



Empowering Maluku Communities: Participatory Strategies for Sustainable Local Development

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ABSTRACT

This study examines strategies to empower communities in Maluku Province, Indonesia, through participatory approaches for sustainable local development. Focusing on the role of local leadership, the research investigates how community capacity can be enhanced to support inclusive decision-making, social cohesion, and resilient household livelihoods. The study evaluates the effectiveness of community-based economic empowerment programs in improving household welfare, income generation, and local resource utilization across three villages in Maluku: Morela Village (Leihitu District, Central Maluku Regency), Negeri Lima (Central Maluku Regency), and Namrole Village (Buru Selatan District). These sites were purposively selected because they actively implement participatory empowerment programs related to local resource management and customary governance, while varying in their geographic settings, program types, and institutional arrangements. The study further examines innovative public administration practices that facilitate collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with particular attention to how such collaboration promotes transparent and responsive governance. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining semi-structured qualitative interviews with 15 local and customary leaders and 12 village government officials and NGO staff, four weeks of participatory observation, and structured quantitative surveys administered to 180 community members using validated empowerment indicators (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative data were examined through descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation. Findings indicate that participatory strategies, when coupled with strong local leadership and adaptive administrative innovation, significantly contribute to sustainable development outcomes, including an increase in the social capital index from 3.2 to 4.1 on a five-point scale, a mean household income increase of 18% (from IDR 1,350,000 to IDR 1,593,000 per month), and improved community well-being. The study also identifies elite capture as a persistent risk in beneficiary selection at one research site, underscoring the need for transparent accountability mechanisms. Integration of local wisdom practices, particularly the customary sasi resource management system and village deliberation forums (musyawarah), strengthened program legitimacy and community ownership. The study offers practical implications for policymakers and development practitioners designing inclusive, accountable, and scalable empowerment programs in Maluku and comparable regional contexts.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment has become a central concept in contemporary development discourse, particularly within the context of decentralized governance and participatory public administration. At its core, community

empowerment refers to the processes through which individuals and groups gain the ability, agency, and authority to influence decisions and actions that affect their lives (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2002). In the Indonesian context, especially in regions such as Maluku,

community empowerment intersects with unique sociocultural dynamics, local governance structures, and historical legacies of resource management. Understanding these intersections is crucial for formulating effective participatory strategies that support sustainable local development.

The province of Maluku, with its dispersed archipelagic geography and culturally diverse populations, presents distinctive challenges and opportunities for community empowerment. Historically, Maluku communities have relied on customary governance systems and local wisdom practices, such as *sasi*, a traditional resource management mechanism in which communities collectively close (*tutup sasi*) and open (*buka sasi*) access to natural resources such as fish, sago, or cloves for defined periods, which function as both social institutions and mechanisms for managing collective resources (Muhtar et al., 2026). These practices embody participatory elements that resonate with broader goals of sustainable development and inclusive governance. However, the province faces identifiable structural constraints that impede empowerment: (1) limited institutional capacity at the village level, manifested in inadequate planning data and weak monitoring systems; (2) uneven geographic access to public services due to the dispersed island configuration; (3) socio-economic disparities between coastal and inland communities; and (4) insufficient alignment between centrally designed programs and local community needs, as documented in Southeast Maluku (Selanno et al., 2023). These factors have often impeded the translation of participatory ideals into meaningful empowerment outcomes.

Decentralization reforms in Indonesia have sought to shift power away from centralized authorities toward local governments and communities, creating space for participatory development approaches at village and district levels. This shift is reflected in studies on participatory village development in Southeast Maluku, where community engagement in planning and implementation has been linked to higher program responsiveness when aligned with local needs (Bakarbesy, 2020). These findings support theoretical perspectives emphasizing bottom-up planning to enhance citizen agency and contextual relevance in development programs (Anomsari & Abubakar, 2019).

Nevertheless, participation levels vary significantly within and across communities, indicating the complexity of operationalizing empowerment in heterogeneous sociopolitical settings. Local leadership emerges as a critical

factor in mediating participatory processes and shaping empowerment trajectories. Studies on customary village leadership in Southeast Maluku show that leaders embedded in local norms mobilize community involvement, coordinate resource management, and lend legitimacy to development initiatives (Steenbergen, 2016). Traditional leaders often bridge formal administrative structures and community members, which helps programs gain acceptance and continue over time. However, leadership is not automatically inclusive. It can just as easily reproduce existing social hierarchies and sideline peripheral groups, meaning that empowerment outcomes hinge on both the quality of leadership and the inclusivity of local governance.

