

Cross-National University Collaboration for Social Learning Innovation of the Six University Initiative Japan–Indonesia (SUIJI) Program in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of the Six University Initiative Japan–Indonesia (SUIJI) in South Sulawesi Province as a cross-national university-based model of social innovation. The SUIJI program emphasizes the importance of direct engagement between universities, local communities, and young people, particularly students, in sustainable development projects. Using the frameworks of Grassroots Social Innovation and the Capability Approach, this study analyzes SUIJI's contributions to enhancing participants' capabilities, fostering collaborative networks, and generating impacts on local communities. The research employed a qualitative case study method, drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings demonstrate that SUIJI enhances students' intercultural competence, adaptive leadership, and reflective agency, while simultaneously fostering collaborative innovations across diverse social domains that promote sustainable community welfare. The benefits extend beyond economic improvements, encompassing the reinforcement of social cohesion, increased environmental awareness, and the adoption of sustainable lifestyles. Nonetheless, several challenges persist, including the dominance of top-down approaches, limited scholarship opportunities, language and cultural barriers, and asymmetrical power relations. This study concludes that SUIJI represents a model of best practice in the internationalization of higher education, grounded in inclusivity, grassroots empowerment, and tangible contributions to sustainable development.

Keywords: *Capability approach; Grassroots social innovation; Internationalization of education; SUIJI; Sustainable development*

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengkaji implementasi Inisiatif Enam Universitas Jepang–Indonesia (SUIJI) di Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan sebagai model inovasi sosial lintas universitas berbasis negara. Program SUIJI menyoroti pentingnya keterlibatan langsung antara universitas, komunitas lokal, dan pemuda, khususnya mahasiswa, dalam proyek pembangunan berkelanjutan. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja Inovasi Sosial Akar Rumput dan Pendekatan Kapabilitas, studi ini menganalisis kontribusi SUIJI dalam meningkatkan kapabilitas peserta, membina jaringan kolaboratif, dan menghasilkan dampak pada komunitas lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kasus kualitatif, yang memanfaatkan wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen.

Temuan menunjukkan bahwa SUIJI memperkuat kompetensi antarbudaya, kepemimpinan adaptif, dan agensi reflektif mahasiswa, sekaligus mendorong inovasi kolaboratif di berbagai ranah sosial yang memajukan kesejahteraan masyarakat berkelanjutan. Manfaatnya melampaui peningkatan ekonomi, mencakup penguatan kohesi sosial, kesadaran lingkungan, dan gaya hidup berkelanjutan. Meskipun demikian, beberapa tantangan tetap ada, termasuk dominasi pendekatan top-down, terbatasnya kesempatan beasiswa, hambatan bahasa dan budaya, serta relasi kuasa yang asimetris. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa SUIJI merupakan model praktik terbaik dalam internasionalisasi pendidikan tinggi, yang didasarkan pada inklusivitas, pemberdayaan akar rumput, dan kontribusi nyata terhadap pembangunan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Inovasi sosial akar rumput; Internasionalisasi pendidikan; Pembangunan berkelanjutan; Pendekatan kapabilitas; SUIJI.*

Introduction

Over the past six decades, Indonesia and Japan have developed a long-standing strategic partnership, particularly in the fields of education and culture. This cooperation has traditionally been dominated by government-to-government (G-to-G) schemes, which often employ top-down approaches. In contrast, such initiatives have yielded important outcomes in academic exchange and cultural diplomacy.¹ They frequently lack direct engagement with local communities and grassroots actors. This gap reflects a broader critique of international higher education cooperation, which has often prioritized institutional prestige and bilateral diplomacy over inclusivity and community empowerment.²

In response to these limitations, new models of collaboration have emerged that place stronger emphasis on inclusivity, empowerment, and sustainable development. The Six University Initiative Japan–Indonesia (SUIJI) represents one such innovative model of cross-national cooperation. Established as a consortium of universities in Japan and Indonesia, SUIJI is designed to promote people-to-people engagement through community-based learning and research. Rather than focusing solely on academic mobility or institutional partnerships, SUIJI integrates students, faculty members, and local communities into collaborative projects. These initiatives encompass a range of sustainable development activities, including organic farming, waste

¹ Takayama, Keita. "Deploying the Post-Colonial Predicaments of Research on Educational Borrowing: Critical Reflections on the OECD's PISA and the Universalizing of Policy." *Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46, no. 3 (2016): 327–344. ; Yonezawa, Akiyoshi, and Yuko Shimmi. "Transformation of University Governance through Internationalization: Case Studies in Japan." *Higher Education* 70, no. 2 (2015): 173–186.

