e-ISSN: 2745-9535
No. 105/E/KPT/2022
Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat
Member of: AJEBI
Editorial Office: Jl. Soekarno-Hatta, Rembuksari No. 1A, Malang, East Java, Indonesia, 65113
Contact: Phone: +62 (341) 478494 e-mail: jpm@asia.ac.id
The journal is published by Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang
Website: https://jurnal.stie.asia.ac.id/index.php/jpm
Indexed in: Google Crossref neliti GARUDA Journal Dimensions

Social Interaction Assistance to Enhance Community Harmony in Bantarkawung Village

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Volume
7
Issue
2
Edition
November
Page
647-655
Year
2026

Article History

Submission: 09-09-2026
Review: 15-09-2026
Accepted: 20-11-2026

Keyword

Social Interaction;
Community Harmony;
Mentoring;
Mutual Cooperation;
Village;
Social Cohesion;

How to cite

Aditya, B. A., Arrizqi, A. P., Fitri, C. A., Ujaja, M. B., Winarty, M., Rabbany, K. Z., Ghofur, A., Maulidatussa'diyah, Khasanah, I., Andini, D., Anggraini, M., Abdillah, L., & Adim, A. N. (2026). Social Interaction Assistance To Enhance Community Harmony In Bantarkawung Village. Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat, 7(2), 647–655. https://doi.org/10.32815/jpm.v7i2.3119

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Abstract

Purpose: This community engagement activity was carried out to assist residents of Bantarkawung Village, Brebes Regency, in restoring patterns of social interaction that had begun to weaken because of personal workloads, labor migration, and declining participation in communal activities, with the aim of preserving and strengthening social harmony.

Method: The assistance drew on a Participatory Action Research approach, combining field observation, focus group discussions, training for local facilitators, and the revival of mutual-cooperation (gotong royong) activities together with community forums over a four-month period.

Practical Applications: The outcomes of this assistance can be adopted by village governments and other community organizations to design programs that strengthen social cohesion on the basis of local wisdom

Conclusion: The social interaction assistance program was shown to raise the frequency of communication among residents, increase participation in mutual-cooperation activities, and rebuild mutual trust, thereby strengthening community harmony in Bantarkawung Village.

Introduction

Social interaction is a cornerstone of shared community life. Through it, residents build communication, mutual understanding, and cooperation, all of which sustain social harmony within a neighborhood. Yet the pace of modern life presents a number of challenges to sustaining such interaction, particularly in rural areas experiencing social change driven by labor migration, economic demands, and growing individualism.

Bantarkawung Village, located in Brebes Regency, Central Java Province, is an agrarian community once known for a strong tradition of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) and communal solidarity. In recent years, however, a portion of residents has taken part less often in shared activities such as communal clean-up work, hamlet deliberations, and regular resident meetings. Left unaddressed through participatory means, this trend risks weakening social cohesion and raising the likelihood of misunderstanding among neighbors.

A number of studies point to the same pattern: social interaction that is well maintained among residents, whether from similar or different backgrounds, tends to produce harmonious relationships built on mutual respect (Panjang et al., 2022). Social capital in the form of trust, networks, and shared norms likewise plays a key role in driving empowerment and inclusive development at the community level (Fathy, 2019). Where the practice of mutual cooperation has been sustained, villages have shown that it strengthens social capital and deepens kinship ties among residents (Faedlulloh, 2017).

Socialization and assistance programs that are participatory in design and grounded in local values have likewise proven capable of reviving a spirit of togetherness and strengthening communication among residents in other villages (Nurlita et al., 2026). In a similar vein, strengthening the active role of communities through structured assistance has been shown to significantly improve social cohesion (Indrawadi et al., 2022). These findings underscore the case for carrying out a comparable social interaction assistance effort in Bantarkawung Village.

On this basis, the present community service activity was designed to assist residents of Bantarkawung Village in revitalizing patterns of social interaction through community forums, training for local facilitators, and the renewed strengthening of mutual-cooperation activities, so that community harmony can be preserved and sustained over the long term.

