



Youth Engagement and Community Empowerment for Social Development in Bantaeng Regency

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Abstract

This study examines the role of youth engagement in strengthening community empowerment and its contribution to social development in Bantaeng Regency, Indonesia. The research is grounded in the growing recognition that young people are key actors in local development processes, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts where community participation is essential for sustainable development outcomes. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation involving youth groups, community leaders, and local government officials. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of youth participation, community empowerment processes, and their implications for social development. The findings reveal that youth engagement in Bantaeng is multidimensional, encompassing social, economic, digital, and civic participation. Youth contribute to community development through collective activities, small-scale entrepreneurship, digital advocacy, and involvement in local organizations such as karang taruna. However, their participation is often limited to functional and symbolic levels, with restricted access to decision-making processes. Community empowerment in the region is characterized by a transitional phase between top-down governance and emerging participatory practices, although structural and institutional constraints continue to limit its effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the study finds that youth engagement significantly strengthens social capital, enhances community cohesion, and stimulates local initiatives that contribute to social development. The relationship between youth engagement and community empowerment is mutually reinforcing but highly dependent on institutional support and inclusive governance structures. The study concludes that meaningful integration of youth into development planning is essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive social development in Bantaeng Regency.

Introduction

Social development is a key agenda in sustainable development, emphasizing improving community welfare, reducing inequality, and strengthening social capacity at the local level (Franco & Tracey, 2019). From a global perspective, social development is understood not only as economic growth but also as a process of strengthening citizen participation, social inclusion, and community cohesion (Howard & Wheeler, 2015). In this context, community engagement is a key element in determining the success of various development programs (Akbar et al., 2018). Several studies show that without active community participation, development policies tend to be unsustainable and less responsive to local needs (Kawer et al., 2018).

One social group that plays a strategic role in development is youth. Youth are seen as agents of social change, possessing energy, innovation, and a high adaptive capacity to social and technological change (Mutamam & Shantini, 2019). In various development

literature, youth engagement, or the involvement of young people in social, economic, and political activities, has been identified as a crucial factor in strengthening local democracy and community development (Mxumalo & Matsiliza, 2020). However, the level of youth involvement in development processes is often symbolic and not fully meaningful (Riva'I, 2016).

In many developing countries, including Indonesia, young people face various challenges in actively participating in social development. These challenges include limited access to resources, a lack of inclusive participation spaces, and the dominance of hierarchical social structures (De Freitas & Martin, 2015). As a result, youth's immense potential as a driving force for development has not been optimally utilized (Manik, 2016). On the other hand, the development of digital technology has opened up new opportunities for youth participation through social media, digital activism, and community-based innovation (Akom et al., 2016).

In addition to youth engagement, the concept of community empowerment is also a crucial pillar of social development (Ani et al., 2018). Community empowerment emphasizes increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to control resources and make decisions that affect their lives (Stoeffler, 2018). In practice, community empowerment is not only economic but also encompasses social, political, and cultural dimensions (Faizal, 2015). An effective empowerment process requires the active participation of the community, including youth as an integral part of the community (Ulum & Anggaini, 2020).

The relationship between youth engagement and community empowerment is becoming increasingly important in the context of local development. Several studies show that youth participation can strengthen communities' capacity to manage local resources, enhance social innovation, and expand social networks (Huang & Han, 2019). Thus, youth become not only beneficiaries of development but also key actors in the process of social transformation (Bertozzi, 2015).

However, in practice, the relationship between youth engagement and community empowerment still faces various structural challenges. Inequality in access to education, economic opportunities, and political opportunities often limits youth participation in local development (Salsabila et al., 2020). Furthermore, a top-down development approach often reduces the space for innovation and active community participation, including for youth (Isidiho & Sabran, 2016). This situation indicates a gap between development policies and the reality of implementation at the community level.

Bantaeng Regency in South Sulawesi Province is an interesting area to study in the context of the relationship between youth involvement and community empowerment. Bantaeng is known as a region that has experienced significant progress in community-based regional development over the past two decades (Harakan, 2018). The local government has promoted various community empowerment programs involving youth participation through local organizations such as youth organizations and youth business groups (Astuti, 2019). However, despite the implementation of various programs, the effectiveness of youth involvement in social development still varies across regions.

Several local studies indicate that youth participation in Bantaeng tends to be sporadic and has not been systematically integrated into village development planning (Samsir, 2016). Furthermore, the limited capacity of youth organizations and the lack of institutional support often hinder strengthening their role in social development

(Tjenreng et al., 2019). On the other hand, there are also good practices in several villages that demonstrate that youth involvement can foster social innovation and enhance community solidarity (Noack & Federwisch, 2020).

