



Empowering Rural Communities: Strengthening Environmental Literacy and Public Health Through Action-Based Programs

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Abstract:

This study analyzed the implementation and outcomes of the Village Development Program as an embodiment of the Tri Dharma of Higher Education, strengthening student engagement in community empowerment based on local needs, particularly in environmental education, agricultural waste management, and public health awareness. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach through preliminary observation, community socialization, hands-on practice, and activity evaluation. The program involved ten students and one field supervisor who led several activities, including environmental education, converting rice straw waste into compost fertilizer, and health promotion through group exercise. The results indicated that the program enhanced community knowledge and awareness regarding agricultural waste management, increased participation in health-promoting activities, and strengthened collaboration between students and community members in addressing environmental and social issues. These findings show that student-based village development programs can effectively support sustainable environmental management, improve public health awareness, and encourage local empowerment. The study's implications highlight the importance of ongoing collaboration between higher education institutions and communities to promote participatory, sustainable, innovative, and locally responsive development.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural waste and community health are interconnected issues that require practical, sustainable responses, especially in rural communities. Rice straw is one of the most abundant agricultural residues, yet farmers often burn it or leave it unmanaged after harvest (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Utaminingsih et al., 2024; Wahyudin et al., 2025). Such practices can contribute to air pollution, unpleasant environmental conditions, and inefficient use of organic resources. At the same time, limited participation in regular physical activity may increase the risk of unhealthy lifestyles and weaken opportunities for social interaction among residents (Sutriyono et al., 2026; Wibowo, 2026; Hina & Solikhatin, 2025). These conditions demonstrate that rural development should not address environmental and health concerns separately, because both are closely related to community behavior and quality of life. Community-based programs are therefore

important because they can transform local problems into opportunities for learning, participation, and action. When residents receive knowledge accompanied by direct practice, they can develop practical skills and awareness (Ahmad & Soma, 2025; Mursid et al., 2026; Syafrudin et al., 2026; Triyono et al., 2026). Thus, integrated community empowerment supports cleaner environments, healthier lifestyles, and community capacity for long-term rural development and social wellbeing.

Many rural communities struggle to manage agricultural waste because knowledge of environmentally responsible processing remains limited. After rice harvesting, farmers often leave straw in fields, burn it, or let it decompose without proper management (Alwahedi, 2025; Holidi, 2025; Kusumawati, 2026). These practices suggest that people often are agricultural residues as waste rather than reusable resources. Another challenge is public health awareness, particularly regarding consistent physical activity in everyday life. Community members may understand the importance of maintaining health but lack activities that encourage participation and interaction (Dewi et al., 2024; Mohidem & Hashim, 2023). These environmental and health challenges create a need for community programs that are simple and suited to local conditions. Information delivery alone may not be enough to change behavior because residents need opportunities to practice, see results, and participate together. Therefore, a community empowerment approach that integrates environmental education, rice straw processing, and group exercise can address multiple local needs while encouraging residents to participate in improving their surroundings and well-being.

The field situation shows that agricultural residues can become an environmental concern when communities lack sufficient knowledge, facilities, or support. Rice straw left after harvesting can accumulate and is often burned or left to decompose. However, this material can be valuable when processed into compost and returned to agricultural land. This situation also presents an opportunity to link environmental management with community health promotion through participatory activities (Rohman et al., 2025; Yoeliyanto et al., 2025; Susanti et al., 2025). For example, group exercise can give residents a platform to engage in physical activity while strengthening communication and involvement. Discussing these issues together matters because local community development is meaningful when a participatory framework encourages environmental practices and healthy behaviors (Darmadi et al., 2023; Sudrajat et al., 2026; Supriatna et al., 2026). Practical demonstrations can make technical knowledge easier to understand, while collective activities can strengthen motivation and social cohesion. Consequently, an integrated program can create social benefits beyond the activities themselves by encouraging residents to recognize local resources, adopt healthier routines, and participate actively in developing shared solutions to environmental and health challenges.