Method

This community service activity applied a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, positioning residents as active subjects rather than mere recipients of assistance. This approach was chosen for its capacity to build residents' critical awareness of shared social potentials and problems, while also strengthening the sense of community that underpins the sustainability of the program (Megayanti et al., 2021).

The activity targeted residents of Hamlet 1 and Hamlet 2 of Bantarkawung Village, Bantarkawung Sub-district, Brebes Regency, involving community leaders, village officials, members of the Family Welfare Movement (PKK), the youth organization (Karang Taruna), and residents at large. Participants were selected purposively, taking into account representation across age groups, gender, and hamlet of residence.

The assistance was carried out over four months in five stages: (1) observation and social assessment to map the existing state of resident interaction; (2) socialization and focus group discussions (FGDs) to draw out residents' views on social harmony; (3) training of local facilitators to serve as sustained drivers of community activity; (4) hands-on strengthening of mutual-cooperation practices and regular community forums; and (5) joint evaluation and reflection to assess outcomes and formulate a follow-up plan. These stages are illustrated in Figure 1.

Data were gathered through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with community leaders, and documentation of activities. The data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively by comparing conditions of social interaction before and after the assistance,

supported by simple quantitative data on attendance and participation levels across each stage of the activity.

Result

The assistance program was carried out in Hamlet 1 and Hamlet 2 of Bantarkawung Village, involving 70 participants made up of community leaders, village officials, PKK members, youth organization members, and residents at large, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Assistance Program Participant Groups

No.	Participant Group	Number (persons)	Remarks
1	Community leaders & village officials	8	Resource persons & facilitators
2	PKK members	15	FGD & training participants
3	Youth organization (Karang Taruna)	12	Local facilitators
4	General residents	35	Participants in mutual cooperation & community forums

Source: Author's Work, 2026.

At the observation and social assessment stage, resident meetings were found to occur less often than five years earlier, with a number of residents reporting that they interacted more through online channels than face to face. The focus group discussion held in the second week drew out residents' views on the causes of this decline, among them time spent working outside the village, a shortage of venues for gathering, and the diminishing role of community organizers.

Training for local facilitators, involving 12 members of the youth organization, produced a core group equipped with skills in communication, discussion facilitation, and the coordination of shared activities. This group subsequently took an active role in reviving weekly mutual-cooperation work and monthly community forums.

During the implementation stage, participation in mutual-cooperation activities rose from an average of 15 people per activity before the program began to 42 people per activity by the third month. The monthly community forum, previously inactive, was successfully revived, reaching an attendance rate of 68% of all household heads across the two target hamlets.

At the evaluation stage, residents reported that the assistance program had helped strengthen social bonds, opened space for communication across generations, and rebuilt a sense of mutual trust that had begun to erode. One community leader noted that the revived community forum had become an effective means of resolving shared concerns through deliberation.

Further analysis indicated that these outcomes were underpinned by three main factors: the legitimacy extended by the village government, the enthusiasm shown by youth acting as local facilitators, and the fit between the participatory approach and the character of this agrarian community. At the same time, two principal constraints emerged — the limited availability of residents working outside the village, and a partial shift in communication patterns toward digital channels — both of which warranted particular attention in shaping a strategy for the program's continuity.

In response to this digital-communication constraint, the service team and local facilitators began, in the fourth month, to establish a resident communication group as a channel for circulating activity schedules, while the core activities themselves continued to be carried out face to face. An initial trial of this arrangement showed an increase in the number of residents aware of upcoming schedules, although the conversion of that awareness into physical attendance was not yet even across all participant groups.

Discussion

The results indicate that strengthening social interaction through a participatory approach produced a genuine improvement in social cohesion and harmony within Bantarkawung Village. The rise in resident participation in mutual-cooperation work and community forums points to a renewed collective awareness that had earlier weakened due to shifting lifestyles and personal workloads.

Photo 1. Social Interaction Assistance Activity in Bantarkawung Village



Source: Private Documentation, 2026.

