

## Strengthening Rural Smart Economy: Evidence from Village Innovation Programs in Indonesia and South Africa

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### Abstract

The transformation of rural development in Global South countries requires innovative approaches to strengthen local economic resilience and competitiveness amid structural changes, spatial inequalities, and increasingly complex market dynamics. This study aims to analyze the contribution of village innovation initiatives in Indonesia and South Africa in shaping an adaptive, inclusive, and endogenous potential-based rural smart economy. This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design, combining interviews, observations, and documentation. The results show that the Village Innovation Program in Indonesia and various community-based rural innovation initiatives in South Africa empirically contribute to improving economic and digital literacy, diversifying local resource-based products, and strengthening market connectivity through collective mechanisms, cooperatives, and local socio-economic networks. The findings also indicate that a smart rural economy is determined more by social organizational capacity, institutional coordination, and market integration than by the mere adoption of technology. Nevertheless, relatively similar structural challenges remain, particularly those related to infrastructure limitations, unequal access to resources, and uneven institutional capacity. This study concludes that strengthening the rural smart economy through village innovation programs is a strategic path for rural development in the Global South, with the main prerequisites being sustainable policy support, cross-sector integration, and strengthening local institutions to achieve inclusive and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** *Rural Development, Smart Economy, Village Innovation Program.*

### INTRODUCTION

Rural development globally still faces structural challenges in the form of economic inequality, low productivity, limited market access, and weak integration of technology and innovation compared to urban areas. This situation leaves villages vulnerable to global and national economic dynamics, particularly amid the acceleration of digital transformation and changes in the knowledge-based economic structure. Therefore, conventional approaches to rural development are increasingly seen as inadequate to address long-term development challenges (OECD, 2025).

In response to these challenges, the concept of smart rural development has emerged as a development paradigm that places innovation, technology, and social capital as the main drivers of improving the welfare of rural communities. This approach emphasizes that villages have the internal capacity to grow and transform through strengthening the local economy, institutional innovation, and community participation, rather than merely being beneficiaries of development (Visvizi & Lytras, 2018).

Within the framework of smart villages, the smart economy is one of the key pillars that focuses on improving local economic competitiveness through innovation, entrepreneurship, and efficiency in production and distribution systems. The smart economy is understood as a systematic process to create economic added value based on local potential by utilizing knowledge, creativity, and technology adaptively (Giffinger, 2007).

At the implementation level, the rural smart economy encompasses the development of micro and small businesses, the strengthening of village economic institutions such as Village-Owned Enterprise, the use of digital platforms for marketing local products, and the improvement of human resource capacity through entrepreneurship and digital literacy. Various studies show that the integration of innovation and digitalization in the village economy can expand market access and increase community income in a sustainable manner (Philip & Williams, 2019). However, the development of a smart economy in rural areas is not without structural challenges, such as limited digital infrastructure, low local institutional capacity, and suboptimal cross-sector policy support.

Without appropriate intervention, the innovation gap between rural and urban areas has the potential to widen (Salemink et al., 2017).

In Indonesia, rural economic strengthening has gained a strong legal and institutional foundation through decentralization policies and the enactment of the Village Law. This policy positions villages as subjects of development with the authority to design and implement economic development strategies in accordance with local potential and needs (Antlov et al., 2016). The Village Innovation Program serves as a strategic policy instrument to drive economic transformation in villages through innovative, participatory, and practice-based approaches. The program aims to strengthen the capacity of villages to develop local innovations that have a direct impact on improving community welfare.

One of the main pillars of the Village Innovation Program is the smart economy, which aims to increase productivity and economic added value in villages through the development of local businesses, product innovation, and the strengthening of market networks. This pillar is crucial given that the economic structure of villages in Indonesia is still dominated by the primary sector with relatively low added value (Bebbington et al., 2004). The empirical dimensions of strengthening the smart economy through the Village Innovation Program can be observed concretely in North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. This region has great natural and socio-cultural resource potential, but it has not been fully managed optimally as a basis for local economic development. The characteristics of villages in North Konawe reflect the common challenges of rural Indonesia, while also holding great opportunities for the application of locality-based innovation.