Previous community empowerment initiatives have shown that appropriate processing techniques can convert agricultural waste into useful products. Composting rice straw reduces unmanaged waste while producing organic material that supports soil management (Bungawati & Rahmadani, 2023; Saleha & Sholihah, 2024). Training and demonstrations can improve residents' understanding because participants can observe the preparation, processing, and utilization stages directly. These approaches suggest that community learning is more meaningful when information connects to concrete activities and locally available materials. However, many initiatives have focused primarily on the technical dimension of agricultural waste processing, with less attention to how environmental education can connect to broader community wellbeing. Programs that

focus only on compost production may improve technical skills but may not fully address other dimensions of community participation (Christina & Indra, 2025; Shompa & Mohadis, 2022). This limitation supports integrating environmental management with health promotion. Such integration can broaden the social value of community service by linking resource efficiency, practical learning, physical activity, and collective participation within one more locally relevant and comprehensive empowerment program.

Community service programs have also explored approaches to improving public health through group activities, education, and community involvement. Group exercise can encourage physical activity while creating opportunities for residents to interact, communicate, and develop awareness of healthy living (Lubis et al., 2026; Rozi, 2025). Nevertheless, environmental and health initiatives are often implemented separately, even though both depend heavily on community participation and behavioral change. This separation creates an important gap because rural empowerment can benefit from coordinated activities that address several community priorities. This initiative addresses this gap by combining rice straw compost production with group exercise and environmental and health education. Its contribution lies not merely in implementing two different activities, but in creating a framework where environmental skills and healthy community routines can be developed alongside one another. The approach recognizes residents as active partners rather than passive recipients of assistance (Islamiah & Maulidiah, 2024; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Shabila et al., 2026). Addressing this gap matters because sustainable community development requires continuity in knowledge, skills, participation, and responsibility. An integrated approach can therefore provide a stronger foundation for community capacity building.

Based on these conditions, this community service initiative addresses the limited use of rice straw as a valuable agricultural resource, the need to strengthen knowledge and skills in compost production, and the need to increase community participation in health-promoting activities. Residents need more than information because effective waste management requires understanding materials, procedures, processing stages, and appropriate uses. At the same time, health promotion requires activities that are accessible, enjoyable, and encourage regular participation. These problems are interconnected through the broader issue of community capacity. When people have limited technical knowledge and insufficient opportunities for collective learning, available resources may go underused and healthy practices may be difficult to sustain. Therefore, this initiative addresses these needs through environmental socialization, practical compost production training, and group exercise activities. The program's novelty lies in integrating environmental resource utilization and community health promotion into an empowerment framework. This approach is expected to strengthen community members' competence, awareness, participation, and sense of responsibility.

This community service initiative aims to strengthen community capacity through environmental education, rice straw waste utilization, compost production training, and group exercise activities. The program is intended to increase residents' understanding of agricultural waste management, encourage the productive reuse of available materials, and promote awareness of healthy lifestyles. Its scope covers preliminary observation, community socialization, practical compost production, participatory health activities, and evaluation of program implementation and community responses. The activities align with broader community needs by emphasizing accessible knowledge, active participation, resource use, and sustainable behavioral practices. Rather than focusing solely on delivering information, the program encourages residents to apply

what they learn in daily life and continue beneficial activities after the intervention. Through this approach, the initiative contributes to environmental responsibility, resource efficiency, physical well-being, and social cohesion. The expected implication is that community service programs can function as collaborative platforms for addressing local challenges while strengthening students' roles in facilitating learning, participation, and sustainable community development.

RESEARCH METHODS

This community service activity was conducted in Karang Indah Village, Mandastana District, Barito Kuala Regency, from December 1, 2025, to January 10, 2026, as part of the ULM Berdampak Village Development Program 2025. Target participants included members of the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) and local community members involved in the program activities. The activity used a participatory community empowerment approach, in which participants actively identified local problems, implemented activities, and evaluated the program (Cornish et al., 2023; De Oliveira, 2023). The implementation began with field observation and needs identification through coordination, discussions, and direct communication with village officials and community members. This initial stage identified the state of agricultural waste management, household waste management, environmental cleanliness, and community health awareness, which then informed program activities based on local needs.

The program implemented several integrated activities focused on environmental management, agricultural waste utilization, and health awareness. The first activity involved socialization and community education on the importance of maintaining environmental cleanliness and using rice straw waste as a more beneficial, environmentally friendly resource. The activity continued with hands-on training in processing rice straw into compost fertilizer using rice straw, EM4, and molasses. Participants were directly involved in the preparation and processing stages to build practical skills they could apply independently after the program. In addition, participants were guided to make simple waste bins from used buckets to encourage household waste sorting and management. The team also led a joint exercise session to strengthen community awareness of physical health as part of a clean, healthy lifestyle.

