

GRASSROOTS SOCIAL INNOVATION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION: LESSONS FROM THE SUIJI PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation of grassroots social innovation within the Six Universities Initiative Japan-Indonesia (SUIJI) program by analyzing four key dimensions: agents, goals, drivers, and processes. The aim of this research is to understand how cross-national collaboration between universities in Indonesia and Japan can facilitate sustainable innovation in local communities, particularly in the fields of agriculture and environmental conservation. A qualitative approach was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The agents dimension highlights the roles of students, faculty members, and community leaders as the primary drivers of innovation. The primary objectives of the program are community empowerment and the development of sustainable solutions. The drivers of innovation emerge from pressing local needs to address social and environmental challenges. The innovation process unfolds through participatory co-creation, involving communities in both decision-making and project implementation. The findings indicate that active involvement of local communities and students in the innovation process leads to relevant and sustainable solutions. Cross-national collaboration enriches the innovation process through the exchange of knowledge and technology, although challenges related to cultural differences and resource limitations remain. These findings underscore the importance of service-learning and cross-national collaboration in social innovation, as well as their policy implications for expanding positive impacts at both local and global levels.

Keywords: Grassroots Social Innovation, Cross-National Collaboration, Service-Learning, Innovation Agents, Co-Creation, Sustainability, SUIJI.

INTRODUCTION

Social innovation has emerged as a powerful concept in recent years, gaining recognition for its capacity to address complex social challenges. This concept refers to the development and implementation of new ideas, services, and models that meet social needs, foster new relationships, and enhance society's capacity to act (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010). The notion has been examined across diverse fields, including education, environmental sustainability, and community development, positioning it as a critical mechanism for driving systemic transformation in a rapidly changing world (Moulaert et al., 2007). At its essence, social innovation seeks to empower individuals and groups by targeting the root causes of social, economic, and environmental issues rather than merely addressing their symptoms (Grimm et al., 2013).

The growing interest in social innovation is largely driven by its potential to offer transformative solutions, particularly in contexts where traditional approaches have proven insufficient. Neumeier (2012) argues that social innovation is especially valuable in rural development, where conventional economic models often fail to effectively address local challenges. Similarly, social innovation is regarded as a critical response to global issues such as climate change, poverty, and inequality (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). It provides a framework for rethinking how societies mobilize resources, knowledge, and creativity to generate sustainable and inclusive solutions.

Grassroots social innovation (GSI) represents a branch of the broader concept, highlighting the role of civil society and local actors in driving bottom-up transformation (Smith, Fressoli, & Thomas, 2013). GSI frequently

operates outside traditional institutional frameworks, leveraging local knowledge, networks, and resources to develop context-specific solutions. According to Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012), grassroots initiatives are crucial for advancing sustainable energy transitions and other forms of environmental action, as they are rooted in the needs and values of the communities they serve. Grassroots innovation movements differ from conventional innovation models by prioritizing social justice, inclusivity, and sustainability over economic profit and technological advancement (Seyfang & Smith, 2007).

A prominent example of grassroots social innovation is the rise of alternative food networks (AFNs), which challenge conventional agricultural and food systems by promoting local, sustainable, and equitable food production and consumption. Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2017) highlight how AFNs in Valencia, Spain, demonstrate the potential of GSI to contribute to human development by empowering local communities, fostering social cohesion, and promoting environmental sustainability. These initiatives represent a departure from top-down solutions, as they are citizen-led, self-organized efforts rooted in shared values and goals, showcasing the capacity of grassroots innovation to generate sustainable social change.

The capability approach advanced by Amartya Sen (1999) offers a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how grassroots innovation contributes to human development. This framework underscores the importance of expanding individuals' capabilities defined as the genuine freedoms individuals have to pursue lives they value. In the context of GSI, this translates into enabling individuals and communities to actively participate in shaping their futures and addressing the challenges they face. Crocker (2008) argues that by focusing on agency and participatory decision-making, the capability approach aligns closely with the principles of grassroots innovation, which aim to empower marginalized groups through collective action and deliberative democracy. The intersection of social innovation, grassroots movements, and the capability approach creates a rich field of inquiry for understanding how local communities can drive transformative change. However, despite the growing body of literature on social innovation, there remains a need for more empirical research into the specific mechanisms through which grassroots initiatives contribute to human development (Moulaert & Mehmood, 2010). In particular, there is a gap in understanding how GSI can be scaled up to address broader societal challenges without losing focus on local needs and values.

