

Strategies for Community Empowerment and Participation by Social Institutions in Improving Environmental Well being: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received April 01, 2026 Revised April 11, 2026 Accepted April 30, 2026	Community empowerment is a crucial approach in development that positions the community as the primary actor. Social institutions play a strategic role as a bridge between public policy and community needs, as well as catalysts for capacity building and participation. This study aims to synthesise the empowerment strategies implemented by social institutions, the factors influencing their success, and their impact on community and environmental well-being.
Keywords: Community empowerment Social institutions Participation Social capital Environmental sustainability	The study employed a <i>Systematic Literature Review</i> approach in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Data were obtained from <i>Scopus</i>, <i>Web of Science</i>, <i>ScienceDirect</i>, <i>Semantic Scholar</i> and <i>ResearchGate</i> for the period 2015–2026. A total of 33 articles meeting the criteria were analysed using <i>thematic synthesis</i> techniques. The results indicate that an asset-based approach is the most dominant strategy, emphasising the utilisation of local potential. The success of empowerment is influenced by the quality of community participation, the strength of social capital, and institutional capacity. Substantive participation and high levels of trust have been shown to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of programmes. The impact of empowerment extends beyond economic aspects to include improvements in social welfare, the quality of public services, and environmental sustainability. These findings underscore the importance of designing programmes that are participatory, based on local potential, and long-term oriented.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment is a key approach in development, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia. Development is not merely understood as economic growth, but also as an effort to enhance communities' capacity to independently shape their future, participate, and ensure sustainability [1], [2]. This perspective reflects a paradigm shift from a centralised development model towards an approach that positions communities as the primary agents social change, known as people-centred development [1], [3], [4], [5].

In theory, community empowerment is intended as a process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to gain control over life decisions, resources and institutions that influence their lives. Empowerment encompasses improvements in economic, social, political, psychological and institutional capacities [6], [7]. Thus, it can be understood that an empowered community is one that can recognise its potential, is directly involved in decision-making, and possesses the ability to resolve issues collectively [8], [9].

The empowerment process in development requires driving actors who can bridge community needs with public policy, mobilise resources, foster awareness, and enhance collective capacity [10], [11], [12]. Social institutions, which in this context include civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, cooperatives, religious organisations, youth organisations and other organisations active in the social sector, play a strategic role in driving this development [10], [13], [14].

The findings of several previous studies indicate that social institutions act as a bridge between the state and society. Social institutions play a dual role in the development process: on the one hand, they translate government policies into programmes that meet local needs; on the other hand, they also serve to convey the aspirations of grassroots communities to the government or other development stakeholders [15], [16], [17]. This makes social institutions a vital component in strengthening local democracy, participatory development, and efforts to reduce social inequality.

Community empowerment strategies in Indonesia currently implemented by social organisations are becoming increasingly diverse. Some organisations operate in the field of skills training and micro-enterprise strengthening. Others employ approaches such as the formation of self-help groups, social capital development, policy advocacy, strengthening local leadership, and asset-based approaches [18], [19]. Other social organisations work in the field of environmental conservation through community-based waste management, conservation of local resources, sustainable agriculture, and enhancing community resilience to climate change [20], [21].

The effectiveness of the strategies implemented by these social organisations has yielded mixed results. Some programmes have proven capable of increasing community income, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting community self-reliance [22], [23], [24]. However, a significant number of programmes are temporary in nature, reliant on donor aid, or cease when external support ends [25], [26]. In some cases, community participation remains largely symbolic; whilst people are formally involved, they lack real influence in strategic decision-making [27].

Based on the facts revealed, it is evident that the success of community empowerment is determined by the type of programme implemented and the quality of the social institution itself. Factors such as organisational leadership, managerial capacity, transparency, social legitimacy, collaborative networks, and the level of public trust are crucial elements determining the sustainability of the programme [28]. However, this institutional dimension has not yet received adequate attention in much previous research.

