

## Participation of Socio-Economic Empowerment Groups in Improving the Economy in Rural Areas

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### Abstract

Agricultural institutions play a crucial role in agricultural development as they can enhance the quality of human resources, increase production and income, and improve farmers' welfare. Participation of socio-economic empowerment groups in improving the economy in rural areas in various aspects is essential to achieve these goals. This study aims to describe the characteristics of the research subjects and their participation from both internal and external aspects. The internal aspect is based on the benefits received, while the external aspect is influenced by local socio-cultural factors, agricultural extension workers' guidance, and leaders' capabilities. The research employs mixed methods, with data collection techniques including questionnaires, observations, in-depth interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The data are analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. The informants consist of members of the Leading Farmer and Fishermen Contact (LFFC) Padamara and field extension officers. The research was conducted in the agricultural institutions of Padamara District, Purbalingga Regency, and Central Java. The results show: (1) The majority of the research subjects are male (85%), aged 46 – 60 years (45%), with high school education (60%), earning 1,000,000 – 2,000,000 per month (65%), and have been members of LFFC for more than 3 years. (2) Participation from the internal aspect, based on the benefits received by members, shows a very high level of agreement. (3) Participation from the external aspect, including the culture of cooperation, also shows a very high level of agreement.

*Keywords: participation, agricultural institutions, socio-economic empowerment, extension workers, cooperation*

### 1. Introduction

A significant role in agricultural development stems from the strength of agricultural institutions. These institutions can enhance human resource quality, increase production and income, and improve farmers' welfare. The most strategic approach to empowering farming communities is through farmer groups. Law No. 19 of 2013 Article 7, paragraph 3 states that strategies for empowering farmers include: (1) Education and training, (2) Extension and assistance, (3) Development of marketing systems and facilities for various agricultural products or partnership networks, (4) Consolidation and assurance of agricultural land area, (5) Easy access to knowledge, technology, and information, (6) Strengthening agricultural institutions.

Strengthening agricultural institutions is crucial in community empowerment as it aims to raise awareness among the community to initiate social activities and improve their situations<sup>[1-3]</sup>. One of the empowerment groups within agricultural institutions is the Leading Farmer and Fishermen Contact, which operates at the national and village levels. Members of these agricultural institutions include representatives of farmer group leaders who are chosen to represent the aspirations of farmers and/or fishermen at lower levels.

One function of agricultural institutions is to enhance knowledge, attitudes, and skills in applying appropriate and modern technology from production to marketing while considering environmental conservation and quality improvement<sup>[4-6]</sup>.

Among the 18 districts in Purbalingga Regency, there are 3 active district-level LFFC agricultural institutions and 15 inactive ones. Reasons for inactivity include (1) Poor management, including inappropriate leader selection, lack of thorough planning, and inefficient decision-making; (2) Limited resources, such as capital, land, and other resources; (3) Internal conflicts, differing opinions among members, and interpersonal conflicts; (4) Domination and lack of involvement and active participation from all members; (5) Lack of transparency between management and members. Unlike most LFFC institutions elsewhere, the LFFC agricultural institution in Padamara District referred to as LFFC Padamara, is an example of an active and dynamic district-level agricultural institution that has been conducting empowerment activities for over 15 years. Membership is dominated by farmers of food crops and horticulture.

Preliminary studies show that LFFC Padamara, established in 2007 with facilitation from field agricultural extension workers from the Purbalingga Regency Agriculture Office, has grown from the camaraderie among the management and members of farmer groups in Padamara District. The initial purpose of establishing LFFC was to foster relationships among farmer group representatives in each village. Initially, LFFC Padamara had 15 members representing farmer groups in the Padamara District, with a total agricultural land area registered in the Agricultural Extension System of 1,092 hectares.

LFFC Padamara continuously educates its members on agricultural advancements, enhancing knowledge, attitudes, and skills (PSK) in applying technology dissemination and innovation from upstream (production) to downstream (marketing) while maintaining environmental sustainability (Sutrisno, 2024). Another important aspect is that this agricultural institution strives to provide futuristic agricultural information to its members (Sunardi, 2024).

