

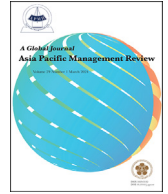
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# Does interconnectivity matter? An integration model of agro-tourism development

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to formulate an agro-tourism management model, with a focal point on community participation in the establishment of sustainable tourism regions. This is achieved through the integration of diverse components, utilizing a grounded theory approach to explore and evolve the notion of sustainable agribusiness management. Data were garnered through on-site observations and semi-structured interviews involving 17 participants, encompassing government officials, farmers, traders, and enterprise proprietors. The study findings elucidate the substantial community engagement in upholding the sustainability of agro-tourism through the creation of marketing innovations, stimulation of entrepreneurial endeavours, and establishment of networks. Integrated collaboration amongst pivotal stakeholders, including the government, universities, business entities, and farmers, serves as the catalyst for area development. We present a management model designed to maximise resources, thereby optimising the advancement of sustainable agro-tourism. The local government assumes a significant role in assisting the development of agro-tourism zones through the provision of training aid and infrastructure enhancement. This research has formulated a conceptual framework underpinning the expansion of sustainable agro-tourism. The study underscores how an interlinked ecosystem can facilitate a community-driven integrated strategy for agro-tourism management. While this inquiry focuses on a single case study, the findings underscore the necessity of an integrated network strategy encompassing all stakeholders to harmonise tourism advancement whilst preserving the sustainability and authenticity of the region. Marketers have the capacity to devise tactics for augmenting tourism by identifying the distinctiveness of particular locales, thereby enhancing the economic, societal, and cultural potentials of agro-tourism. For governmental entities, comprehending the latent potential of agro-tourism while acknowledging the significance of community sustainability remains of paramount importance.

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## 1. Introduction

Agro-tourism, as a variant of rural tourism, not only generates novel revenue streams for local enterprises but also affords local residents the opportunity to engage in safeguarding indigenous resources and culture (Quaranta et al., 2016; Tolstad, 2014). Indeed, according to Nelson (1994), community access to the management

and development of resources constitutes a pivotal facet of sustainable tourism. The challenge facing agro-tourism lies in effectively harmonising the expectations of tourists who are eager to immerse themselves in the cultural legacy of the region (Sidali et al., 2015) with the imperative of sustainable resource management. The triumph of sustainable agro-tourism hinges on the community's willingness to respond to consumer demand through innovative approaches, simultaneously augmenting their comprehension of the significance of sustainable business practices (Grybovych & Hafermann, 2010) and circumventing what Winter (2003) denoted as 'defensive localism'. The systemic character of sustainable tourism development is enshrined within Latip et al.'s

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(2015) conceptualisation of the three pillars: environment, economy, and socio-culture. Consequently, the pursuit of sustainability necessitates the comprehensive consideration of all these pillars when formulating an agro-tourism management strategy, with the aim of mitigating environmental harm and precluding unnecessary exploitation of the local community's culture (Sumantra et al., 2017).

The agricultural expanse in Bojonegoro embodies a rural community whose principal income stems from star fruit cultivation, bolstered by an emerging agro-tourism sector (See Fig. 1). Situated within Ngeringinrejo Village, Kalitidu District, Bojonegoro Regency, East Java, this locale comprises an array of rural settlements characterized by a modest population density of approximately 3000 inhabitants. Encompassing a land area of around 19.3 ha, this terrain is dedicated to star fruit cultivation, serving as a means of livelihood for the local populace. The region's allure, coupled with its resident demographic, attracts visitors with an inclination for rural tourism, as well as those yearning for respite from the

confines of densely populated urban centres (Lane, 1994). In alignment with the broader Indonesian context, agriculture stands as the predominant vocation within this area (Rahman et al., 2023). Existing as an agrarian enclave steeped in traditional non-urban and non-industrial economies, it offers a counterpoint and an escape from the industrialized landscapes tourists may be more accustomed to.

Positioned 15 km to the west of its nearest urban hub, Bojonegoro, the village sustains a tightly-knit communal fabric, wherein time-honoured cultural norms and values are collectively upheld. Given the prevalence of farming as the primary occupation, the architectural landscape is notably sparse, fostering a close proximity to nature. Farmsteads are proximate to the cultivated fields, supplemented by rustic resting huts that also serve as platforms for vending fresh star fruit, thereby affording tourists the opportunity to relish this local delicacy within the agro-tourism milieu.

The evolution of the star fruit industry and the emergence of agro-tourism were largely fortuitous in nature. Initially, the village