² Knight, Jane. *Concepts, Rationales, and Interpretive Frameworks in the Internationalization of Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2012.; De Wit, Hans. "Internationalisation in Higher Education: A Western Paradigm or a Global, Intentional and Inclusive Concept?" *International Journal of African Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2020): 9–20.

management, and livelihood enhancement programs in rural villages. In doing so, SUIJI advances not only academic exchange but also practical interventions that link higher education with grassroots needs.³

Hasanuddin University, located in South Sulawesi, has played a central role as one of the key implementing institutions of SUIJI. Its active involvement demonstrates how universities can act as mediators between academic innovation and community needs while simultaneously advancing Indonesia–Japan educational diplomacy at the grassroots level. Such engagement embodies the university's "third mission," which underscores social responsibility and a direct contribution to community welfare beyond the traditional domains of teaching and research.⁴

However, despite these achievements, SUIJI continues to face several challenges. These include the persistence of top-down decision-making structures, limited scholarship opportunities, language and cultural barriers, and asymmetrical power relations within the partnership. Such issues echo findings from other cross-national university collaborations, where structural inequalities and resource asymmetries risk undermining local ownership and long-term sustainability.⁵ Addressing these challenges is therefore essential for ensuring that cross-national university collaboration generates meaningful and sustainable benefits for local communities.

To analyze SUIJI's practices and impacts, this study employs the frameworks of Grassroots Social Innovation and the Capability Approach. Grassroots Social Innovation highlights how communities co-create solutions to address local problems by mobilizing bottom-up knowledge and practices,⁶ while the Capability Approach emphasizes the expansion of human freedoms

³ Bringle, Robert G., and Julie A. Hatcher. "International Service Learning." In *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research*, edited by Robert G. Bringle, Julie A. Hatcher, and Steven G. Jones, 3–28. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011.; Moulart, Frank, Diana MacCallum, Abid Mehmood, and Abdelillah Hamdouch. *The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013.

⁴ Bennenworth, Paul, and Ben W. Jongbloed. "Who Matters to Universities? A Stakeholder Perspective on Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Valorisation." *Higher Education* 59, no. 5 (2010): 567–588.; Trencher, Gregory, Masaru Yarime, Kes B. McCormick, Christopher N. H. Doll, and Stephen B. Kraines. "Beyond the Third Mission: Exploring the Emerging University Function of Co-Creation for Sustainability." *Science and Public Policy* 41, no. 2 (2014): 151–179

⁵ Montgomery, Catherine. "Reimagining Internationalization in Higher Education: International Consortia as a Transformative Space?" *Higher Education Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2020): 40–54

⁶ Pellicer-Sifres, Victoria, Sergio Belda-Miquel, Amparo López-Fogués, and Alejandra Boni. "Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development: An Analysis of Alternative Food Networks in the City of Valencia (Spain)." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18, no. 2 (2017): 258–274.

and agency through access to resources, skills, and opportunities.⁷ By combining these perspectives, this study examines how SUIJI contributes to enhancing students' intercultural competencies, adaptive leadership, and reflective agency, while simultaneously fostering collaborative networks and sustainable community development.

This article contributes to the broader discourse on the internationalization of higher education by offering an empirical case that demonstrates how cross-national university partnerships can move beyond elite-centered cooperation toward grassroots empowerment. It also highlights the potential of higher education institutions to play an active role in advancing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), by integrating academic innovation with community engagement.⁸

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. The research informants consisted of students, faculty members, and community participants who were actively involved in the SUIJI program in South Sulawesi. A case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of phenomena within their real-life context, particularly the dynamics of cross-national collaboration and community empowerment⁹. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture participants' subjective experiences and reflective narratives concerning intercultural learning, leadership, and social innovation¹⁰. Direct observation allowed the researcher to examine actual social interactions and collaborative practices in the field, thereby enriching the analysis of participatory dynamics¹¹. Document analysis was employed to review policies, program reports, and archival records, providing institutional and historical context for the continuity of SUIJI.

⁷ Nussbaum, Martha. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011

⁸ UNESCO. *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020

⁹ Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018

¹⁰ Kvale, Steinar, and Svend Brinkmann. *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.

¹¹ Spradley, James P. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980.

The data were analyzed thematically, with a particular focus on how agents, goals, drivers, and processes were manifested within the program, and on how these contributed to capability enhancement and community outcomes. Thematic analysis was applied to systematically identify patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from the qualitative data¹². By combining these methods, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how SUIJI functions as a cross-national, university-based model of social innovation.