The team evaluated the program at the end through direct observation and participant feedback during each activity. The evaluation focused on community participation, participant involvement in the training and practical activities, participants' ability to follow the compost-making process, and their responses to the environmental and health education provided. The evaluation results were described qualitatively to assess program implementation and identify changes in community awareness and practical involvement in environmental and health-related activities. The program's overall stages were designed to encourage active community participation, strengthen environmental literacy, improve the use of agricultural waste, and support the development of healthier, more environmentally conscious community practices in Karang Indah Village.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Strengthening Environmental Literacy through Rice Straw Composting Training

The observation and needs assessment in Karang Indah Village identified limited use of post-harvest rice straw as an environmental issue requiring attention. Farmers

commonly left rice straw to accumulate in fields or burned it after harvest. Although these practices had become routine, they showed that the community had not fully recognized rice straw as a potentially useful organic resource. This condition led to the introduction of composting as an alternative approach to agricultural waste management through the ULM Berdampak Village Development Program 2025.

The program began with socialization concerning agricultural waste management, the environmental implications of unmanaged rice straw, and the potential use of rice straw as organic fertilizer. The socialization was followed by practical training using rice straw, EM4, and molasses. Combining explanation with hands-on practice helped participants, particularly members of the Family Welfare Movement (PKK), connect environmental knowledge with a practical waste-processing activity. Participants were actively involved in the preparation and processing stages rather than merely receiving information from the facilitators.

The practical training showed that community members could learn a relatively simple method for converting locally available agricultural waste into a useful product. During the activity, participants followed the compost-making stages and showed enthusiasm for learning how the materials used in the process function. The activity also encouraged a shift in perspective regarding rice straw, from a material that is commonly discarded or burned to an organic resource that can potentially be processed into fertilizer for agricultural land and home gardens. The program then used the resulting compost as one of its outputs, distributing it to the community.



Figure 1. Socialization and practical training on rice straw composting

Figure 1 illustrates the educational and practical stages of the rice straw composting program. The photograph shows facilitators interacting with participants while delivering information and implementing the training. The combination of socialization and direct practice is important in community service activities because participants are given both conceptual understanding and practical experience. The visual documentation therefore supports the finding that environmental education was delivered through an active, participatory learning process rather than through information delivery alone.

Strengthening Household Waste Management through Simple Waste Bins

The second environmental issue identified during the needs assessment was the limited availability of adequate waste disposal facilities in several community areas. Households still managed waste through relatively simple practices, but the availability of waste bins could be improved. This condition indicated that environmental awareness

needed practical facilities to encourage residents to dispose of household waste more appropriately.

In response, the program facilitated the production of simple waste bins using unused paint buckets. The activity introduced the principle of reuse while simultaneously providing a functional facility for the community. Using discarded buckets also aligned with the program's environmental message: materials considered waste can still have functional value when properly processed and reused.

The activity resulted in three pairs of simple waste bins, which were later handed over for community use at selected locations. Community members and village officials responded positively to the facilities because the waste bins could support more organized household waste collection. Nevertheless, the limited number of bins means that the output should be viewed as an initial intervention rather than a complete solution to household waste-management issues. Continued community participation and reinforcement are still required to ensure that the facilities are used consistently and maintained properly.



Figure 2. Handover of simple waste bins to the community

Figure 2 documents the handover of the completed waste bins to the community. This image marks the transition from production to use, showing that the activity produced a tangible output intended for continued community use. Beyond providing physical facilities, the handover also reinforced collective responsibility for environmental cleanliness. Thus, the waste-bin activity combined a practical environmental solution with an educational message about the importance of maintaining clean community surroundings.

Improving Health Literacy through Community Group Exercise

The environmental improvement was complemented by a health-oriented activity: community group exercise. The activity served as an accessible form of health promotion, encouraging residents to engage in physical activity while creating opportunities for social interaction. Residents from different age groups participated, allowing health messages to be introduced in an informal, enjoyable community setting.