From the above explanation, it is evident that LFFC Padamara has successfully maintained member enthusiasm for participating in empowerment activities for over 15 years. This has led researchers to be interested in describing member participation in LFFC Padamara's empowerment activities based on internal benefits received by members and external factors influencing the institution.

## **2. Research Methods**

The methodology employed in this study is a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study used mixed methods research integrates quantitative and qualitative research into a single study, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The mixed methods design used in this study is the explanatory sequential approach<sup>[7]</sup>

The research begins with a questionnaire to obtain quantitative data, which will be analyzed descriptively. A qualitative exploration follows this through observations, in-depth

interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), documentation, and secondary data analysis using data reduction techniques described by Miles and Huberman<sup>[8]</sup>.

The data collection process utilizes a triangulation approach involving multiple data collection techniques simultaneously. Through triangulation, the researcher can combine observation, interview, and documentation techniques to draw a comprehensive conclusion. The quantitative phase involves administering questionnaires to 22 research subjects, while the FGD involves 10-12 research subjects.

The study is conducted in the Padamara District, which has had a functional district-level agricultural institution for over 15 years. This long-standing institution inspired the researcher to explore member involvement and participation, particularly in terms of the benefits received by members. The research is carried out from March to April 2024, involving 22 research subjects: 20 members as the primary research subjects and 2 agricultural extension officers as supporting research subjects.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### ***Characteristics of Research Subjects***

The research identified several characteristics of the subjects. The first characteristic is based on age. Subjects aged 30-45 years constitute 35%, those aged 46-60 constitute 45%, and those over 60 constitute 20%. Most participants fall within the 46-60 year age range, with 9 individuals, followed by the 30-45 year range with 7 individuals, and those over 60 years with 4 individuals. This indicates the 46-60-year age range represents the mature farmer category.

Mature farmers are generally interested in participating in agricultural institutions for various reasons, such as exchanging experiences, discussing problems, and collaboratively finding solutions.

They are emotionally and socially connected through their shared profession, as farming is not merely an occupation but also a part of their identity. In these institutions, they can explore themselves, enhance their knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and engage in various training activities, from production to marketing [9-11].

The middle-aged individuals with stable morals and norms tend to participate more actively. However, it is widely agreed that individuals of any age can actively participate in LFFC Padamara's empowerment activities, provided they adjust their involvement to their capabilities. Efforts to involve young farmers are also being made to prevent stagnation and ensure the adoption of new agricultural knowledge and technology. The age-based characteristics of the research subjects are illustrated in Figure 1.