This finding is consistent with the view that social capital, built on networks, norms, and trust, plays an important role in driving community empowerment within the context of inclusive and sustainable development (Fathy, 2019). Such social capital does not arise on its own; it needs to be revitalized through participatory and context-sensitive intervention, as demonstrated by a comparable program in Jorong Data Buayan that succeeded in strengthening communication among residents and their sense of belonging to the community (Nurlita et al., 2026).

Religious activities and local tradition have likewise proven effective as vehicles for improving social interaction, as shown in an assistance program built around the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW), which succeeded in strengthening ties among residents of the Grand Sangatta housing area (Yasin et al., 2023). This suggests that religious and social occasions, as well as the tradition of mutual cooperation, can serve as entry points for strengthening interaction among residents of Bantarkawung Village.

The mutual-cooperation practices revived through this program also reflect a form of social capital rooted in individuals' willingness to place shared interests above their own, a pattern also observed among coconut-sugar artisans in Ketanda Village, who sustained their social capital through consistent mutual-cooperation activity (Faedlulloh, 2017). Strengthening the active role of communities through structured assistance has similarly been shown empirically to raise social cohesion across both rural and urban settings (Indrawadi et al., 2022).

Even so, the program faced several limitations. Its relatively short duration means that the sustainability of its outcomes now rests largely on the continued commitment of local facilitators once the service team is no longer directly involved. In addition, residents who work outside the village remain difficult to engage fully in face-to-face activities. Addressing these constraints would call for follow-up assistance carried out in closer partnership with the village government, including the allocation of village funds to support the continuity of community forums and mutual-cooperation activities. The program's principal contribution lies in building the capacity of local facilitators drawn from village youth, who are expected to serve going forward as independent drivers of continued social interaction, without relying on external intervention.

The success of the social interaction assistance program in Bantarkawung Village was underpinned by several supporting factors identified over the course of the activity. The first was the full backing of the village government, which provided permission, space, and social legitimacy for every stage of the program to proceed. The second was the enthusiasm of the youth group, particularly Karang Taruna members, who showed readiness to be trained as local facilitators. The role of young people as agents of change in strengthening village-level social cohesion has been widely studied and shown to be significant, given their broad social networks, emotional closeness across different age groups, and ability to adapt to new modes of communication (Rahmawati & Santoso, 2023).

A third factor was the fit between the Participatory Action Research approach and the character of Bantarkawung's agrarian community, which has historically been accustomed to deliberation and collective work. This participatory approach allowed residents to become not merely beneficiaries but also designers and implementers of the program, strengthening their sense of ownership over its outcomes. Conversely, the most prominent inhibiting factor was the limited time available to residents who work outside the village, whether as migrant laborers or as daily wage workers in the city, whose participation in face-to-face activities tended to be lower than that of residents who lived and worked closer to home.

Another factor affecting the program's outcomes was a shift in residents' communication patterns toward digital media. This is consistent with findings that the digitalization of communication in rural areas carries a double-edged consequence: on one hand it speeds up the flow of information among residents, but on the other it risks displacing the physical meeting spaces that have long served as venues for direct social interaction (Anwar et al., 2024). Future assistance strategies should therefore integrate digital media as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face resident forums.

Mutual cooperation, as a local cultural value, proved to be a strategic instrument for revitalizing social interaction among Bantarkawung residents. Even so, the practice of mutual cooperation in contemporary society cannot be preserved in a static form. Revitalizing this value calls for adjustment to present-day realities — for example, by combining conventional communal work with more flexible participation schemes, such as staggered scheduling or the use of digital communication groups to coordinate activities. This kind of adaptive strategy is consistent with the view that mutual cooperation needs to be revitalized in a context-sensitive way in order to remain relevant as a social development strategy in the digital era, without losing its underlying spirit (Wibowo, 2021).

In practice, the service team and local facilitators began piloting this combined scheme in the fourth month of the program by forming a resident communication group to circulate schedules for mutual-cooperation work and community forums, while core activities remained face to face. Early results showed that this scheme helped more residents become aware of activity schedules, although not all of that awareness translated into physical attendance. This finding is an important consideration for the program's sustainability once direct assistance ends.