Given these conditions, this research is crucial for in-depth examination of how youth engagement contributes to community empowerment and social development in Bantaeng Regency. This study focuses not only on youth participation but also on how the community empowerment process unfolds within a dynamic local context. Thus, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the literature on youth engagement and community empowerment, as well as practical contributions to the formulation of more inclusive and sustainable social development policies.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore youth engagement, community empowerment, and social development in Bantaeng Regency. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study aims to understand social processes, meanings, and lived experiences of individuals involved in community-based development. The case study design allows an in-depth examination of a specific geographical and social context, providing a holistic understanding of how youth participation contributes to empowerment and social change at the local level.

Research Site

The research is conducted in Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, which is selected due to its active community development programs and growing youth participation initiatives. The regency provides a relevant context for examining the interaction between youth engagement and community empowerment within rural and semi-urban settings. The study focuses on selected villages and communities where youth organizations and empowerment programs are actively implemented.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants in this study include youth members, community leaders, village officials, members of youth organizations (such as *karang taruna*), and local government representatives involved in social development programs. The selection of participants uses a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that individuals chosen have relevant experience and knowledge regarding youth engagement and community empowerment processes. The sample size is determined based on the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until no new significant information emerges.

Data Collection Techniques

Data are collected through three main qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation. In-depth interviews are conducted to explore participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and roles in community development activities. FGDs are used to capture collective views and group dynamics among youth and community members. Participant observation is carried out to directly observe social interactions, community programs, and youth-led activities in their natural settings. These multiple methods are used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Data Analysis

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. The analysis process begins with data transcription, followed by coding, categorization, and theme development. Emerging themes are then organized to explain patterns of youth engagement, mechanisms of community empowerment, and their contribution to social development in Bantaeng Regency. The analysis is iterative, allowing continuous comparison between data sources to enhance depth and accuracy of interpretation.

Results

Forms of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement in Bantaeng Regency is manifested in several interconnected forms, reflecting the diverse roles that young people play in social, economic, and community development processes. The findings indicate that youth participation is not limited to formal organizational structures, but also extends to informal, digital, and community-based activities. In the social dimension, many young people actively participate in community service activities, such as village clean-up programs, religious events, and mutual aid practices (*gotong royong*), which strengthen social cohesion and collective responsibility within the community. These activities demonstrate that youth are not passive actors, but actively contribute to maintaining local solidarity and social harmony.

In addition to social engagement, economic participation among youth is also evident, particularly through involvement in small enterprises, agricultural activities, fisheries, and creative industries. Although many of these initiatives are still small-scale and informal, they reflect an emerging entrepreneurial spirit among young people. Youth-led microbusinesses and cooperative efforts are increasingly seen as important contributions to local economic resilience. As one participant stated,

"We try to start small businesses with friends, even if the income is not big, it helps us support our families and gain experience."

Digital engagement is another significant form of youth participation identified in this study. Many young people in Bantaeng utilize social media platforms to promote community activities, share information about local events, and raise awareness on social issues. This form of engagement has expanded the reach of youth activities beyond physical boundaries, enabling broader community participation and visibility. One respondent explained,

"Through social media, we can promote village events and invite more young people to join social activities."

Furthermore, civic and organizational engagement remains an important dimension of youth involvement. Many youth participate in formal organizations such as *karang taruna*, village youth groups, and local forums for development planning. However, the level of participation varies, with some youth actively involved in decision-making processes, while others remain at a more symbolic level of participation. As noted by a village official,

"Youth are present in meetings, but only a few are actively involved in decision-making discussions."

Conditions of Community Empowerment

The condition of community empowerment in Bantaeng Regency reflects a transitional stage between government-driven development programs and emerging community-based initiatives. The findings indicate that empowerment efforts have been implemented through various programs such as village development planning (*Musrenbang*), livelihood improvement initiatives, and capacity-building activities facilitated by local government and non-governmental organizations. These programs aim to enhance community participation, improve access to resources, and strengthen local decision-making capacities. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies significantly across villages, depending on local leadership, institutional capacity, and the level of community participation.

In many areas, community empowerment is still characterized by a top-down approach, where planning and decision-making processes are largely dominated by government institutions. While communities are invited to participate, their involvement is often limited to consultation rather than active decision-making. This condition suggests that empowerment has not yet fully reached the level of community control or self-management. As one community member stated,

"We are usually invited to meetings, but most decisions have already been prepared by the village officials."

Despite these limitations, there are also positive developments in certain communities where empowerment processes are becoming more participatory and inclusive. In these areas, local organizations, particularly youth groups and community-based associations, play an increasingly important role in initiating development activities and mobilizing collective action. These initiatives include cooperative businesses, environmental programs, and social welfare activities that are managed collaboratively by residents. As a local youth leader expressed,

"In our village, young people are starting to take part in planning and even initiating small projects for the community."

Nevertheless, several structural challenges continue to hinder the full realization of community empowerment. These include limited financial resources, insufficient training and capacity-building programs, and unequal access to development opportunities. In addition, dependency on external funding often reduces the sustainability of local initiatives.