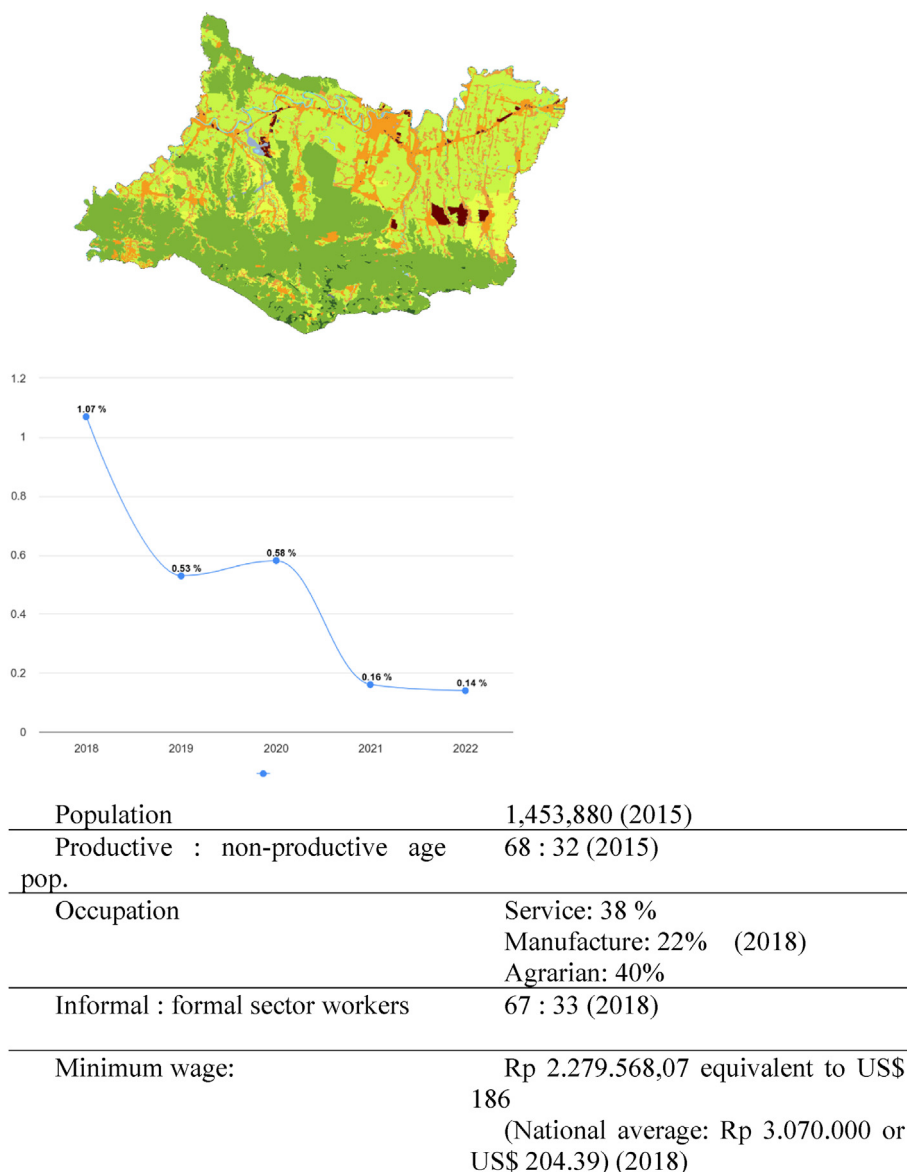


Fig. 1. Bojonegoro Regency Snapshot (middle: population growth). Sources: <http://sipetarung.bojonegorokab.go.id/>; <https://bojonegorokab.bps.go.id/>; <https://bojonegorokab.go.id/>; <https://data.bojonegorokab.go.id/>

enjoyed an ample expanse of arable land primarily dedicated to rice cultivation. However, this trajectory took an unforeseen turn as the area confronted recurrent inundation stemming from the nearby river, leading to the failure of rice harvests. In response, farmers shifted their focus to staple crops like corn, only to encounter arid soil conditions that once again resulted in crop failure. Amidst this backdrop of challenges, the star fruit tree displayed remarkable resilience, flourishing along the banks of the Bengawan River, and soon establishing itself as the preeminent agricultural produce of the region. The cultivation, harvesting, and processing of star fruit engaged the entire community, with even farmers' spouses contributing by crafting value-added items for sale, encompassing condiments like sambal (chilli sauce), crisps, and confections. This multi-faceted success not only brought economic prosperity but also heightened the region's visibility.

The advancement of agro-tourism necessitates the engagement of numerous stakeholders, coupled with a thorough comprehension of how their interactions synergistically contribute. To illustrate, Suardana et al. (2020) underscore the significance of community institutions and empowerment in upholding the tenets of sustainable tourism. From a policy standpoint, Winter (2003) identified the dearth of infrastructure development and governmental backing as primary impediments to the establishment of a sustainable agro-tourism enterprise. Undoubtedly, the government occupies a pivotal role in establishing a conducive milieu, characterized by a comprehensive strategy that encompasses the nurturing of entrepreneurial capacities within local communities (Stanovcic et al., 2018).

Henceforth, utilizing the starfruit agricultural expanse in Bojonegoro as an illustrative case study, the primary objective of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it seeks to scrutinize the challenges entailed in the transition towards an integrated agro-tourism management system. Secondly, it aspires to cultivate an in-depth comprehension of how the region redefined its identity, infusing sustainability into its overarching business framework. Lastly, it endeavours to furnish a conceptual framework that delineates the intricate interplay of the local ecosystem and underscores the paramount role of community involvement in the evolution of a sustainable agro-tourism locale.

With these aims firmly entrenched, the research hinges upon the exploration of the following inquiries.

1. What constituents constitute the agro-tourism ecosystem, and in what manner do they exert influence upon the maturation of rural agro-tourism development?
2. How is an integrated, sustainable agro-tourism model forged, one that harmoniously amalgamates all essential components while nurturing their cohesive interrelationships?

## 2. Literature review

Sustainable development is defined as the fulfilment of contemporary needs while safeguarding the capacity of future generations to meet their own requisites (WCED, 1987, p. 247). Business organisations adhering to the concept of sustainable development strive to harmonise the creation of economic, social, and environmental value (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Weissbrod & Bocken, 2016), with the ultimate aim of optimising business performance (Luan et al., 2016).

The tourism sector stands as one of the most substantial economic spheres and serves as a primary impetus for global economic growth (Goodwin & Chaudhary, 2017). Sumantra et al. (2017) posit that the evolution of agro-tourism can be realised through the identification of competitive advantages rooted in distinctive

features, whether they manifest as unique local flora or fauna; the production of value-added goods crafted from regional resources, thus ascending the value chain; the amplification of regional cultural distinctiveness; and the promotion of captivating scenic landscapes and indigenous wildlife.

In line with Latip et al. (2015), the foundation of sustainable tourism development rests upon three pivotal pillars: environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. It remains of paramount importance, however, to preserve this equilibrium whilst concurrently establishing essential hospitality provisions for tourists. Torres (2003) explored the potential synergy between tourism and agricultural advancement, investigating the feasibility of supplying hotels in the Cancun region with local produce. Regrettably, the envisaged interconnections between tourism, hospitality, and local agriculture failed to materialise, stymied by concerns surrounding the quality of regionally sourced food. This instance serves to underscore the intricate challenge of reconciling these pillars whilst forging linkages that amplify agro-tourism, accruing benefits for all stakeholders. Furthermore, the trajectory of tourism development must be carefully navigated to minimize environmental degradation, amplify economic progress, and preclude undue exploitation (Sumantra et al., 2017), as well as the commercialisation of indigenous cultures (Deloria, 1969).

The establishment of a sustainable tourism industry, as postulated by France (1997), mandates a harmonious convergence of ecological preservation, harmonious community engagement, and the fulfilment of tourist contentment. The pursuit of sustainable tourism unfurls through the prudent utilization of environmental assets, thereby guaranteeing long-term viability that bestows equitable socio-economic gains upon all stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on local communities, whilst simultaneously safeguarding and augmenting tourist satisfaction (Sumantra et al., 2017).

Additionally, Suardana et al. (2020) formulated a model to reinforce community institutions during the evolution of community-based agro-tourism villages. The enhancement of institutional prowess is achieved through heightened coordination, interaction, enforcement of regulations, and collaboration amongst local government bodies, village officials, and the local populace. Furthermore, the model for community empowerment in the agro-tourism village's development must focus on aspects of human resources, entailing the augmentation of communal knowledge, which in turn augments the value of tourism offerings and attractions (Suardana et al., 2020). This holds particular significance within the Indonesian context, as village-owned enterprises are perceived as pivotal to the nation's developmental trajectory (Siskawati et al., 2022).

