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The Impact of the Implementation of the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Scaling Up Initiative (READSI) Program on Community Empowerment

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Abstract:

Objective: to analyze the role of agricultural extension workers in the implementation of the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Scaling Up Initiative (READSI) program on empowering cocoa farmers in Lasusua district, North Kolaka regency and to analyze the impact of the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Scaling Up Initiative (READSI) program on farmer empowerment in terms of cocoa farming income through field school activities (SL-Kakao) in Lasusua district, North Kolaka regency. Method: this type of research is descriptive research with a quantitative approach. This research is more specific using a case study method. Results: the role of extension workers of the READSI program in Lasusua district is quite effective. As a dynamic, their role is classified as moderate because there are still challenges in increasing the independence and networking of farmer groups. However, their role as facilitators and motivators is classified as high, as seen from the success in delivering technology and increasing farmer enthusiasm. As a liaison, extension workers are very successful in bridging farmers with various parties, strengthening agribusiness networks, and facilitating access to resources. Conclusion: Overall, the synergistic role of extension workers has supported the increase in capacity and independence of cocoa farmers, while accelerating the successful implementation of the READSI program in Lasusua district, North Kolaka regency.

Keywords: cocoa; community; empowerment; impact; readsi

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Introduction

Cocoa (Theobrema cacao L.) is a plantation commodity that plays a significant role in the national economy. Besides providing employment and a source of foreign exchange, cocoa is also expected to provide a continuous source of income for farmers.

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This is possible because cocoa can be harvested year-round, although the volume varies from month to month. Furthermore, cocoa plays a role in encouraging regional development and agro-industry development, particularly as a raw material for the food and beverage industry, as well as the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries. Cocoa was the third-highest export commodity in the plantation sector in 2020, after palm oil and rubber.

Cocoa plantations in Indonesia have experienced rapid growth over the past 20 years. In 2001, cocoa plantations were recorded at 0.82 million hectares, and in 2020, they increased to 1.53 million hectares, representing a 54.51% increase. According to their management status, cocoa plantations in the past 10 years (2012-2021) were predominantly managed by smallholder plantations (97.57%), 1.01% by state-owned large plantations (PBN), and the remaining 1.42% by private large plantations (PBS) (BPKK, 2023).

The development of Indonesian cocoa area during the period 2013-2022 experienced a decline of -1.80% per year. In 2013, the area of Indonesian cocoa reached 1.74 million ha, then in 2022 (Estimated Figures of the Directorate General of Plantations) decreased to 1.48 million ha or a decrease of 264 thousand ha. Based on the results of the Directorate General of Plantations estimates, the area of cocoa in 2022 will decrease -0.09% compared to 2021 (Provisional Figures (ASEM) of the Directorate General of Plantations). The lowest growth occurred in 2017, a decrease of -3.62% compared to 2016. Conversely, the highest growth in area was recorded only in 2016, reaching 0.67% compared to the previous year (Plantation Outlook, 2023).

Southeast Sulawesi Province was the third-highest cocoa production center in Indonesia in 2020, with 115,020 tons. In 2023, production reached 225,400 tons (BPS, 2025). Meanwhile, the regencies with the highest cocoa production in Southeast Sulawesi Province were North Kolaka (47,830 tons), East Kolaka (28,360 tons), Konawe (10,380 tons), Kolaka (9,590 tons), and South Konawe (8,420 tons). The remaining 10,440 tons came from other regencies (BPS North Kolaka, 2023).

North Kolaka Regency is one of 18 regencies across six provinces in Indonesia targeted by the READ-SI project. The READ-SI project is designed to enhance the READ project approach and will transform the stand-alone project paradigm into a broader and more inclusive program paradigm, aiming to attract private and community investment in project activities. This approach will be implemented through national community empowerment.