In Maluku's policy landscape, the implementation of community empowerment initiatives often intersects with broader efforts to alleviate poverty, enhance food security, and improve welfare. For instance, empirical legal studies on the application of sustainable development law in coastal communities highlight how regulatory frameworks can enable community participation in fisheries resource management and support local food systems (Pamungkas et al., 2026). These legal and policy instruments aim to integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. However, their effectiveness depends on regulatory clarity, institutional capacity, and the integration of local cultural values. Despite policy commitments to participatory development, evidence suggests that implementation gaps persist. Analyses of the execution of community empowerment policy in Southeast Maluku District indicate that inaccuracies in policy design, insufficient alignment with community needs, and weak data infrastructure undermine the effectiveness of poverty alleviation strategies (Selanno et al., 2023). Such findings align with broader critiques in public administration literature, which argue that participatory policies often remain rhetorical when not accompanied by robust institutional support and mechanisms that ensure genuine citizen voice in decisionmaking (Wijaya & Munandar, 2026).

Participation is not a single, uniform experience; it spans a spectrum of community involvement in development processes. At one end sit lower levels of engagement, such as basic consultation; at the other, communities share in decision-making and hold real control over resources. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation captures this spectrum well, making the point that not every form of

participation translates into substantive empowerment. In the Maluku context, studies on community participation in village development show that involvement during the planning stages often remains limited, underscoring the need for stronger mechanisms to enable communities to shape agenda-setting and resource allocation (Sialana et al., 2024).

Evaluations of social welfare program planning in Maluku Province make a similar point about participatory planning. These evaluations find that data-based participatory planning improves the relevance and responsiveness of social interventions. However, constraints in stakeholder engagement and data integration still limit the extent to which empowerment outcomes are realized (Tutuhatunewa et al., 2026). Participatory planning is thus both a tool and a challenge: it can align policies with community priorities, but only where institutions commit to inclusive processes and ongoing capacity development.

Beyond formal governance structures, socio-cultural transformation policies grounded in community empowerment are gaining attention as pathways to prosperity in regions such as Southwest Maluku. Rather than applying generic participatory frameworks, recent research argues that effective socio-cultural transformation must work through local cultural identities: specifically, by embedding empowerment programs within existing adat (customary) institutions, using indigenous deliberation forums as planning vehicles, and ensuring that economic interventions build on locally valued livelihood systems such as fisheries and sago cultivation. Sulistiyani et al. (2026) demonstrate that such context-specific approaches address poverty and welfare disparities in underdeveloped districts more effectively than standardized program designs because they leverage pre-existing community trust and organizational capacity.

The literature also highlights specific community empowerment efforts in Maluku's socio-environmental landscape, such as revitalization programs that strengthen socialecological resilience through local resource management practices. Revitalization of *sasi*, for instance, is framed as a participatory governance mechanism that reinforces community engagement in natural resource stewardship, thus contributing to both social and ecological sustainability (Muhtar et al., 2026). Such initiatives illustrate how traditional practices can be integrated with contemporary development goals, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is deeply situated in

local cultural logics. These empirical and theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that community empowerment in Maluku cannot be understood in isolation from broader processes of governance reform, socio-cultural transformation, and institutional capacity building. Participatory strategies must therefore be multi-dimensional, addressing structural barriers, enhancing local leadership, and fostering inclusive governance processes that enable communities to actively shape development priorities.

A recurring caution in this literature concerns the risk that participatory arrangements are captured by local elites rather than genuinely shared. Comparative evidence from community-driven development programs in Indonesia shows that even well-designed participatory projects can leave decision-making concentrated in the hands of village elites, with accountability arrangements such as democratic leadership selection only partly offsetting this tendency (Fritzen, 2007). Related work on Indonesian community-driven development similarly finds that elite dominance over collective action can persist despite formal participatory procedures, particularly where monitoring is weak (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007). More broadly, endogenous imperfections within communities themselves, such as pre-existing inequality and unequal bargaining power, can distort ostensibly participatory processes even before external actors become involved (Platteau & Abraham, 2002). These findings suggest that local leadership and customary institutions, while often framed positively in the Maluku literature discussed above, also warrant scrutiny of how power is distributed and exercised within them, rather than only of their capacity to mobilize participation.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do participatory strategies shape community empowerment outcomes in Maluku? (2) What roles do local leadership and local wisdom play in facilitating or constraining participation? (3) How does collaboration between government and NGOs enhance the sustainability of community-based programs? Building on local leadership, participatory planning, policy implementation, and socio-cultural integration, this study extends the existing literature. It offers insights relevant to both scholarly debates on participatory development and practical strategies for strengthening community well-being in Maluku. To guide the quantitative strand of the analysis, the study further tests the hypothesis that higher levels of community participation are positively associated with