The principal hurdle in fostering rural agro-tourism resides in the level of awareness and engagement among the local residents. Stanovčić et al. (2018) unearthed from their investigation in Montenegro that the entrepreneurial culture is at best nascent or constrained, accompanied by a limited grasp of the significance of hospitality—an aspect Winter (2003) delineated as “defensive localism.” Furthermore, issues of underinvestment, underdeveloped infrastructure, and inadequate governmental backing emerged as pivotal impediments to the establishment of a prosperous and sustainable agro-tourism enterprise. Stanovčić et al. (2018) contended that governments ought to establish a supportive and comprehensive strategy, empowering farmers through incentives, training, and support, thereby unlocking their entrepreneurial potential. Quaranta et al. (2016) put forth the notion of reducing the gap between production and consumption, targeting consumers who gravitate towards the authenticity of traditional produce. Nonetheless, they also underscore the imperative of establishing a coherent synergy between the “supply and

demand for local products and services,” necessitating enhanced cohesion between rural and urban sectors, drawing upon an array of stakeholders to foster social capital within the rural community. Moreover, agro-tourism stands poised to elevate the quality of life by generating employment opportunities, enhancing social and economic prospects, thereby contributing to the establishment of a sustainable multifunctional rural development (Wyporska & Mosiej, 2010).

Evgrafova et al. (2020) have highlighted the pertinence of agro-tourism development in regions grappling with low socio-economic progress in rural areas. The continuous outmigration of populations from villages, coupled with the constraints faced by small and medium enterprises striving to modernise or collaborate for diversified engagements, further accentuates the impetus for such development. Geographical isolation of interior rural areas from major centres, along with the modest advancement of organised domestic tourism and the demand for affordable holiday options, collectively shape the backdrop against which agro-tourism's significance is underscored. Consequently, Evgrafova et al. (2020) posit that agro-tourism development should not be confined to a singular model; rather, it must meticulously account for the distinctiveness and multifaceted conditions prevailing in each locale, contingent upon specific objectives. The pursuit of agro-tourism development encompasses an array of strategies, including the establishment of regional agro-tourism networks, the restoration of socio-cultural settings and historical settlements, the creation of purpose-built agro-tourism facilities, and the cultivation of agricultural parks. Meanwhile, an inquiry by Budiassa and Ambarwati (2014) reveals that the progress of community-based agro-tourism is hindered by various factors. These include the limited acumen of villagers in the realm of agro-tourism, budget constraints in furnishing more standardised agro-tourism amenities, inadequate promotional efforts, and a scarcity of expansive agro-tourism zones.

Bramwell (2015) elucidates four distinct perspectives for comprehending sustainable tourism: political ecology, mobilities, transitioning pathways, and behavioural and systemic shifts in tourist travel. Political ecology delves into the intricate interplay between society and nature, contending that a sense of conscientiousness among the populace is indispensable to the preservation of the environment. This necessitates a symbiotic relationship wherein social mechanisms of control over natural resources are upheld, often enforced through governmental regulations aimed at nature conservation. The concept of mobilities unravels the enigma behind successfully transformed and revitalised tourism destinations. This transformation is fuelled by heightened mobility of both people and capital, while simultaneously necessitating the delineation of a distinctive regional identity rooted in traditional facets. This, in turn, acts as a magnet for tourists and fosters local business development, thereby shaping the trajectory of the locale. Transition pathways delve into the nuanced question of whether tourist travel adheres to established paths or possesses the potential to forge new trajectories. This concept is an analytical tool for comprehending shifts and continuities within societal paradigms concerning tourist trends. These changes can manifest in technological and cultural shifts that propel alternative paradigms of tourism and lifestyles. In alignment with this, the realm of behavioural and systemic changes for sustainable tourist travel delves into strategies for promoting sustainability. Such strategies necessitate an enhanced comprehension of tourist psychology and its profound influence on choices and behaviour.

Adedoyin et al. (2022) underscore the pivotal role of government and institutional frameworks in bolstering the macro-environment of tourism. Tecel et al.'s (2020) investigation spanning 14 Mediterranean nations reveals that an upsurge in tourism

volume precedes a substantial increase in real income, and vice versa. However, an alternate study probing the nexus between tourism and poverty in Latin America demonstrates that tourism can exacerbate poverty in countries beset by high levels of economic inequality (Dossou, Ndomandji Kambaye, Bekun, & Eoulam, 2023). Thus, beyond ensuring the vitality of the tourism ecosystem, a pressing imperative arises to incorporate grassroots community engagement to avert the inadvertent repercussions of tourism, such as the exacerbation of inequality, as highlighted by Dossou et al. (2023).

Moreover, Bramwell (2015) asserts that sustainable tourism demands additional substantiation through empirical studies, illustrating how these four perspectives can be harmoniously amalgamated in a more systematic fashion to cultivate sustainable tourism. Research encompassing the realm of sustainable tourism assumes paramount significance, particularly in the run-up to 2030, wherein the discourse is steeped in the developmental context of SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) (Bramwell et al., 2016). A prior scholarly exploration has formulated a conceptual framework delineating integrated rural tourism, entailing the interweaving of networks to jointly harness resources. This conceptualisation underscores that integrated rural tourism necessitates collaborative networking involving both local and external stakeholders, thereby facilitating the synergistic mobilisation of resources for the augmentation of rural communities' assets and capabilities. However, this investigation also unveils the intricate nature of network development in rural tourism, underpinned by a resource that posits the requirement for a more comprehensive strategy and an expansive marketing policy to underpin the success of integrated rural tourism (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008).

### 3. Research methods

This study employed grounded theory, adhering to the fundamental tenets delineated by Strauss and Corbin (1998). While grounded theory methodology was adopted, a concurrent literature review was conducted to discern gaps in existing research pertaining to sustainable management and agro-tourism. Through the application of grounded theory techniques (Gibson & Hartman, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a profound comprehension of the intricate phenomena enveloping agro-tourism development in Bojonegoro was meticulously constructed. Furthermore, it assumes significance to unveil the interplay of variables and the engagement of stakeholders within the emerging network, a facet that crystallizes during deliberations pertaining to the research inquiries (Eisenhardt, 1989; Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 2003).

The initial sampling was purposive, aimed at encompassing diverse perspectives concerning agro-tourism management and the ecosystem. The subsequent in-depth interviews engaged the local community, comprising farmers, traders, SME owners, and local government officials. This strategic selection enabled the acquisition of micro-level insights, illuminating the intricate and multifaceted dynamics intrinsic to rural-based agro-tourism. The inclusion of local government officials, on the other hand, facilitated the attainment of macro-level viewpoints encompassing the overarching value chain of the enterprise and pertinent policy orientations.