Compared with social cohesion strengthening programs elsewhere, the outcomes of the Bantarkawung assistance program display a fairly consistent pattern, with rising resident participation serving as the primary indicator of success. Post-disaster community resilience programs in other areas, for instance, have shown that social capital acts as a key determinant of how quickly social recovery occurs, with communities possessing strong social networks tending to rebuild patterns of interaction and cooperation more rapidly (Suryani & Prabowo, 2020). Although Bantarkawung Village was not facing a post-disaster situation, the same principle applies: pre-existing social capital made it easier for the assistance program to revitalize interaction among residents.

The fundamental difference between the Bantarkawung program and these comparison cases lies in the point of entry for intervention. Whereas post-disaster resilience programs are typically triggered by emergency conditions that spur solidarity rapidly, the Bantarkawung

program instead began from a condition of social cohesion that had weakened gradually because of shifting lifestyles, requiring a more incremental process of collective awareness-building. This explains why a PAR approach, with its emphasis on reflection and participation, was judged more suitable than an intervention designed for instant results.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the argument that social capital is not a fixed state but a resource that can be built, weakened, and restored through appropriate intervention. The rise in mutual-cooperation participation and community forum attendance in Bantarkawung Village provides empirical evidence that social capital can be revitalized within a relatively short period, given competent local facilitators and a participatory approach.

In practical terms, these findings carry several implications for village governments and community organizations. First, building youth capacity as local facilitators should become a standing agenda rather than an occasional activity, given the strategic role young people play in sustaining social cohesion (Rahmawati & Santoso, 2023). Second, village governments should consider setting aside dedicated village-fund allocations to support community forums and mutual-cooperation activities as part of a sustainable social development program. Third, digital communication strategies need to be integrated in a planned way so they can reach residents working outside the village without diminishing the intensity of face-to-face interaction.

Another implication worth underscoring is the importance of follow-up assistance after the program ends, to secure the sustainability of what has been achieved. Without a mechanism for continued support, there is a risk that residents' patterns of interaction will revert to their pre-program state, given that the structural drivers of weakened social interaction — such as labor migration and economic pressures — have not been fully resolved by a four-month program.

Building on the findings and discussion above, the service team put forward several recommendations for sustaining the social interaction strengthening program in Bantarkawung Village and in other villages with similar characteristics. First, a dedicated resident working group should be established to maintain the continuity of community forums and mutual-cooperation schedules, with the trained local facilitators serving as its main drivers. Second, village governments are advised to incorporate the community forum into the more formal village deliberation mechanism, so that its continued existence does not depend solely on individual initiative.

Third, schemes should be developed to involve residents who work outside the village, for example by scheduling activities on weekends or during homecoming periods, and by using digital communication groups to keep them connected with village affairs. Fourth, periodic evaluation of participation levels and the quality of resident interaction should be carried out — every six months, for instance — so that the development of social cohesion can be tracked in a measurable way and follow-up programs can be adapted to residents' needs.

A final recommendation concerns the importance of replicating this facilitator-based assistance model in other villages across Brebes Regency facing similar challenges. With adjustments for local social and cultural context, this model has the potential to become a standard strategy for community-based social cohesion programs at both the sub-district and regency levels.

Beyond the role of youth as local facilitators, the involvement of PKK members was another important pillar underpinning the success of the social interaction assistance program in Bantarkawung Village. As a women's institution well established at the hamlet level, the PKK commands a fairly extensive communication network among residents, particularly within households and daily social activities, so that information about community forum schedules and mutual-cooperation activities could circulate more effectively through this channel.

This finding is consistent with research showing that the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) plays a significant role in building women's capacity and participation at the village level, both through skills development and by strengthening women's role as drivers of community

activity (Mulyati & Suhaety, 2021). In Bantarkawung Village, a similar role was evident in the active involvement of PKK members in the focus group discussions and training sessions held, which in turn strengthened informal communication networks among residents outside the village government's official channels.

The success of the social interaction assistance program can thus not be separated from cross-institutional collaboration — between the youth group acting as technical facilitators and the women's group acting as drivers of household-based communication. Combining these two institutions broadened the program's reach while also strengthening its sustainability, since it engaged a wider cross-section of the village's social fabric.