One innovative practice that has developed in North Konawe is the establishment of an Innovation House in Laramo Village, Lembo District. This Innovation House serves as a center for village community collaboration in developing creative ideas, strengthening local economic capacity, and promoting the village's leading products. The existence of the Innovation House shows how the Village Innovation Program can be applied to real and contextual socio-economic spaces. The Laramo Village Innovation House not only serves as a production center but also as a multifunctional public space that supports skills training, art performances, community meetings, and

various community empowerment activities. This function shows that the smart economy at the village level does not stand alone, but is integrated with the strengthening of local social and cultural capital.

The products developed at the Innovation House include handicrafts based on the creativity of village women, such as prayer beads, key chains, and woven items, as well as processed local foods such as sago-based bagea, various chips, and herbal drinks made from ginger, corn, and sweet potatoes. This product diversification reflects efforts to increase economic added value based on local resources and traditional knowledge. Practices in Laramo Village show that the development of a smart economy does not always have to start with the application of high technology, but can be based on social innovation, community creativity, and participatory economic management. This approach is in line with the concept of endogenous rural development, which emphasizes the importance of the internal strength of villages as the main engine of development (Ray, 2006).

In the South African rural development context, strengthening the rural smart economy reflects the strategic need to respond to structural inequalities, limited market access, and the economic vulnerability of villages, which are the legacy of history and the spatial dynamics of uneven development. Community-based development approaches, strengthening local institutions, and diversifying rural productive systems are key instruments in building rural economic resilience, as reflected in various rural innovation initiatives such as the development of agricultural cooperatives, strengthening micro-enterprises based on crafts and local tourism, and utilizing contextual and affordable digital technologies. These practices confirm that the smart rural economy in South Africa is determined more by social organizational capacity, coordination between local actors, and integration into formal and informal market networks than by the mere adoption of modern technology.

The similarity in orientation between the Village Innovation Program in Indonesia and South Africa reinforces the argument that strengthening the smart rural economy in the Global South requires a policy framework that is sensitive to the local context, oriented towards community empowerment, and capable of optimizing the endogenous potential of villages. Therefore, the experiences of Indonesia and South Africa are important in demonstrating how

participatory rural innovation based on local institutions can serve as the foundation for policies designed to strengthen rural economies in an adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable manner.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to get a deep, contextual, and holistic understanding of how the smart economy is implemented through the Village Innovation Program at the local level. The case study design was chosen because this study focuses on contemporary phenomena occurring in real-life contexts, where the boundaries between phenomena and contexts cannot be clearly separated. According to Yin (2017), the case study approach is particularly appropriate when the research aims to answer questions of how and why related to complex and contextual development programs, policies, or practices.

The case study in this research is instrumental in nature, where the case is positioned as a means to understand broader issues regarding the strengthening of the rural smart economy. The research location was purposively selected in Laramo Village, Lembo Subdistrict, North Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. This village was selected based on empirical considerations that Laramo Village demonstrated innovative practices in the implementation of the Village Innovation Program, particularly through the establishment of an Innovation House as a collaborative space for creative economic development based on community participation. Thus, Laramo Village serves as a relevant explanatory case to illustrate how the pillars of a smart economy are operationalized in the context of rural villages in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through field observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, which were designed to complement each other and strengthen the validity of the findings through triangulation of methods and data sources. The use of multiple data collection techniques is a key characteristic of qualitative case study research, which aims to capture the complexity of a phenomenon in its entirety (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observations were conducted in a non-participatory manner with limited involvement, whereby researchers were present at the research site to observe economic activities, social interactions, and