The methodology adopted for data collection and analysis was grounded theory. Grounded theory is harnessed to craft theory from comprehensive data, systematically garnered in the field and meticulously analysed throughout the research journey (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory stage commences with data collection, whereby overarching themes are identified, with provisions for adapting the discussion guide to explore intriguing or pioneering concepts that warrant further examination. The

grounded theory approach empowers researchers to seamlessly navigate between the data and existing literature as they traverse back and forth between fieldwork and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Notably, this methodology, particularly tailored for this study, facilitates exploratory research, enabling profound insights into the realm of sustainable management within agro-tourism.

Data collection encompassed in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. Prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, these interviews were conducted face-to-face at the agro-tourism sites, coupled with observational elements. These face-to-face sessions spanned one to 2 h. Subsequent interviews were conducted telephonically due to pandemic restrictions, with meticulous recordings undertaken. Field observations also played a pivotal role, providing a holistic portrayal of the agro-tourism landscape, encapsulating both physical attributes and interactions with local communities, farmers, and traders. Thoughtfully curated discussion guides were devised to explore myriad facets of agro-tourism management. The interview questions were particularly directed towards delineating the diversification of star fruit processed products, unraveling the contours of the marketing network, and elucidating the role of governmental intervention in agro-tourism development. The overarching objective remains the construction of a robust theoretical framework that comprehensively expounds upon the sustainable development paradigm within agro-tourism.

In-depth interviews were conducted over a span of two months in 2020, commencing before the COVID-19 pandemic in February through face-to-face interactions, and subsequently adapting to pandemic circumstances in Indonesia around March, necessitating telephone interviews. Employing a theoretical sampling approach, researchers meticulously gathered and analysed data, concurrently determining the subsequent participants to be enlisted as the emergent theory dictated (Glaser, 2014a). Although theoretical saturation was discerned following the completion of 12 interviews, the interviewing process extended to the 17th respondent to comprehensively ensure the encapsulation of all nuances and to ascertain that no additional conceptual insights remained unexplored (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Telephone interviews spanned durations of one to 2 h. Memo notes assumed a pivotal role, serving as a vital tool in pinpointing burgeoning concepts and engendering theoretical insights (Glaser, 2014b). Following the interviews, meticulous transcription and translation into English were undertaken. The participants encompassed a selection that resonated with characteristics encapsulating various facets germane to agro-tourism management (refer to Table 1 for respondent profiles).

**Table 1**  
Respondent profile.

Resp.	Occupation	Gender	Age
1	Farmer	Male	40
2	Farmer	Male	45
3	Government Officer	Male	43
4	Government Officer	Male	42
5	SME's Owner	Female	46
6	SME's Owner	Female	41
7	SME's Owner	Female	46
8	SME's Owner	Female	40
9	SME's Owner	Female	46
10	Farmer	Male	46
11	Farmer	Male	50
12	Farmer	Male	51
13	Trader	Female	51
14	Government Officer	Male	49
15	Government Officer	Male	48
16	Trader	Male	35
17	Government Officer	Male	40

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Starfruit agro-tourism

The conversion of the starfruit agricultural expanse into a tourism village, an agro-tourist locale in Bojonegoro, captivates researchers poised to decipher the data and articulate a model for agro-tourism management grounded in community empowerment. The historical trajectory of agro-tourism's genesis in Bojonegoro underscores the pivotal role assumed by the community in effecting a transformative shift, reshaping the purpose and perception of the riverbank vicinity into a thriving tourist enclave.

If I'm not mistaken, it was during the 1980s, around 1982 to 1985, correct? During that period, the majority of farmers were primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture. This trend had its origins since the era of Pak Harto (President Suharto), where farmer groups were nurtured, with a predominant focus on cultivating essential crops such as rice, corn, and subsequently expanding to include various other crops (Palawija) (Farmer/Male/40)

Currently, the primary cultivation revolves around cassava, complemented by an array of supplementary vegetable crops, albeit cassava remains the chief crop in cultivation (Farmer/Male/45).

Ownership of the starfruit trees varies among individuals, with nearly all residents in the village engaged in starfruit cultivation. The extensive garden hosts sizable starfruit trees, collectively owned by 80 farmers, thereby cementing starfruit's status as a cornerstone product and an emblem of the Bojonegoro region. Within this locale, visitors are afforded the privilege of handpicking starfruit and savouring their succulent taste. Notably, the starfruit assortment cultivated here includes the starfruit honey variety, distinguished by its enhanced sweetness and larger proportions compared to the standard variant. Beyond the realm of freshly plucked starfruit, visitors also have the opportunity to relish a diverse array of processed souvenirs crafted from this tropical fruit.

Originally situated along the banks of the Bengawan Solo river, the inception of starfruit agro-tourism was anchored in this locale. However, a series of crop failures prompted community leaders in Ngringinrejo Village, in collaboration with Agricultural Officers, to launch an initiative focused on starfruit cultivation. In 1984, upon learning of starfruit cultivation in the Siwalan Village of Tuban, farmer figures from the region transitioned their efforts towards cultivating starfruit plants on their land. Presently, the ranks of starfruit farmers stand at 104. t.

Yes, that was in the earlier period, during the 1980s, referring to the farmer groups. Indeed, the focus shifted towards starfruit farming. In cases where rice or cassava fields were distant, this trend persisted even since the colonial era. The circumstances here were somewhat challenging, isn't that so, sir? Whether it's rice or cassava, aside from the soil quality, the geographical conditions played a significant role. Throughout generations, there has been a heavy reliance on the rainy season, particularly for vegetable cultivation. I took the initiative to venture into starfruit cultivation for the first time, and the outcomes were notably more favourable. It turned out to be a beneficial endeavour for farmers. Within a span of less than five years, an increasing number of fellow farmers began transitioning to starfruit cultivation. Hence, one could infer that the shift from cultivating crops preceding starfruit to starfruit itself transpired around those years, approximately between 1980 and 1985. It

was just prior to the onset of the 1990s, and I distinctly recall that period (Farmer/Male/40).

Ngringinrejo Village has been designated as an agro-tourism hub for starfruit within Bojonegoro Regency. In the expanse of the starfruit orchard, a total of 9,604 trees have been meticulously cultivated. To enhance the allure for tourists visiting Ngringinrejo Village's Belimbing Agro-tourism, various agro-tourism administrators alongside the local village government undertake promotional initiatives, including hosting events such as the 2014 Starfruit Festival at the agro-tourism site.