Law Number 19 of 2013 Article 1 paragraph 2 farmer empowerment is all efforts to improve the ability of farmers to carry out better farming efforts through education and training, extension and mentoring, development of agricultural product marketing systems and facilities, consolidation and guarantee of agricultural land area, easy access to science, information technology, and strengthening capacity and institutions, this regulation is in line with the READSI program at the Ministry of Agriculture which focuses on empowering poor farmers in rural areas through assistance from extension workers in the field.

Field assistance provided by extension workers through the Readsi program still requires improvement, particularly in the management of agricultural businesses related to cultivation and financial management systems. Furthermore, the utilization of several components of the assistance provided, such as agricultural machinery, is being assessed to see whether they are being utilized in accordance with the technical guidelines of the Readsi program.

The READ-SI project scale-up strategy will combine the results of testing and refining the READ project approach implemented in different geographical conditions through strong knowledge management based on a policy framework with reference to real evidence, and strengthening institutional capacity. READSI has a long-term goal of improving the welfare of poor farming families in Indonesia, and the short-term goal of this READSI program is to empower rural households in the project location, both individually and as a group, with skills to build self-confidence and utilize resources to increase income from agricultural and non-agricultural sectors and improve the standard of living of farmers in a sustainable manner.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of agricultural extension workers in the implementation of the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Scaling up Initiative (READSI) program in empowering cocoa farmers in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka district and to analyze the impact of the Rural Empowerment and Agricultural Development Scaling up Initiative (READSI) program on farmer empowerment in terms of cocoa farming income aspects through field school activities (SL-Kakao) in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka district.

Methods

The type of research used in this study is descriptive research, with a quantitative approach that aims to understand the object being studied in depth and not to make generalizations, but rather to make an in-depth explanation of the meaning behind the object of study regarding the role of extension workers in increasing productivity in the Readsi program in cocoa farming in North Kolaka district (Creswell, 2010).

This research specifically uses a case study method as a strategy to answer the research problem formulation. The case study was chosen as the research strategy considering that the role of extension workers in efforts to increase cocoa farming productivity in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka Regency is a contemporary phenomenon (current), and the main question in this research is How.

Yin (2011) stated that in general, case studies are a more suitable strategy when the main question of a research concerns how or why, when the researcher has little opportunity to control the events being investigated, and when the focus of the research lies in contemporary phenomena (present day) in the context of real life on the role of agricultural extension workers in North Kolaka district, especially in Lasusua sub-district (Yin, 2015). Creswell (2016) explained that case studies are a research strategy in which researchers carefully investigate a program, event, activity, process, or group of individuals.

The case unit in this study is the impact of the implementation of the readsi program in empowering cocoa farming communities in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka district. The case variations include: (1) Looking at the role of agricultural extension workers of the readsi program in increasing cocoa productivity (2) The impact of the readsi program in empowering cocoa farming communities from the aspect of income in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka district.

PeThis research was conducted from April to June 2025 in Lasusua District, North Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. The location of this research was determined intentionally (purposive sampling) considering that Lasusua District is one of the centers of cocoa farming, has sufficient plantation land potential and the dominant population is plantation farmers.

PThe population in this study was all cocoa farmers participating in the Readsi

program in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka Regency, located in three villages that are plantation centers and were selected purposively. Further details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Cocoa Farmer Population in Lasusua District, North Kolaka Regency in 2025

No	Location (Village)	Population Size (Head of family)	Sample (15%)
1.	Monapa Peak Village	75	11
2.	Rante Limbong Village	50	8
3	Watuliu Village	48	7
	Amount	173	26

Source: BPP Office 2023.

Based on table one (1) it is explained that the total population in the three villages is 173 KK (Farming Family Heads). According to Arikunto (2010), if the population is less than 100 people, all of them should be taken, if the population is larger or more than 100 people, 10-15% can be taken. So the sample in this researchtotaling 26 people. The criteria used as samples as primary data sources are: (1) as administrators or as members of farmer groups, (2) farmers who actively manage their farming businesses and are active in their farmer groups, (3) active and involved in participating in extension activities, (4) farmers aged between 30 and 60 years.

The data collected in this study includes primary data and secondary data. The data collection methods in this research are interviews, literature studies, andddocumentation.