institutional dynamics that took place during the implementation of the Village Innovation Program. The focus of the observation included production and marketing activities at the Innovation House, the use of the innovation space as a center for economic and social activities, patterns of interaction between actors, and the level of community participation in the village's creative economic activities. The observation was conducted systematically using observation guidelines and field notes, enabling researchers to capture real practices that are often not fully revealed through other data collection techniques (Spradley, 1980; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of stakeholders regarding the implementation of the Village Innovation Program and the strengthening of the smart economy. Research informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement and knowledge of the program, including village government officials, Innovation House managers, local business actors, village facilitators, and community leaders. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using flexible interview guidelines, allowing for the exploration of issues that arose during the research process. All interviews were recorded (with the consent of the informants) and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In addition to observation and interviews, document analysis was conducted to supplement, confirm, and verify field data, as well as to understand the policy and institutional framework underlying the implementation of the Village Innovation Program. The documents analyzed included Village Innovation Program reports, profiles, and archives of Innovation Houses, and documentation of village creative economy products. Document analysis was conducted systematically by examining the content, context, and consistency of information between documents, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of village economic policy and practices (Bowen, 2009).

The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis, which included the stages of initial coding, category grouping, identification of main themes, and interpretation of meaning. The analysis process was conducted iteratively and reflectively to identify

patterns relevant to the research objectives, such as forms of village economic innovation, the role of local institutions, the level of community participation, and factors supporting and hindering the implementation of the Village Innovation Program. This approach is in line with the qualitative analysis framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006). To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applied a strategy of triangulation of methods and data sources, as well as limited member checking with key informants. These steps were taken to ensure the consistency of the findings and strengthen the internal validity of the study, as recommended in case study-based qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2017).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Smart Economy Development through Village Innovation Programs in Laramo Village, Indonesia

Strengthening the smart economy as one of the main pillars of the Village Innovation Program in Laramo Village is packaged contextually through the local term "*Laramo Masagena*," which means prosperous Laramo. This concept represents efforts to localize village economic development policies so that they are in line with the values, identity, and needs of the local community. *Laramo Masagena* is not just a program slogan, but serves as an operational framework for economic innovation that integrates community participation, the use of science and technology, and the productive and sustainable management of local potential.

Conceptually, "*Laramo Masagena*" reflects an inclusive and adaptive smart economy approach, in which rural economic development is not only oriented towards growth, but also towards improving social capacity, institutions, and community independence. This program is designed to accelerate rural economic growth through the creation of productive spaces, the strengthening of household-based micro-enterprises, and the diversification of community income sources. Thus, the smart economy is positioned as a development strategy that emphasizes synergy between innovation, creativity, and sustainability.

In practice, the implementation of "*Laramo Masagena*" is carried out through a series of productive economic activities involving various community groups, including women, youth, and local entrepreneurs. These activities do not stand alone, but are designed as part of an interconnected village

economic ecosystem, ranging from production, packaging, marketing, to human resource capacity building. This approach is in line with the smart village paradigm, which places the community as the main actor in the development process (Visvizi & Lytras, 2018).

Furthermore, "*Laramo Masagena*" functions as a collective learning process for village communities in adopting more rational, innovative, and long-term economic practices. The use of technology in this program is not always interpreted as advanced digital technology, but also includes appropriate technology, updated local knowledge, and more efficient production and marketing methods. This confirms that the smart economy at the village level is contextual and gradual, in accordance with local capacities and needs. Based on the results of a thematic analysis of the implementation of "*Laramo Masagena*," this study identified seven main themes that represent concrete forms of strengthening the smart economy in Laramo Village. These seven themes reflect a variety of complementary village economic innovation strategies, ranging from strengthening business identity, creating alternative market spaces, improving financial literacy, diversifying local resource-based products, to sustainable natural resource management. The following discussion describes each theme in depth as an empirical manifestation of the application of the smart economy within the framework of the Village Innovation Program. The seven themes are outlined as follows.

