

## Community Engagement in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions: A Paradigmatic Critique

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**Abstract.** Community engagement serves as a vital bridge between the academic sphere and social reality. The community is the ideal partner in applying, developing, testing, and evaluating theoretical-conceptual ideas. However, community engagement within State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri, PTKIN*) appears to be limited to a service-oriented paradigm, predominantly focused on religious services. This study examines these patterns through a qualitative-descriptive approach involving documentary analysis from Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Alauddin Makassar, UIN Batusangkar, and the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. Employing textual interpretation, comparative analysis, and critical reflection, the research identifies an outdated paradigm in PTKIN's community engagement, one that fails to adapt to shifting societal realities. The evolving nature of society necessitates a corresponding shift in the conceptual and practical framework of community engagement. A paradigmatic transformation is essential if community engagement at PTKIN is to remain relevant and contributive both to the university and the broader society.

**Keywords:** change; community engagement; paradigm; society

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of systematic community engagement efforts by Indonesian universities in the 1950s–1960s established a direct link between higher education institutions and society. Despite its scholarly attention and the development of diverse perspectives within academic discourse, community engagement has often functioned as an instrument of developmentalist paradigms—frequently influenced by Western models through state apparatuses (Suwignyo, 2024). In the context of PTKIN, a persistent paradigm frames community engagement narrowly as the provision of religious guidance and counsel, underpinned by a deeply embedded belief system intrinsic to religious higher education in Indonesia (Jun & Collins, 2019).

Two contradictory paradigms underlie the inception of community engagement traditions in Islamic higher education. While these paradigms are historically contextual and may have evolved, they remain relevant for understanding current practices and offer a foundation for critical inquiry. Community engagement involves both internal

institutional goals and broader societal objectives—two dimensions that, although interdependent, often diverge in practice. Thus, a conceptual reexamination is required to understand community engagement as a dynamic, multifaceted field. It is crucial to identify the paradigmatic threads that link the interests of the university, the society, and the state.

This necessitates a critical reassessment of the concept of community engagement within PTKIN. What is needed is an awareness of social sensitivity—an orientation that transcends religious didacticism and the “ivory tower” stereotype often attributed to Islamic higher education. Ideally, community engagement should be rooted in an in-depth understanding of societal needs and fostered as a grassroots social movement driven by the community's own consciousness.

As a core component of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, *Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat* (community engagement) aspires to embody values of social justice, national development, and Islamic ethics. However, in practice, its implementation often diverges from this ideal. Institutions such as UIN, IAIN, and STAIN have formalized programs like faculty-led service projects and student community engagement programs (KKN), but the culture of engagement remains procedural—dominated by administrative requirements, reporting, and compliance.

Consequently, community engagement is not seen as a transformative activity. It is often reduced to an administrative obligation, rather than a meaningful opportunity for students to cultivate empathy, address real-world problems, and apply Islamic social justice principles. One of the critical issues lies in the superficial perception, lack of innovation, and contextual irrelevance of many engagement projects. Faculty and students are often assigned generic programs with little adaptation to the specific socio-cultural and economic challenges of the target communities. Furthermore, collaborations between universities and communities are frequently shallow—limited to short-term activities without long-term impact or sustainability. This diminishes both the educational value for students and the tangible benefits for local residents.

Given its mandate to develop Islamic knowledge, PTKIN is tasked not only with education and research but also with producing socially responsible agents of change. This role positions PTKIN with a heavier burden than other universities: to foster community development in ways that contribute to national progress.

By analyzing the procedures, operational models, and implementation practices of community engagement at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Alauddin Makassar, UIN Batusangkar, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs—which governs these institutions—this study utilizes qualitative documentary analysis. It focuses on paradigmatic dimensions (Kuhn, 1996) as a framework to interpret existing practices and critically reflect on their alignment with contemporary societal needs. The study assumes that current models still carry outdated paradigms, and thus, there is a pressing need for paradigm shifts—moving from humanitarian intent alone to emancipatory principles.

Such transformation can only occur by dismantling the old paradigm and constructing a new, more contextually grounded one.

The choice of institutions for this study reflects regional diversity in religious culture. UIN Sunan Kalijaga represents Javanese religiosity, UIN Alauddin Makassar reflects the Bugis and Mandar traditions, and UIN Batusangkar embodies Malay and Batak religiosity. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, as a national policy maker, represents institutional religiosity within its local and national context. Their narratives and discourses shape the paradigms of community engagement across PTKIN. This analysis explores how those paradigms operate and what challenges they present, ultimately raising the question: Is there a movement toward a more emancipatory and transformative model of community engagement?