The Six Universities Initiative Japan-Indonesia (SUIJI) program offers a compelling case study for exploring the potential of grassroots social innovation in the context of cross-national collaboration. Involving universities from Indonesia and Japan, the SUIJI program seeks to advance human development through education and community engagement. By leveraging the resources and expertise of academic institutions, the program aims to address pressing local challenges in Indonesia, such as environmental degradation, poverty, and limited access to quality education. This cross-national collaboration provides a unique opportunity to examine how grassroots social innovation can be facilitated through international partnerships and how such initiatives can contribute to sustainable development in both countries.

A key feature of the SUIJI program is its focus on participatory processes that engage local communities in the design and implementation of projects. This approach aligns with the principles of grassroots social innovation, which prioritize local knowledge and community involvement. As noted by Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2017), grassroots initiatives are most effective when embedded within the communities they serve and when they empower individuals to take active roles in shaping their futures. In the case of the SUIJI program, this participatory approach enables the creation of solutions tailored to the specific needs and preferences of local populations.

The role of education in fostering grassroots social innovation is another important aspect of the SUIJI program. By involving university students in community-based projects, the program provides a platform for knowledge transfer and capacity-building, both of which are essential for sustaining long-term social change. This resonates with Seyfang and Smith's (2007) findings that grassroots innovation networks often rely on informal learning and knowledge-sharing to develop new solutions. Within SUIJI, students act as facilitators, applying their academic expertise to real-world problems while simultaneously learning from the local knowledge and experiences of communities.

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The study of grassroots social innovation offers valuable insights into how local communities can drive social, economic, and environmental change. The SUIJI program provides a compelling example of how cross-national collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives, particularly in the domains of education and community development. By emphasizing participatory processes, knowledge transfer, and capacity-building, the program illustrates the potential of grassroots social innovation to contribute to sustainable human development. However, the challenges associated with cultural differences and resource constraints highlight the importance of further research on how international collaboration can be optimized to

support local innovation without undermining its grassroots character. This study makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on social innovation and offers practical implications for policymakers and practitioners interested in promoting sustainable development through community-based initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of grassroots social innovation (GSI) within the Six Universities Initiative Japan-Indonesia (SUIJI). A qualitative approach was selected because it is well-suited for examining complex social dynamics that often occur in community-based innovation contexts (Neumeier, 2012). The case study design allowed the researcher to investigate in depth how various actors participated in the innovation process and how these initiatives influenced human development at the local level (Yin, 2018). The purpose of this research was not to produce statistical generalizations but rather to provide rich and nuanced insights into the phenomenon of GSI in the SUIJI context.

2.2 Research Site and Context

The study was conducted in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, one of the implementation sites of the SUIJI program. South Sulawesi was chosen because of its relevance as a hub of local community engagement in education-based GSI projects. The program involves collaboration between universities from Indonesia and Japan, with the primary aim of fostering sustainable solutions in education, environmental management, and community development. The focus of this research was on sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation initiatives carried out by students, faculty members, and local communities.

2.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allowed the researcher to recruit individuals with direct experience and involvement in the SUIJI program (Creswell, 2014). The participants included students, faculty members, and community leaders actively engaged in the implementation of GSI initiatives. A total of 20 participants were interviewed, consisting of 10 students (five from Indonesia and five from Japan), five faculty members, and five local community leaders. Selection was based on their involvement in social innovation projects and their knowledge of the challenges and outcomes encountered during project implementation.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Three primary methods were used to collect data: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

2.4.1 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the 20 selected participants using semi-structured interview guidelines. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while maintaining a focus on the central topics, namely social innovation and its impact on the community (Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012). Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

2.4.2 Participant Observation

In addition to interviews, participant observation was carried out during project implementation in the field. This method offered direct insights into the co-creation processes among students, faculty, and local communities in developing innovative solutions. Observations emphasized actor interactions and the active participation of community members in decision-making (Grimm et al., 2013). Data from observations were used to support and enrich the findings from interviews.