#### 1. Business Location Branding

The results of the study show that business location branding is a crucial starting strategy in strengthening the smart economy at the village level. In Laramo Village, the branding process was carried out by collectively naming the business space the Innovation House, arranging the visual design of the production space and product shelves, and using local symbols that represent the village's identity. This branding not only serves as a means of promotion but also as an instrument for shaping the image of an innovative village that can increase the trust of consumers and external partners.

From the perspective of local businesses, place branding contributes to an increased sense of ownership and collective pride in village products. This is in line with the concept of place branding in a rural context, which emphasizes the importance of local

identity as socio-economic capital (Logar, 2025). Locally-based branding has proven to strengthen the differentiation of village products amid increasingly competitive markets. This is in line with previous studies that micro-business branding in rural areas plays a significant role in increasing market visibility and business sustainability (Gulisova et al., 2025; Boisen et al., 2018). Within the framework of the smart economy, branding is not only understood as a marketing strategy but also as a social process that integrates identity, innovation, and local economic value.

## 2. *Organization of the Pop-up Market*

The Pop-up market, which is held regularly every Wednesday, is one of the most effective socio-economic innovations in driving the village economy. The Pop-up market serves as an alternative distribution channel for local products, as well as a venue for social interaction between producers and consumers. Research shows that this activity is able to increase daily economic turnover and open up market access for household-scale businesses. Empirically, the Pop-Up market promotes economic inclusiveness by involving women, youth, and informal businesses. The flexible and community-based market mechanism allows businesses with limited capital to participate.

This reflects the principle of an inclusive local economy, which emphasizes equitable economic access at the grassroots level. These findings are in line with previous studies showing that community-based markets contribute to strengthening the local economy and social resilience of villages (Hinrichs, 2000; Renting et al., 2003). In the context of the rural smart economy, Pop-up Markets are an example that economic innovation is not always based on high technology, but can grow from adaptive and sustainable social organization.

## 3. *Financial Literacy Training*

Financial literacy training is an important component in improving the capacity of village entrepreneurs. The results of the study show that prior to the intervention, most entrepreneurs did not have an adequate understanding of financial record keeping, the separation of business and household finances, and medium-term business planning. The training facilitated through Innovation House focused on simple and practical financial management. The impact of the training was evident in changes in the economic behavior of business actors, particularly in terms of

transaction recording and profit management. Financial literacy serves as the foundation for smart decision-making in village business management.

This is in line with the views of Lusardi & Mitchell (2014), who emphasize that financial literacy plays an important role in improving economic welfare and the resilience of small businesses. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the argument that a smart economy does not only depend on technological infrastructure, but also on the cognitive capacity and economic knowledge of the community. Therefore, financial literacy is a key prerequisite for the success of village economic innovation.

## 4. *Diversification of Healthy Drink Products and Their Marketing*

The diversification of healthy drink products based on local ingredients such as ginger, corn, and sweet potatoes is a strategy to increase the economic value of villages. Research shows that this diversification stems from a combination of local knowledge and simple innovations in food processing. Healthy drink products are positioned as natural consumption alternatives that are relevant to healthy lifestyle trends. In terms of marketing, the strategy used is still hybrid, combining direct marketing at the Pop-up Market with promotion through simple social media. Although not yet fully digital, this practice reflects the early stages of smart marketing adoption in villages. This is in line with the findings of Porter & Kramer (2011) on the importance of shared value in developing products based on local potential. Previous studies have shown that product diversification based on local resources can increase the competitiveness of micro-enterprises and strengthen the rural economy (Purbawati et al., 2025). In the context of the Smart Economy, the diversification of healthy drink products is a concrete example of sustainable, market-oriented economic innovation

## 5. *Acrylic Craft Production*

Acrylic craft production in Laramo Village is a relatively new form of creative economic innovation. Research shows that this activity is driven by the need to expand the range of non-food products and improve the technical skills of the community, especially women and youth. Products such as acrylic key chains and souvenirs have considerable market potential. From a capacity-building perspective, acrylic crafts serve as a means of transferring simple skills and technology. The relatively easy production process

allows for independent replication and business development. This is in line with the concept of a creative rural economy, which places creativity as a source of rural economic growth (UNESCO, 2013). This finding reinforces the results of previous studies, which state that small-scale creative industries can be a driving force for the local economy if supported by training and market access (Scott, 2010). Within the framework of the Smart Economy, acrylic crafts reflect the village's adaptation to new creativity-based economic opportunities.