Results and Discussion

Social Innovation and the Development of Community Capacities

Grassroots social innovation emphasizes bottom-up initiatives that seek to address local challenges through collaborative processes.¹³ Identify four key dimensions of this innovation: agents, objectives, drivers, and processes, providing a framework for analyzing how regional and international actors can jointly generate social change through participatory mechanisms.

Expanding this perspective, Moulaert et al. argue that social innovation is not merely concerned with creating technical solutions, but also with fostering new social relations, modes of participation, and the redistribution of power within society.¹⁴ This resonates, emphasizing that social innovation is transformational in nature, involving changes in social and cultural structures rather than simply resolving practical problems.¹⁵

Similarly, Seyfang and Smith introduced the concept of grassroots innovations as community-driven movements that emerge to create sustainable alternatives to dominant systems.¹⁶ These innovations are frequently linked to issues such as environmental protection, renewable energy, and community development, serving as social laboratories for testing new models of participation and sustainability.

In cross-national contexts, this theoretical approach is further enriched by the understanding that social innovation often arises from the interaction

¹² Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

¹³ Pellicer-Sifres et al (2017), op.cit.

¹⁴ Moulaert et al. (2013), op.cit.

¹⁵ Cajiaba-Santana, Giovany. "Social Innovation: Moving the Field Forward." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 82 (2014): 42–51.

¹⁶ Seyfang, Gill, and Adrian Smith. "Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable Development: Towards a New Research and Policy Agenda." *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 4 (2007): 584–603.

between local agents and global networks.¹⁷ Such collaboration enables the exchange of ideas, practices, and resources, thereby strengthening community capacities to respond to global challenges with locally grounded solutions.

The theoretical dynamics of grassroots social innovation, therefore, highlight that success is determined not only by the creativity of solutions but also by the extent to which processes enhance capabilities, foster more inclusive social relations, and ensure long-term sustainability through multilevel collaboration at local, national, and international levels.

To achieve sustainability, the Capability Approach is considered a complementary perspective, as it emphasizes the expansion of human capabilities, reflective agency, and social inclusion. This approach offers a valuable lens for evaluating the extent to which SUIJI contributes to enhancing intercultural competencies, leadership skills, and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods among its participants.

Within the framework of grassroots social innovation, the Capability Approach underscores that innovations emerging from communities are not limited to technical solutions but also create spaces for enhancing both individual and collective capacities. By broadening fundamental capabilities such as the ability to participate, access resources, and build networks, social innovation can drive more sustainable and equitable transformations.

Potential outcomes of this process include: (1) the emergence of young generations, particularly students, equipped with stronger intercultural competencies and adaptive leadership; (2) the development of alternative community-based economic models such as organic farming and integrated approaches to social problems; (3) the strengthening of social cohesion through cross-cultural collaboration; and (4) the enhancement of community resilience in facing global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and economic transformation.

In this sense, sharpening the focus on grassroots social innovation reveals that the benefits of SUIJI extend beyond immediate community projects. The initiative also holds the potential to generate long-term outcomes, including social transformation, expanded life opportunities, and the creation of new pathways for sustainable development.

¹⁷Howaldt, Jürgen, and Michael Schwarz. *Social Innovation: Meaning, Challenges, and Strategies*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017.

SUIJI Program Educational Process to Promote Grassroots Social Innovation

The SUIJI program in South Sulawesi, conducted in partnership with Hasanuddin University, is designed to make a significant contribution to enhancing participants' capabilities, particularly for students from Hasanuddin University and several Japanese universities. Student involvement in various activities such as service-learning programs in rural communities, participatory research with residents, the development of appropriate technologies, and cultural and language exchange aims to strengthen their roles not merely as beneficiaries but also as agents of change. It becomes increasingly relevant, given that many Japanese students often have limited direct experience in social contexts, particularly in cross-cultural interactions, despite their academic orientation ultimately being intended to generate benefits for society. Accordingly, SUIJI serves as a crucial platform to bridge this gap while enriching both educational and social experiences. Moreover, the development of collaborative social innovations and adaptive mechanisms that reinforce cross-cultural cooperation has been one of the expected outcomes of the program since its inception.

Through its diverse activities, the SUIJI program has stimulated tangible capability enhancement among students, faculty, and local communities. Participants demonstrated significant progress in intercultural competence, adaptive leadership, civic engagement, and reflective agency. For instance, students from Hasanuddin University participating in community service-learning alongside Japanese partner universities gained cross-cultural experiences that enriched both their academic and social capacities. This resonates with the Capability Approach, which emphasizes the importance of expanding human choices and capacities to lead meaningful lives, and aligns with Deardorff's view of intercultural competence as a core outcome of higher education internationalization.

