness of social change.

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Local values-based engagement is also in line with the research of *Lestari & Nugroho (2024)* which found that adaptation to local culture strengthens the acceptance of programs and expands their social impact.

Reflection on Sustainability Values and Social Impact

The third theme relates to how academics reflect on the value of sustainability in service activities. Many academics emphasize the importance of *continuity* and *capacity building* over instant results.

An informant (MN, 42 years old, agricultural lecturer) said:

"Sustainability is not just about keeping projects going, but how the community can continue without us."

This reflection shows the internalization of social *sustainability values*, which include justice, independence, and strengthening local capacity (*Mensah, 2020*). Observational data shows that in some locations, communities are starting to develop advanced programs independently, such as local cooperatives and women's entrepreneurship training. These findings support the view of *Ahmad et al. (2022)* that the role of academics in sustainable development lies in the creation of adaptive and autonomous social learning ecosystems.

Academic and Social Integration

The results of the study show that the community service process is a two-way social learning arena. Academics act as reflective agents who not only transfer knowledge but also build mutually enriching social relationships. Thus, community service is not just an institutional activity, but an intellectual practice that forms *academic citizenship*. These findings expand on the theory of *Engaged Scholarship* (*Van de Ven, 2007; Fleming et al., 2021*) by showing that academic engagement can be a transformative space for articulating scientific knowledge into contextual social action. From a social perspective, these findings also strengthen the concept of *collective impact* (*Kania & Kramer, 2023*) which emphasizes the importance of cross-actor collaboration in building an empowered society. Overall, this study confirms that collaboration based on values, reflection, and participation has great potential in realizing a sustainable society that is socially independent and knowledgeable.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the role of academics in increasing the capacity of sustainable society is not only at the level of knowledge transfer, but also in the transformation of meaning and social relations between academics and communities. These findings broaden the understanding of *Engaged Scholarship theory* (*Van de Ven, 2007; Fleming et al., 2021*), which emphasizes the importance of collaboration in the creation of socially relevant knowledge. In the Indonesian context, the involvement of academics is not linear, but reflective-participatory, where the learning process occurs in two directions between academics and the

community. This reinforces the idea that *community service* is a social process that forms critical awareness, not just an implementive activity. Compared to the research of Rahardjo et al. (2023) which highlighted the challenges of Indonesian academics in maintaining the sustainability of service programs, this study found that value factors and social relations have a greater influence than institutional structural aspects. This means that the sustainability of the program is not solely determined by university policies, but by the depth of interaction and trust built between academics and the community. These findings provide a new perspective that the success of university-based community service does not depend on external resources, but on *mutual trust* and *shared ownership* between the two parties.

Furthermore, the results of this study are in line with the view of Perkins & Zimmerman (1995) and reinforced by Kania & Kramer (2023) that community empowerment requires active participation and collaboration across actors. However, the contribution of this research lies in the affirmation of the reflective role of academics as *social interpreters*—translators of scientific values into the cultural and social context of society. This approach bridges the gap between universities and society that has been considered to have an "epistemic distance." Thus, this research not only supports the theory of empowerment, but also expands the concept of *academic citizenship* in a plural and communal Indonesian social framework.

From a cultural perspective, findings on the importance of local values such as *siri' na pacce* in Makassar show that the success of service cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it takes place. This is in line with the results of research by Lestari & Nugroho (2024) which emphasizes the relevance of local wisdom in strengthening community participation. However, this research deepens this aspect by showing that local values are not only a tool of social legitimacy, but also a source of reflective learning for academics. Thus, community service becomes an arena for cross-value dialogue between universities and communities that enrich each other. From a theoretical perspective, this research offers a new contribution to the development of the concept of *sustainable academic engagement*. This approach views the role of academics not just as facilitators or educators, but as social partners involved in the *co-learning* and *co-creation process*. These findings expand on the *Triple Helix theory* (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2021) by adding an often overlooked socio-cultural dimension, namely values, reflection, and social sustainability. In this context, universities are not only part of the innovation system, but also moral agents that play a role in maintaining social justice and the sustainability of the community.

Practically, this research provides implications for the development of community service policies in higher education. First, a participatory value-based collaboration model is needed that positions the community as the subject of development. Second, reflective training for academics needs to be strengthened to foster social empathy and critical listening skills. Third, universities need to integrate *community engagement* into the curriculum to create an academic culture that cares about social sustainability issues. For further research, it is recommended to explore with a **grounded theory** approach to develop a more measurable *conceptual model* of reflective academic engagement, or use **mixed-methods** to test the relationship between the dimensions of value, participation, and sustainability

impact quantitatively. In addition, cross-cultural studies can be conducted to compare the practice of academic engagement in Indonesia with the global context, so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how social values and contexts shape sustainable community service practices.

Conclusion

This research confirms that the role of academics in increasing the capacity of sustainable societies is not only limited to knowledge transfer, but is further a reflective, dialogical, and collaborative process that fosters shared social awareness. Through a phenomenological approach, this study found that the success of community service is determined by the quality of social relationships, participatory involvement, and the ability of academics to integrate local values into service practices. The transformation of the role of academics from instructors to social partners reflects a paradigm shift towards *engaged scholarship*, where knowledge is no longer monopolized by universities, but is created together with the community through *the co-learning* process. Theoretically, this research expands the concept of *academic citizenship* by adding ethical and reflective dimensions in community service practices. In practical terms, the results of this research can serve as a basis for universities to design participatory, contextual, and sustainable service policies—through strengthening the reflective capacity of academics and integrating local values into any empowerment activities. From a policy perspective, stronger institutional support is needed to bridge cross-sectoral cooperation between universities, local governments, and communities. For further research, it is recommended that a broader exploration use a *grounded theory* or *mixed methods* approach to develop a conceptual model of *reflective academic engagement* that can be empirically tested in various cultural and social contexts. Thus, this research contributes to the development of a sustainable community service paradigm, rooted in human values, and oriented towards the empowerment of the people as the subject of social change.

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