Regarding the farmers, yes, that pertains to an earlier phase. The bulk of starfruit farmers encompassed both landowners themselves and those engaged as garden cultivators, colloquially referred to as farm labourers. Although their numbers were not substantial, a portion of them comprised landowners who directly managed the cultivation process (Government Officer/Male/43)

That period marked the onset of heightened activity in starfruit agro-tourism, correct. During that time, following the transition to starfruit cultivation and the subsequent bountiful outcomes, our village garnered attention from the Regional Government. The genesis of this support could be traced back to the Agricultural Service, which initially extended aid in the form of fungicide for plant disease eradication, if I recall correctly. Furthermore, it was during this phase that the notion of the starfruit festival was first initiated

Endeavors to safeguard the agricultural expanse persist despite its transformation into a prominent attraction for tourists. This implies a profound grasp within the community of the significance entailed in both conserving and enhancing indigenous resources, with the ultimate aim of nurturing a sustainable, productive commodity capable of luring tourists. A multitude of stakeholders, encompassing the local government among others, have been actively engaged in fostering the evolution of this territory into a well-established agro-tourism destination.

#### 4.2. Innovation and entrepreneurial

Starfruit is typically consumed in its natural state, owing to its delightful sweetness and abundant water content. Additionally, starfruit boasts a considerable fibre content. The diverse array of advantages inherent in starfruit offers a fertile ground for the development of processed goods. Within the domain of agro-tourism, an assortment of starfruit-derived processed items has been crafted, encompassing syrup, cakes, and crisps.

At present, I am primarily engaged in crafting starfruit syrup, while other women within the group create an assortment of products such as crepes, pastries, eggrolls, and a diverse range of crisps. In the past, I also ventured into cake production, yet the starfruit syrup seems to be particularly resonant, thus my focus remains steadfast on starfruit-based endeavours (SME's Owner/Female/46)

In the future, you could perhaps inquire with the women's collective, most of whom are tending to the gardens alongside their spouses. This group also delves into the creation of starfruit crackers, starfruit cakes, and cookies. Mrs. Fufah and a number of women within the group contribute to the production. Starfruit syrup and starfruit juice are among their noteworthy offerings (SME's Owner/Female/38)

The assortment extends to various amalgamations. For instance, cakes or jams may incorporate strawberries, milk, and assorted fruits; however, starfruit undeniably takes centre stage. When it comes to eggrolls, the starfruit variation remains emblematic of market sales (SME's Owner/Woman/41)

The readiness of the local populace to engage in harnessing the potential of converting fresh starfruit into an array of distinct products becomes evident, reflecting the community's collective pursuit of novel avenues for innovation. This active involvement spans beyond the realm of mere farmers, encompassing housewives and business entities alike. This serves to underscore that starfruit cultivation stands as a reservoir with the capacity to generate affluence while concurrently amplifying prospects for employment. Entrepreneurial figures within the community further safeguard their inventive contributions by procuring patents and trademarks for their respective offerings.

Regarding the trademark, we obtained a certificate from the Trade Office around 2010 or 2011, if my memory serves me correctly. Our IRT (Indonesian Traditional Product) registration also encompasses a series of identifications, granted by the BPOM (National Agency of Drug and Food Control), shared among the group of women. One of these registrations pertains to my syrup. Mr. Syafii initiated the submission for an actual Patent in 2017. However, it appears that the public disclosure of this patent has yet to materialise, and the timeline remains uncertain. If, as he suggests, it is indeed a protracted process, one wonders about the criteria governing such delays in the selection process for the patent. In essence, the application was originally initiated around 2010–11. The underlying objective revolves around fortifying our endeavours with a brand that can facilitate sales. Moreover, the establishment of a brand would empower us to market our product with heightened autonomy (SME's Owner/Woman/46)

The starfruit agro-tourism community has cultivated a discerning appreciation for the significance of packaging and the refinement of their marketing strategies. This discernment is evident in their conception of a trademark for the starfruit syrup packaging. Beyond its conventional role as a protective casing, packaging assumes the additional function of facilitating convenient product transport. Furthermore, packaging intertwines with aesthetics, thereby underscoring the pronounced significance of packaging design and hues. The packaging also serves as a conduit for disseminating product information, encompassing details about nutritional constituents as well as optimal storage and consumption practices. By introducing names or brands during the packaging phase, the products acquire a distinctive identity. The presence of effective packaging engenders the capability for extensive distribution, thereby enabling the products to reach far-flung consumers through efficient shipment mechanisms. Belimbing Agro-tourism has elevated its packaging standards by incorporating brands, exemplified by the Matoh syrup branding initiative.

Apologies for any confusion, but my reference was directed towards my own starfruit syrup, wherein I bestowed the moniker "Matoh." Indeed, the process entails heating the concoction until it reaches a boiling point, and it is crucial to allow it to cool naturally before sealing. Furthermore, the efficacy of the process can be influenced by external factors, including the timing of sealing and refrigeration. Consequently, the packaging label provides guidance, advocating for refrigeration, which in turn

affects the syrup's quality and longevity (SME's Owner/Female/46)

The advancement of processed starfruit products persists with government assistance, encompassing the provision of machinery, including a shredder, for chip production.

Yes, indeed, this is executed under the purview of the association, right? Consequently, we can effectively borrow from there. In the past, we acquired a tool for crafting 'sawut,' a derivative product akin to chips made from starfruit skin. We obtained the grinder, albeit incidentally, as I did not personally engage in its operation; therefore, I remain unfamiliar with its use. Nevertheless, it remains a valuable asset, as its potential remains untapped. To illustrate, consider the scenario of starfruit utilization: while syrup and fruit juice often emerge as the primary outputs, the residual remnants of the extracted juice are ingeniously transformed into chips. This showcases the ingenuity fostered through the assistance we received (SME's Owner/Female/40)

The evolution of processed starfruit products has notably impacted the well-being of the community positively. The production of starfruit syrup not only augments income but also stimulates innovation and entrepreneurial ventures, thereby fostering a dual benefit.

Naturally, producing syrup proves to be more lucrative. Perhaps it involves a more extended procedural timeline, doesn't it? Nonetheless, there's an inherent satisfaction for those who opt to sell the fruit, especially if they experience a bountiful harvest. Calculations reveal that our typical production is per batch, but consider this: each bottle is crafted using merely one to one and a half starfruit. To illustrate further, for instance, one kilogram of starfruit—given its relatively modest weight—translates to approximately 2–3 bottles of the previously squeezed starfruit juice. Let's assume it results in 3 bottles per kilogram, valued at 3 times 22 thousand. Supposing that we usually acquire around 5–6 thousand per bottle for most of the fresh fruit. In terms of profitability, the most appealing avenue seems to be processing the chips from the dregs, right? Occasionally, they may not find a ready market, but fortunately, this allows for a more personalised experience (SME's Owner/Female/46).

It can be inferred that the locals' willingness to opt for a more extended process to attain enhanced outcomes and income reflects their cognizance of the appropriate strategy to preserve their resources. The local community has cultivated a progressive mindset that has facilitated the continued growth of this agro-tourism venture.