In conclusion, this study posits that paradigmatic issues persist and merit deeper critique. The prevailing normative and administrative paradigm must be replaced with a more reflective, participatory, and emancipatory model—one that aligns with the liberating and humanizing spirit of Islamic knowledge.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, with documentary analysis serving as the primary method for data collection and interpretation. Rather than relying on fieldwork or interviews, the research draws exclusively from institutional documents, including official guidelines from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, academic reports, strategic plans, and program evaluations related to community engagement (*Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat*, or *PkM*) from selected State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri*, or *PTKIN*), namely UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, UIN Alauddin Makassar, and UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs as the overseeing authority.

The choice of documentary analysis is grounded in two principal considerations. First, institutional documents reflect formal paradigms, expectations, and operational structures that shape the implementation of community engagement within PTKIN. Second, this method enables the researcher to trace the ideological and paradigmatic foundations embedded within these texts—elements that are often overlooked in empirical assessments of *PkM* activities.

To guide the analysis, this study adopts a paradigmatic critique framework, which focuses on how underlying assumptions shape the orientation, objectives, and praxis of community engagement. Drawing on emancipatory theory as articulated by Paulo Freire and the tradition of public sociology (e.g., Burawoy, 2005), the research critically examines whether current paradigms reflect a top-down bureaucratic model or move toward more participatory, dialogical, and transformative engagement with local communities.

The analytical process unfolds in three stages:

- 2.1 Textual Interpretation. Identifying the language, tone, and conceptual framing used in official documents to articulate the aims and methods of PkM.
- 2.2 Comparative Analysis. Differentiating the paradigmatic orientations of the three PTKIN institutions to detect similarities, divergences, and emerging patterns.
- 2.3 Critical Reflection. Evaluating the implications of prevailing paradigms in relation to social justice, community empowerment, and local agency.

Through this methodology, the study aims not only to map how community engagement is institutionally structured but also to uncover its ideological positioning and its potential (or lack thereof) to foster emancipatory outcomes in the communities it seeks to serve.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Community Engagement: A Literature Review

The term *pengabdian* (devotion or service) in the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language) is derived from *abdi*, which refers to the act or process of dedicating oneself, being obedient, and showing loyalty to the one being served (KBBI.web.id, 2025). In English, the concept of *pengabdian kepada masyarakat* is commonly translated as community engagement or community engagement, both denoting activities aimed at serving or guiding the community. The word devotion can also be traced to the Latin term *devotio*, which implies sacrifice or dedicating oneself to the Supreme Being or a deity (Versnel, 197 C.E.). Despite variations in terminology, the core of the concept lies in a profound sense of dedication, loyalty, and commitment to a particular cause or objective—an engagement often passionate enough to transcend formal religious boundaries.

In Western academic literature, the concept of *pengabdian kepada masyarakat* is broadly referred to as community engagement. This concept not only includes the initial process of community mapping but also extends to critical analysis of engagement strategies. Empowerment is initiated through mapping and critical synthesis, followed by research, community involvement, and pilot implementation in various engagement settings (Farnell & Ilic, 2021). Bringle and Hatcher conceptualize community engagement as “a collaborative, solutions-oriented effort to address societal issues by leveraging the knowledge and resources of higher education institutions.”

The terminology gained prominence during the 1980s and 1990s, when many universities began to integrate community engagement practices into their curricula, vision, and mission statements (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). As a result, community engagement (or *Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat – PkM*) has become more structured, organized, and widely acknowledged within higher education institutions worldwide. This perspective emphasizes the importance of collaboration among academic institutions, communities, and governmental bodies in identifying, planning, and implementing community-focused programs.

Indonesia's Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (Kemenristekdikti) defines community engagement as *"a higher education activity aimed at empowering communities through the application, development, and dissemination of scientific knowledge, technology, and the arts to improve quality of life."* In this context, universities act as agents of change, assisting communities in identifying problems, developing solutions, and implementing beneficial programs. Moreover, such engagement fosters mutually beneficial relationships between universities and society (Cress et al., 2005). Yudhoatmojo also emphasizes that community engagement serves as a platform for universities to apply the results of research and innovation on a broader scale, thereby generating greater societal benefits (Wekke, 2022).