Studies on community empowerment through social institutions are still often fragmented. Some studies focus on specific sectors, such as cooperatives, women's empowerment, village development, community-based tourism, or microeconomic strengthening. Most studies also employ a contextually rich local case-study approach, but this is insufficient to explain broader general patterns. Consequently, there remains a scarcity of community empowerment research that systematically integrates various empowerment strategies across contexts, institutional types, and geographical regions.

Another limitation in previous research is the dominance of success indicators that place greater emphasis on economic aspects, such as increased income, the number of new businesses, or access to capital. In fact, the success of community empowerment should be understood in a multidimensional way, encompassing increased social capacity, political participation, institutional autonomy, community resilience, and environmental well-being. Such a narrow perspective risks overlooking the social transformation that is, in fact, at the very heart of social capital.

In light of this, there is a need for a study capable of systematically synthesising various empirical findings regarding how social institutions empower communities, which strategies are most commonly employed, what factors determine their success, and how they impact the sustainable well-being of communities. One relevant approach to addressing this need is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Through this approach, researchers can identify research trends, map key concepts, compare results across studies, and identify gaps for further research in a more objective and transparent manner.

2. METHOD

This study was designed using the SLR approach to systematically examine empirical evidence regarding community empowerment strategies through social institutions. This approach was chosen as it produces a literature review that is more transparent, structured, and replicable compared to conventional narrative reviews [29].

Article selection followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines, which encompassed source identification, initial screening, eligibility assessment, and the inclusion of final articles. This review focuses on empirical research discussing the role of social institutions in implementing community empowerment programmes in the social, economic, and environmental sectors.

This study was designed to answer four key questions, namely: (1) which empowerment strategies are most commonly used by social institutions; (2) what factors influence the success of these strategies; (3) to what extent institutional capacity plays a role in determining empowerment outcomes; and (4) how empowerment programmes impact community well-being and environmental sustainability.

Relevant articles were collected from several scientific databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, Science Direct, Semantic Scholar and Research Gate. The use of multiple databases aimed to broaden the scope of the literature whilst reducing the likelihood of publication bias. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, such as community empowerment, community development, social institution, NGO, cooperative, civil society organisation, strategy, participation, and capacity building. These keywords were then adapted to the search systems of each database.

This review included only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026 to ensure the consistency and quality of the articles examined; these were written in English or Indonesian and directly addressed community empowerment through social institutions. Articles were excluded from the review if they were duplicates, not journal articles (e.g. dissertations, theses, reports, or conference proceedings), did not have a full-text version available, or lacked a clear research methodology.

The initial search phase yielded 486 articles during the initial identification stage. After removing duplicates, 392 articles remained. The title and abstract screening phase yielded 164 relevant articles. Subsequently, 73 articles were reviewed in full to assess their suitability, and ultimately 33 articles met all criteria for further analysis. The entire selection process was conducted systematically to ensure the relevance and methodological quality of the selected articles.

Information from the selected articles was extracted using a structured coding sheet covering year of publication, country of research location, type of social institution, research design, empowerment strategies used, success factors, and reported impacts. Subsequently, the data were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach, involving repeated reading, open coding, grouping of recurring concepts, and the formulation of broader main themes.

This study explicitly applied inclusion and exclusion criteria, utilised more than one database, and followed the PRISMA guidelines to enhance the credibility of the findings throughout the research process. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations, such as potential publication bias, the predominance of English-language articles, and the diversity of research contexts across the studies analysed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that community empowerment strategies implemented through social institutions continue to evolve in line with community needs, regional characteristics, and the capacity of implementing organisations. These findings demonstrate that community empowerment is not a simple or uniform process, but is influenced by the interplay between local potential, institutional quality, and levels of community engagement [6], [30]. In this context, social organisations occupy a crucial position as a bridge between citizens' interests and broader development agendas.