#### 4.3. Community empowerment

Efforts aimed at enhancing the quality and production capacity of starfruit and its processed derivatives are undertaken through collaboration with various stakeholders, including the Regional Government via the Agriculture and Tourism Office, business entities operating in the agro-tourism sector, and, notably, the farmers themselves.

The first group is Poktan Mekar Sari, right? They oversee the starfruit farmers, boasting about 80 members out of a total exceeding 100 farmers. The absence of some farmers from this group is often attributed to age-related factors; for the older

generation, extensive involvement in such institutions or collectives might be less feasible as they predominantly engage in farming activities. Subsequently, there's the second group, known as Pokdarwis or the Tourism Awareness Group, specifically called Agro Jaya. The membership count here is approximately the same, with a majority being either farmers or individuals responsible for starfruit cultivation areas. Although a few members are affiliated with youth organizations or are active local youths/Male/48).

The starfruit farmers in the same region have also fostered a sense of community, enabling them to collaborate and optimize the potential of their agricultural land and produce. This communal engagement among farmers serves to augment their knowledge, skills, and productivity, functioning as a platform for mutual support. Furthermore, it facilitates the strengthening of cooperative ties among fellow farmers and other relevant stakeholders. This community-driven empowerment translates into active participation from business operators within the agro-tourism sector, who play a pivotal role in land preservation and protection against river erosion, thereby contributing to environmental conservation. One farmer expressed:

Yes, it happened by chance, but subsequently, following the introduction of organic methods by the district government, our orientation shifted towards safer practices with a preference for reduced chemical use. Firstly, the clear advantage lies in its eco-friendliness; secondly, regarding environmental preservation, considering the proximity of our community to the Bengawan River, it holds immense significance. At that time, flood vulnerability was substantial, and this prompted the development of starfruit plantations and mangroves in the area to combat this issue (Farmer/Male 46).

Farmers acknowledge that the starfruit plantation serves as a safeguard against flooding. Therefore, the imperative to minimize detrimental impact on the surrounding environment becomes an indispensable factor that cannot be compromised. Correspondingly, the farmers are actively engaged in upholding the sustainability of this agro-tourism endeavour by striving to devise an organic pest extermination method and eschewing the use of chemicals that could potentially pose hazards to both the plantation and its environs.

Consequently, we produce organic remedies, Sir. This, indeed, sets us apart. In point of fact, we were the first to create these remedies right here in the community. For instance, the pesticide is concocted from sugarcane extracts, locally known as 'leri' soaking water. This natural solution effectively combats fungal growth on starfruit stems and leaves, entirely devoid of chemical constituents. Furthermore, we have succeeded in crafting fermented fertilisers derived from starfruit itself, eliminating the need for any synthetic additives. Our emphasis on organic methods has earned us a reputation for producing renowned organic starfruit. As for processed products like cakes and syrup, while I lack technical expertise, the foundational components are unquestionably organic (Farmer/Male /50).

The facet of sustainability has emerged as a pivotal concern in the evolution of this agro-tourism venture. The adoption of organic fertilisers and the implementation of natural pest control strategies underscore the resolute commitment of the farmers and affiliated stakeholders to champion environmental sustainability. The deliberate choice to embrace eco-friendly practices through

organic treatments has garnered acclaim for yielding products of superior quality. The element of sustainability assumes a paramount role in the advancement of agro-tourism founded upon community empowerment.

#### 4.4. Expansion of the marketing network

The augmentation of sales volume was orchestrated through an expansion of the marketing network. Initially, knowledge about star fruit propagated solely through oral communication. Its dissemination gained momentum with traders commencing the vending of starfruit products along interconnecting roads between cities. The ambit of starfruit cultivation, underpinning these broader marketing endeavours, could be further broadened via participation in fruit fairs and exhibitions.

We have already channelled a portion of our produce to market stalls, and there are also souvenir boutiques lining the roadside, Sir. Some of these establishments enjoy heightened demand in our vicinity (Farmer/Male/51).

Indeed, starfruit is vended at these fruit stalls, occasionally presented alongside other starfruit-based delicacies, reflective of the village's starfruit concept. This practice is prevalent in local markets, particularly in Malang, for instance, where we peddle our wares (Trader/Female/51).

Our distinctive identity traces back to the Trade Service, doesn't it? We have earned recognition through avenues such as BPOM (Food and Drug Regulatory Agency), IRT (Home Industry Trademark), and other certification we've procured. Additionally, we've established a presence at trade expos, actively inviting participation in exhibitions of this nature (Government Officer/Male/49).

The genesis of the idea to augment marketing outreach originated with the establishment of this agricultural enclave as a rural tourism hub. This initiative has galvanized diverse entities to proactively contribute to heightening the visibility and eminence of agro-tourism through a multifaceted approach.

Presently, various media outlets, including the local Trans TV in East Java, frequently feature our endeavour. We also disseminate promotional content via YouTube and benefit from the enthusiastic support of students engaged in the KKN (Community Service Program). Furthermore, our efforts gain exposure through broadcasting on ANTV (Government officer/Male/40).

The expansion of marketing networks, facilitated through television broadcasts, proves highly effective in reaching a substantial nationwide audience. The keen interest displayed by various TV stations in featuring the region underscores its untapped potential. Furthermore, both public and state universities have expressed their intent to enhance and cultivate the area, transforming it into a practical learning destination for students engaged in the Community Service Program. This hands-on engagement involves students immersing themselves within the local community for a designated period, addressing indigenous challenges with tangible, implemented solutions.

Indeed, the momentum is palpable. Sales have flourished, and our products have found their way to diverse corners, a testament to our online retail efforts (Trader Male/35).

Expanding marketing efforts into the digital realm is a viable

avenue. The creation of a dedicated website has yielded significant success in enticing tourists. This strategic decision to harness online marketing stems from the dual objective of broadening the market scope for processed goods while concurrently facilitating more streamlined and impactful information dissemination.

#### 4.5. Integration

The evolution of Bojonegoro's starfruit agro-tourism stands as a harmonious synthesis engendered by multiple stakeholders, amplifying the role of the local community, particularly the starfruit cultivators, in safeguarding the environment. Strategically situated along the banks of the Bengawan Solo River, the agro-tourism site serves a dual purpose as a bulwark against river erosion. The transformation of Bojonegoro's starfruit agro-tourism into a rural tourist haven underscores the community's central role. Evidently, public consciousness concerning the Tourism Village Area is evident through the community's unwavering commitment to embodying the seven charms of *Sapta Pesona*. *Sapta Pesona* encapsulates seven fundamental dimensions: safety, orderliness, cleanliness, serenity, aesthetic allure, warmth, and indelibility. Concurrently, starfruit farmers, occupying the pivotal roles in the trajectory of tourist village development, have diligently internalised the imperatives of sustainability. This is manifest in their judicious utilization of organic fertilisers and the application of natural pest control methods.

