

Community Empowerment Through Non-Formal Education: An Analysis of Community Service Programs in Village A

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the impact of non-formal education (NFE) in empowering rural communities by analyzing a community service program in Village A, Indonesia. Using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, the research explores how NFE initiatives-such as vocational training, literacy classes, and entrepreneurship workshops-contribute to community development. Findings indicate that NFE programs significantly enhance participants' skills, economic independence, and social cohesion. Women and youth, in particular, benefit from increased opportunities for self-employment and active participation in community affairs. The study also identifies several challenges, including limited resources, insufficient facilitator capacity, and fluctuating motivation among participants, which hinder program sustainability. Despite these obstacles, the research highlights the importance of participatory approaches, local relevance, and strong collaboration between facilitators and community members in achieving empowerment outcomes. The integration of local wisdom and the potential use of digital tools are suggested as strategies to improve program adaptability and reach. Overall, this study concludes that non-formal education, when contextually tailored and well-facilitated, plays a vital role in fostering sustainable community empowerment in rural Indonesia. Recommendations include enhancing resource allocation, investing in facilitator training, and leveraging technology to support and expand NFE initiatives. This research contributes to the understanding of effective community empowerment strategies and provides practical insights for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners working in similar contexts.

Keywords: Community, empowerment, education, program.

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INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment is widely recognized as a crucial element in sustainable rural development, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia, where disparities in access to education, economic resources, and social services remain significant. The concept of empowerment encompasses processes that enable individuals and groups to gain greater control over their lives, participate actively in decision-making, and improve their socio-economic conditions (Chand & Saha, 2025). In the context of rural Indonesia, empowerment is not only about increasing individual capacities but also about fostering collective agency to address local challenges and create pathways for community-driven change (Tage & Febriyanti, 2024).

Formal education systems in Indonesia, while extensive, often face limitations in reaching marginalized rural populations due to geographical, economic, and socio-cultural barriers (Meetha Ram & Bakhtawar Nizamani, 2025). Issues such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and high dropout rates impede the effectiveness of formal education in many rural areas. Moreover, the formal curriculum may not always align with the immediate needs and realities of rural communities, particularly in terms of livelihood skills and local knowledge. As a result, non-formal education (NFE) emerges as a vital alternative for community development and empowerment (Johnston, 2024).

Non-formal education refers to organized educational activities that occur outside the established formal system, offering flexible, learner-centered approaches tailored to the specific needs of communities (Tleuzhanova, 2023). In Indonesia, NFE encompasses a wide range of programs, including literacy and numeracy classes, vocational training, health education, and community development initiatives. These programs are often delivered through Community Learning Activity Centers (Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat, PKBM), local NGOs, and university-led community service projects (Adekeye, 2025).

NFE is particularly relevant in rural settings, where the majority of the population relies on agriculture and informal sector employment. It provides opportunities for lifelong learning, skill development, and social participation that are directly linked to improving livelihoods and enhancing community resilience (Gumula Rafaelsen, Håkansson Lindqvist, & Seikkula-Leino, 2024a). By focusing on practical skills and local relevance, NFE can bridge the gap between education and everyday life, empowering individuals to respond effectively to socio-economic challenges.

In recent years, Indonesian universities have increasingly engaged in community service as part of their “Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi” (Three Pillars of Higher Education), which include education, research, and community service. These programs, known as “pengabdian kepada masyarakat,” often involve students and faculty members working collaboratively with local communities to identify problems, design interventions, and implement solutions. Community service initiatives frequently utilize NFE approaches, recognizing that participatory, context-sensitive education is key to fostering sustainable empowerment.

Village A, the focus of this study, is a rural community located in Central Java, Indonesia. Like many rural villages, Village A faces multiple development challenges, including limited access to formal education, high rates of underemployment, and a lack of economic diversification. In response, a university-led community service program was established to provide NFE opportunities aimed at enhancing local capacities, promoting entrepreneurship, and improving overall well-being.