Furthermore, the SUIJI program has fostered collaborative social innovations, reflected in concrete projects across the Province of South Sulawesi, including the development of organic farming in Gowa Regency, community-based waste management in Makassar, and the creation of sustainable livelihoods in coastal Barru Regency. These initiatives are consistent with the concept of grassroots innovations, which highlights the role of local communities in generating sustainable solutions,¹⁸ while also

¹⁸ Seyfang, Gill, and Adrian Smith. "Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable Development: Towards a New Research and Policy Agenda." *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 4 (2007): 584–603.

reinforcing Moulaert's view that social innovation involves the creation of new social relations and more inclusive collaborative practices.¹⁹

The program has also encouraged adaptive mechanisms, as evidenced by joint workshops organized by Hasanuddin University and its Japanese partners, the adoption of multilingual communication strategies, and cultural exchange programs. These mechanisms have proven effective in overcoming language barriers and cultural differences, illustrating the importance of adaptive learning in cross-national collaboration.²⁰ This process is also consistent with Nonaka and Takeuchi's framework of knowledge creation through social interaction, as well as Wenger's notion of *communities of practice*, which emphasizes collective learning within social contexts.²¹

Nevertheless, the program continues to face challenges that risk undermining its expected benefits. Key obstacles identified include the dominance of top-down approaches, which limit local initiative; restricted scholarship opportunities that reduce broader student participation; language and cultural barriers that can slow down collaborative processes; and unequal power relations between Indonesian and Japanese partner universities. These findings suggest that, while the program offers significant positive value, it must contend with structural and institutional factors that may hinder the consistency and equity of its impacts.

Despite its promising achievements, the SUIJI program is not without significant challenges that may constrain its long-term impact. First, the dominance of top-down approaches often restricts the space for local initiatives, resulting in academic agendas being more heavily influenced by stronger partner universities rather than local needs in South Sulawesi. This asymmetry risks reproducing dependency rather than fostering equal partnerships. Second, limited scholarship opportunities and resource constraints, both financial and technical, have reduced the program's accessibility, thereby narrowing opportunities for broader student participation and limiting the scalability of successful projects. Third, persistent language and cultural barriers have occasionally led to miscommunication and hindered the integration of cross-national knowledge. Finally, the fragility of institutional sustainability, particularly in terms of long-term commitment and resource allocation, threatens the consistency of the program and may undermine the durability of its community impacts.

¹⁹ Moulaert et. Al. (2013), Op.cit

²⁰ Argyris, Chris, and Donald Schön. *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

²¹ Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

These challenges align with broader critiques in international collaboration literature, which highlight structural imbalances in global partnerships²² and the risk of uneven benefits in higher education internationalization.²³ Addressing these issues requires stronger institutional reforms, equitable governance mechanisms, and long-term policy support to ensure that SUIJI can fulfill its transformative potential.

If these challenges are managed through adaptive strategies and equitable collaboration, the SUIJI program has the potential to generate profound and lasting benefits. For students, SUIJI offers invaluable opportunities for intercultural learning, adaptive leadership, communication skills, and civic engagement. Such outcomes align with scholarship on international service-learning, which emphasizes its role in developing global competencies and fostering social responsibility among university students.²⁴

For local communities, the program contributes to the development of sustainable, community-based solutions, including organic agriculture, waste management, and diversified coastal livelihoods. These innovations not only improve economic resilience but also promote environmentally sustainable practices and strengthen social cohesion. As noted by Moulaert et al., grassroots social innovation can deliver long-term benefits by enhancing community autonomy, fostering inclusive participation, and improving quality of life.²⁵

In the case of South Sulawesi, collaborative efforts between Hasanuddin University and Japanese partner institutions have also facilitated knowledge transfer and access to appropriate technologies, further amplifying community welfare. Beyond its economic and ecological impacts, the program has strengthened social relations through collective practices, such as "*gotong royong*" (cooperation). It has fostered intercultural networks that link residents with international students and scholars.

Ultimately, the sustainable value of SUIJI lies not only in its immediate community projects but also in its role as a platform for transformational learning and capacity building at multiple levels. By integrating grassroots initiatives into cross-national collaboration, SUIJI contributes to the creation

²² Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence*. 3rd ed. New York: Longman, 2001.

²³ Knight, Jane. *Concepts, Rationales, and Interpretive Frameworks in the Internationalization of Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

²⁴ Bringle, Robert G., and Julie A. Hatcher. "International Service Learning." In *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research*, edited by Robert G. Bringle, Julie A. Hatcher, and Steven G. Jones, 3–28. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011.