increases in household income (H1) and expects that participation is positively associated with gains in the social capital index (H2).

■ METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of community empowerment strategies in Maluku through participation in sustainable local development. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it integrates numerical empirical data with deep socio-cultural context, supporting a holistic analysis of community empowerment phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Abdul Muthalib Sangadji State Islamic University of Ambon (Ref. No. EC-UINAM/2024/089). All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection, and identifying information was anonymized in all reported findings.

Research Sites and Participants

The study was conducted in three villages in Maluku Province that actively implement participatory community empowerment programs related to local resource management and customary governance: (1) Morela Village, Leihibu District, Central Maluku Regency, selected for its active *sasi* practice and fisheries-based economy; (2) Negeri Lima, Central Maluku Regency, selected as a site of revitalized *sasi* and village deliberation programs supported by NGO partnerships; and (3) Namrole Village, Buru Selatan District, selected for its active government-NGO collaboration in agricultural and microenterprise empowerment programs. These sites were purposively chosen to represent variation in geographic context, program type, and institutional arrangement while sharing a commitment to participatory governance. Study participants comprised three groups:

1. Local and customary leaders ($n = 15$), representing authorities who facilitate participatory processes and hold recognized roles in adat governance (Steenbergen, 2016). Inclusion criteria: minimum of two years in a leadership position and direct involvement in at least one empowerment program cycle.
2. Community members ($n = 180$), including households directly involved in the empowerment programs. Inclusion criteria: residence in one of the three study villages

for at least one year and participation in at least one program activity.

3. Village government officials and NGO staff ($n = 12$), to capture institutional perspectives and program coordination dynamics (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Included officials from the Community and Village Empowerment Service (*Dinas Pemberdayaan Masyarakat dan Desa*, DPMD) at the district level and field officers from two local NGOs: Yayasan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Maluku (YPMM) and Lembaga Pengembangan Masyarakat (LPM).

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select local leaders and program coordinators meeting the inclusion criteria above. Stratified random sampling was applied to select community members to ensure variation across age groups, gender, and program participation levels (Patton, 2015). In each village, lists of program participants maintained by village offices served as sampling frames; households were randomly drawn from each stratum (age $\times$ gender $\times$ participation level) proportional to their representation.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary techniques:

1. Semi-structured interviews with local leaders, NGO staff, and government officials were conducted to understand perspectives on empowerment strategies, leadership roles, and participation processes. Interview guides were developed based on community empowerment frameworks (Chambers, 1997) and covered themes of participatory governance, leadership practice, and program coordination (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).
2. Quantitative surveys administered to community members using a structured questionnaire assessing participation levels, social capital, and program impact on household welfare. The questionnaire was developed based on validated community empowerment indicators (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006) and adapted to the Maluku context through consultation with community leaders. Instrument reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$), indicating good internal consistency (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). Content validity was verified by three academic experts in community development, with an average content validity ratio (CVR) of 0.87.
3. Participatory observation at program sites

over four weeks to record social interactions, decision-making processes, and participatory mechanisms in practice (Spradley, 1980). Observational notes were structured around indicators of participation quality and leadership behavior.

Variables measured in the survey included: (1) participation in program planning and implementation, (2) community perceptions of program effectiveness, and (3) improvements in social and economic capacity at the household level, with baseline economic data obtained retrospectively by asking respondents to recall income levels prior to program enrollment, a method validated in comparable community-based studies (Van Bastelaer, 2000).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify main themes related to empowerment strategies, challenges, and participatory practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts and field notes were manually coded by two researchers independently; inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.79$), indicating substantial agreement. NVivo software was used to organize and manage codes. The validity of qualitative findings was established through source triangulation (comparing the perspectives of leaders, community members, and NGOs) and method triangulation (cross-checking interview data against observational evidence).