Despite the recognized potential of NFE in supporting community empowerment, there remains a need for empirical research that critically examines how these programs are implemented in rural Indonesian contexts, what outcomes they achieve, and what factors influence their effectiveness. Existing literature often highlights the benefits of NFE in general terms but provides limited insight into the specific processes, challenges, and successes experienced at the community level (Tecson, Ibon, Ebesa, & Trangia, 2025).

Moreover, while community service programs are widely implemented, their impact on empowerment is not always systematically evaluated. Questions persist regarding the extent to which these initiatives foster genuine participation, build sustainable capacities, and address the diverse needs of marginalized groups such as women, youth, and the elderly.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the role of non-formal education (NFE) in community empowerment through the analysis of a community service program implemented in Village A. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, such as empowerment processes, community dynamics, and educational practices, within their natural context (Creswell, 2014). The focus is on capturing the perspectives, experiences, and meanings attributed by the program participants, facilitators, and local stakeholders.

The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to provide a detailed and rich description of the community service program's implementation, outcomes, and challenges. This approach facilitates the exploration of how NFE activities contribute to individual and collective empowerment, as well as the contextual factors that influence the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Village A, a rural community located in Central Java, Indonesia. Village A was selected due to its socio-economic characteristics typical of many rural Indonesian villages, including limited access to formal education, reliance on agriculture, and challenges related to poverty and underemployment. The village has been the site of a university-led community service program focused on delivering NFE activities aimed at enhancing local skills, promoting entrepreneurship, and improving community welfare.

Village A's demographic profile includes approximately 2,500 residents, with a significant proportion of women and youth who are the primary beneficiaries of the NFE initiatives. The village's socio-cultural context, local leadership structure, and existing community organizations provide a relevant backdrop for examining the dynamics of empowerment through education.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved multiple stakeholders engaged in or affected by the community service program. Participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives, including:

- Program Facilitators: University lecturers, students, and local trainers responsible for designing and delivering NFE activities.
- Community Participants: Adult learners, women, youth, and other community members who actively participated in the NFE programs.
- Local Leaders: Village heads, community organization representatives, and other influential figures involved in supporting or overseeing the program.

Purposive sampling was chosen to identify individuals with direct experience and knowledge relevant to the research questions. A total of 25 participants were involved: 8 facilitators, 15 community participants, and 2 local leaders. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, where no new significant information emerged during data collection.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed multiple qualitative techniques to triangulate findings and enhance validity:

1. In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participant groups to gather detailed insights into their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding the NFE program. The interview guides included open-ended questions covering topics such as:

- The nature and content of NFE activities
- Perceived benefits and impacts on skills, economic opportunities, and social relations
- Challenges encountered during program participation or facilitation
- Suggestions for program improvement and sustainability

Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with consent, and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. Follow-up interviews were held with selected participants to clarify and deepen understanding.

2. Participant Observation

The researcher engaged in participant observation during NFE sessions, community meetings, and related events. This method allowed direct observation of interactions, teaching methods, participant engagement, and the social environment. Field notes were taken to document observations, informal conversations, and contextual details that enriched the data.

3. Document Analysis

Relevant documents were collected and analyzed to complement interview and observation data. These included:

- Program proposals and reports
- Training materials and curricula
- Attendance records and participant feedback forms
- Local government policies related to education and community development
- Document analysis provided background information, verified reported activities, and helped identify program objectives and implementation strategies.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of four concurrent and iterative activities:

1. Data Collection

Data from interviews, observations, and documents were systematically gathered and organized. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were expanded into detailed memos.

2. Data Reduction

The researcher engaged in data reduction by selecting, focusing, and simplifying the data. Transcripts and notes were coded using thematic coding techniques, identifying key concepts and patterns related to empowerment, program activities, challenges, and outcomes.