To answer the first objective, an analysis was carried out using a quantitative descriptive method.To answer the second problem formulation, it was analyzed using the T-test with the help of the SPSS 23 application.

Results

The Role of Extension Workers in Plant Cultivation System Reading Activities

The READSI program is a collaborative effort between the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). It aims to improve the income and food security of poor farming households through economic empowerment and farmer institutions. Cocoa is one of the program's leading commodities due to its potential to increase farmer incomes in target areas such as Southeast Sulawesi and several regions in eastern Indonesia.

Extension workers in the READSI Program play a key role as companions, facilitators, educators, and liaisons between cocoa farmers and resources, technology, and markets. The success of cocoa cultivation in this program is largely determined by the quality and intensity of the assistance provided by extension workers in the field. The following table describes the role of extension workers in the READSI program, a cocoa cultivation system in Lasusua District, North Kolaka Regency:

Table 1, The Role of Extension Workers as Dynamists, Facilitators, Motivators, and Liaisons in Lasusua District, North Kolaka Regency.

No	The Role of Extension Workers	Answer					Score	Category
		SS (5)	S (4)	RR (3)	TS (2)	STS (1)		
1	Extension Workers as Dynamics	0	4	44	8	3	59	Currently
2.	Extension Worker as Facilitator	0	0	27	34	0	61	Tall
3	Extension Workers as Motivators	0	0	39	24	1	64	Tall
4.	Extension Workers as Connectors	0	4	45	20	0	69	High

Source: Primary Data After Processing, 2025

Based on the description in Table 1, it is clear that the role of a dynamic facilitator still needs improvement, as it is still in the moderate category, while those already in the high category. This is consistent with research findings that suggest that extension workers in the READSI Program have made a significant contribution to changing the perspectives and behavior of cocoa farmers toward greater productivity, as well as increasing their access to technology and markets (Safaruddin et al. 2022; Rismawati, 2020).

The role of extension workers in the READSI program is as follows:

1. Extension Workers as Dynamists

One of the strategic roles of extension workers in the READSI program is as dynamic agents, agents of social change tasked with mobilizing and motivating farmers to actively participate in agricultural development, particularly in cocoa cultivation. However, in its implementation, several studies have found that the dynamic role of extension workers in this program remains moderate due to various obstacles such as the limited number of active extension workers, high workloads, and weak ongoing training, resulting in suboptimal development of cocoa farmer group dynamics (Putri et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the dynamic role of extension workers cannot be considered a failure. In several regions, extension workers are beginning to demonstrate their influence in mobilizing cocoa farmers, particularly through group activities such as demonstration plots, organic fertilizer training, and cocoa fermentation. Although capacity building in various aspects is still needed to achieve high levels of productivity.

In North Kolaka Regency, the READSI Program has been implemented in several cocoa-producing sub-districts, such as Batu Putih, Ranteangin, and Lasusua. Extension workers' role as dynamic agents is still considered moderate. One of the problems faced is the gap in extension workers' competency in the social and managerial aspects of group management. This has led to cocoa farmer groups tending to be passive and awaiting direction, rather than acting proactively in resolving their technical and institutional issues (Saleh, 2014).

On the other hand, geographical conditions also pose challenges. In Patowonua and Ponggiha Villages, for example, limited transportation facilities result in low frequency of extension worker visits, resulting in unsustainable group dynamics development. An evaluation by the North Kolaka Agriculture Service (2023) noted that cocoa farmer participation in group activities remains below 60%. However, there are positive indications in several farmer groups facilitated by senior extension workers who have received intensive READSI Program training. This success demonstrates that if extension workers are able to play an active role as dynamic agents—motivating, mediating, and facilitating social change—the dynamics

of cocoa farmer groups can significantly improve. Therefore, ongoing training and reducing administrative burdens are urgently needed to boost the effectiveness of the READSI Program in North Kolaka.