The coding framework in NVivo also included an explicit power-sensitive dimension, informed by Gaventa's (2006) power cube, to flag instances of visible, hidden, and invisible power that shaped who could access and influence program benefits. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (Creswell, 2014). Descriptive statistics depicted sample characteristics and participation distributions. Simple linear regression and bivariate correlation analyses tested relationships among participation level, social capital index, and household income change. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS v.26.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile and Community Characteristics

This study involved 180 respondents from three villages in Maluku that were implementing participatory community empowerment programs. Table 1 presents a

summary of participant demographic characteristics.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents (72.2%) were farmers or fishers, reflecting the community's reliance on local natural resources. The predominance of junior high school education (42.2%) influenced respondents' understanding of program procedures and benefits. Bivariate correlation analysis confirmed that education level was positively and significantly associated with participation intensity ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), consistent with prior studies indicating that individuals with higher education participate more actively in planning and evaluation due to stronger analytical and communication skills (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Bakarbesy, 2020).

Local social structures shaped participation dynamics. Traditional leadership and community figures acted as intermediaries between government programs and residents. As one village elder in Morela articulated during an interview: "*Kami tidak bisa memisahkan program dari adat. Kalau kepala soa sudah setuju, warga pasti ikut*" ("We cannot separate the program from customary practice. If the clan head agrees, the community will follow"). Similarly, an NGO field coordinator in Negeri Lima noted: "*Keterlibatan raja desa sejak awal perencanaan menjadi kunci diterimanya setiap program oleh masyarakat*" ("The village raja's involvement from the earliest planning stage is the key to community acceptance of any program"). These observations confirm that cultural and social context are powerful determinants of program engagement (Muhtar et al., 2026; Berkes, 2004).

Access to information infrastructure also influenced participation. Respondents who regularly attended village deliberation meetings (*musyawarah*) and had access to community notice boards and mobile network coverage participated more intensively in the survey, as measured by a composite of three items: frequency of *musyawarah* attendance, access to printed village announcements, and mobile or internet connectivity. Both social and physical infrastructure, in other words, jointly support how effectively empowerment programs reach and engage communities.

Level of Participation in Empowerment Programs

Participation was highest during activity implementation (75%) and program planning (68%), and lowest during program evaluation (52%). Participation was strongest in community-based economic activities such as entrepreneurship training, fishery resource

Table 1. Demographic profile of study participants (n = 180)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	81	45.0
	Female	99	55.0
Age Group	20–35 years	52	28.9
	36–50 years	79	43.9
	51–65 years	49	27.2
Occupation	Farmer / Fisher	130	72.2
	Trader / SME	28	15.6
	Other	22	12.2
Education	Primary school or below	38	21.1
	Junior high school	76	42.2
	Senior high school	46	25.6
	Higher education	20	11.1
Program Participation	Active participant	122	67.8
	Occasional participant	41	22.8
	Non-participant	17	9.4
Total		180	100.0

management, and local resource utilization (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Pretty, 1995), consistent with Rifkin's (2003) finding that active community involvement enhances program effectiveness and sustainability. Survey results on participation across program phases are presented in Table 2.

Participation levels were further influenced by social, economic, and structural

Table 2. Community participation by program phase (n = 180)

Participation Phase	Number	%	Notes
Program planning	122	68	Highest barrier: time constraints
Activity implementation	135	75	Highest overall engagement
Program evaluation	94	52	Lowest: feedback access is limited

factors. Individuals with prior organizational experience, involvement in village deliberations, or technical skills were more proactive in planning and implementation, indicating that participation depends not only on individual willingness but also on social capital, access to information, and community networks (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Lower participation in evaluation (52%) suggests constraints in time, knowledge, or access to feedback mechanisms, highlighting the need for more inclusive monitoring and evaluation strategies (Chambers, 1997; Berkes, 2004).

Activities offering direct economic benefits, such as entrepreneurship training and local resource management, attracted significantly higher engagement than non-economic activities, such as administrative meetings or policy workshops. Practical incentives and relevance to daily needs are thus critical for encouraging participation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Eade, 1997).