Relationship between Youth Engagement and Community Empowerment

The relationship between youth engagement and community empowerment in Bantaeng Regency is found to be strongly interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The findings indicate that youth participation plays a crucial role in strengthening community empowerment processes by increasing collective awareness, enhancing local initiative, and improving the capacity of communities to participate in development activities. When young people are actively involved in social, economic, and civic activities, they tend to act as catalysts for broader community participation, encouraging other community members to become more engaged in development programs. This suggests that youth engagement functions not only as an individual form of participation but also as a driving force for collective empowerment.

The study reveals that communities with higher levels of youth involvement tend to demonstrate stronger organizational capacity and more dynamic local development initiatives. Youth groups often serve as bridging actors between the community and local government, facilitating communication, mobilizing resources, and translating community needs into actionable programs. In this context, youth are not merely participants but also facilitators of empowerment processes. As one village official stated,

"When young people are active in our village, community programs become easier to organize and more people are willing to participate."

Furthermore, youth engagement contributes to the development of social capital within the community. Through participation in group activities, networks of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity are strengthened, which are essential elements of sustainable community empowerment. These social networks enable communities to respond more effectively to local challenges and development needs. A community leader explained,

"Youth groups help build trust among residents, and this makes it easier for us to work together in development activities."

However, the relationship between youth engagement and community empowerment is not always linear or fully optimal. In some cases, youth participation remains symbolic or limited to specific events, which reduces its impact on broader empowerment outcomes. Structural constraints such as limited institutional support, lack of leadership opportunities for youth, and insufficient integration into formal decision-making processes weaken this relationship.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The findings of this study indicate that youth engagement and community empowerment in Bantaeng Regency are influenced by a combination of supporting and inhibiting factors that shape the effectiveness of local social development processes. Supporting factors primarily include institutional support from local government, the presence of active youth organizations, access to education and capacity-building programs, and strong social cohesion within communities. Local government initiatives, particularly through village development programs and youth empowerment schemes, provide formal spaces for participation and encourage young people to be involved in community activities. As one local official stated,

"We always try to involve young people in development programs because they bring new ideas and energy to the community."

In addition, youth organizations such as *karang taruna* play a significant role in mobilizing participation and fostering leadership among young people. These organizations serve as platforms for collaboration, skill development, and social interaction, which strengthen both individual capacities and collective action. Educational opportunities and training programs also contribute to enhancing youth competencies, particularly in entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and community leadership. A youth leader expressed,

"Through training and youth organizations, we learn how to manage activities and contribute to our village development."

Strong social cohesion within communities further supports the success of empowerment initiatives. The tradition of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and close interpersonal relationships among residents create an environment that encourages

collective participation in development activities. This social capital becomes a foundation for sustaining community-based programs and strengthening trust among stakeholders.

However, several inhibiting factors continue to limit the effectiveness of youth engagement and community empowerment. These include limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient long-term support for youth programs. Many initiatives depend heavily on temporary funding, which affects their sustainability. As one community facilitator noted,

"Many youth programs stop after the funding ends, so it is difficult to maintain long-term activities."

Another significant challenge is the limited access of youth to decision-making processes. In many cases, young people are included in activities but are not fully involved in strategic planning or policy formulation. This reduces their sense of ownership and limits the impact of their participation. A youth participant explained,

"We are often invited to join activities, but we are rarely involved when important decisions are made."

Overall, while supporting factors provide a strong foundation for youth engagement and community empowerment, inhibiting factors related to resources, institutional inclusion, and sustainability remain significant challenges that need to be addressed to optimize social development outcomes in Bantaeng Regency.

Impacts on Social Development

The findings of this study indicate that youth engagement and community empowerment in Bantaeng Regency have significant implications for social development, particularly in strengthening social cohesion, improving community participation, and fostering local development initiatives. Social development in this context is reflected in the gradual improvement of collective welfare, increased awareness of community needs, and the growing capacity of local actors to address social and economic challenges. When youth actively participate in community activities and empowerment processes, they contribute to creating a more inclusive and dynamic social environment that supports sustainable development.

One of the key impacts observed is the strengthening of social cohesion within communities. Youth involvement in collective activities such as community service, local events, and social campaigns helps build trust, solidarity, and mutual cooperation among residents. These social bonds are essential for maintaining harmony and ensuring the sustainability of community-based programs. As one community leader stated,

"When young people are active in village activities, people become more united and willing to work together."

In addition, youth engagement contributes to the emergence of local innovation and community initiatives. Many young people initiate small-scale projects such as environmental cleanliness programs, digital promotion of local products, and entrepreneurship activities. These initiatives not only provide economic benefits but also stimulate creativity and problem-solving within the community. A youth participant explained,

"We try to create new activities that can help the village, like promoting local products through social media."