2. The Role of Extension Workers as Facilitators

As facilitators, extension workers play a role in bridging the needs of cocoa farmers with various sources of technological innovation, such as sustainable cocoa cultivation techniques, the use of organic materials, intensive pruning, and post-harvest processing through fermentation. Research shows that 76% of cocoa farmers in Lasusua District are very active in assisting farmer groups in every field school, training, and technical guidance activity. This demonstrates the strong role of facilitators in guiding and directing farmers towards better agricultural practices (Rahmadani et al., 2023).

Furthermore, an internal evaluation by the North Kolaka Agriculture Service (2024) showed that farmer groups in Lasusua, facilitated by READSI extension workers, demonstrated improved capabilities in developing annual group work plans, managing aid funds, and establishing partnerships with cocoa cooperatives. This directly reflects the role of extension workers as facilitators in strengthening farmer institutions. This increased institutional capacity has positively impacted cocoa production and quality, as well as expanding market access for farmers.

The key factors determining the success of facilitators are their ability to build harmonious working relationships, mastery of cocoa technical materials, and skills in facilitating group learning. This indicates that the READSI program in this region has strong leverage in increasing the capacity of cocoa farmers through effective outreach.

Although challenges remain, such as the limited number of extension workers compared to the number of farmer groups, the collaborative spirit and participatory approach implemented by extension workers ensure the program remains effective. Extension workers in Lasusua also actively utilize social media and digital agricultural applications to convey information to farmers, ensuring communication is seamless despite geographical barriers. This is a modern form of facilitation that adapts to current developments and increases the efficiency of information delivery (Maulana et al., 2023).

3. The Role of Extension Workers as Motivators

Extension workers, as motivators, play a role in building farmer awareness and enthusiasm, encouraging them to change, learn, and take initiative. In Lasusua, agricultural extension workers involved in the READSI Program actively visit farmer groups regularly and provide moral support to encourage farmers to persevere despite challenges such as fluctuating cocoa prices, pest attacks, or crop damage. This motivational approach is highly effective in building farmer resilience and optimism.

Based on field data collected by the North Kolaka Regency Agriculture Office (2024), 82% of cocoa farmers in Lasusua felt that the presence of extension workers had given them renewed enthusiasm in managing their farms. Extension workers were not only present during training but also provided personal support when farmers faced difficulties. This created a positive emotional bond between extension workers and farmers, fostering a high level of trust and respect.

The role of motivators is also evident in the success of extension workers in fostering an entrepreneurial spirit among cocoa farmers. Many farmers in Lasusua District, who initially only sold fresh cocoa beans, have now begun to learn how to ferment, package, and market them themselves collectively. READSI extension

workers inspire farmers to view cocoa not only as an agricultural commodity but also as a product with high economic value. This motivation encourages farmers to continuously improve the quality and quantity of production.

Extension workers in Lasusua also use the success of other farmers as a motivational model. They invite successful farmers to share their experiences in farmer group forums, which psychologically boosts the morale of other farmers. This technique has proven effective because farmers feel more inspired by fellow successful farmers. This approach also builds solidarity and self-confidence within the cocoa farming community in Lasusua. The motivation provided by extension workers has been shown to have a direct impact on increasing productivity at the Lasusua Agricultural Extension Center (2023).

Despite the significant role of motivators, extension workers still face challenges such as heavy workloads, vast areas covered, and limited communication facilities in remote villages. Therefore, overall, the role of extension workers as motivators in Lasusua District under the READSI Program has shown encouraging results. It has not only boosted farmer morale and confidence but also created a more independent and progressive cocoa farming community. This successful model can serve as an example for other regions in strengthening the role of extension workers as agents of change who not only teach but also inspire.

4. The Role of Extension Workers as Liaisons

As liaisons, extension workers not only act as information bridges but also as networking facilitators between farmer groups and external resources. Under the READSI program, extension workers in Lasusua District successfully connected cocoa farmers with various government programs, such as assistance with superior seeds, technical training from the Plantation Center, and access to People's Business Credit (KUR) financing. This success is clear evidence that the liaison role is being carried out optimally.