The group exercise activity received strong community participation. The activity-based approach allowed residents to experience physical activity directly rather than receiving health information solely through formal socialization. The program also offered door prizes to encourage participation and create a more engaging atmosphere.

This approach linked health education with community interaction and collective participation.

The exercise activity was also connected to the program's environmental component through the distribution of compost produced from the rice straw processing activity and several household necessities. This integration strengthened the relationship between the different activities implemented during the community service program. The environmental activities encouraged responsible waste use and cleaner surroundings, while the exercise activity promoted active, healthy living. The program therefore addressed environmental and health awareness as interconnected aspects of community well-being.



Figure 3. Community group exercise activity

Figure 3 demonstrates the participatory nature of the health promotion activity. Residents' involvement in group exercise shows how health messages can be incorporated into an activity that is practical, enjoyable, and socially engaging. The photograph also reflects interaction among community members during the activity, highlighting that community-based health promotion can provide opportunities for physical activity while strengthening social participation.

Supporting Factors and Implementation Constraints

Strong cooperation among the implementation team, village officials, and community members supported the implementation of the ULM Berdampak Village Development Program 2025. Village officials helped with coordination, communication, and identifying community needs. At the same time, members of the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) played an important role in participating in environmental education and rice straw composting activities. Residents' willingness to participate in practical activities and community exercises also supported program implementation.

Local resources further facilitated the activities. Rice straw was readily available as an agricultural by-product, making it possible to introduce a waste-utilization approach based on materials already present in the village. The composting process also used relatively simple materials and techniques. Similarly, using unused paint buckets as waste bins showed that the community could produce environmental facilities by reusing materials available locally. These conditions provided a practical foundation for implementing activities without relying entirely on complex technology or external resources.

However, several constraints were encountered during implementation. Community members had different household and agricultural responsibilities, which affected their availability to participate in every activity. In addition, changing established waste-management practices requires ongoing reinforcement and cannot be achieved through a single intervention. Practices such as leaving rice straw in agricultural fields or

burning it after harvest may require repeated education and mentoring before alternative practices become part of routine community behavior.

Weather conditions also posed challenges, particularly for outdoor activities and compost fermentation. Furthermore, the number of waste bins produced remained limited compared with the community's broader needs. These constraints provide important considerations for future community service activities, particularly regarding longer-term mentoring, wider facility provision, and follow-up monitoring. Despite these limitations, the collaboration between village stakeholders, community participation, and the utilization of local resources provided a foundation for continuing environmental and health empowerment activities in Karang Indah Village.



Figure 4. Distribution of compost and program outputs to community participants.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of program outputs to community participants. The distribution shows that the activities produced tangible benefits that residents could receive directly, particularly compost from the rice straw utilization activity. This output strengthens the link between training and community benefit because participants not only learned the composting process but also received the resulting product. The figure therefore provides visual evidence of the program's effort to translate environmental education and practical training into outputs the community can use.

Discussion

The community service program's findings indicate that participatory environmental education, combined with hands-on practice, can support community engagement in agricultural waste management. This finding aligns with the broader literature on community-based environmental education, which emphasizes that environmental literacy is more meaningful when knowledge is paired with opportunities to practice environmentally responsible actions (Altınok, 2024; Baig & Yadegaridehkordi, 2023; Abdullah, 2025; Fahriansyah et al., 2025). In the present program, participants were not only introduced to the environmental problems associated with rice straw but were also directly involved in converting the material into compost. This combination of explanation and practice suggests that community learning becomes more contextual when the knowledge provided is directly connected to resources and problems encountered in everyday life. Unlike approaches that emphasize information delivery

alone, the program emphasized learning through direct participation and the use of locally available materials.

The composting activity also demonstrates that environmental literacy involves more than understanding environmental problems. Participants' involvement in processing rice straw provided an opportunity to develop practical awareness of how agricultural residues can be managed and reused. This finding aligns with literature that conceptualizes environmental literacy as a combination of environmental knowledge, awareness, and the capacity to engage in responsible environmental practices (Abas & Kholidah, 2025; Shandilya & Bansal, 2025; Putra & Mukti Soma, 2025)). At the same time, the findings offer a more practical perspective because the program was implemented in a community setting rather than a formal educational environment. The production of compost and the subsequent distribution of the resulting product showed that environmental education can be connected to tangible community outputs. However, the observed participation should not be interpreted as evidence of long-term behavioral change, because sustainable changes in agricultural waste-management practices require continued reinforcement and follow-up.