3.1. The shift in approach from needs-based to asset-based

One key finding of this research is the shift in orientation from a needs-based approach towards an asset-based approach. A needs-based approach generally focuses on problems, deficiencies, and the external assistance that must be provided to communities [31]. Although it can address short-term needs, this approach often fosters dependency and does not fully promote community self-reliance [1], [32].

An asset-based approach views communities as possessing internal strengths. These strengths may take the form of residents' skills, local experience, social networks, cultural values, or economic resources available within the local environment. By utilising the potential already possessed by the community, empowerment programmes tend to be more sustainable because the community acts as the primary agent, rather than merely a beneficiary.

The implementation of this approach still faces a number of obstacles. Not all social organisations have adequate capacity for support, so the mapping of community potential is sometimes not followed by consistent follow-up programmes.

3.2. Community participation and the distribution of power

Further findings indicate that community participation has become an integral part of many empowerment programmes. However, the quality of this participation varies across programmes. In some cases, communities are involved through consultative forums, residents' meetings, or group discussions, but key decisions remain in the hands of the organisation's management or external parties.

This situation indicates that the participation that occurs is not yet fully substantive. Community involvement remains largely a matter of administrative formality, so the scope for community influence over the direction of programme policy remains limited. Consequently, a sense of ownership of the programme also tends to be low.

When the community is given a more equal role in the planning, implementation, and monitoring processes, community involvement becomes more active. They do not merely attend activities but also take responsibility for the programme's success. This demonstrates that the greater the delegation of authority to the community, the greater the likelihood of successful empowerment.

3.3. Social capital as a determining factor for success

This study also found that social capital is a crucial element in supporting the success of community empowerment. Social capital is evident through mutual trust among residents, a culture of mutual assistance, solidarity, and strong social networks. These elements facilitate cooperation and collective action.

Community trust in the management of social institutions, for example, is crucial to the smooth implementation of programmes. When the community perceives programme management to be open and fair, participation tends to increase. Conversely, if transparency is weak and communication is poor, resistance and internal conflict are more likely to arise.

Thus, social capital is not merely a complement, but a driving factor that accelerates the success of empowerment strategies. Programmes supported by a high level of trust generally have a greater chance of sustainability.

3.4. Impact on environmental well-being

Research findings show that the impact of community empowerment is not limited to increased income or employment opportunities. Furthermore, empowerment programmes also influence social well-being and environmental quality [33].

Business training and the development of local destinations in the community-based tourism sector have proven capable of increasing residents' incomes whilst promoting the conservation of the surrounding environment. Meanwhile, in the fields of health and education, community involvement in decision-making has helped to improve the quality of public services and human resource capacity at the local level.

This demonstrates that the success of empowerment must be understood more broadly, encompassing economic, social, institutional and environmental dimensions. Therefore, the success of a programme cannot be measured solely by short-term economic gains, but must also take into account changes in community capacity and long-term environmental sustainability.

3.5. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the findings of this study confirm that community empowerment is closely linked to the concepts of participation, institutional capacity, and social capital. These three aspects are interrelated in determining the success or failure of a programme.

In practical terms, these findings convey the message that governments, civil society organisations, and donors need to design programmes that are more participatory, based on local potential, and that strengthen the capacity of social institutions. Programmes that are solely oriented towards short-term aid tend to produce temporary impacts and lack sustainability.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that social institutions play a vital role in promoting community empowerment through capacity building, strengthening participation, and fostering community self reliance. The most prevalent strategy employed is the asset-based approach, which utilises local potential as the foundation for community development.

The findings of this research also indicate that the success of programmes is significantly influenced by the quality of community participation, the strength of social capital, and the institutional capacity of implementing organisations. Meaningful participation, high levels of social trust, and sound institutional management have been shown to enhance the effectiveness of empowerment programmes.

In addition to having an impact on economic improvement, community empowerment through social organisations also contributes to social welfare, improved quality of public services, and environmental sustainability. Therefore, empowerment programmes need to be designed in a participatory manner, based on local potential, and with a long-term orientation in order to produce sustainable impacts

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

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