Extension workers also connect cocoa farmer groups with cooperatives and agribusinesses, such as trading partners from Kendari and Makassar, who are willing to purchase quality fermented cocoa beans. In terms of technology, READSI extension workers in Lasusua facilitate farmers' access to information and innovations, for example by introducing organic cocoa cultivation systems, the use of biofertilizers, and simple post-harvest technologies. In the financial sector, extension workers play a crucial role in managing access to capital. They help farmers prepare proposals, develop farming business plans, and facilitate communication with banks that implement the People's Business Credit (KUR).

According to a report from the North Kolaka Agriculture Service (2024), the liaison role of extension workers is also evident in inter-agency program integration activities. Extension workers actively coordinate with the Food Security Service, the Cooperatives Service, and Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) to provide supporting programs such as training in packaging and farm management. As a result, cocoa farmer groups have been able to expand their activities to include downstream product processing. Furthermore, extension workers in Lasusua also act as informal liaisons between farmers, enabling the exchange of experiences, local technology, and group management strategies. Extension workers, acting as communication bridges between farmers and external institutions, have a positive impact on increasing farmers' self-confidence and bargaining power (Maulana & Wahyuni, 2023).

Despite this, challenges remain, such as the limited number of extension workers and the vast area covered. However, extension workers in Lasusua have demonstrated their adaptability through the use of information technology. They use

WhatsApp groups, Zoom, and other digital platforms to connect farmers with external sources, including government agencies, universities, and market players. This digital transformation has increased the efficiency of their liaison role, especially in the post-pandemic era. This success demonstrates the significant role of extension workers as liaisons in strengthening farmers' positions within the agribusiness system.

The Impact of the Readsi Program on Increasing Farmers' Income

Hypothesis testing was conducted before and after the READSI program. Because the data was homogeneous and normally distributed, hypothesis testing could be conducted using Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) software version 22, using the Paired Sample t-Test technique. This hypothesis testing was conducted to determine the tentative assumptions that had been formulated. The following is the hypothesis previously established by the author.:

H0: Accepted There is no influence of the readsi program on the level of farmer welfare in East Luwu Regency if the significance level is > 0.05

H1: It is accepted that there is an influence of the readsi program on the level of farmer welfare in East Luwu Regency if the significance level is <0.05.

Based on the results of data management with SPSS version 22, the sig value (2-tailed) was obtained at 0.000 < 0.05, so Ho was rejected and Hi was accepted, so we can conclude that there is a real difference before and after the farmer community empowerment program through Readsi activities in increasing their income or in other words that the Readsi program has an impact on increasing the income of cocoa farmers in Lasusua sub-district, North Kolaka Regency.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion of this study, several conclusions can be drawn, namely: 1) The role of extension workers as dynamic agents in the READSI Program in Lasusua District is classified as moderate, demonstrated through efforts to stimulate the dynamics of farmer groups and build farmer participation in collective activities. Although there has been progress in group awareness, there is still a need for improvement in terms of independence and initiative of cocoa farmer groups to innovate and network actively. The limited intensity of mentoring and social capacity of extension workers are the main challenges in maximizing this role; 2) The role of extension workers as facilitators and motivators is in the high category, as reflected in the success of extension workers in effectively conveying cocoa cultivation technology and fostering farmer enthusiasm and self-confidence. Extension workers are able to create a participatory learning atmosphere and encourage farmers to carry out fermentation, processing, and marketing of cocoa independently. Field school activities, technical training, and communicative interpersonal approaches have strengthened the technical and mental capacity of cocoa farmers in this area; 3) The role of extension workers as liaisons also shows very good results, demonstrated by the ability to bridge farmers with various parties such as cooperatives, financial institutions, government agencies, and markets. Extension workers have successfully strengthened cocoa agribusiness networks and facilitated farmers' access to assistance, business capital, and trading partners. Thus, the synergistic combination of extension workers' roles has boosted the capacity and independence of cocoa farmers, while accelerating the successful implementation of the READSI Program in

Lasusua District.

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