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The Role of Islamic Religious Counselors as Agents of Change in Community Empowerment in Enrekang Regency

¹Nasrah Abd. Rahim Erro, ²Suparman, ³Haerusman, ⁴Saidang, ⁵M. Hatta

¹Nonformal Education Student, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, Indonesia.

E-mail : 95nasrah@gmail.com

²Graduate Program in Primary Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, Indonesia.

E-mail : suparmansosiologi21@gmail.com

³Non-formal education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, Indonesia.

E-mail : rusmanhcm7@gmail.com

⁴Non-formal education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, Indonesia.

E-mail : saidangsaid03@gmail.com

⁵Non-formal education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, Indonesia.

E-mail : rezhahatta@gmail.com

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Abstract. *This research is motivated by the importance of the role of Islamic Religious Counselors as agents of change in community empowerment, which until now has tended to be understood normatively and has not been studied in depth from a social perspective. This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Counselors in community empowerment in Enrekang Regency. Theoretically, this research benefits from enriching sociological studies, while practically, it serves as evaluation material for policy makers. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office in Enrekang Regency for three months. The main instrument is the researcher with the support of interview guidelines, observation, and documentation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation using primary and secondary data sources. Data analysis uses the Miles and Huberman model, while data validity is tested through triangulation and member checking. The results show that Islamic Religious Counselors play a role as facilitators, mediators, and motivators in community empowerment through a participatory and contextual approach. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of strengthening the capacity of counselors and institutional support to increase the effectiveness of their role in encouraging sustainable social change.*

Keywords: *Religious Counselor; Agent of Change; Community Empowerment.*

Abstrak. *Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh pentingnya peran Penyuluh Agama Islam sebagai agen perubahan dalam pemberdayaan masyarakat yang selama ini masih cenderung dipahami secara normatif dan belum dikaji secara mendalam dalam perspektif sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran penyuluh Agama Islam dalam pemberdayaan masyarakat di Kabupaten Enrekang. Manfaat penelitian ini secara teoritis adalah memperkaya kajian sosiologi, sedangkan secara praktis menjadi bahan evaluasi bagi pemangku kebijakan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di Kantor Kementerian Agama Kabupaten Enrekang selama tiga bulan. Instrumen utama adalah peneliti dengan dukungan pedoman wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi dengan sumber data primer dan sekunder. Analisis data menggunakan model Miles dan Huberman, sedangkan keabsahan data diuji melalui triangulasi dan member*

check. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penyuluh Agama Islam berperan sebagai fasilitator, mediator, dan motivator dalam pemberdayaan masyarakat melalui pendekatan partisipatif dan kontekstual. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya penguatan kapasitas penyuluh serta dukungan kelembagaan untuk meningkatkan efektivitas peran mereka dalam mendorong perubahan sosial yang berkelanjutan.

Keywords : *Religious Counselor; Agent of Change; Community Empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of social change in society demands the presence of strategic actors capable of driving sustainable social transformation. Islamic religious instructors are one such actor who holds a crucial position in community development, not only in religious aspects but also in everyday social life. This role is becoming increasingly relevant amidst social change marked by the increasing complexity of social, economic, and cultural issues in society. However, studies on religious instructors are still dominated by a normative approach that focuses solely on the function of preaching and fostering worship. However, from a sociological perspective, religious instructors have great potential as agents of social change, capable of influencing people's mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors. This gap indicates a research gap between the ideal role of instructors as agents of change and the empirical practices occurring in the field (Setyawan, 2025).

Enrekang Regency as a region with the characteristics of an agrarian society has strong social dynamics based on cultural and religious values (Najib, 2024). Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency of Enrekang Regency, the population has reached more than 232,870 people, with the dominant livelihood being in the agricultural and plantation sectors.(Case et al., 2024)This situation indicates that the community is highly dependent on local resources and maintains a strong communal lifestyle. Furthermore, data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Enrekang Regency shows that there are dozens of Islamic religious instructors spread across various sub-districts, each with their own designated areas.(Mahmuddin, 2024) The level of community participation in empowerment activities such as religious study groups, mentoring groups, and socio-religious activities still shows significant variation across regions. This indicates that the success of community empowerment is greatly influenced by the intensity and quality of mentoring provided by religious instructors (Putra, 2022).