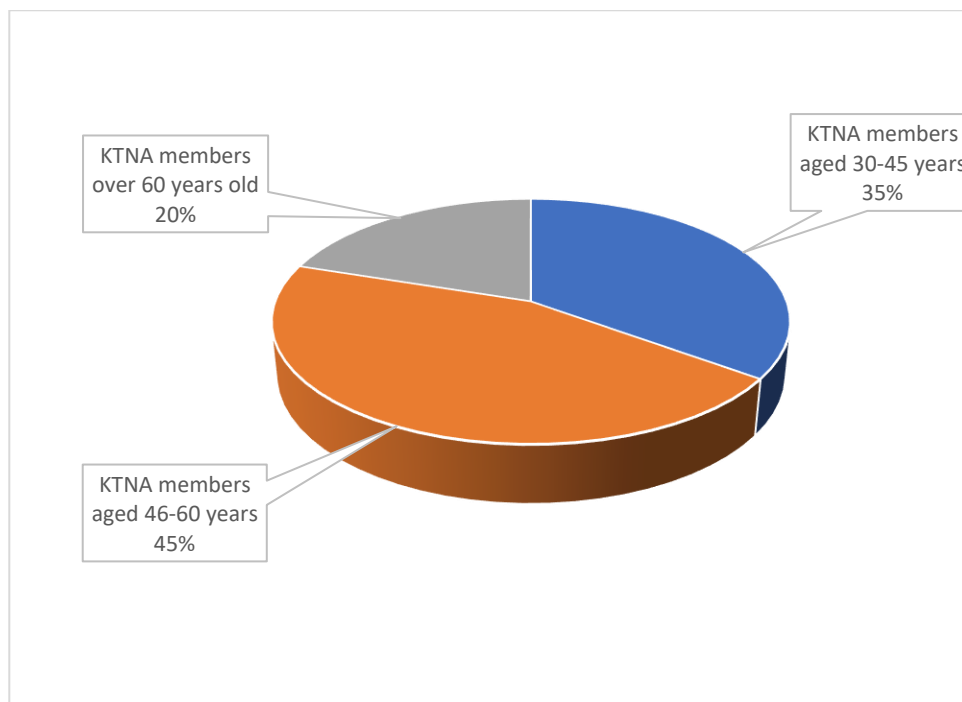


Figure 1. Age-Based Characteristics of Research Subjects

The second characteristic is based on gender. The questionnaire results show that 85% of the members are male, while 15% are female. Specifically, there are 17 male members and 3 female members. Despite the male dominance, all members agree that LFFC Padamara’s empowerment activities accommodate both genders.

Female membership significantly supports agricultural activities through the optimal use of home gardens by women’s farmer groups. Although there are gender biases suggesting that roles undertaken by one gender are inferior to the other.

The women possess strong capabilities and determination to work in agriculture to support their husbands' efforts. Their involvement should not be underestimated. Optimizing home gardens to meet daily vegetable needs is crucial for family support [12-14].

If vegetable cultivation is maximized using soil nutrient enhancers programmed by LFFC Padamara, the productivity of horticultural crops can improve both quantitatively and qualitatively. Therefore, female participation in LFFC Padamara’s activities is essential to enhance their knowledge and support their partners better.

As stated by Bambang Sutrisno, SH, the current LFFC chairman, full support from partners (husbands, wives, and families) fosters good synergy, making it easier to overcome challenges. In the future, gender roles will become more equal, allowing both men and women to work in various fields and engage in diverse activities. The gender-based characteristics of the research subjects are illustrated in Figure 2.

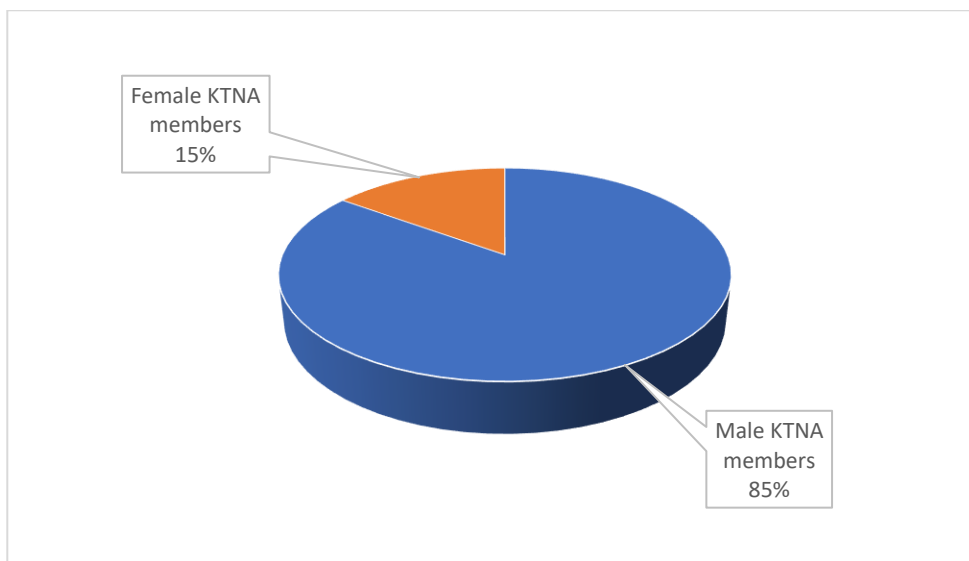


Figure 2. Gender-Based Characteristics of Research Subjects

The third characteristic is based on education level: 20% have completed junior high school, 60% have completed high school, and 20% have completed an undergraduate degree. Most involved members have a high school education (60% or 12 individuals), followed by junior high school (20% or 4 individuals), and undergraduate degrees (20% or 4 individuals).