Within the higher education framework, the *Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi* (Three Pillars of Higher Education)—education, research, and community engagement—provides a strong foundation to bridge academia with real-world societal needs. According to the Directorate General of Higher Education, the *Tridharma* is *"an obligation of every higher education institution, comprising education, research, and community service, implemented in an integrated and sustainable manner and aligned with governance and development efforts."* Therefore, community engagement initiatives must be synergistically aligned with and supported by the broader institutional mission.

Zlotkowski argues that community engagement can enhance institutional reputation and public image, foster student involvement in experiential learning, and strengthen networks and partnerships beyond academia (Zlotkowski, 2011). As such, integrating these concepts into curriculum development can inspire more relevant and community-responsive educational models.

One of the core roles of community engagement is the empowerment of communities through participatory approaches. Ward and Wolf-Wendel point out that this approach emphasizes enhancing the capacity of communities to identify and resolve their own issues while developing sustainable, locally grounded solutions (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). Through such initiatives, universities can equip communities with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to take ownership of their development and improve their quality of life, both individually and collectively.

Nevertheless, despite the growing recognition of PkM, several challenges remain in its implementation. One major challenge is ensuring program sustainability. As Horowitz et al. highlight, many engagement programs tend to be short-term projects reliant on external funding and resources, which hampers their long-term viability (Horowitz et al., 2009). Higher education institutions, therefore, must develop sustainable strategies, including capacity building within local communities and the generation of internal resources to support long-term programs.

Another significant challenge is the lack of formal recognition and incentives for academics involved in community engagement. PkM activities are often seen as additional tasks that are not adequately acknowledged in academic performance evaluations, such as promotion assessments or merit awards (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). As a result, many academics may feel reluctant or insufficiently motivated to

participate in PkM initiatives, despite their potential positive impacts on society and institutions.

As noted in paulkeviel.com, Keivel stresses that community engagement should not reinforce a hierarchical dynamic in which communities are merely passive recipients of aid. Rather, engagement should catalyze social change, not merely social service. Unfortunately, higher education has not always succeeded in enabling its graduates to escape societal challenges such as unemployment or poverty, suggesting that universities still struggle to dismantle systemic social inequalities (Marginson, 2014). Therefore, quality education must encompass not only academic excellence but also the development of character and skills necessary for active and adaptive participation in community development. Universities must align curricula and pedagogical methods with societal needs, offering students practical, real-world learning opportunities through community engagement.

As evidenced, addressing these challenges requires active participation from various stakeholders, including universities, government bodies, communities, and the private sector. Jacoby asserts that strong partnerships among stakeholders can foster an environment conducive to sustainable and effective PkM practices (Jacoby, 2014). In addition, supportive policy measures—such as academic incentives for faculty involvement and adequate funding allocations—are essential to ensure the implementation of high-quality community engagement programs. Simultaneously, engagement-oriented approaches can help more accurately identify community problems and develop appropriate strategies and technologies to enhance community well-being (Ali & Hidayah, 2021). Consequently, universities should promote research relevant to societal needs and ensure that research outcomes are effectively implemented through community engagement.

To maintain their integrity and independence, however, universities must ensure that community engagement is conducted with high ethical standards and integrity, avoiding unhealthy political interference or conflicts of interest. As Kurniawan notes, higher education institutions bear a moral responsibility to disseminate knowledge and skills to those in need, contributing to the overall well-being of society. Accordingly, universities must develop inclusive community engagement programs accessible to all societal groups, including the economically and socially marginalized.

Yudo Wicaksono offers a critical perspective on the development of higher education in Indonesia. He categorizes Indonesian higher education into two streams: secular higher education, which has been established since the colonial era (e.g., medical education in Jakarta and civil engineering in Bandung), and religious (Islamic) higher education, which emerged more recently. This latter category has introduced a new typology of Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi, with a distinctive Islamic identity that increasingly shapes the form and substance of community engagement (Wicaksono & Friawan, 2022).

