




## The Marharoan Bolon Tradition as a Socio-Ecological Practice in the Sustainable Development of the Simalungun Community

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### ABSTRACT

*Local wisdom plays an important role in building harmonious relationships between communities and the environment. Marharoan Bolon, a tradition of mutual cooperation unique to the Simalungun community, reflects socio-ecological practices that embody the values of togetherness, solidarity, and care for the environment. This study aims to analyze the role of this tradition in supporting sustainable development, particularly through community participation in environmental management. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach through literature study and conceptual analysis from an ecological sociology perspective. The results show that Marharoan Bolon functions as a social mechanism that strengthens community cohesion while also serving as an adaptive strategy in maintaining the sustainability of natural resources. This tradition encourages active community involvement in village infrastructure development, land maintenance, and collective environmental preservation. However, the dynamics of modernization and changes in social structure pose significant challenges to the sustainability of these traditional values. Therefore, the preservation of Marharoan Bolon needs to be integrated with community-based development policies so that it can adapt to the contemporary socio-ecological context without losing its local cultural meaning.*  
**Keywords:** Marharoan Bolon, Simalungun community, local wisdom, sustainable development

### ABSTRAK

Kearifan lokal memainkan peran penting dalam membangun hubungan yang harmonis antara masyarakat dan lingkungan. Marharoan Bolon, sebuah tradisi kerja sama timbal balik yang khas bagi masyarakat Simalungun, mencerminkan praktik-praktik sosio-ekologis yang mewujudkan nilai-nilai kebersamaan, solidaritas, dan kepedulian terhadap lingkungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran tradisi ini dalam mendukung pembangunan berkelanjutan, khususnya melalui partisipasi masyarakat dalam pengelolaan lingkungan. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif melalui studi literatur dan analisis konseptual dari perspektif sosiologi ekologi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Marharoan Bolon berfungsi sebagai mekanisme sosial yang memperkuat kohesi komunitas sekaligus berperan sebagai strategi adaptif dalam menjaga keberlanjutan sumber daya alam. Tradisi ini mendorong keterlibatan aktif masyarakat dalam pembangunan infrastruktur desa, pemeliharaan lahan, dan pelestarian lingkungan secara kolektif. Namun, dinamika modernisasi dan perubahan struktur sosial menimbulkan tantangan signifikan terhadap keberlanjutan nilai-nilai tradisional ini. Oleh karena itu, pelestarian Marharoan Bolon perlu diintegrasikan dengan kebijakan pembangunan berbasis masyarakat agar dapat beradaptasi dengan konteks sosio-ekologis kontemporer tanpa kehilangan makna budaya lokalnya.

**Kata kunci:** Marharoan Bolon, masyarakat Simalungun, kearifan lokal, pembangunan berkelanjutan



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**1. Introduction**

In the context of community development, local wisdom plays a strategic role in shaping the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment. Local values not only represent the cultural identity of a community, but also serve as a social instrument that supports sustainable coexistence. Marharoan Bolon, a tradition of mutual cooperation unique to the Simalungun community, is a form of local wisdom that is deeply rooted in the social structure of rural communities. This tradition is not merely a collective activity to build public facilities, but also a social practice with ecological implications. In practice, Marharoan Bolon serves as a collective means for the community to manage environmental resources, such as the construction and maintenance of village infrastructure, land management, and the preservation of shared living spaces.

In recent decades, the discourse on sustainable development has increasingly emphasized the importance of integrating local knowledge systems into environmental governance and community development practices. Scholars argue that development models that neglect indigenous knowledge often fail to address the socio-cultural realities of local communities (Druker-Ibáñez & Cáceres-Jensen, 2022). In this context, local traditions such as Marharoan Bolon offer an alternative framework that is not only culturally embedded but also ecologically adaptive. These practices demonstrate how communities develop context-specific strategies to manage natural resources sustainably while maintaining social cohesion.

From the perspective of ecological sociology, the relationship between humans and the environment is not merely utilitarian but socially constructed through cultural values, norms, and collective practices. Marharoan Bolon reflects this interdependence by positioning environmental management as a shared social responsibility. Similar findings have been highlighted in studies on community-based natural resource management, where social capital plays a crucial role in ensuring sustainable outcomes (Musavengane & Simatele, 2016). Thus, examining Marharoan Bolon contributes to a broader understanding of how traditional institutions function as socio-ecological systems.