Theoretically, this research uses the change agent perspective put forward by Everett Rogers, which places individuals as important actors in the process of innovation diffusion and social change. In this context, Islamic religious instructors are positioned as communicators who play a role in transforming new values, knowledge, and practices into the community (Rahmawaty et al., 2025). Furthermore, Paulo Freire's theory of community empowerment emphasizes the importance of critical awareness and active community participation in creating sustainable social change.(Fikri, 2024; January, 2026) This research is also supported by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which explains the dialectical relationship between agents and structures in shaping social practices. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research seeks to deeply understand how these theories are implemented in the actual practices of religious instructors within the community (Giddens, 2025).

The research problem explicitly lies in the suboptimal role of Islamic Religious Counselors in Enrekang Regency as agents of social change in community empowerment. To date, counseling activities have been predominantly oriented toward delivering religious material, fostering worship, and normative lectures, resulting in a lack of visible contributions to increasing critical awareness, economic independence, social participation, and resolving community issues. On the other hand, communities face various social, economic, and cultural challenges that require ongoing support (Dwiyono & Hapsari, 2024). However, there has been no in-depth study explaining the strategies, interaction patterns, obstacles, and effectiveness of religious instructors in carrying out their social change function. This situation indicates a significant gap between the ideal role of religious instructors and empirical practice in the field (Verawati & Sa'idi, 2022).

Previous research shows that Islamic religious instructors have a significant contribution in increasing the religious understanding of the community, especially in the aspects of worship and moral development. (Ali, 2024) However, most of these studies still use a general quantitative or descriptive approach that fails to delve deeply into the experiences, strategies, and social practices of extension workers in the field. Several studies also reveal that extension activities still tend to be top-down, so that communities are not fully engaged in the empowerment process. (Government et al., 2025) Furthermore, studies that specifically examine religious instructors as agents of change in the context of community empowerment are still relatively limited. This indicates the need for more exploratory and in-depth research to understand the social realities that occur contextually and comprehensively (Ali, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to examine the role of Islamic religious instructors as agents of change through a descriptive qualitative approach that emphasizes processes, meanings, and social dynamics. This research not only focuses on the results of extension activities but also explores the strategies, approaches, and patterns of social interaction employed by instructors in empowering communities. Furthermore, this research took place in Enrekang Regency, which has unique socio-cultural characteristics, thus providing a contextual perspective rarely explored in previous research. Therefore, this research is expected to provide new contributions to sociological studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between agents of change, social structures, and community empowerment practices based on religious values.

The theoretical benefit of this research is that it enriches the body of sociological knowledge, particularly in the study of agents of change and community empowerment based on religious values. It is also expected to contribute to the development of empowerment concepts that are more contextual and relevant to local community conditions. Practically, the results of this study can serve as evaluation material for the Ministry of Religious Affairs in improving the effectiveness of the role of Islamic religious instructors in the field. Furthermore, this research can serve as a reference for academics and practitioners in designing more participatory, inclusive, and sustainable community empowerment programs. Therefore, this research is expected to have a positive impact in encouraging the creation of a more independent, empowered, and socially conscious society.

METHODS

This research used a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type and a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research aimed to deeply understand social phenomena related to the role of Islamic Religious Instructors as agents of change in community empowerment (M. Firmansyah & Article, 2021). Case studies were used to comprehensively explore the context, processes, and dynamics that occur in the field in a specific and contextual manner. This research was conducted at the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office in Enrekang Regency as the primary location, considering that this institution is the official institution that oversees and coordinates Islamic religious instructors. The informants in this study numbered seven people, consisting of Islamic religious instructors, relevant officials, and assisted community members who were selected purposively according to the research data needs. The research period was approximately three months, starting from the initial observation stage, data collection, and data analysis. This approach allowed researchers to obtain a complete picture of the social practices carried out by religious instructors in the context of community empowerment (Poltak, 2024).

The characteristics of the informants in this study refer to the specific traits possessed by the respondents, making them worthy of providing data in line with the research focus. Informants were selected because they have direct experience in religious outreach and community empowerment activities, thus understanding the processes, strategies, and obstacles that occur in the field. Furthermore, informants also understand the social, cultural conditions, and needs of the Enrekang Regency community, thus being able to provide contextual information. Another characteristic was their active involvement in religious programs and social activities, both as implementers and beneficiaries. Informants were also selected because they have good communication skills, are open, and were willing to provide information honestly, so that the data obtained was more valid, in-

depth, and relevant to the research objectives. The informant selection technique in this study used purposive sampling, namely the deliberate selection of informants based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives. The main informants in this study were Islamic religious instructors who actively served in the Enrekang Regency area. In addition, supporting informants included representatives from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, community leaders, and assisted communities directly involved in outreach activities. Criteria for informants were determined based on their experience, involvement, and knowledge related to community empowerment activities (Prayogi & Kurniawan, 2024). The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself, who played a role in collecting and interpreting data. To support the data collection process, interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation were also used as supporting instruments to ensure more systematic and in-depth data collection.