### 3.2 The Mosaic of Community Engagement in the Perspective of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and within the PTKIN Environment

#### 3.2.1 Community Engagement According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs

The discussion on the regulations, concepts, and paradigms of community engagement as promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs—as the governing body for Islamic Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam or PTKI)—refers to the Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia No. 55 of 2014 concerning Research and Community engagement in Religious Higher Education Institutions. The core elements of this regulation are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Community engagement Concepts According to Ministerial Regulation No. 55 of 2014 (Republic of Indonesia, 2014)

No	Concept / Article	Statement
1	<b>Definition</b> (Article 1, Paragraph 3)	Community engagement is defined as an activity carried out by the academic community that applies scientific knowledge and technology to improve welfare, empower communities, and facilitate social transformation aimed at achieving social justice, guaranteeing human rights, and contributing to the intellectual advancement of the nation.
2	<b>Principles</b> (Article 12)	Community engagement must be: a) participatory; b) empowering; c) inclusive; d) gender-equitable and just; e) accountable; f) transparent; g) based on partnership; h) sustainable; i) professional; and j) beneficial.
3	<b>Objectives</b> (Article 13)	The objectives are to: a) empower communities; b) develop environmental potential; c) apply and promote science and technology; d) absorb and resolve societal problems; and e) foster the potential, social sensitivity, and service orientation of the academic community.
4	<b>Scope</b> (Article 14)	The scope of community engagement in Religious Higher Education Institutions covers scientific and professional fields developed by each institution.
5	<b>Forms of Engagement</b> (Article 15)	(1) Community engagement is carried out through various activities, in accordance with institutional capacity and societal needs. (2) It can be conducted individually or in groups by members of the academic community.
6	<b>Outcomes</b> (Article 16, Paragraph 2; Article 17, Paragraph 3)	Community engagement outputs may serve as learning resources and contribute to the development of science and technology. Work that demonstrates academic contribution and/or is published in international journals may be awarded special recognition.

The understanding of community engagement as described in the above regulation was further clarified and expanded in the Technical Guidelines issued by the Directorate of Islamic Education in 2024. In general, these clarifications are reflected in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Community Engagement Methodologies in PTKI  
 Directorate General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2025)

No	Community Engagement Methodology	Description
1	<b>Participatory Action Research (PAR)</b>	PAR is a research approach that involves the active participation of community members affected by the problem under study. They serve not merely as research subjects, but as collaborative partners in the processes of research, planning, implementation, and evaluation. This approach aims to produce appropriate solutions and build the community's capacity to address its own challenges.
2	<b>Community-Based Research (CBR)</b>	CBR is a research model that emphasizes active involvement of the community throughout the entire research process—from planning and implementation to analysis and dissemination. It aims to address problems encountered by the community and develop solutions that are relevant and sustainable.
3	<b>Service Learning (SL)</b>	SL is an educational approach that combines academic learning with meaningful community engagement. It fosters civic responsibility and allows students to apply classroom knowledge through direct engagement with societal needs.
4	<b>Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)</b>	ABCD is a community development model that focuses on identifying, utilizing, and strengthening the existing assets within a community. Rather than concentrating on problems or deficits, it values local resources such as human, physical, natural, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual assets.

The book developed by the Sub-Directorate of Research and Community Engagement, in collaboration with several authors, outlines four alternative methodologies for conducting community engagement: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based Research (CBR), Service Learning (SL), and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). This publication is highly significant, as community engagement conducted through clear and systematic methodologies tends to yield broader and more concrete benefits for the public, thereby enhancing public trust in higher education institutions.

### 3.2.2 Community Engagement at UIN Batusangkar

As an Islamic-based higher education institution, UIN Batusangkar has developed various community engagement programs. These programs focus on the



application of scientific knowledge and the utilization of available resources to assist communities and strengthen community capacities through research and innovation (Siregar & Pulungan, 2024).

Community engagement activities at UIN Batusangkar include the following: First, Training and Counseling Programs aimed at enhancing community skills in specific fields such as technology, entrepreneurship, or health. Second, Social Research and Innovation that address social issues such as poverty, education, or other local problems. Third, Institutional Strengthening of Religious Organizations by providing support in human resources and technology based on academic expertise. Fourth, Collaborative Programs with Local Communities to improve quality of life, such as education, economic development, and health initiatives. Activities also include the development of foster villages and waste recycling seminars and training.

Through the Institute for Research and Community Engagement (LPPM), UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar has initiated a community engagement program in Nagari Tanjung Bonai, Lintau Buo Utara Subdistrict, Tanah Datar Regency (Oktarizal, 2024). During the initial visit and observation, the aim was to identify community potentials, problems, and needs to serve as the foundation for a foster-village program. Community engagement at UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar reflects the university's social commitment. These activities involve faculty members, students, and administrative staff. Examples include strengthening family psychological resilience and addressing early marriage and family issues.