Table 1. Variables and Research Indicators

Variables	Indicators
<b>1. Marharoan Bolon</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community cooperation practices in Simalungun</li> <li>● Values of togetherness and social solidarity</li> <li>● Collective activities in village development</li> </ul>
<b>2. Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Management and conservation of natural resources</li> <li>● Community participation in preserving shared living spaces</li> <li>● Sustainability of local ecosystems</li> </ul>
<b>3. Sustainable Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integration of local cultural values in development</li> <li>● Social and ecological balance</li> <li>● Community resilience to change</li> </ul>

The values of togetherness and social responsibility inherent in this tradition reflect a form of social cohesion that supports the creation of a sustainable socio-ecological system. In other words, Marharoan Bolon is a traditional social mechanism that serves to maintain the stability of human interaction with the

environment. Modernization, urbanization, and changes in social structure pose serious challenges to the continuity of this tradition. The shift to individualistic mindsets and the weakening of community ties threaten the existence of the collective values that form the foundation of Marharoan Bolon. Therefore, it is important to reexamine the strategic role of this tradition in the context of sustainable development. Through an ecological sociology perspective, an analysis of Marharoan Bolon can reveal how local traditions contribute to environmental sustainability while strengthening the social resilience of communities.



Figure 1. Marharoan Bolon tradition, Simalungun

Furthermore, the concept of social capital becomes central in understanding the resilience of such traditions. Social capital, which includes trust, networks, and norms, enables communities to coordinate collective action effectively (Adhikari & Goldey, 2010). In the case of Marharoan Bolon, these elements are embedded in daily practices, allowing communities to respond adaptively to environmental and social challenges. This aligns with research in Indonesia showing that mutual cooperation traditions (*gotong royong*) significantly contribute to economic resilience and community problem-solving (Lukiyanto & Wijayaningtyas, 2020).

However, the sustainability of such traditions cannot be taken for granted. Rapid socio-economic transformations, including urbanization and the penetration of market-oriented values, have altered traditional patterns of interaction and weakened communal ties. Without deliberate efforts to integrate local wisdom into formal development frameworks, there is a risk that these practices may gradually disappear. Previous studies have focused primarily on cultural preservation and social values, leaving a gap in understanding how such traditions contribute to ecological sustainability and economic resilience. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing Marharoan Bolon through a socio-ecological systems perspective. The study provides both theoretical contributions and practical implications for integrating local wisdom into sustainable development frameworks.

## 2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the practice of Marharoan Bolon as a form of local wisdom of the Simalungun community in maintaining social cohesion. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore social meanings, cultural values, and the dynamics of community interactions in a contextual manner, thereby producing a deep understanding of the social phenomena being studied. The research location is in the Simalungun region, specifically in village communities that still actively practice the Marharoan Bolon tradition. This location was chosen based on historical and cultural considerations, where mutual cooperation is still an important part of community social life. Research informants were selected using snowball sampling, including traditional leaders, community members who practice the tradition, and the younger generation. This strategy allows researchers to obtain diverse perspectives that represent the social dynamics in these practices.

Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to explore the subjective experiences and cultural meanings of the informants, while participatory observation allowed researchers to directly observe the social interaction processes in mutual assistance activities. Documentation such as photographs and field notes served as supporting material in the analysis process. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis through the stages of reduction, categorization, interpretation, and analytical narrative compilation. Source and method triangulation was used to maintain the validity of the findings. In addition, the researchers applied research

ethics principles, including informed consent and participant identity protection, in order to maintain the integrity of the research process and respect the cultural values of indigenous peoples.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### **The Role of Marharoan Bolon in Building Social Solidarity**

In Simalungun society, Marharoan Bolon plays a very important role as a means of building and strengthening social solidarity. This tradition of mutual cooperation is not only a form of collective work, but also a manifestation of the values of togetherness that have become historically and culturally ingrained. Activities such as helping to build houses for residents, repairing village infrastructure, or cleaning the environment become moments where the community gathers, interacts, and strengthens social relationships. In this context, solidarity does not only arise as a spontaneous reaction to common needs, but has become part of a social system that is embedded in everyday life.

The meaning of solidarity in Marharoan Bolon is in line with Émile Durkheim's thinking on mechanical solidarity, which is solidarity that grows in traditional societies with a strong collective consciousness. Participation in mutual assistance activities is considered a moral obligation, not merely a voluntary choice. Those involved in marharoan form close social bonds, characterized by mutual trust and a sense of belonging. Social norms work naturally to ensure that each individual understands their role in maintaining the integrity of the community. Participation in this collaborative work creates a dense social network, which strengthens social capital and expands access to support when someone faces difficulties.