The data collection techniques in this study were conducted through three main methods: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to directly obtain information from informants regarding the experiences, strategies, and roles of religious instructors in community empowerment. The interview procedure involved preparing a questionnaire, scheduling interviews with informants, conducting face-to-face interviews, recording answers, noting key points, and then transcribing the interview results for systematic and in-depth analysis according to the research focus. Participatory observation was conducted to directly observe the activities of religious instructors in community development and empowerment activities, allowing researchers to understand the social context. Documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of archives, activity reports, photographs, and other documents relevant to the research. The combination of these three techniques aimed to obtain comprehensive and in-depth data. Furthermore, this technique also allowed researchers to triangulate sources and methods to improve the quality and accuracy of the data obtained (S & Djafar, 2018).

The data analysis in this study used the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by sorting, focusing, and simplifying data relevant to the research objectives. Data presentation was done in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of the research findings. Conclusions were drawn continuously throughout the research process by paying attention to patterns, relationships, and meanings emerging from the data. To maintain data validity, this study used source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking techniques with informants. Furthermore, increased diligence and discussions with colleagues were carried out to ensure that the data obtained were valid, reliable, and scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are compiled based on the established problem formulation, with reference to data obtained through interview, observation, and documentation techniques in Enrekang Regency. An in-depth analysis was conducted to comprehensively describe the role of Islamic religious instructors in community empowerment, as well as the factors that influence the effectiveness of this role. The collected data were then systematically classified and interpreted to provide an empirical picture of field conditions. The presentation of the results of this study is divided into two main sections tailored to the focus of the problem formulation: the role of instructors as agents of change and the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of community empowerment. Thus, the description of the results of this study is expected to provide a complete, structured, and relevant understanding of the dynamics of the role of Islamic religious instructors in the social context of the community in Enrekang Regency.

A. The Role of Islamic Religious Instructors as Agents of Change in Community Empowerment in Enrekang Regency

Interviews with several Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency revealed that their role extends beyond delivering religious material to encompass comprehensive community social development. These instructors are actively involved in various activities, such as religious study groups (Majelis Taklim), youth development at mosques, fostering harmonious families, and other religious-based social activities. Field observations indicate that religious instructors often play a central role in various community activities, both formal and informal. During various religious and social events, the community tends to rely on instructors as a reference in resolving their problems. Activity documentation from the Enrekang Regency Ministry of Religious Affairs Office also demonstrates the existence of routine development programs that are implemented in a structured and sustainable manner. This demonstrates that religious instructors play a strategic role in building both religious and social awareness in the community.

Further interviews revealed that Islamic religious instructors also serve as facilitators in the community empowerment process. They not only provide lectures or religious sermons, but also assist communities in addressing various social issues. Several instructors stated that they strive to integrate religious values into the community's daily lives, such as strengthening children's education, fostering family morals, managing household finances, and fostering the younger generation. Observations revealed intense interaction between instructors and the community in their assisted groups. This indicates that instructors have effectively implemented their empowerment function through an approach that addresses community needs.

In addition to facilitating, religious instructors also act as motivators, encouraging positive changes in community behavior. Interviews revealed that the presence of instructors increases enthusiasm for religious activities, improves social relationships, and fosters concern for the surrounding environment. These instructors provide moral and spiritual encouragement to encourage community participation in social activities. Observations show increased community participation in religious study groups, community service programs, and other social activities following intensive guidance from religious instructors. This demonstrates that religious instructors have a positive influence on shaping community social behavior.

Religious instructors also act as mediators between the community and the government, particularly in communicating various social and religious development programs. Interviews revealed that instructors often serve as liaisons in conveying government policy information to the community, particularly those related to family development, public health, education, and religious programs. Observations indicate that instructors are involved in cross-sectoral activities with village governments, community health centers, schools, and other social institutions. This role demonstrates that instructors are not only active in the field of da'wah (Islamic outreach) but also contribute to broader community development.

Overall, the research results indicate that Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency have optimally fulfilled their role as agents of change in community empowerment. This role is reflected in their functions as educators, facilitators, motivators, and mediators. The presence of instructors not only impacts the community's religious understanding but also encourages social change for the better. Thus, religious instructors have made a significant contribution to increasing the capacity and independence of the community in Enrekang Regency.

B. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of the Role of Islamic Religious Instructors in Community Empowerment in Enrekang Regency

Based on the interview results, one of the main factors supporting the success of religious extension workers is their personal and social competence. Extension workers who possess good communication skills, empathy, patience, and closeness to the community tend to be more

successful in carrying out their guidance duties. Communities are more receptive to materials and guidance from extension workers who are able to build good interpersonal relationships. Observations also show that extension workers who are actively present in the community have a greater influence than those who interact less intensively. This demonstrates that the personal qualities of extension workers are crucial in determining the effectiveness of community empowerment.

Another supporting factor is the support of the community and local leaders for outreach activities. Based on interviews, several extension workers stated that the program's success is greatly influenced by the involvement of religious leaders, village officials, mosque administrators, and local community groups. When community leaders support outreach activities, community participation is higher. Observations show that activities implemented with the support of the village government and community leaders tend to be more lively and run smoothly. This social support is a crucial asset for extension workers in implementing community empowerment programs.

However, the research also revealed a number of inhibiting factors. Limited facilities and infrastructure were a significant obstacle in carrying out the duties of religious instructors. Several instructors stated that the lack of transportation, learning media, and budgetary support prevented the optimal implementation of training activities. The mountainous geography of Enrekang Regency and the considerable distances between villages also posed challenges for instructors in reaching their target communities. As a result, the intensity of activities in some areas was uneven.

Furthermore, the limited number of religious instructors compared to the size of the area they serve hinders the optimization of community services. Interviews revealed that a single instructor often has to cover several villages simultaneously, limiting the amount of time available for coaching. Observations indicate that some areas only receive coaching at specific times due to limited instructors. This situation contributes to differences in the success rate of empowerment programs across regions. Therefore, increasing the number of instructors is crucial for improving the quality of public services.

Overall, factors supporting the success of religious extension workers include personal competence, community support, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Meanwhile, the main inhibiting factors include limited facilities, the size of the target area, and the limited number of extension workers. These findings indicate that the success of religious extension workers depends not only on individual abilities but also on structural support and the social environment. Therefore, stronger policies are needed to support the role of religious extension workers in Enrekang Regency.

The following table presents the results of a systematic research analysis based on the main dimensions studied, including the role of Islamic religious instructors as agents of change and the factors influencing their effectiveness in community empowerment in Enrekang Regency. This tabular presentation aims to facilitate understanding of the interrelationships between indicators, sub-indicators, empirical findings, and analyses generated from field data. Each component in the table reflects the results of data processing obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, thus providing a more structured, comprehensive, and analytical picture of the dynamics of the role of instructors in the social context of the community. Thus, this table serves not only as a data summary but also as a basis for drawing scientific interpretations of the phenomena studied.

Table 1. Analysis of the Role of Islamic Religious Instructors as Agents of Change and Influencing Factors in Community Empowerment in Enrekang Regency

No	Dimensions of Analysis	Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Empirical Findings	Analysis
1	The Role of Extension Workers as Agents of	Educator	Delivery of religious material	Active instructor in religious study groups and routine coaching	The educational role is not only cognitive, but also forms social awareness in society.

	Change	Facilitator	Community assistance	Extension workers assist in children's education and family economics	Demonstrate a participatory approach that promotes sustainable empowerment
		Motivator	Increased participation	People are more active in social and religious activities	Motivational roles contribute to collective behavioral change
		Mediator	Liaison with the government	Extension workers deliver cross-sector programs	Strengthening the position of extension workers as strategic actors in social development
		Impact	Social change	Increasing community awareness and independence	Demonstrate the success of the role of extension workers as agents of change
2	Factors Influencing the Role of Extension Workers	Internal	Personal competence	Communication skills, empathy, social closeness	Individual competence is the main determinant of role effectiveness
		External	Social support	Support from community leaders and village officials	Social capital strengthens the success of empowerment programs
		Means	Availability of facilities	Media and budget limitations	Structural barriers reduce the optimization of activities
		Region	Geographical conditions	Large and difficult to reach area	Causes inequality in coaching services
		HR	Number of extension workers	Limited manpower compared to the target area	Demonstrates the need for policies to increase and equalize workforce

DISCUSSION

The research results show that Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency not only fulfill their normative function as transmitters of religious teachings, but also act as agents of change in the community empowerment process. This role is reflected in their active involvement in various social activities, community group development, and local needs-based mentoring. (Khairunnisa et al., 2026). Interpretation of these findings shows that the success of extension workers in carrying out this role is greatly influenced by their ability to build strong social relations with the community. (Sudarso, 2025) Emotional closeness, effective communication, and an understanding of the social context are key factors in increasing community participation. Thus, extension workers function not only as communicators but also as facilitators and motivators capable of driving changes in community behavior and mindsets toward a more independent and empowered state. (Halimah & Fatmah, 2024; Muhda, 2023).