Overall, the community engagement activities at UIN Batusangkar remain general and largely similar to the programs conducted by other Islamic universities (UINs) across Indonesia. As of the writing of this paper, no distinctive or unique feature has been identified that differentiates UIN Batusangkar's community engagement from others.

### 3.2.3 Community Engagement at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

Community engagement in academic environments takes various forms, with one of the most common approaches being the KKN (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata* or Community engagement Program), which is a manifestation of the university's *Tri Dharma* (three pillars of higher education) and is managed by the Institute for Research and Community Engagement (LPPM). This program aims to support faculty members in conducting academic activities aligned with the university's vision and mission. In this context, students and faculty are expected to collaboratively analyze real-life cases and implement problem-solving and empowerment models, thus serving as a reference framework for community engagement within UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta.

Such initiatives go beyond academic seminars or workshops and are grounded in legal frameworks derived from higher education legislation. This concept was also discussed during the community engagement conference (Call for Papers) organized by LPPM in collaboration with university faculties. The aim was to disseminate and

document the results of research activities conducted during KKN programs (Soehadha et al., 2019).

The Rector of UIN Sunan Kalijaga for the 2020–2024 period explicitly stated that *“community engagement is one of the university’s key identities”* (Muhrisun, 2021). KKN student activities are thus seen as a practical and tangible form of community engagement within the university’s academic ecosystem.

Furthermore, community engagement at UIN Sunan Kalijaga emphasizes an interdisciplinary partnership approach, research-based community engagement, and KKN. This integrated model aims to provide comprehensive solutions and generate new understandings that bridge the intellectual elite and local communities, especially in preserving traditional religious culture. As an Islamic university, UIN Sunan Kalijaga holds a positive public image, often associated with religious scholars (ustadz and ulama), reinforcing its religious identity (Soehadha, 2016).

Other aspects that support the university’s community engagement efforts—while maintaining traditional values—include environmental initiatives such as community-based waste management. For instance, Dr. Munawar Ahmad introduced the implementation of the Incinerator System (SI) for waste processing on campus, integrating theoretical and applied approaches informed by scientific literature (Ahmad, 2024). Simultaneously, KKN students organized training on converting household waste into organic fertilizer under a Capacity Building framework with the theme *“Build Our Community with Empowerment Activity”* in Maguwoharjo, Yogyakarta. As explained by Isro Hariadi, S.P., an agricultural extension officer (BPTP), this activity combined material presentation, dialogue, and hands-on demonstrations of organic fertilizer production (Hariadi, 2022).

### 3.2.4 Community Engagement at UIN Alauddin Makassar

The concept of community engagement at UIN Alauddin Makassar incorporates an integrated learning system between students and lecturers (STILeS) as a strategic effort toward sustainable learning. The core component of this system is the integration of academic learning into community contexts. This is operationalized through the Service-Learning (SL) methodology, where students are actively engaged in community-based projects and apply academic knowledge in practical ways (Kambau et al., 2016).

This model has drawn attention in academic circles, such as in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) hosted by the university’s Institute for Research and Community Engagement (LP2M), which involved multiple stakeholders to explore relevant potentials, challenges, and opportunities to improve community quality of life (Hildayant, 2023).

In another context, UIN Alauddin Makassar has demonstrated a commitment to becoming a research-oriented university, emphasizing the importance of scientific publication as a contribution to knowledge development (Ibrahim, 2024). Regarding political education, the Head of the Political Science Department initiated community engagement efforts during the pre-election period by providing civic orientation,

education, and political literacy in Maros. This initiative aimed to raise public awareness against money politics (Muqsith, 2023).

Internationally, Dr. Dewi Setiawati, a faculty member of UIN Alauddin Makassar, has established community collaboration with Indonesian communities in Sydney, Australia. This program highlights the importance of international partnerships, specifically with Ashabul Kahfi Language School (AKLS), to support continuous learning and the pursuit of aspirations (Setiawati, 2024).