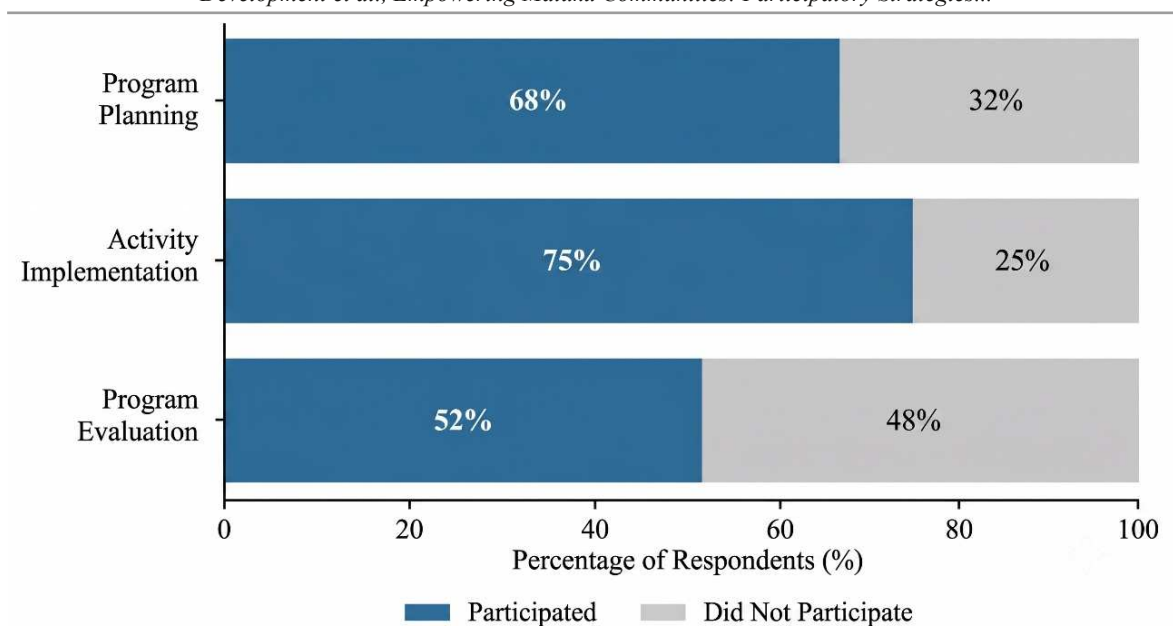


Figure 1. Level of community participation by program phase (n = 180)

Enhancement of Social and Economic Capacity

Table 3 presents changes in social capital and household income indicators following program implementation.

As shown in Table 3, the average social capital index rose from 3.2 to 4.1 on a five-point scale, a 28.1% increase, reflecting improved interactions, cooperation, and trust among community members (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Baseline values were obtained retrospectively by asking respondents to report their social interactions before program enrollment; this method has been validated for use in community-based program evaluations where pre-intervention surveys were not conducted (Van Bastelaer, 2000). This increase was closely associated

Table 3. Pre- and Post-Program social capital and income indicators

Indicator	Baseline	Post-Program	Change
Social capital index (1–5 scale)	3.2	4.1	+0.9 (↑28.1%)
Avg. monthly household income (IDR)	1,350,000	1,593,000	+243,000 (↑18.0%)
Inter-member cooperation score (1–5)	3.0	4.0	+1.0 (↑33.3%)
Trust level within group (1–5)	3.1	4.2	+1.1 (↑35.5%)

with the role of local leaders in facilitating social networks, communication, and coordinated community activities (Steenbergen, 2016; Berkes, 2004).

Economically, average monthly household income increased by 18%, from IDR 1,350,000 to IDR 1,593,000, demonstrating the positive impact of community participation in economic empowerment programs, including entrepreneurship training, fishery management, and local microenterprise development (Van Bastelaer, 2000; Mansuri & Rao, 2004). This improvement strengthened long-term household financial resilience and reinvestment capacity.

Interview and observational data also showed that community members became more confident in managing enterprises and local resources, making collective decisions, and engaging proactively in community initiatives. These findings affirm that participatory community empowerment enhances both economic and social capacities essential for program sustainability and local development.