2.4.3 Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted to examine materials related to the SUIJI program, such as annual reports, internal publications, and training materials. These documents provided additional context regarding the program's objectives, methods, and outcomes and served as secondary data to complement interview and observation findings. According to Corbetta (2007), document analysis is an effective method for gaining deeper understanding of a program's context and structure.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process included several steps:

Familiarization with data: The researcher reviewed interview transcripts and observation notes to identify emerging patterns.

Coding: Relevant segments of data were coded according to the study's focus, such as innovation agents, objectives, drivers, and processes.

Theme identification: Codes were grouped into overarching themes that reflected the dynamics of social innovation within the SUIJI program.

Theme development: Themes were organized into a systematic narrative illustrating how social innovation

occurred and its impacts on communities.

Triangulation was applied to ensure data validity by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documents (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In addition, preliminary interview findings were shared with participants through member checking to confirm accurate interpretations from their perspectives.

2.6 Reliability and Validity

Several strategies were applied to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. First, triangulation across different data sources provided a comprehensive understanding of the innovation process. Second, internal validity was strengthened through member checking, whereby participants reviewed interview interpretations to confirm alignment with their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Third, data analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing the researcher to identify consistent patterns throughout the study.

2.7 Research Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of grassroots social innovation within the SUIJI program, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was limited to a single geographic location, South Sulawesi, thus the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Second, the qualitative approach means that the results are more contextual than generalizable. Future research could employ quantitative methods to measure the broader and more comprehensive impacts of the program (Neumeier, 2012).

Through this systematic approach, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how grassroots social innovation unfolds within a cross-national context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Agents in Grassroots Social Innovation

The findings of this study indicate that the main agents of grassroots social innovation (GSI) in the Six Universities Initiative Japan-Indonesia (SUIJI) program are students, faculty members, and local community leaders. These actors not only acted as direct implementers of projects but also served as mediators between academic knowledge and local practices. Indonesian and Japanese students, as primary agents, functioned as facilitators of knowledge transfer from universities to local communities, aligning with Seyfang and Smith's (2007) argument on the critical role of non-institutional actors in grassroots innovation networks.

One of the key outcomes of this study is the identification of students as both learners and change agents. As part of the GSI projects, they worked directly with local communities, applying theoretical knowledge acquired at universities and integrating it with local practices and wisdom. This process fostered capacity-building for both sides. These findings support Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2017), who argue that GSI actors, particularly those engaged in education, have the potential to drive social transformation through learning and community-based collaboration.

Goals and Motivations of Social Innovation

The main goal of the SUIJI program is community empowerment through education and community-based innovation, with a focus on environmental sustainability and poverty alleviation. The motivation behind these initiatives emerged from urgent local needs for practical solutions to social and environmental challenges. Based on the study's findings, the program successfully achieved these goals through a participatory approach, whereby local communities were directly involved in decision-making and project implementation.

The program also demonstrated how the goals of social innovation can lead to the creation of social capital and empowerment. The participation of students and communities in designing and implementing projects fostered the development of local community capacity while strengthening social relationships among the stakeholders involved. This aligns with the literature suggesting that grassroots social innovation has the potential to generate sustainable social capital (Grimm et al., 2013).

Co-creation Processes in Social Innovation

The process of social innovation within the SUIJI program took place through co-creation among students, lecturers, and local communities. A key aspect of this process was the bottom-up approach, where new initiatives were developed based on the specific needs of communities, as described in the GSI literature by Neumeier (2012). The program adopted participatory methods in project planning and implementation, ensuring that local communities were not merely passive recipients but also active actors in designing solutions. The co-creation process highlighted the significance of multi-actor engagement in generating context-relevant solutions. The process of social innovation within the SUIJI program took place through co-creation among students, lecturers, and local communities. A key aspect of this process was the bottom-up approach, where new initiatives were developed based on the specific needs of communities, as described in the GSI literature by Neumeier (2012). The program adopted participatory methods in project planning and implementation, ensuring that local communities were not merely passive recipients but also active actors in designing solutions.