The findings regarding household waste management similarly correspond with community empowerment approaches that emphasize the importance of combining awareness-building with accessible facilities (Schade et al., 2021; Sewak et al., 2021). Producing simple waste bins from used paint buckets showed that environmental messages can be reinforced through practical examples of reuse. The literature generally recognizes that environmental behavior is influenced by both individual awareness and the availability of supporting facilities. The program reflected this relationship by providing simple waste-management facilities while simultaneously communicating the importance of maintaining environmental cleanliness. Nevertheless, the limited number of waste bins indicates that infrastructure alone cannot resolve household waste-management challenges. Their effectiveness depends on consistent community use, maintenance, and the development of shared waste-management habits. Thus, the program highlights the need to integrate environmental education, community participation, and appropriate facilities rather than relying on a single intervention.

The health promotion component through community group exercise further demonstrates the value of participatory approaches in community-based programs. Existing discussions of community health promotion generally emphasize that healthy living practices are more effectively encouraged when people are given opportunities to participate in practical and socially engaging activities (Maksum et al., 2025; Wahyudin, Rohmad, et al., 2025). The positive participation observed during the exercise activity supports this perspective. Integrating exercise with door prizes and distributing compost and household necessities also connected health promotion with environmental empowerment. Theoretically, this finding reinforces the idea that community empowerment can be understood as an integrated process in which environmental and health awareness are developed through participation, social interaction, and practical experience. Practically, the activity provides a relatively simple model for integrating health promotion into broader village development programs without requiring highly complex interventions.

The program's theoretical implication lies in demonstrating the practical relationship between environmental literacy, community participation, and empowerment. In this context, environmental literacy was not treated solely as increased

knowledge but as an entry point for encouraging communities to recognize local environmental problems and participate in possible solutions (Arifin et al., 2026; Hartadi, 2022). The practical implication is that community service programs should be designed around locally identified problems and provide residents with opportunities to practice the proposed solutions directly. For future implementation, environmental education can be strengthened through repeated mentoring, monitoring of compost utilization, expansion of waste-management facilities, and follow-up activities that assess whether newly introduced practices are maintained. Similarly, health promotion activities can be integrated with environmental programs to create a broader community-based approach to improving quality of life.

The program's main contribution is integrating agricultural waste utilization, household waste management, and community health promotion within a single participatory village empowerment framework. Rather than implementing these activities as isolated interventions, the program linked environmental education to tangible outputs, including rice straw compost and reusable waste bins. It complemented them with a community-based health activity. This integrated approach shows how locally available resources, simple technologies, and active community participation can address interconnected environmental and health concerns. The program therefore offers a practical community service model that can be adapted to rural communities with similar agricultural and environmental conditions. Its contribution is particularly relevant for programs seeking to move beyond short-term knowledge transfer toward community involvement in identifying, practicing, and sustaining locally appropriate solutions.

CONCLUSION

The ULM Berdampak Village Development Program 2025 demonstrated that a participatory, needs-based approach can support environmental literacy, waste management awareness, and community health engagement by combining practical activities with locally available resources. Rice straw composting training provided participants with practical knowledge and skills to transform agricultural waste into useful organic fertilizer, while the construction of simple waste bins encouraged greater awareness of household waste management. Community group exercise also supported participation in healthy physical activities and strengthened social interaction. These findings suggest that community empowerment programs can be implemented more broadly by integrating environmental and health initiatives with simple, accessible, and locally relevant activities. For sustainability, the community and local stakeholders are encouraged to continue compost production, expand waste-sorting facilities, maintain regular group exercise activities, and establish follow-up mentoring and monitoring. Future community service or research should examine longer-term changes in environmental practices, waste management behavior, and health awareness using more systematic evaluation methods. Further programs could also involve larger participant groups, additional village areas, and measurable pre- and post-intervention indicators to assess the sustainability and broader applicability of the empowerment model.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Anthropic's Claude to polish the language, improve grammatical accuracy, and enhance overall readability. The authors conducted all conceptual development, data analysis, and conclusions independently and take full intellectual responsibility for the published work.

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