Role of Local Leadership

Qualitative interviews revealed that local and customary leaders play a strategic role in community empowerment. They organize activities, mediate social conflicts, and act as liaisons between communities and formal institutions. Inclusive leadership encourages participation across all social strata, including women and marginalized groups, leading to more equitable and effective programs. Conversely, hierarchical or exclusive leadership

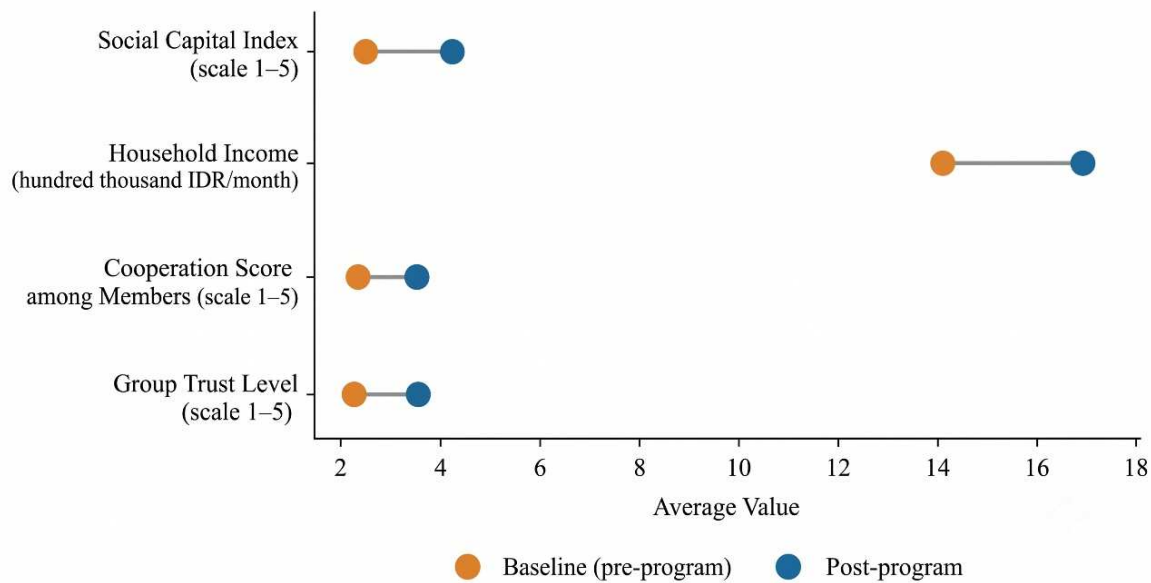


Figure 2. Comparison of average pre- and post-program outcomes (connecting lines indicate values, not distribution)

limits access for minority groups, creating participation gaps that can hinder program success (Avelino & Rotmans, 2011; Chambers, 1997).

However, the leadership landscape was not uniformly facilitative. Analysis of interview data and observational records also revealed evidence of elite-capture dynamics in one of the three study villages. In Namrole Village, a field observation recorded that program beneficiary selection for the microenterprise training cohort was controlled by a single village official, with participants drawn predominantly from that official's extended kinship network (soa), effectively excluding younger household heads and female-headed households from the program's economic benefits. Community members from excluded groups expressed awareness of the exclusion but indicated reluctance to challenge it publicly, citing concerns about social repercussions. Read through Gaventa's (2006) power cube framework; this pattern reflects a largely hidden form of power: participation was formally open to all households, yet informal kinship-based gatekeeping determined who could substantively access program benefits, illustrating how power can operate beneath outwardly neutral participatory procedures. This finding also aligns with Mansuri and Rao's (2013) argument that elite capture is a pervasive risk in community-driven programs with weak accountability mechanisms, underscoring the need for transparent beneficiary selection criteria and independent

oversight.

At the other two sites, leaders attuned to cultural and social contexts successfully integrated traditional practices, such as village deliberations, into decision-making processes, thereby increasing program relevance, acceptance, and sustainability (Escobar, 1995; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). These findings indicate that local leaders serve not only as program managers but also as catalysts for participation and guardians of social sustainability, provided that governance systems include adequate checks against exclusionary leadership behavior.

Effectiveness of Community-Based Economic Empowerment Programs

Community-based economic empowerment programs in the study villages demonstrated significant effectiveness in enhancing technical skills, resource management, and household economic capacity. Observations and interviews indicated that entrepreneurship training, fishery resource management, and local resource utilization provided practical knowledge directly applicable to household income generation. This enabled communities to develop micro-enterprises, manage catch resources sustainably, and diversify livelihoods.