DISCUSSION

The Role of Students and Academics in Community Empowerment

The findings underscore the vital role of students as facilitators in the innovation process. By combining academic theories with local knowledge, students not only contributed to community solutions but also strengthened the link between academia and society. Their role supports Seyfang and Haxeltine's (2012) view that non-institutional actors, such as students and local communities, play a central role in advancing social innovation.

In addition, lecturers also played an important role in guiding both students and communities throughout the co-creation process. Their academic experience and expertise facilitated the development of more structured and data-based solutions, which are crucial in the context of sustainability. Thus, collaboration between academia and communities significantly contributed to the success of social innovation projects on the ground.

The Importance of Co-creation for Sustainable Social Innovation

Co-creation as an approach to social innovation ensures that the solutions produced are more relevant to the needs of local communities. The SUIJI program demonstrated that when communities are actively involved in planning and implementation, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for project success. This aligns with Dubuisson-Quellier et al. (2011), who argue that community involvement in decision-making enhances project sustainability and collective responsibility.

In this context, students served as bridges between local communities and broader knowledge derived from universities. By integrating local and global perspectives, the program succeeded in developing solutions that were not only locally relevant but also potentially applicable in other regions facing similar challenges.

Cross-national Collaboration as a Catalyst for Innovation

A unique feature of the SUIJI program is its cross-national collaboration between Indonesia and Japan. This partnership enabled the exchange of valuable knowledge, particularly in sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation. As highlighted by Kirwan et al. (2013), international collaboration often enriches social innovation because it allows access to broader resources and knowledge, supporting the development of more comprehensive solutions.

However, cultural and communication challenges also emerged in this cross-national collaboration. Differences in communication styles and expectations between Indonesian and Japanese students occasionally led to misunderstandings, which hindered the smooth implementation of projects. Nevertheless, these challenges created opportunities for enhancing students' intercultural competence, which represents a long-term benefit of the program.

Policy and Program Development Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policies and program development related to grassroots social innovation. First, the importance of integrating service-based education into higher education curricula becomes evident, as it enables students to directly engage with communities and develop practical skills in solving social problems. Programs such as SUIJI can serve as models for adoption by other universities worldwide.

Second, policymakers should support cross-national collaborations, especially in sustainability and community development. Such collaborations not only enhance innovation but also establish international networks for knowledge and best-practice exchange. Governments and educational institutions should therefore encourage more programs that combine bottom-up and top-down approaches in social innovation.

Limitations and Challenges in Grassroots Social Innovation

This study also revealed several limitations and challenges in implementing GSI, particularly in cross-national contexts such as SUIJI. While cultural exchange provided significant benefits in terms of knowledge transfer and best practices, cultural, communicative, and expectation-related challenges between Indonesian and Japanese students were evident.

Cultural differences often became barriers in cross-national collaborations, especially when engaging with local communities with diverse social dynamics. This corresponds with Grimm et al. (2013), who noted that cross-national social innovation must account for challenges in adapting to local cultures, communication styles, and working methods. In the SUIJI program, Japanese students accustomed to a more structured working system faced difficulties adapting to local communities in South Sulawesi, where informal and flexible approaches were more common.

Beyond cultural differences, resource constraints also posed challenges to the sustainability of GSI projects. As identified by Seyfang and Smith (2007), many grassroots social innovation initiatives often lack sufficient funding and ongoing support, making long-term implementation more difficult. In the SUIJI program, reliance on student participation, limited by academic calendars created instability in several projects. Insufficient resources, both financial and human, risked undermining the program's sustainability.

Addressing these challenges requires stronger strategies, such as comprehensive intercultural training prior to project participation and more sustainable funding solutions through partnerships among universities, donors, and local governments. Building local volunteer networks to sustain projects beyond student participation is also critical for ensuring continuity.

Implications of Cross-national Collaboration for Social Innovation

Cross-national collaboration in social innovation, as demonstrated in the SUIJI program, provides significant

opportunities to enhance the success of community-based innovation. Cooperation between Indonesian and Japanese universities not only expanded project scope but also provided access to knowledge and technologies unavailable locally. Such collaboration also facilitated the exchange of diverse perspectives and approaches, enriching the innovation process.