The research findings indicate that LFFC Padamara’s membership is predominantly high school-educated. There is a theory that adequate primary education, aligned with the mandatory 9-year education policy, correlates with higher participation levels.

The education level influences individuals' attitudes and responses to their environment, contributing to community welfare. At LFFC Padamara, 100% of members have at least the mandatory 9-year education, indicating good understanding.

The empowerment activities aim to improve education and income. Education can be achieved through formal and non-formal training to enhance members' knowledge, attitudes, and skills[15-17]

However, not all members who receive training can practice and share their knowledge with other farmers. Practical skills are linked to interest, talent, hobby, and diligence, which vary among individuals. The education-based characteristics of the research subjects are illustrated in Figure 3.

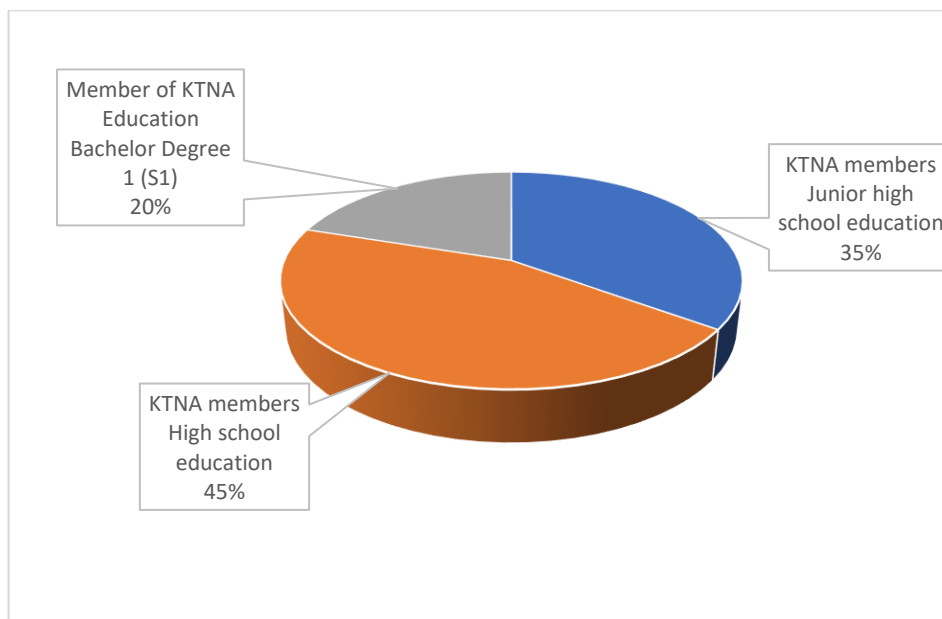


Figure 3. Education-Based Characteristics of Research Subjects

The fourth characteristic is based on the length of LFFC membership. The questionnaire results show that 5% have been members for 3 years (1 individual), 10% for 4 years (2 individuals), 0% for 5 years, 35% for 6 years (7 individuals), 10% for 7 years (2 individuals), 0% for 8-13 years, 10% for 14 years (2 individuals), 5% for 15 years (1 individual), and 25% for 16 years (5 individuals).

The length of residence correlates with increased participation compared to newcomers, as long-term residents generally have more interaction experience, fostering a sense of belonging. The local communities inherently utilize their environment, social conditions, and natural resources for their benefit [18-20].

More extended residence period fosters a sense of ownership of the environment. Long-term LFFC membership increases members' responsibility towards the institution, making them feel proud and involved. LFFC Padamara members take pride in their achievements and in winning various competitions organized by both district and provincial agricultural departments.