Beyond economic gains, programs strengthened organizational capacity and collaboration among community members. Participants in entrepreneurship training exhibited improved business planning, capital

management, and market negotiation skills, producing benefits at both individual and collective levels. These results confirm that community-based economic empowerment strengthens social networks and human capital, both of which are critical for sustainable local economic development. These findings align with Eade (1997) and Chambers (1997), emphasizing that building local capacity is key to sustaining community-based programs.

Implementation Challenges

Despite positive outcomes, the study identified several interacting challenges affecting program implementation, summarized in Figure 3 along with their associated mitigation strategies.

Adaptive mechanisms that balance resources, build literacy, strengthen multi-actor coordination, and introduce transparent accountability structures are needed to address these barriers comprehensively.

Integration of Local Wisdom

Local wisdom practices, particularly *sasi* and village deliberation forums (*musyawarah*), played a crucial role in supporting community participation in empowerment programs. These

cultural mechanisms enhanced program legitimacy, facilitated consensus-building, and strengthened sustainable resource management (Muhtar et al., 2026; Berkes, 2004; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). At the legal and regulatory level, *sasi* in Central Maluku Regency is formally recognized in Peraturan Daerah (Regional Regulation) Kabupaten Maluku Tengah No. 4 Tahun 2006 on the Protection of Customary Rights and Local Wisdom, which provides a legal foundation for its enforcement alongside national environmental and fisheries regulations. While formal spatial planning instruments at the district level do not always explicitly incorporate *sasi* boundaries, ongoing advocacy by local NGOs and the presence of this regional regulation have created a governance space in which *sasi* operates with a degree of institutional legitimacy beyond purely cultural recognition.

By integrating local wisdom, communities perceived greater ownership of programs, increased adherence to collective rules and decisions, and stronger social cohesion. The integration of *sasi* into fisheries management, for instance, not only conserved resources but also created sustainable economic opportunities by ensuring stock recovery

Figure 3. Concept Map of Program Implementation Challenges and Mitigation Directions