#### 6. *Woven Craft Production*

Woven crafts are a powerful representation of the use of local wisdom in rural economic development. Research shows that woven production not only serves as an economic activity but also as an effort to preserve traditional knowledge. Woven products have both cultural and economic value. This activity demonstrates the integration of economy and culture within the framework of the smart economy. Weaving is produced using a participatory approach and utilizing environmentally friendly local raw materials. This is in line with the concept of cultural economy, which emphasizes the relationship between culture, identity, and economic development (Throsby, 2001). This is in line with previous research showing that traditional crafts play a strategic role in sustainable rural development when linked to design and marketing innovation (Becattini et al., 2009). Thus, the woven crafts of Laramo Village are a concrete example of how village innovation can integrate economic, social, and cultural aspects.

#### 7. *Forest Product Management Training*

Forest product management training focuses on the sustainable use of non-timber forest resources. Research shows that this training raises public awareness of the importance of sustainable natural resource management as a basis for long-term economic development. Forest products are positioned as part of the village green economy. From a smart economy perspective, forest product management reflects the integration of the economy and environmental sustainability. This training encourages non-exploitative economic practices that are in line with the principles of sustainable development. This is in line with Ostrom's (1990) findings on the importance of community governance in the management of shared resources. A synthesis with previous research shows that community-based forest product management

contributes to increased income and environmental conservation (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Larson & Ribot, 2007). Thus, this training strengthens the ecological dimension of the rural smart economy.

### **Smart Economy Development through Rural Innovation Initiatives in Selected South African Communities**

#### 1. *Community-Driven Rural Innovation and Local Governance Reform*

Since the end of Apartheid, South Africa's efforts at restructuring local governance, combined with the uneven spatial development, and South Africa's unique context of the Village Innovation Program, provide a useful basis for analyzing rural innovation and development at the village level (Mkhwanazi & Jili, 2024). The South African policy instruments for the institutionalization of community-driven development at the village level may differ from the programs implemented at South Africa's Village Innovation Program (Forde et al., 2021). The use of community-driven development, cooperatives, municipal facilitation, and the innovation of various development sectors help to establish a localized 'smart rural economy' (Francis & Webster, 2019). This rural smart economy is a result of a variety of distinct programs and systems of social organization and community innovation.

#### 2. *Policy Frameworks and Endogenous Rural Economic Development*

At the policy level, South Africa's rural development vision is described through the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) and other related frameworks such as the District Development Model (DDM) and the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) systems (Makgatle, 2023). These frameworks outline the importance of rural participatory planning, endogenous development, and economic diversification in the rural peripheral districts. These policies might not be the same as Indonesia's Village Law, but both policies' contexts side with local government units for fostering development, managing relationships among stakeholders, and activating the local development potential. Within such policies, the rural smart economy is understood less as technological modernising and more as the strengthening of rural productive systems, market connections, and place-based innovation.

### 3. Agricultural Innovation, Cooperatives, and Market Integration

The development of South Africa's rural smart economies can be measured through innovation in agriculture and the development of micro-enterprises at the village level (Nxumalo & Chauke, 2025). In the rural municipalities of the Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces, agricultural cooperatives have been established as key drivers of the organisation of production, output distribution, transaction cost reduction, and market access (Nyawo & Olorunfemi, 2023). These cooperatives in the production of vegetables, poultry, goats, and bees demonstrate the value of collective organisation as they enhance their value chain bargaining power in the value chains that have been dominated by middlemen and large retailers. The formal market integration of small-scale producers is critical for the rural smart economies because smart economies are about enhanced coordination, information flow, and stronger institutional linkages (Mabunda, 2017). The rural municipalities in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces have empirically demonstrated the integration of small-scale producers into formal markets. Even though the digital divide is considerable, mobile phones and rural farming WhatsApp groups serve as low-cost 'appropriate technology' through which the cooperatives offer technical farming information, weather updates, market prices, and buyer access (Mulaudzi et al., 2024).