Examples include Mr. Sutarso from Sokawera Village, who first place in the provincial self-supporting extension competition (2018) and rice cultivation group competition (2018); Mr. Sarijan from Dawuhan Village, first place at the district level and second place at the provincial level in the corn cultivation group competition; the late Mr. Sudirwan from Sokawera Village, first place at the district level in the *jajar legowo* system competition (2018); Mr. Salimin and Mr. Turmudi from Prigi Village, first place at the district level and second place at the provincial level in the PUAP competition (2018); and Mr. Harto and Mr. Abdul from Karanggambas Village, third place at the provincial level in the PUAP competition (2019). Each member's dedication significantly supports participation by contributing to the collective needs according to their abilities. The membership duration-based characteristics of the research subjects are illustrated in Figure 4.

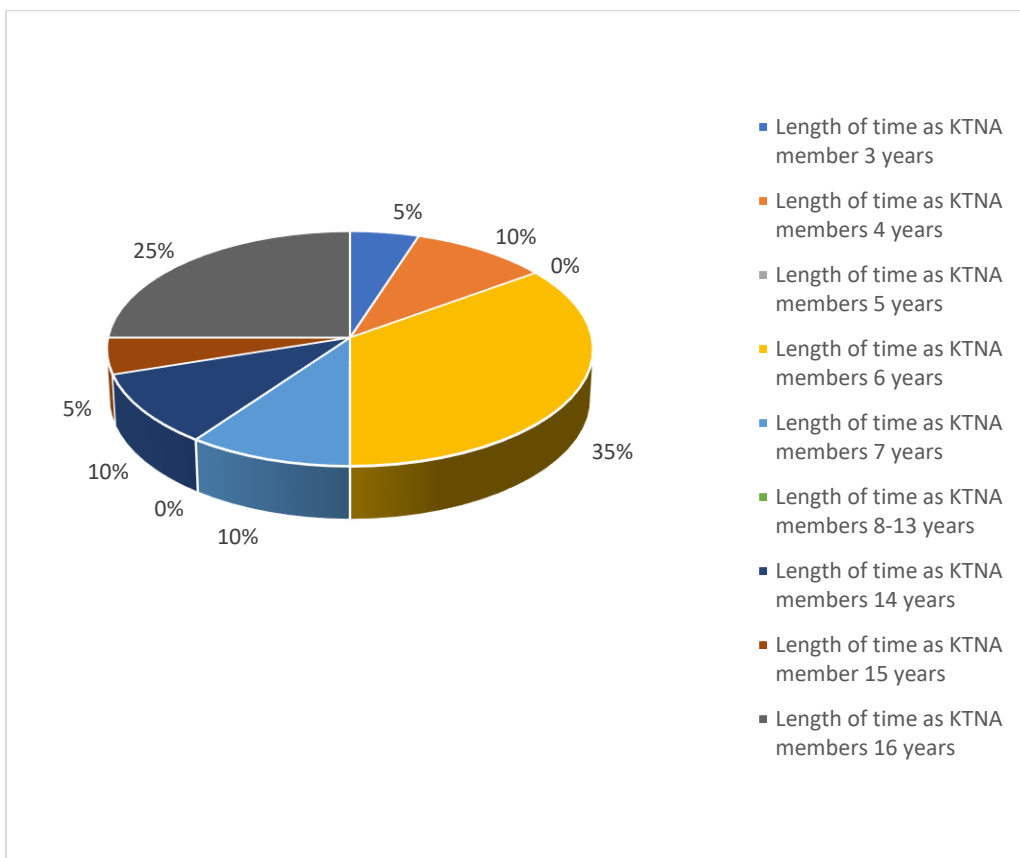


Figure 4. Membership Duration-Based Characteristics of Research Subjects

***Participation from an Internal Aspect Based on Benefits Received***

Based on the results of the research questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) activities, members reported numerous benefits from participating in LFFC Padamara activities. Regarding the first indicator, the research questionnaire results showed that 90% (18 respondents) strongly agreed, and 10% (2 respondents) agreed.