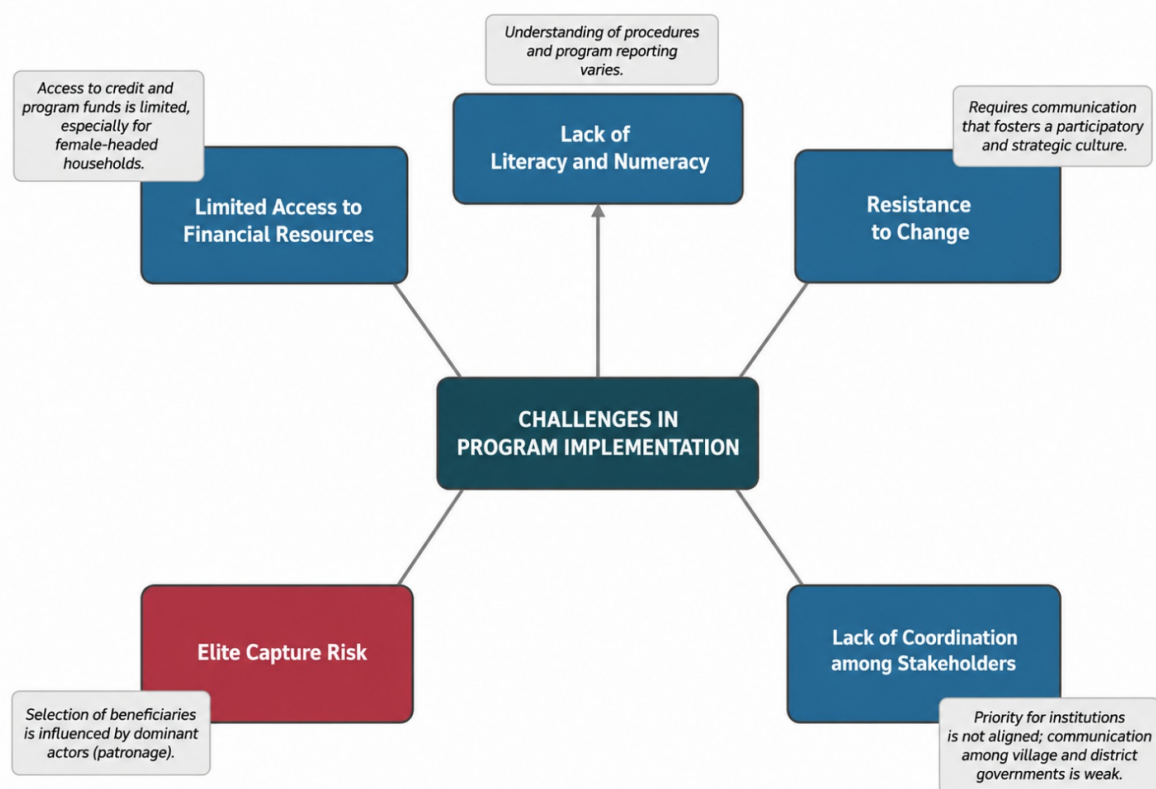


Figure 3. Concept map of program implementation challenges and mitigation direction

between harvest seasons. Village deliberation forums allowed for more adaptive activity planning tailored to local conditions, ensuring that empowerment interventions were responsive to community needs and environmental contexts.

Synergy between Government and NGOs

Collaboration between government agencies and NGOs effectively expanded community access to resources, technical knowledge, and social networks essential for empowerment programs. Specifically, DPMD district officers provided regulatory authorization and administrative linkages to village government. At the same time, YPMM provided technical facilitation for fisheries resource management training, and LPM provided entrepreneurial coaching and market-access networking in the villages of Negeri Lima and Morela. NGO field officers also served as culturally competent mediators, translating government program requirements into forms accessible to community participants with lower administrative literacy.

This synergy enabled the combination of technical expertise, logistical support, and local cultural understanding, making programs more effective and sustainable. Findings align with those of Edwards & Hulme (1996), who emphasized the importance of multi-actor collaboration in community empowerment. Strong partnerships minimized resource or capacity constraints and increased the socio-economic impact of programs on local communities (Pamungkas et al., 2026; Sulistiyani et al., 2026).

Implications for Sustainable Development

The study demonstrates that participatory strategies, supported by local leadership and integration of local wisdom, significantly contribute to sustainable development. Active community participation not only enhances social capital but also strengthens economic resilience and household welfare, indicating that empowerment programs affect both economic and social dimensions (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Berkes, 2004).

Translating these findings into policy requires moving from broad appeals for participation toward specific, measurable action. District and village governments could, for example: (1) formalize a digital *musyawarah* platform, such as a village-level mobile application or SMS-based system, that lets residents who cannot attend in-person forums submit input and track how it is addressed in planning documents; (2) require village governments to set aside and publicly

report a fixed share of the annual Village Fund (Dana Desa) for empowerment program operations, disbursed only after community-verified beneficiary lists are published; (3) establish independent, rotating oversight committees, drawn from outside the beneficiary selection chain, to review and sign off on beneficiary lists before program funds are released, directly addressing the elite capture risk identified in this study; and (4) require program evaluations to include a structured feedback mechanism, such as scheduled village-level report-back sessions, to close the gap between the high participation observed in planning and implementation and the comparatively low participation recorded during evaluation (52%). Embedding these mechanisms in local regulations, rather than leaving them to programmatic discretion, would give participatory commitments an operational and auditable form (Chambers, 1997; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Pretty, 1995; Fritzen, 2007).

■ CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community empowerment in Maluku, implemented through participatory strategies in three villages across Central Maluku and South Buru districts, effectively enhances the social, economic, and cultural capacities of communities. Active community participation in program planning, implementation, and evaluation strengthens household welfare, social networks, and local resource management. Inclusive local leadership, integration of local wisdom practices (*sasi and musyawarah*), and collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, and communities improve program effectiveness and sustainability. Despite challenges related to financial resources, literacy, coordination, and the risk of elite capture, adaptive empowerment strategies that are sensitive to local contexts and governed by transparent accountability mechanisms have proven more successful in supporting sustainable development.

Several study limitations should be noted. First, the sample of 180 respondents drawn from three villages limits the generalizability of the quantitative findings to other districts in Maluku, which have distinct socio-ecological and institutional contexts. Second, baseline income data were obtained retrospectively through respondent recall, which may introduce memory bias; future studies should incorporate prospective longitudinal designs to verify causal claims. Third, the four-week observational period may not have captured the full range of seasonal program dynamics,

particularly for *sasi*-based activities that follow agricultural and marine cycles.

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