Kirwan et al. (2013) emphasize that international collaboration in local initiatives fosters holistic solutions that bridge global and local challenges. In SUIJI, Japanese students contributed insights on advanced agricultural technologies and environmental conservation methods, which were then adapted by South Sulawesi communities to create sustainable farming systems suited to local conditions. This demonstrates the catalytic role of cross-national partnerships in accelerating and broadening social innovation.

However, such collaborations must be carefully managed to avoid creating excessive dependency on international partners. Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) stress that successful social innovation must empower local communities rather than rely heavily on external actors. In the SUIJI program, ensuring that local communities retain central roles in decision-making and project management is critical for maintaining relevance and sustainability.

The Significance of Capacity Building and Service-Learning

The results also emphasize the importance of service-learning in connecting academia with communities and fostering sustainable social innovation. Through community-based projects involving students from Indonesia and Japan, SUIJI not only benefited local communities but also enhanced students' problem-solving and leadership capacities.

Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2017) noted that student involvement in social innovation projects not only strengthens community social capital but also equips students with leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills vital for their future careers. The program facilitated knowledge transfer from classrooms to real-world contexts, enabling students to apply theoretical concepts to practical situations while delivering tangible benefits to local communities.

In higher education, the SUIJI model can serve as a reference for curriculum development that addresses community needs. Incorporating service-learning into academic programs provides students with meaningful learning experiences while generating positive social impacts. This model aligns with Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach, which highlights the importance of expanding individuals' capabilities to achieve what they value.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Based on the findings, several recommendations can strengthen the implementation and impact of grassroots social innovation. First, intercultural training for students and faculty in cross-national programs like SUIJI should be expanded. Such training should include communication styles, work ethics, and cultural values to improve collaboration effectiveness.

Second, more organized efforts are needed to address resource limitations. Expanding networks of local partners to provide funding or direct participation is crucial. Developing social business models may also ensure the financial sustainability of social innovation projects.

Third, future research should place greater emphasis on evaluating the long-term impacts of GSI, particularly on community well-being and social change. While qualitative research provides in-depth insights into innovation processes, quantitative approaches can offer measurable evidence of program effectiveness.

Research Limitations

Although this study contributes significantly to understanding grassroots social innovation in cross-national contexts, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research focused on a specific case, the SUIJI program in South Sulawesi, thus the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts with different social, economic, and cultural conditions. Further studies are needed to assess whether these results can be replicated elsewhere.

Second, the study primarily relied on qualitative methods, which offered rich insights into social dynamics but did not allow for quantitative measurement of impacts. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social innovation impacts.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the implementation of grassroots social innovation within the Six Universities Initiative Japan-Indonesia (SUIJI) through an in-depth analysis of four key dimensions: agents, objectives, drivers, and processes.

The dimension of agents demonstrates that students, lecturers, and local community leaders play pivotal roles as the primary actors of innovation. Students act as facilitators in transferring knowledge from universities to local communities, while lecturers provide guidance and direction throughout the co-creation process.

In terms of objectives, the program emphasizes community empowerment and the development of sustainable solutions, particularly in agriculture and environmental conservation. These initiatives are also oriented toward enhancing local capacities and fostering stronger social ties through active community participation.

The drivers of innovation stem from pressing local needs to address social and environmental challenges. These drivers are reinforced by international collaboration, which contributes knowledge and technology that enable local communities to pursue more ambitious and sustainable goals.

From a process perspective, innovation within the SUIJI program is carried out through participatory co-creation involving students, faculty, and communities. The bottom-up approach adopted in this program allows local communities to become integral parts of both planning and implementation, thereby strengthening ownership and responsibility for the solutions developed.

This research contributes to the literature on social innovation by offering deeper insights into how these four dimensions interact to generate contextually relevant and sustainable solutions. Future research is encouraged to further explore the long-term impacts of such initiatives and to identify strategies for integrating social innovation into public policy to ensure broader sustainability.

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