Member participation in an institution is often driven by the orientation towards achieving goals, precisely the benefits that can be derived from the institution.

The genuine participation involves obtaining benefits for actively participating members. The perceived benefits indicate that the empowerment activities have been successful as expected [21-22].

These benefits include: (1) Practical Benefits: Members can learn about agricultural science and its dynamics, including land preparation, planting, maintenance, harvesting, and post-harvest activities. Such practical experience is highly beneficial for the members; (2) Building Camaraderie: Developing close relationships among fellow farmers who are members fosters strong community bonds. This facilitates cooperation in various matters; (3) Learning Opportunities: Enhancing Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills (KAS) related to various agricultural concepts, both traditional and modern, such as selecting new superior varieties (VUB) based on current weather conditions, balanced fertilizer use, minimizing chemical fertilizers, optimizing organic fertilizers, and various soil amendment nutrients, intermittent water use management, and controlling endemic pests and diseases; (4) Increasing Environmental Awareness: Promoting sustainable agriculture; (5) Appreciating Agricultural

Production: Understanding the entire process from upstream to downstream and increasing appreciation for healthy and quality food; (6) Expanding Positive Networks: Building connections that can be leveraged to start entrepreneurial ventures, thus increasing members' income and quality of life; (7) Leadership and Organizational Management Training: Learning how to manage an institution effectively, with transparency between leaders and members to build trust; (8) Boosting Self-Confidence: Gaining more knowledge and hands-on experience makes members more confident in managing their agricultural land. This increased confidence keeps members interested and enthusiastic about participating in activities, enhancing participation in the agricultural institution.

Every member has equal opportunities to acquire knowledge, apply it personally, and is encouraged to share it with other farmers, akin to a "drop of oil," spreading knowledge to others. Knowledge dissemination is conducted through the Adult Learning System (POD) via practice and training activities [23-24]

The next indicator is the orientation towards appreciation and recognition from administrators, other farmers, the wider community, and the government. Questionnaire results showed that 35% (7 respondents) strongly agreed, and 65% (13 respondents) agreed. Following the research questionnaire results, in-depth interviews, and FGD activities, it was found that members actively participate based on the orientation of gaining recognition from administrators, other farmers, and the government for several reasons.

Participating in agricultural and institutional activities makes members feel more respected by other farmers not part of the institution. This orientation fulfills practical needs and reflects the farmers' aspirations to hold a position and influence within the agrarian community in their respective areas.

Being part of a respected agricultural institution makes members feel more acknowledged and prestigious among their peers. Members believe that joining this agricultural institution empowers them to transform sustainable farming practices, improving overall welfare. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