### 3.3 Toward a New Paradigm of Community Engagement

Community engagement in higher education in Indonesia—such as that practiced by the aforementioned Islamic State Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN)—remains largely tied to traditional models of institutionalized service. These models are typically administered through formal university structures and carried out by both faculty members and students, most notably through the *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* (KKN or Community engagement Program), which first emerged in the 1970s. During the *Dies Natalis* of Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in 1972, President Soeharto expressed his vision: “Every student should spend a period of time living and working in rural areas, helping villagers address development issues as part of their academic curriculum.” This statement led the Ministry of Education and Culture to mandate three state universities—UGM, UNHAS, and UNAND—to launch the KKN program. While this initiative has played a pivotal role in bridging academic knowledge with community development, its relevance and effectiveness in contemporary contexts require renewed critical examination.

#### 3.3.1 Expanding the Meaning and Scope of Community Engagement

Community engagement represents a core commitment of higher education institutions in Indonesia as part of the Tri Dharma of Higher Education—the threefold mission encompassing education, research, and community engagement. Through programs like KKN, students are directly involved with local communities, applying their academic knowledge and skills to address real-world challenges in areas such as education, healthcare, agriculture, and environmental sustainability. These engagements foster students’ social responsibility and leadership abilities while simultaneously empowering rural communities through collaboration and innovation. Accordingly, community engagement programs should embody the deeply rooted cultural values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) that are integral to Indonesian society.

Community engagement constitutes a fundamental component of higher education across both public and Islamic institutions in Indonesia. In secular universities, community engagement is often conducted through programs like KKN, grounded in the Tri Dharma framework. These programs are designed to apply academic expertise in solving practical issues in sectors such as agriculture, education, public health, and environmental conservation. The emphasis is placed on fostering civic

responsibility and empowering students to contribute to national development through interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation.

Conversely, Islamic State Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), such as UINs, IAINs, and STAINs, incorporate community engagement not only as part of the *Tri Dharma* but also as a reflection of Islamic ethics and values. Programs like KKN with religious orientations, including those focused on religious moderation, aim to promote interfaith tolerance, social harmony, and moral leadership alongside conventional developmental goals. In the Islamic tradition, community engagement is perceived as a form of *ibadah* (worship) and *amal shalih* (righteous deed), with a strong emphasis on social justice, compassion, and service to others as acts of devotion to God. While both types of institutions aim to produce socially responsible and capable graduates, Islamic higher education adds a spiritual and moral dimension rooted in religious teachings. Thus, community engagement in UINs is not merely a civic obligation but also a religious calling. The key distinction lies in the religious mission and moral transformation that Islamic institutions integrate into their community engagement strategies.

Community engagement in PTKINs such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Alauddin Makassar, and UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar—under the coordination of the Directorate General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs—remains firmly grounded in the *Tri Dharma* framework and infused with Islamic religious values. These institutions emphasize community engagement as a core academic duty, aligned with the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*—bringing benefit and mercy to all creation. Programs like KKN *Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation KKN), which seek to promote religious moderation, interfaith dialogue, and peaceful coexistence, exemplify this principle in practice. In addition to addressing practical community needs—such as education, sanitation, and economic development—community engagement in various forms reflects the mission of Islamic higher education to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also ethically responsible and socially active in improving the welfare of Indonesia's diverse population (Azyumardi, 2017).

Therefore, despite these noble goals, the scope and implementation of community engagement programs still face significant challenges. Many initiatives become entangled in the grand symbolism of religious identity, often neglecting the actual needs of the communities they aim to serve. As a result, some activities are ceremonial or superficial in nature. The service work undertaken thus far has often lacked meaningful and sustainable impact. Coordination among universities, local governments, and community stakeholders remains weak, leading to fragmented efforts. Additionally, many members of the academic community at PTKINs tend to view community engagement merely as a graduation requirement or a performance metric, rather than as a transformative learning experience genuinely aimed at improving societal capacity and quality of life.

This situation is further exacerbated by limited understanding and training, inadequate project monitoring, and a lack of integration between academic research and

community needs. Clearly, a paradigm shift is needed—one that reconceptualizes community engagement as a sincere and empowering effort to serve and uplift communities.

### 3.3.2 A Changing Society

Engaging in community engagement necessarily involves conceptualizing what constitutes “the community.” Traditionally, rural communities have often been prioritized over urban ones, and farming or fishing communities are commonly seen as more legitimate recipients of service than urban or working-class populations. However, new classifications and emerging variations challenge this conventional understanding of “community.” A review of the literature on community engagement across the four PTKIN institutions referenced earlier reveals that many conceptualizations of community have become outdated. Despite this, it is important to note that institutional leaders and educators within PTKIN continue to advocate for reforms to enhance the vision, methodology, implementation, and outcomes of community engagement.