The Bojonegoro Regency Government has undertaken a range of facilitative initiatives encompassing developmental aid and training programs tailored for starfruit farmers, aimed at bolstering both production and marketing efforts. The augmentation of road infrastructure leading to the agro-tourism precinct has been orchestrated by the Bojonegoro Regency Government, substantially enhancing accessibility to the designated area. The instrumental role of local governance in nurturing the growth of starfruit agro-tourism is evident through diverse training endeavours orchestrated by the Department of Agriculture, with a particular focus on enhancing starfruit cultivation. Concurrently, the Tourism Office assumes a pivotal function in broadening the marketing matrix, orchestrating exhibitions and starfruit-centric festivals to attract tourists. This discovery corroborates the perspective posited by [Adedoyin et al. \(2022\)](#), underlining the pivotal role of governmental agencies in forging a supportive institutional landscape.

The realm of higher education also substantively contributes to the maturation of Bojonegoro's starfruit agro-tourism domain. The development of context-appropriate technologies for farmers and the provision of managerial training for administrators stand as tangible manifestations of support extended to the agro-tourism community. The active engagement of both public and private universities in nurturing agro-tourism underscores the palpable potential for the future evolution of starfruit agro-tourism.

The process of establishing a network holds profound significance in crafting a cohesive rural tourism offering. The development of integrated agro-tourism hinges upon collaborative efforts from diverse stakeholders and comprehensive support across multiple dimensions. A composite framework comprising six pivotal elements contributes to the creation of an integrated and sustainable model: diversification, rural tourist allure, production chain and community empowerment, natural and cultural assets, harmonized locale, and networking (see [Fig. 2](#)).

Primarily, the diversification of processed starfruit derivatives, encompassing syrup, jam, cakes, and crisps, constitutes a pivotal facet of agro-tourism innovation. Encouraging a heightened degree of ingenuity in the processing of agricultural yield is imperative for the enterprising protagonists within the starfruit Ngringinrejo Bojonegoro agro-tourism milieu. As underscored by a participant,



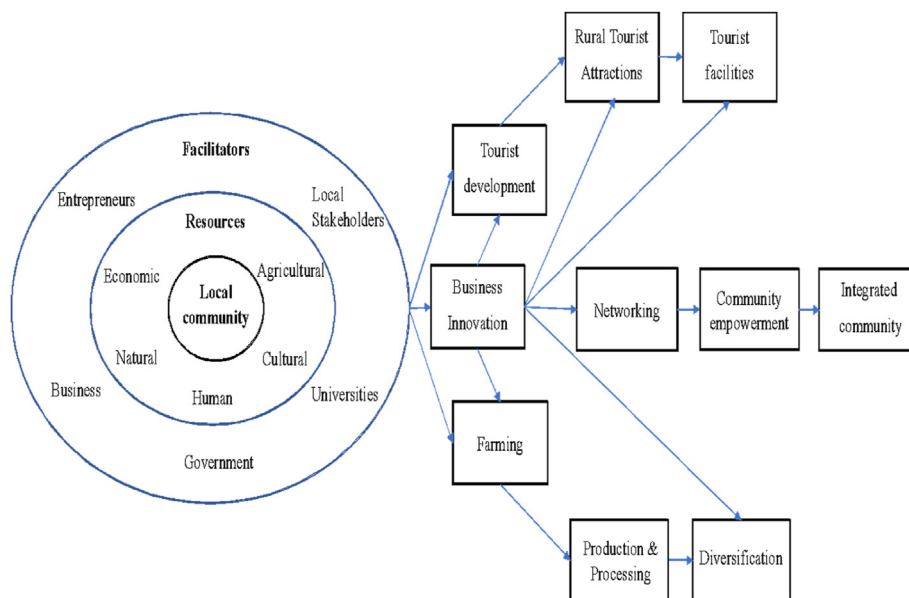


Fig. 2. Integrated and sustainable agro-tourism development model.

'Presently, I am involved in crafting starfruit syrup, although there are women within our ranks who fashion an array of culinary delights, including crepes, cookies, eggrolls, and an assortment of crisps' (SME's Owner/Female/46). Elevating the economic and social capital invested in starfruit agro-tourism is requisite for the augmentation of its appeal, rendering it a more captivating destination through the incorporation of indigenous culinary delicacies and mementos. The pivotal roles of innovation and entrepreneurship bear paramount import in the triumphant realization of agro-tourism aspirations (Budiasa & Ambarwati, 2014; Stanovčić et al., 2018).

Secondly, the allure of rural tourist destinations. The establishment of an enticing tourist site, particularly within rural environs, is profoundly influenced by the ethos and disposition of the surrounding community. The prevailing self-assurance within rural communities is oftentimes subdued, necessitating a transformative process that facilitates a rediscovery of rural existence – an existence that may be perceived as traditional, yet possesses an inherent magnetism for agro-tourism. The local authorities also contribute to this endeavour through orchestrating promotional affairs, as exemplified by the statement, '... there exists a star fruit festival' (Government Officer/Male/48). Notably, the most successful tourism ventures unfurl within communities marked by a pervasive engagement of the populace in the choreography of formulating and administering tourism-centric undertakings (Quaranta et al., 2016).

Thirdly, the production chain and community empowerment assume pivotal roles. The orchestration of agro-tourism management is inextricably intertwined with the production continuum, encompassing the provision of starfruit seeds, fertilisers, pest management, and the standardisation of processed starfruit derivatives. The local populace residing within the ambit of agro-tourism cultivation also share robust social bonds. A participant expounded, 'Poktan Mekar Sari, the pioneering entity, oversees starfruit farmers, boasting an approximate membership of 80 individuals out of a total exceeding 100 farmers. Those not affiliated are predominantly older, perhaps hindered by age from active involvement in organisational or collective pursuits. They primarily recognise themselves as farmers, versed in cultivation. A subsequent group is dubbed Pokdarwis, the Tourism Awareness Group,

namely Agro Jaya, harbouring a membership tally analogous to its precursor. This assembly predominantly comprises farmers and stewards of starfruit acreage, albeit some enlistment from youth bodies or active local youths also occurs' (Government Officer/Male/48). Strengthening the interconnecting community bonds amongst farmers can be augmented through provisions of instruction and training encompassing agricultural practices. Suardana et al. (2020) posited that fortifying socio-economic institutions and fostering community empowerment constitute pivotal endeavours within the remit of sustainable agro-tourism management.