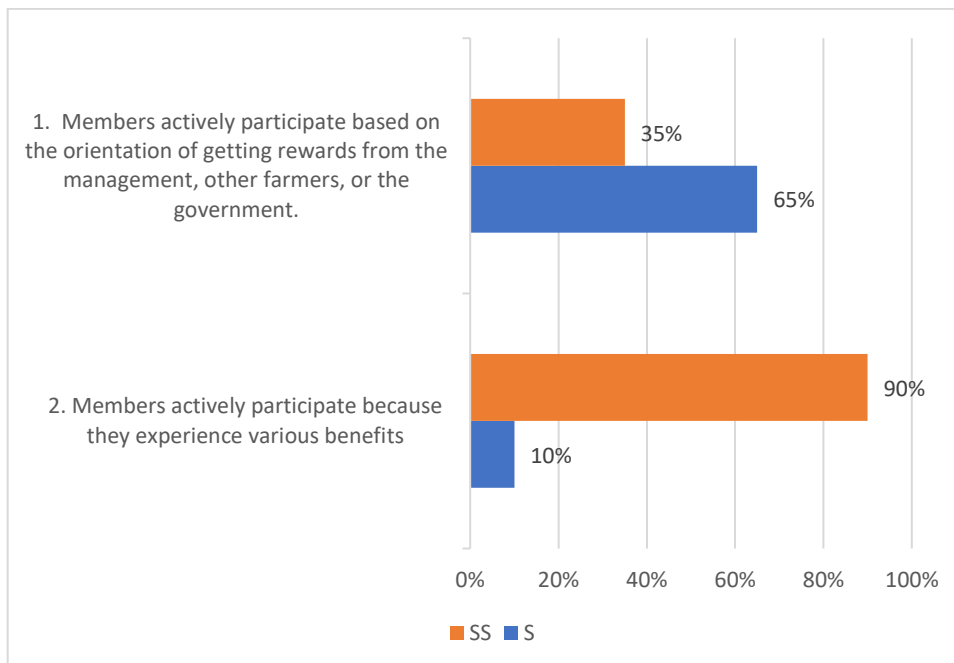


Figure 5. Participation Based on Benefits Received by Members



***Participation from an External Aspect Based on Local Socio-Cultural, the Role of Extension Agents, and Leadership Capabilities***

Based on the results of the research questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) activities, it was found that external factors influence participation. The local culture of "guyub rukun" (community solidarity) showed the highest agreement frequency, with 35% strongly agreeing, followed by the role of agricultural extension agents at 30%, the paradigm of environmental conservation at 25%, and leadership capabilities at 15%.

The first indicator is the members' perception of the socio-cultural factor of "guyub rukun". The questionnaire results revealed that 35% (7 respondents) strongly agreed, and 65% (13 respondents) agreed. The socio-cultural factor of "guyub rukun" significantly influences participation levels and motivation in fostering member solidarity.

A positive socio-cultural environment promotes open communication, cooperation, and discussion among members. This facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences, thereby collectively enhancing individual capacities in agricultural cultivation. Socio-culture can establish shared norms and values towards sustainable agricultural practices. Members are inclined to consistently contribute according to the values upheld by the agricultural institution [25-27].

A culture of togetherness motivates members, making them feel valued and highly committed to planning and executing collective decisions. A conducive environment encourages members to experiment and adopt technological innovations, which are expected to improve quality and efficiency in agriculture. The firm "guyub-rukun" socio-culture in the Padamara sub-district is a unique asset for the area.

The second indicator is the members' perception of the role and guidance of agricultural field extension agents (PPL). The questionnaire results showed that 30% (6 respondents) strongly agreed, and 70% (14 respondents) agreed. The members of this agricultural institution appreciate the role of extension agents.

This is reflected in the education and various training sessions the extension agents provide on the latest agricultural techniques, resource management, and continual education towards sustainable agriculture.

Extension agents also offer consultation and guidance on challenges and obstacles related to agriculture, such as controlling endemic pests in the Padamara sub-district through techniques like the Trap Barrier System (TBS) for rats and the brown planthopper control movement (*gerdal*) in various areas. Extension agents frequently conduct relevant training to enhance members' technical and managerial skills. Occasionally, they facilitate the invitation of experts or speakers to provide additional insights.

Together with the members, extension agents develop clear and directed agricultural activity plans through the annual institutional program. They also assist in monitoring and evaluating activities, building partnership networks, developing marketing strategies, and accessing competitive markets for members' agricultural products.

Members remain enthusiastic, even though the training is conducted independently through regular monthly contributions during meetings. The role of extension agents can significantly enhance member participation[.

The third indicator is the members' perception of the leadership activity, particularly the chairman and board members, influencing participation levels. The questionnaire results showed that 15% (3 respondents) strongly agreed, and 85% (17 respondents) agreed.

According to Sunarti (in Purwandari and Mussadun, 2016), external factors influencing participation include the presence of leaders with the capability to influence the community and maintain good relationships with various parties.