Furthermore, this practice also has normative and practical functions. The norm of mutual cooperation becomes the moral foundation for ensuring collective involvement, while its practice enables the community to resolve problems independently without relying on outside parties. When a family experiences difficulties, the community will be present through the marharoan mechanism as a form of social care and responsibility. This tradition indirectly becomes a community-based social protection system that strengthens social resilience at the local level. Modern social dynamics present new challenges. Urbanization, labor mobility, and changes in lifestyle have begun to shift the meaning of communal solidarity. Some groups, especially the younger generation and migrant workers, no longer have the same level of involvement as previous generations. This indicates a gap in the reproduction of solidarity, which was once a hallmark of Simalungun social life. In addition, the dominance of patriarchal customary structures can create inequalities in participation, especially for women and marginalized groups.

Thus, Marharoan Bolon should be understood not only as a static tradition, but as a social practice that continues to adapt to the changing times. The value of solidarity contained within it remains relevant, but needs to be reinterpreted in order to respond to contemporary social challenges. Strengthening cross-group participation and opening up more inclusive spaces are important steps to ensure that Marharoan Bolon continues to function as the foundation of social solidarity in the Simalungun community.

#### **Local Wisdom as a Mechanism for Strengthening Community Cohesion**

Marharoan Bolon represents the local wisdom of the Simalungun community, which serves as a social glue. This tradition not only mobilizes collective work but also instills values of togetherness, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging to the community. Through the practice of mutual cooperation, the community builds awareness that their collective survival depends on solidarity and adherence to social norms.

This local wisdom creates a strong social control mechanism. Participation is considered a moral obligation, not merely a choice, so that individuals who do not participate will face social sanctions, either subtle or overt. In this way, Marharoan Bolon strengthens community cohesion without the need for rigid formal structures. This concept is in line with Clifford Geertz's thinking on local knowledge, in which local values are able to create shared meaning and organize social action effectively. Modernization and social mobility have begun to change the way people interpret this tradition. Much of the participation is now in the form of material contributions rather than direct labor, so that the meaning of social cohesion has become

more symbolic. Without adaptation, the role of this local wisdom has the potential to weaken. Therefore, the preservation of Marharoan Bolon must be dynamic: its basic values must be maintained, but the form of participation must be adapted to current social realities.

### **Transformation of Traditional Practices in the Flow of Modernization**

Modernization has brought significant changes to the structure and patterns of social life. In this process, traditional practices that were once carried out collectively and sacramentally have undergone transformations in form and meaning. Traditions are no longer practiced rigidly as in the past, but have been adapted to keep pace with the dynamics of the times. For example, traditional activities that used to only take place in communal spaces are now being integrated with digital technology—through documentation and dissemination via social media, digital invitations, and even live broadcasts that allow remote participation.

This transformation reflects the community's ability to negotiate old values with the demands of modern life. Symbolic elements and cultural meanings have not been completely lost, but have been reformulated to remain relevant to the younger generation. Traditions have become more flexible and open to renewal. This process also shows how communities maintain their cultural identity without being trapped in romanticism about the past, but rather by creating new forms that are appropriate to the current social context.

### **Marharoan Bolon as Social Capital in Strengthening Community Cohesion**

In Simalungun society, the practice of Marharoan Bolon not only functions as a tradition of mutual cooperation, but also as a tangible form of social capital that strengthens community cohesion. Through this practice, the community builds trust, solidarity, and strong social networks. The values of mutual assistance and collective responsibility create a sense of shared ownership, thereby strengthening the local social structure. In this context, social capital is not merely a relationship between individuals, but an important foundation in maintaining the sustainability of community life.

The practice of Marharoan Bolon also encourages the development of social mechanisms that promote the principle of reciprocity—giving and receiving assistance within a framework of togetherness. The social relationships formed in these activities create deep emotional bonds, minimizing social conflict through mutual trust. When communities trust each other and are connected in a strong social network, their ability to cope with change, economic challenges, or external pressures becomes stronger.

### **Marharoan Bolon as a Socio-Ecological Resilience Strategy**

Marharoan Bolon can also be understood as a form of socio-ecological resilience that enables communities to adapt to both environmental and social changes. Resilience in this context refers to the capacity of a community to absorb disturbances while maintaining its core functions and identity. Through collective work and shared responsibility, the Simalungun community builds adaptive mechanisms that allow them to respond to environmental challenges such as land degradation or resource scarcity. This aligns with studies on community-based forest management in Indonesia, which highlight the role of collective institutions in reducing environmental degradation and strengthening sustainability (Santika et al., 2017).