Fourthly, the inherent embrace of natural and cultural riches presides. The ethos of sustainable agro-tourism management hinges upon accentuating the area's distinctiveness, contingent upon the fusion of natural endowments and cultural fabric of its inhabitants (Evgrafova et al., 2020). Encompassing an agriculturally fertile terrain and expanses of arable land, the starfruit Ngringrejo agro-tourism precinct is notably graced by pristine natural vistas. A contributor expounded, '... when the discourse pertains to environmental conservation' (Farmer/Male/46). Additionally, the genteel and hospitable ethos embedded within rural communities stand as invaluable assets germane to the agro-tourism's maturation.

Fifthly, a locational convergence materialises. A salient charm of agro-tourism resides in the distinctiveness of regional circumstances (Evgrafova et al., 2020), which engenders a robust business ecosystem (Joo & Shin, 2018). A farmer articulated, '... the people residing along the banks of the Bengawan Solo river, correct, Sir? Indeed, we are galvanized to safeguard it, as the river epitomises a wellspring that sustains our existence as well' (Farmer/Male/46). The agro-tourism domain, sited proximate to the fringes of the Bengawan Solo River, emerges as a magnetic lure for tourists drawn to its unique positioning. The landscape, characterized by its scenic allure, is ensconced with picture-perfect spots that serve as memorabilia repositories. Within the agro-tourism expanse, a plethora of amenities, from paved thoroughfares to recreational playgrounds for children, augments the experience. Ample shelters beckon visitors to savour freshly harvested starfruit, while meticulously laid paths facilitate safe, hands-on fruit picking experiences directly from the trees.

Sixthly, the underpinning of marketing networks is paramount. Myriad initiatives have been undertaken to augment footfall within this agro-tourism enclave, encompassing digital avenues such as the creation of a dedicated tourist village website. This online platform's inception was a collaborative effort, borne of the synergy between business stakeholders and the local governance apparatus of Bojonegoro Regency. Echoing this sentiment, a government official remarked, '... and then there are those trade expos, correct? We routinely extend invitations to participate in such exhibitions' (Government Officer/Male/49). The progress of agro-tourism inexorably hinges upon the expansion of the regional agro-tourism network, an encompassing enabler that notably encompasses the marketing dimension (Evgrafova et al., 2020; Sumantra et al., 2017). This facet assumes heightened importance in light of the discernment that travellers, amid their decision-making phase, are presented with an array of potential vacation alternatives (Tan & Soon, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

This investigation underscores the pivotal significance of amalgamation and collaboration amongst farmers, business collectives, governmental entities, and academic institutions. The case study substantiates the premise that a confluence of disparate entities can harmoniously coalesce in fostering the evolution of sustainable agro-tourism. The tenets of sustainable agro-tourism administration hinge upon a synthesis of communal contributions and an unrelenting pursuit of innovation. The reinvigoration of rural economies through agro-tourism is steered by the orchestration of intrinsic capabilities and the astute harnessing of extraneous circumstances. The realm of internal administration is animated by a spectrum of endeavours, encompassing the diversification of processed commodities, the expansive proliferation of marketing networks, and the tenacious preservation of the production chain. The capitalization of external conditions, exemplified by the starfruit agro-tourism case, elucidates the eminence of landscape-driven rural tourist attractions, underpinned by the fecundity of agrarian resources skirting the periphery of the Bengawan Solo River. A model of sustainable agro-tourism management must adeptly harmonise the interplay between internal resource capacities, notably those of farmers and local communities, and the art of eliciting external resources. The findings of this study contribute substantively to the extant literature, particularly within the realm of sustainability within agro-tourism development contingent upon community engagement.

### 5.1. Recommendation

The enterprises within the agro-tourism domain predominantly embody the essence of modest Indonesian small businesses (Rahmanto, 2017; Retnawati & Retnaningsih, 2021). While the Bojonegoro agro-tourism has, to a certain extent, fulfilled established sustainable tourism benchmarks (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020), this accomplishment has unfolded somewhat serendipitously. The inception of the agro group was serendipitous, stemming from the communal experimentation of select members who undertook starfruit cultivation. Nevertheless, the resources and facilitators delineated in Fig. 1 outline avenues by which they can methodically nurture their sustainability endeavours.

Hence, the agro-tourism realm possesses the inherent capacity to strategically embrace sustainability measures. Notably, the grounded inquiry attested to a culture within the community that predominantly leans towards collaboration rather than competition. While embarking on sustainability measures often corresponds with escalated costs (Cerciello et al., 2023), the traders

within the community remain relatively insulated from competitive threats, given their shared provenance within the tightly-knit social fabric.

The agro-tourism domain should actively engage the acknowledged facilitators, encompassing governmental bodies, local stakeholders, and universities, thereby capitalising on the propitious network effect that serves as an impetus for innovation. Universities' research yields invaluable insights into optimal sustainable agro-tourism practices, readily applicable to the enterprising community (Suardana et al., 2020). Moreover, both the local government and universities stand poised to furnish assistance in capacity building, especially if the ventures aspire to judiciously scale their operations. In summation, by synergising their efforts, these stakeholders can furnish requisite support, resources, and knowledge transfer, fostering sustainable practices while preserving the ventures' long-term viability.

The trajectory of agro-tourism development is further fortified by the fervour exhibited by the community in constructing agro-tourism-oriented management frameworks, ably supported by an eclectic array of stakeholders spanning the domains of planning, development, management, and expertise in agricultural product processing. Additionally, the ethos of sustainable agro-tourism mandates the strategic reconfiguration of elements within agricultural cultivation, social dynamics, cultural ethos, institutional paradigms, and infusion of governmental and alternative funding sources, all while accentuating marketing strategies and augmenting collaborative networks. It becomes imperative to safeguard and propagate local cultural customs, for they stand as inseparable components of the overarching tapestry of sustainable agricultural evolution.

### 5.2. Limitation and future research

Although the present study adeptly captures the perspectives of diverse stakeholders within the community, it is noteworthy that the demographic composition of the Bojonegoro agro-tourism community predominantly encompasses individuals aged between 40 and 50 years. Consequently, the present inquiry was somewhat constrained in its ability to solicit the viewpoints of the younger generation concerning rural-centric agro-tourism management. Subsequent investigations are recommended to explore initiatives characterized by more pronounced youth participation, thus engendering a more expansive and comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, future research endeavors could spearhead an evaluative appraisal and comprehensive analysis of the operational dynamics inherent to this agro-tourism management model. Concurrently, forthcoming inquiries ought to elucidate strategies aimed at surmounting the challenges germane to fostering symbiotic collaborations amongst governmental bodies vested in shaping public policies, universities functioning as founts of scientific and technological knowledge, local communities serving as pivotal agro-tourism constituents, and indeed cross-sectoral entities harboring vested interests in the realm of sustainable agro-tourism. This multifaceted examination stands poised to yield nuanced insights into the intricate interplay of multifarious stakeholders within the ambit of sustainable agro-tourism.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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