The adoption of frameworks such as *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (Freedom to Learn–Independent Campus), and educational efforts that aim to generate real impact, present valuable opportunities to redesign community engagement programs like KKN and other service-learning initiatives to be more interdisciplinary, impactful, and student-centered. Additionally, there is an increasing push to integrate digital technology, entrepreneurial thinking, and sustainability principles into community-based projects. This is especially vital in addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change, rural poverty, religious extremism, and digital illiteracy—issues that are being tackled through approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) as mandated by the Directorate General of Islamic Education in the Community Engagement Methodology Handbook.

Zuhdi (2015) offers a critique of how Islamic higher education, despite advocating values such as religious moderation, often struggles to connect theoretical learning in the classroom with practical realities in the field. There exists a significant gap between theological discourse and the real-world engagement that is required. Although Islamic teachings are rich in concepts of service, compassion, and justice, students are not always equipped with the practical skills or critical frameworks needed to translate these values into effective community action. Furthermore, integration between academic research and community engagement remains minimal, despite the potential for mutual enrichment.

Institutionally, logistical challenges—such as inadequate funding, weak supervision, and inconsistent monitoring—further hinder the effectiveness of community engagement. Faculty involvement is often minimal, and feedback mechanisms from communities are either weak or non-existent, resulting in a lack of accountability and missed opportunities for continuous improvement. In sum, while the intentions behind community engagement in Islamic higher education are commendable and grounded in national education mandates as well as Islamic ethics,

the prevailing culture and implementation are often ritualistic and disconnected from deeper educational and social transformation.

What is needed is a shift toward more participatory, reflective, and impact-oriented approaches that align with the changing nature of community categories. The rural-urban dichotomy is increasingly irrelevant. Today, key characteristics of communities are defined not by geography, but by resilience and sustainability across social, economic, and spiritual dimensions. Urban communities, for example, may in some respects be more vulnerable than rural ones. The very nature of community has evolved: the physical, territorial conception of community is becoming blurred as many communities now exist and interact within virtual spheres. As such, virtual communities must be recognized as new subjects of engagement in the PTKIN context. A reimagined conception of "community" is essential for initiating a comprehensive reform of community engagement in Islamic higher education.

Moreover, when comparing institutions within the PTKIN network – such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Makassar, and UIN Batusangkar, as discussed in the data above—it becomes clear that the Ministry of Religious Affairs plays a dual role: as both facilitator and conductor in shaping the future patterns of community engagement. It is incumbent upon the Ministry to formulate a comprehensive roadmap for structuring and systematizing community engagement within PTKIN institutions. In this framework, universities such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga and others function as implementing bodies for the Ministry's community engagement agenda.

At the same time, considering the diversity of local cultures and various contextual factors, it is equally important to allow for institutional flexibility. Thus, a PTKIN—such as a UIN or IAIN—may justifiably develop and carry out community engagement programs that differ in focus or form from those of other institutions, provided they are responsive to local needs and realities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

At the conclusion of this paper, one significant finding emerges: both at the paradigmatic-conceptual level, in regulatory frameworks, and in the implementation processes of community engagement programs developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic Higher Education Institutions—such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Alauddin Makassar, and UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar—there remains a persistent reliance on classical understandings of key concepts. The notion of *pengabdian* (community engagement) is still largely confined to particularistic interpretations, especially within narrowly religious frameworks. Such a perspective ultimately restricts the broader potential and transformative capacity of community engagement itself. Similarly, the conceptualization of "community" continues to be shaped by outdated typologies—such as the religious community, agrarian society, or secular modern society.

For these reasons, a new paradigm of community engagement is urgently needed. The previous paradigm has shifted; there has been a transformation in the meaning, scope, existence, and even the very substance of both *pengabdian* and *masyarakat* (community), as well as the idea of community engagement itself. These changes are driven in part by emerging currents such as the decolonization of knowledge—particularly with regard to Indonesian identity and models of community development. Technological advances, particularly in social and digital media, have also significantly altered the existential reality of communities. The rise of virtual communities demands the formulation of new models of engagement. These virtual communities—often shaped by pragmatism and populism in all aspects of life—tend to drift away from idealistic and metaphysical religious principles.

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