### 4. Micro-Enterprise Ecosystems, Cultural Economy, and Environmental Sustainability

Apart from agriculture, the enhancement of micro-enterprise ecosystems utilizing cultural capital, craft production, and local tourism is of particular note in the rural smart economy of South Africa (Forde et al., 2021). Craft industries, especially beadwork, wood carving, basketry, and textile production, have experienced a revival in the collaborations of the NGOs, development partners, and local municipality triads. In the case of craft micro-enterprises, the integration into local tourism circuits has resulted in increased product visibility and income diversification along the tourism routes in localities with tourism potential, such as the villages surrounding the Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal heritage and nature reserve tourism landscapes. Smart rural economic initiatives in South Africa create opportunities in youth innovation and digital skills. Digital literacy hubs and youth innovation centres have been established in pilot

projects in parts of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. These centres offer training in coding, graphic design, digital marketing, and business administration (Forde et al., 2021). Moreover, community-driven agro-processing projects can be characterized as an innovative development process that fosters the retention of local value (Qange et al., 2025).

The promotion of environmental sustainability as a pivotal aspect of rural innovation in South Africa is equally necessary given the ecological fragility and exposure of the region's rural arid and semi-arid areas (Msweli, 2025). Food products such as marula, mopane worms, honeybush tea, and essential oils demonstrate the economic potential of biodiversity within green value chains in rural households (Makhubele et al., 2026). While South Africa faces a myriad of challenges, particularly regarding the rural economy, its emerging patterns show the ability of rural communities to dynamically adapt, reorganize diversified income-generating activities, and establish collaborative structures to improve their economic resilience (Mishi et al., 2020). South Africa also illustrates the importance of understanding the rural smart economy as a phenomenon that is not just about the adoption of new technologies (Smidt & Jokonya, 2022), but also a reflection of social, economic, and the power of collective rural community action and participatory development (Bukht & Heeks, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The Village Innovation Program in Indonesia, as demonstrated by the case of Laramo Village, and community-based rural development initiatives in South Africa, show strong conceptual overlap in strengthening smart rural economies. Both contexts emphasize that a smart economy in rural areas is not solely determined by the adoption of digital technology, but rather by the ability of local communities to organize resources, utilize local knowledge, and integrate innovation into productive economic activities. Participatory practices, business diversification based on the endogenous potential of villages, and the strengthening of local economic institutions are key elements that consistently drive increased added value and economic resilience in rural communities.

Although Indonesia and South Africa operate within different policy frameworks, socio-political histories, and local governance structures, the findings

of this study indicate a strategic convergence in rural development orientation. Whether through the Village Innovation Program and Village Law in Indonesia or through community-based rural development approaches and territorial policy frameworks in South Africa, rural innovation is directed at community empowerment, institutional capacity building, and expanding market connectivity for micro-enterprises and small-scale producers. Empirical evidence from both countries indicates that strengthening the rural smart economy depends on the capacity of local systems to coordinate actors, reduce dependence, and create inclusive and adaptive economic ecosystems.

Overall, this article emphasizes that strengthening smart rural economies in the Global South is a contextual, collaborative, and long-term socio-economic process. The experiences of Laramo Village and rural communities in South Africa provide important lessons that the success of a smart rural economy lies in the synergy between public policy, community-based innovation, and local market dynamics, rather than in a top-down technological approach. Thus, these findings contribute to the enrichment of the international discourse on rural development by placing village innovation as a key strategy in strengthening economic independence, local competitiveness, and rural socio-economic resilience in developing countries.

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