Strengthening social interaction and community harmony, the central focus of this assistance program, is also relevant to the Village Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs Desa) agenda, particularly the goals of a peaceful and just village and of dynamic village institutions with adaptive local culture. Both goals treat social cohesion and resident participation as essential prerequisites for successful village development overall, so the outcomes achieved in Bantarkawung Village can be seen as a concrete contribution toward the Village SDGs.

Experience from other villages, however, shows that community participation in Village SDGs programs often encounters constraints similar to those found in this assistance program — limited resident understanding, minimal involvement of young people, and dependence on a small number of driving actors such as neighborhood-unit officials (Kurniawan & Artisa, 2023). This recurring pattern of constraints confirms that the problem of resident participation is not merely technical but closely tied to the quality of social interaction and mutual trust among residents, which was the central focus of the Bantarkawung assistance program.

On this basis, strengthening social interaction through a participatory approach, as carried out in this program, can be positioned as the social foundation underlying the success of other sustainable development programs at the village level, including the Village SDGs. Without adequate social capital and cohesion, formal development programs risk reaching only a limited segment of the community, as seen in cases of low resident engagement in Village SDGs implementation elsewhere.

4.8 A Community-Based Strategy for Sustained Assistance

The sustainability of what has been achieved through the social interaction assistance program in Bantarkawung Village ultimately depends on how far this community-based strategy can be institutionalized independently by local residents. Experience from community mentoring programs in other fields shows that empowering local cadres alongside continued mentoring can improve the effectiveness and long-term durability of their roles, although such efforts still face constraints in the form of limited support and recognition that can affect cadres' motivation (Rizal & Tandos, 2023).

The parallel between these findings and the results in Bantarkawung Village suggests that the presence of local facilitators alone is not sufficient to guarantee a program's sustainability, unless accompanied by a mechanism of continued support from the village government and related institutions. Strengthening local facilitators' capacity therefore needs to go hand in hand with a clear system of recognition and follow-up mentoring, so that their motivation to drive resident social interaction remains intact once this community service program has concluded.

Conclusion

The social interaction assistance program in Bantarkawung Village was designed to revitalize patterns of communication and communal life that had weakened amid social change and rising personal workloads. Through a Participatory Action Research approach encompassing observation, focus group discussions, facilitator training, and the strengthening of mutual cooperation, the program succeeded in raising resident participation in shared activities and reviving a community forum that had previously fallen dormant.

The results show a marked increase in mutual-cooperation participation and community forum attendance, indicating a renewed sense of trust and concern among residents. This success was underpinned by the village government's legitimacy, the active role of youth as local facilitators, and the fit between the participatory approach and the character of this agrarian community, while residents' limited availability due to outside work and a shift toward digital communication remain challenges that call for ongoing attention.

These findings offer a practical contribution in the form of a facilitator-based assistance model that can be replicated in other villages with similar social characteristics, while also reinforcing the argument that social capital is a resource that can be revitalized through appropriate participatory intervention. Sustaining these outcomes going forward is recommended to rest on establishing a resident working group, integrating the community forum into a more formal village deliberation mechanism, developing schemes to involve residents who work outside the village, using digital media as a complement to face-to-face forums, and conducting periodic evaluation of participation.

A limitation of this program lies in its short duration; further research or community service is therefore recommended to examine the program's sustainability over a longer period and to measure its impact on social cohesion indicators more precisely. Taken together, the program affirms the importance of participatory social interaction assistance as a strategy for preserving rural community harmony amid ongoing social change, with the local-facilitator model holding potential for replication in other villages across Brebes Regency facing similar challenges.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Village Government of Bantarkawung, Bantarkawung Sub-district, Brebes Regency, for its support and permission to carry out this community service activity. Thanks are also extended to the community leaders, PKK administrators, and members of the youth organization of Bantarkawung Village, who took an active part throughout the program. The authors further express their appreciation to the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Brebes for its funding support and administrative facilitation, as well as to all students who assisted with the activity in the field. Finally, thanks are due to family members and colleagues for the moral support given throughout this community service process.

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