The findings of this study are in line with the theory of change agents put forward by Everett Rogers, which emphasizes that certain individuals have a strategic role in influencing the adoption of innovation and social change in society (Suryadi & Hidayat, 2025). Religious instructors in this context function as mediators who bridge new values with the social realities of society. (Rahmawati & Prasetyo, 2024). In addition, the results of this study are also relevant to Paulo Freire's concept of community empowerment, which emphasizes the importance of critical awareness and active participation in the process of change. Extension workers who use a dialogic and participatory approach have been shown to be more effective in building community engagement (Kurniawan & Lestari, 2023). Furthermore, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory also supports this finding, stating that extension workers, as agents, are not only influenced by social structures but also play a role in shaping and changing those structures through social practices. This finding also reinforces previous research showing that the effectiveness of extension services is strongly influenced by interpersonal approaches and social closeness (F. Firmansyah, 2022).

A number of previous studies have stated that religious instructors carry out more traditional functions as lecturers, worship guides, and strengtheners of community morals, so that their orientation is still normative and has not yet touched on the aspect of empowerment in a broad sense. However, this study found that Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency have experienced an expansion of their roles, namely as social facilitators, community companions, mediators of social issues, and drivers of citizen participation (Dwiyono & Hapsari, 2024). These findings reinforce previous research emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communication, but also refute the view that extension workers function solely one-way (Nabilah & Darmaningrum, 2023). Furthermore, this study also emphasizes that the success of this role is not always evenly distributed, as it is influenced by individual capacity, institutional support, and the social conditions of the target community. Therefore, this study complements, expands, and contextually corrects the findings of previous research (Basit, 2014).

The results of the study show that the role of Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency can strengthen Everett Rogers' theory of change agents, especially that the success of social change is largely determined by local actors who have social closeness, community trust, and interpersonal communication skills. This finding confirms that religious instructors are not merely conveyors of information, but act as a link between social innovation and the needs of the community (Junaid, 2024). In addition, this study develops a new concept in the form of a locally based participatory religious extension model, namely the role of extension workers who combine religious functions, social assistance, group facilitation, and economic empowerment according to the characteristics of agrarian communities (Aspila & Baharuddin, 2022). This model shows that the effectiveness of extension increases when the approach is carried out in a dialogical, contextual, and sustainable manner. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in strengthening the theory of agents of change while developing a concept of religious extension that is adaptive to the needs of local communities. (Verawati & Sa'idi, 2022).

The implications of this research indicate that the role of Islamic religious instructors needs to be more broadly understood as agents of social change who make strategic contributions to community empowerment. Practically, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of instructors through training that focuses not only on religious aspects but also on social skills, communication, and community empowerment. (Anwar & Malik, 2025). Furthermore, institutional support from the Ministry of Religious Affairs also needs to be improved, particularly in terms of providing facilities, strengthening programs, and equitable distribution of extension workers in the target areas. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of sociological studies, particularly in understanding the role of change agents in local contexts based on religious values. Therefore, the results of this research are expected to serve as a basis for formulating more effective policies and strategies to encourage sustainable community empowerment. (Putri & Wahyudi, 2024; Yusuf, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that Islamic religious instructors in Enrekang Regency have significantly fulfilled their role as agents of change in community empowerment. This role is not only limited to conveying religious values, but also includes functions as facilitators, mediators, and motivators in encouraging increased community capacity and independence. Through a communicative, participatory, and contextual approach, instructors are able to build strong social relationships with the community, resulting in increased participation and social awareness in various empowerment activities. The findings of this study also indicate that the success of instructors is greatly influenced by personal competence, communication skills, and social closeness with the community they serve. However, various obstacles remain, such as limited facilities and infrastructure, the vast area of assistance, and the uneven number of instructors in each region. Therefore, efforts are needed to strengthen the capacity of instructors and provide ongoing institutional support so that their role as agents of change can be carried out more effectively and optimally in encouraging social transformation in the community.

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