In addition, the ecological dimension of Marharoan Bolon is reflected in its role in maintaining environmental balance. Activities such as land management, infrastructure maintenance, and environmental cleaning are not only practical actions but also symbolic expressions of the community's relationship with nature. This supports the argument that local wisdom serves as an environmental ethic that guides human behavior toward sustainability (Slikkerveer, 2019). In this sense, Marharoan Bolon functions as an informal environmental governance system rooted in cultural values.

However, the effectiveness of this system depends on the continuity of community participation. As modernization introduces new economic pressures and mobility patterns, participation in collective activities tends to decline. This shift may weaken the transmission of ecological knowledge across generations. Therefore, strengthening intergenerational engagement becomes crucial to ensure that the values embedded in Marharoan Bolon are preserved and adapted to contemporary contexts.

## **Integration of Local Wisdom into Development Policy**

Another important finding is the need to integrate Marharoan Bolon into formal development frameworks. Local traditions often operate outside formal institutions, which limits their influence in policy-making processes. Yet, research shows that incorporating local knowledge into development planning enhances both effectiveness and sustainability (Koopman, 2023). In this regard, Marharoan Bolon can serve as a model for participatory development, where communities are actively involved in decision-making and implementation processes.

Policy integration can take various forms, such as incorporating mutual cooperation practices into village development programs, environmental conservation initiatives, and community empowerment strategies. By doing so, the government and other stakeholders can strengthen existing social structures rather than replacing them with external systems that may not align with local values. This approach not only preserves cultural heritage but also enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of development interventions.

Ultimately, the relevance of Marharoan Bolon lies in its flexibility and adaptability. As a living tradition, it has the capacity to evolve while maintaining its core values. This dynamic nature makes it a valuable asset in addressing contemporary socio-ecological challenges, particularly in the context of sustainable development.

## **Integrative Discussion: Marharoan Bolon as a Socio-Ecological System**

Integrating the social, ecological, and economic dimensions, this study demonstrates that Marharoan Bolon functions as a comprehensive socio-ecological system. The tradition reflects the interconnectedness between human activities and environmental processes, as well as the importance of collective action in sustaining these relationships. The findings contribute to the socio-ecological systems discourse by showing that indigenous practices can serve as adaptive strategies for sustainability. Unlike top-down development models, Marharoan Bolon is rooted in local knowledge and community participation, making it more contextually relevant and sustainable.

Moreover, this study highlights that sustainability is not solely a technical or policy-driven concept but also a cultural and social process. The preservation of traditions like Marharoan Bolon is therefore essential for maintaining both ecological balance and social harmony. In comparison with global sustainability frameworks, this tradition aligns with key principles such as resilience, adaptability, and community participation. However, it also offers unique insights by emphasizing the role of cultural values in shaping sustainable practices.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the Marharoan Bolon tradition functions as a dynamic socio-ecological system that integrates social, ecological, and economic dimensions within the Simalungun community. In response to the research question, the findings confirm that Marharoan Bolon is not merely a cultural practice, but an adaptive mechanism that strengthens social cohesion, promotes environmentally sustainable behavior, and supports community-based economic resilience.

In the dynamics of modern society, characterized by the acceleration of globalization, individualism, and the penetration of digital technology, the existence of the Marharoan Bolon tradition in the Simalungun community has become an important space for rebuilding the meaning of togetherness that has begun to erode. In an era where many social interactions have shifted to virtual spaces, Marharoan Bolon exists as a tangible practice that binds communities through collective action, not just discourse. The value of mutual cooperation contained within it is not only a cultural heritage, but also a social instrument that has the resilience to withstand the changing times.

In the past, Marharoan Bolon was carried out in the context of working together to build houses, clean the environment, or manage fields. In the current context, this practice has begun to undergo a transformation—for example, through collective social activities, environmental actions, or community solidarity in facing social crises. This transformation demonstrates the community's ability to not only

survive but also innovate in maintaining the meaning of togetherness. This is relevant when modern societies are faced with the challenges of social alienation, social inequality, and the weakening of communal bonds due to individualistic urban life.

Marharoan Bolon in this context is not merely a symbol of nostalgia for the past, but rather a source of strong social capital. The values of reciprocity, trust, and cohesion built within it give the community social resilience in the face of uncertainty. While modernization often creates social divides, this tradition bridges communities, connecting them in more egalitarian and participatory relationships.

Therefore, the preservation of Marharoan Bolon cannot be viewed merely as a cultural endeavor, but also as a significant social strategy in strengthening community structures. The development of this tradition needs to be contextualized with the needs of the times, such as its integration into community-based development programs, the strengthening of social solidarity in public spaces, and the development of models for citizen participation in collective decision-making. In this way, Marharoan Bolon will not only survive, but become an adaptive and relevant social force in responding to the challenges of modern society.

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