3. Data Display

Organized data were displayed in matrices, charts, and narrative summaries to facilitate comparison and interpretation. Themes were grouped into categories such as skill development, economic impact, social cohesion, and program management.

4. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Preliminary conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and relationships identified. These conclusions were continuously tested and refined through triangulation across data sources and member checking with participants to ensure accuracy and credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Non-Formal Education Activities

The community service program in Village A offered a variety of NFE activities designed to address local needs. These included vocational skills training, entrepreneurship workshops, literacy classes, and health and environmental awareness sessions. The program was delivered through a combination of formal training sessions, practical workshops, and community gatherings facilitated by university staff, students, and local trainers.

Table 1. Types of Activities and Participation

Activity Type	Description	Target Group	Avg Attendance per Session	Freq
Vocational Skills Training	Agriculture techniques, handicrafts	Adults, Women	25	Weekly
Entrepreneurship Workshops	Business planning, marketing, financial literacy	Youth, Women	20	Biweekly
Literacy and Numeracy	Basic reading, writing, and arithmetic	Adults, Elderly	15	Twice a week
Health & Environmental Awareness	Hygiene, sanitation, waste management	General Community	30	Monthly

The vocational skills training was the most consistent program, attracting a steady group of participants, particularly women interested in improving agricultural productivity and handicraft skills. Entrepreneurship workshops were popular among youth and women aspiring to start small businesses. Literacy classes targeted adults and elderly residents who had missed formal schooling opportunities. Health and environmental sessions were community-wide, promoting awareness and collective action.

Participant observation revealed that facilitators employed participatory methods, including group discussions, role-playing, and hands-on practice. Training materials were adapted to local languages and contexts, often incorporating local wisdom and examples. Facilitators emphasized practical skills and problem-solving, encouraging learners to relate lessons to their daily lives.

Impact on Individual and Community Empowerment

The program's influence on empowerment was evident at both individual and community levels. Interview data and observation notes highlighted improvements in skills, economic opportunities, social cohesion, and self-confidence.

Most participants reported acquiring new skills that enhanced their livelihoods. For example, women involved in handicraft training learned techniques that improved product quality, enabling them to sell goods at higher prices. Youth who attended entrepreneurship workshops gained knowledge about business planning and financial management, which some applied to start small enterprises.

The program fostered stronger social bonds and collaboration among community members. Group activities and workshops created spaces for dialogue and mutual

support. Several participants noted increased willingness to work together on community projects, such as environmental clean-ups and health campaigns.

Many participants expressed enhanced self-esteem and a sense of agency. They felt more capable of making decisions about their economic activities and participating in village affairs. This psychological empowerment was seen as a crucial step toward sustainable development.

Discussion

The results underscore the critical role of NFE in equipping community members with practical skills that directly improve their livelihoods. Vocational training in agriculture and handicrafts, alongside entrepreneurship workshops, enabled participants-particularly women and youth-to develop competencies that translated into increased income and economic independence. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that NFE can bridge gaps left by formal education systems, especially in rural areas where access to formal vocational training is limited (Arif, Ullah, & Bibi, 2023).

The empowerment theory articulated by Yamamori & Morimoto (2025) emphasizes that knowledge and skill acquisition are foundational to enabling individuals to exercise control over their economic activities. This study's findings confirm that participants' enhanced skills led to tangible economic benefits, such as improved crop yields and successful small businesses. These outcomes not only raise household incomes but also contribute to poverty alleviation, a key goal of rural development policies in Indonesia (Yamamori & Morimoto, 2025).

Moreover, the focus on entrepreneurship reflects a broader trend in development practice that recognizes the creative economy as a vital driver of rural transformation (source). The incorporation of digital-based business education, as noted in the literature, further expands opportunities by enabling community members to engage with wider markets and innovate within their local contexts. Although this study did not explicitly measure digital literacy outcomes, the emphasis on business planning and marketing suggests an alignment with these emerging trends.