The leadership capabilities, specifically the activeness of the chairman and board members, significantly affect member participation in meetings, applying agricultural knowledge, and sharing it with other farmers in their areas. This aligns with the Javanese proverb by Ki Hajar Dewantara: "*ing ngarso sung tulodho, ing madyo mangun karso, tut wuri handayani*," which emphasizes the importance of a leader's character in setting a good example, providing ideas, and encouraging the development of existing potential. When leaders actively participate in activities, the members will likely follow suit. The external aspects can be seen in Figure 6 below:

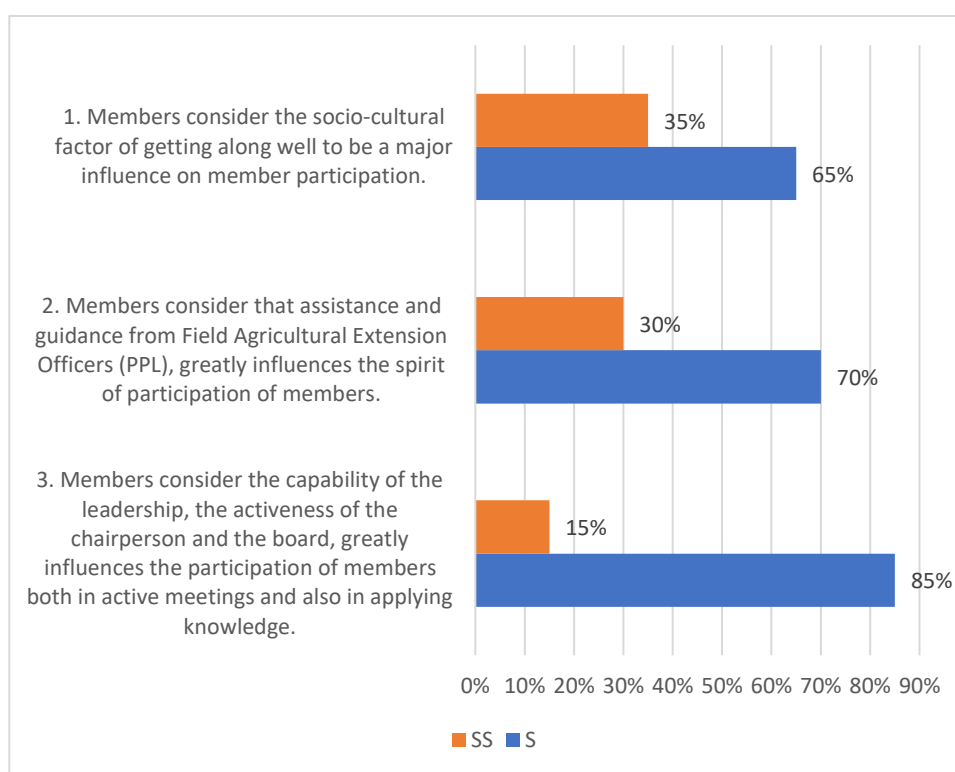


Figure 6. Participation Based on External Aspects

#### 4. Conclusion

The characteristics of the study subjects were assessed based on age, gender, education level, and duration of membership in LFFC Padamara. The majority of the subjects were male (85%), aged 46-60 years (45%), with a high school education (60%), earning between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 per month (65%), and all had been members of LFFC for more than three years.

The participation of LFFC Padamara members has been implemented in various aspects, one of which is based on the benefits received. The benefits of participation include increased knowledge and insight, maintaining social bonds and enhancing camaraderie among members, skills in making various plant nutrients and bio-organic soil amendments to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers, thereby lowering production costs, and realizing environmentally friendly

sustainable agriculture. Participation from the internal aspect based on the benefits received by members shows the highest level of agreement frequency, with a percentage of 90%.

There are external factors that determine the participation of LFFC Padamara members, including the solid socio-cultural/budaya 'guyub rukun,' which is highly effective in reducing individualistic tendencies among members; optimal guidance from agricultural field extension agents (PPL); and leaders with sound capabilities. Participation from the external aspect, namely the 'guyub rukun' culture, shows the highest agreement frequency, with a percentage of 35%.

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