The study also finds that youth engagement and community empowerment contribute to the improvement of basic social well-being, particularly in terms of participation in education, economic opportunities, and access to community programs. Although the impact is gradual, there are indications that communities with higher youth participation tend to experience more active development dynamics and better access to social services.

However, the impact on social development is not yet fully optimal. In some areas, limited resources and weak institutional support reduce the sustainability of youth-driven initiatives. As a village facilitator noted,

"Some programs show good results at the beginning, but they do not continue because there is not enough support."

Overall, the findings suggest that youth engagement plays a transformative role in promoting social development by strengthening community cohesion, encouraging innovation, and improving participation. Nevertheless, sustained institutional support and stronger integration of youth into formal development structures are necessary to maximize these positive impacts in Bantaeng Regency.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between youth engagement, community empowerment, and social development in Bantaeng Regency is complex, dynamic, and non-linear. Conceptually, youth engagement should be a key instrument in strengthening community empowerment and accelerating inclusive social development. However, in practice, this study found a gap between the ideal potential of youth as agents of change and the reality of their participation at the community level. Youth engagement often remains at the level of functional and symbolic participation, not fully reaching the level of partnership that allows youth to participate in strategic decision-making (Crowley & Moxon, 2017).

From the perspective of social capital theory, these findings reinforce Utami's (2020) argument that social development is largely determined by the quality of social networks, trust, and norms of cooperation within the community. In Bantaeng, youth engagement has been shown to strengthen social capital through collective activities, youth organizations, and community activities. However, this social capital has not been fully institutionalized within formal village development structures. This leaves youth contributions to community empowerment contextual and dependent on local initiatives, rather than established institutional systems.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that the community empowerment process in Bantaeng is still in transition from a top-down approach to a participatory one. Although the local government has provided various participation spaces, such as village deliberations and empowerment programs, community involvement, especially among youth, is often limited to the consultation stage, rather than the planning and decision-making stages. This situation aligns with Nunes Silva's (2020) critique of the ladder of participation, where many forms of participation remain at the level of tokenism, rather than genuine citizen power.

From a policy implementation perspective, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of community empowerment is largely determined by the quality of local institutions and the extent to which youth are integrated into development governance systems (Wahid et al., 2017). In many cases, youth are involved in operational activities, but are not given sufficient space in the policy formulation process. As a result, the potential for social innovation among youth has not been fully utilized. This reinforces the view that empowerment is not only about access to programs, but also about the distribution of power in decision-making (Robinson et al., 2017).

Furthermore, this study also found that youth engagement plays a crucial role in strengthening community social resilience. Youth are adaptive actors capable of responding to social change through digital innovation, local entrepreneurship, and community initiatives. In this context, youth serve as a bridge between local social traditions and development modernization (Siswadhi et al., 2020). However, this contribution remains inconsistent due to resource constraints, a lack of institutional support, and minimal program sustainability.

In the context of social development, these findings indicate that the synergy between youth engagement and community empowerment has a positive impact on social cohesion, increased community participation, and the emergence of local, community-based initiatives. However, this impact is not evenly distributed across the Bantaeng region. Disparities in capacity between villages, differences in the quality of youth organizations, and the dominance of formal actors in decision-making are factors that limit the effectiveness of comprehensive social transformation (Phan et al., 2019).

An important implication of this research is the need to reorient social development policies to be more inclusive and based on substantive participation. Local governments need not only provide formal participation spaces but also ensure that youth have real access to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programs. Strengthening the capacity of youth organizations, providing sustainable financial support, and integrating youth into village governance structures are key to increasing the effectiveness of community empowerment.

Furthermore, this research confirms that social development cannot be separated from the dynamics of social relations and institutions at the local level. In other words, the success of social development depends heavily on the extent to which communities, especially youth, are given space for meaningful participation. Without changes to more equal participation structures, community empowerment will tend to be administrative in nature and not result in profound social transformation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that youth engagement plays a crucial and strategic role in strengthening community empowerment and promoting social development in Bantaeng Regency. The findings reveal that youth participation in social, economic, digital, and civic activities contributes to the enhancement of social capital, collective action, and local innovation within communities. However, the effectiveness of this engagement is still influenced by structural limitations, including uneven access to decision-making processes, limited institutional support, and variations in the capacity of local organizations. Community empowerment in Bantaeng is characterized by a transitional process from a top-down approach toward more participatory practices, although meaningful participation of youth in strategic development processes remains limited.

Despite these challenges, youth engagement has been shown to foster social cohesion, strengthen community networks, and support the emergence of local initiatives that contribute to improved social development outcomes. Overall, the study highlights that sustainable social development can only be achieved when youth are meaningfully integrated into community empowerment structures, supported by inclusive policies, and provided with adequate institutional and economic support to fully realize their potential as agents of change.

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