²⁵ Moulaert et. Al. (2013), Op.cit

of a social learning ecosystem that is both locally grounded and globally relevant. This positions the program as a promising model for university-driven social innovation aligned with global sustainable development agendas.

Overall, the research conducted in South Sulawesi affirms that the SUIJI program represents an innovative effort to understand and promote community development through grassroots social innovation. It is achieved by integrating bottom-up initiatives into a framework of cross-national collaboration. The application of the Capability Approach highlights how the program expands the participants' capabilities and agency, while the framework of social innovation²⁶ demonstrates that this process is transformational, as it involves structural change through collective participation.

Nevertheless, the long-term success of the program depends primarily on its ability to address power imbalances, resource limitations, language barriers, and restricted access to scholarships. Institutional reforms, policy strengthening, and more equitable models of collaboration are therefore crucial to ensure sustainability and to enable the program to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, both at the local level in South Sulawesi and on a global scale.

If the program continues, its benefits will be directly felt by two main groups. For students, SUIJI provides opportunities for cross-cultural learning, the development of soft skills such as adaptive leadership and intercultural communication, as well as the strengthening of civic engagement. This finding aligns with the literature on international service-learning, which emphasizes that student engagement in cross-border projects enhances global competence alongside social responsibility.²⁷

For local communities, program continuity contributes to strengthening community capacities to develop sustainable solutions, including environmentally friendly agriculture, community-based waste management, and diversification of local livelihoods. Studies by Moulaert et al. underscore that community-based social innovation generates long-term impacts, including social cohesion, economic independence, and improved quality of life.²⁸ In the South Sulawesi context, collaboration between Hasanuddin University and Japanese partner universities has also opened

²⁶ Howaldt, Jürgen, and Michael Schwarz. *Social Innovation: Meaning, Challenges, and Strategies*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017.

²⁷ Bringle et.al (2011), op.cit.

²⁸ Moulaert et. All (2013), op. cit.

pathways for the adoption of appropriate technology and the transfer of knowledge, which directly enhances the well-being of rural communities.

Thus, the sustainable benefits of the program extend beyond the development of students as future leaders to include the strengthening of local communities as key actors in sustainable development. This is made possible through SUIJI's promotion of collaborative innovation in areas such as organic farming, waste management, and sustainable livelihood development, all of which provide tangible benefits to local communities.

The advantages of these innovations are evident not only in economic improvements but also in the creation of more sustainable lifestyles. For example, the promotion of organic agriculture has encouraged local farmers to reduce dependence on chemical fertilizers and shift to environmentally friendly practices, thereby improving product quality while enhancing local food security. Community-based waste management programs have reduced environmental pollution, opened opportunities for recycling businesses, and fostered collective awareness of environmental health. Similarly, livelihood diversification in coastal villages has strengthened household economic resilience to climate change and market fluctuations, while also creating space for innovative financial solutions based on local resources.

Moreover, these collaborative innovations reinforce social relations through practices of *gotong royong* (cooperation), enhance community capacities for self-managed resource governance, and establish cross-cultural learning networks that connect local communities with students and academics from both Japan and Indonesia. Consequently, the benefits of the SUIJI program extend not only to economic and ecological aspects, but also to social and cultural ones. In this way, SUIJI contributes to the creation of a sustainable social learning ecosystem that is locally grounded while remaining relevant to the global Development agenda.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Six University Initiative Japan–Indonesia (SUIJI) in South Sulawesi serves as a cross-national university partnership that fosters community-based social innovation while simultaneously strengthening the intercultural capabilities of its participants. Through the frameworks of Grassroots Social Innovation and the Capability Approach, the program has been shown to enhance intercultural competence, adaptive leadership, reflective agency, and civic participation among students, faculty, and local communities. Furthermore, SUIJI has successfully generated collaborative innovations in areas such as organic farming, waste

management, and the development of sustainable livelihoods, producing tangible benefits for local communities.

Nevertheless, the program's implementation continues to face several challenges, including the dominance of top-down approaches, limited scholarship opportunities, language and cultural barriers, and asymmetrical power relations. Addressing these issues requires the establishment of more equitable governance structures, the strengthening of local capacities, and sustained institutional support to ensure that the program's benefits can be expanded and sustained over time.

Overall, SUIJI is not only a platform for international academic cooperation but also an innovative model of social learning for students. By engaging directly in cross-national, community-based projects, students acquire transformative experiences that connect academic knowledge with social responsibility. Accordingly, SUIJI can be regarded as a best-practice model of the internationalization of higher education, grounded in inclusion, grassroots empowerment, and meaningful contributions to the sustainable development agenda.

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