Empowerment is not solely economic but also psychological and social. The study reveals that participation in NFE activities enhanced self-confidence and agency among community members, enabling them to participate more actively in village affairs and decision-making processes. This psychological empowerment is crucial for sustaining development gains, as it fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Social cohesion emerged as another significant benefit, with participants reporting stronger community bonds and increased collaboration on collective initiatives such as health campaigns and environmental clean-ups. These findings resonate with the participatory education principles advocated by Shahreza, Imaniah & Purwanto (2025), which emphasize dialogue, critical reflection, and collective action as pathways to empowerment (Shahreza, Imaniah, & Purwanto, 2025).

The strengthening of social networks also addresses challenges of social fragmentation that often accompany rural poverty and marginalization. By creating spaces for interaction and mutual support, the NFE program contributed to building social capital, which is essential for community resilience and adaptive capacity. This

dimension of empowerment highlights the holistic impact of NFE beyond individual skill acquisition.

Despite positive outcomes, the program faced notable challenges that limited its reach and sustainability. Resource constraints, including inadequate funding, facilities, and materials, were frequently cited by participants and facilitators. These limitations are common in rural NFE programs and can undermine the quality and consistency of educational delivery (source). Addressing resource gaps requires strategic partnerships and innovative financing mechanisms, such as community contributions, government support, and private sector engagement.

Facilitator capacity was another critical issue. While university facilitators possessed technical expertise, local trainers sometimes lacked sufficient skills in adult education methodologies. This gap affected participant engagement and learning outcomes. The literature underscores the importance of training facilitators not only in content but also in pedagogical skills tailored to adult learners and community contexts (Elsawah, 2025). Capacity building for local trainers is essential to ensure program continuity and cultural relevance.

Participant motivation and attendance fluctuated, particularly among youth, due to competing economic pressures and household responsibilities. This challenge reflects broader socio-economic realities in rural Indonesia, where livelihood demands often take precedence over educational pursuits. Flexible scheduling, incentives, and integrating learning with income-generating activities can help mitigate these barriers (Muhamad Asri, Ahmad, Md Sawari, & Zakaria, 2024).

The study highlights the importance of community involvement and contextual relevance in enhancing program effectiveness. Active engagement of village leaders and local organizations fostered trust, mobilized participation, and ensured that NFE activities addressed real community needs. This finding aligns with community development theories that emphasize local ownership and participatory governance as prerequisites for sustainable empowerment (Gumula Rafaelsen, Håkansson Lindqvist, & Seikkula-Leino, 2024b).

Tailoring content to local socio-cultural contexts and incorporating local wisdom increased program acceptance and learning relevance. This approach resonates with Freire's concept of education as a dialogical process grounded in learners' lived experiences. It also reflects the need to balance universal knowledge with indigenous knowledge systems, which can enrich learning and strengthen cultural identity (source).

The partnership between the university and Village A was instrumental in providing technical expertise, resources, and legitimacy to the program. University-led community service programs, as part of Indonesia's Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi, represent a promising model for linking academic institutions with rural development (source). Such collaborations facilitate knowledge exchange, capacity building, and innovation.

However, sustaining these partnerships requires careful management to avoid dependency and ensure mutual benefit. The study suggests that empowering local trainers and institutions is critical to transitioning from externally driven interventions to community-owned initiatives. Universities must also be sensitive to local power dynamics and avoid imposing top-down solutions.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion part is the answer to the hypothesis, research objectives and research findings as well as suggestions regarding further ideas from the research. Conclusions are presented in the form of paragraphs.

All references referred to in the text of the article must be listed in the references section. References must contain reference libraries originating from primary sources (scientific journals and amounting to a minimum of 80% of the total bibliography) published in the last 10 (ten) years. Each article contains at least 10 (ten) reference literature.

Reference Writing should use a reference management application such as Mendeley . The writing format used in International Journal of Community Service (IJCS) is in accordance with the ^{APA} 6th Edition (American Psychological Association) format.

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