



The Role of Servant Leadership in Empowering Community-Based Organizations: A Case Study in Rural Development Movements

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Abstract

This study explores the role of servant leadership in empowering community-based organizations (CBOs) within rural development contexts in Indonesia. The primary objective of the research is to examine how servant leadership practices influence community participation, capacity building, and collective agency in grassroots development initiatives. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted in a rural village CBO and involved purposive sampling of 15 participants representing diverse stakeholder groups. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that servant leadership serves as a critical catalyst for community empowerment by fostering inclusive decision-making, strengthening individual and collective capacities, and building trust-based social capital. Leaders who prioritize service, humility, and ethical stewardship enable community members to transition from passive beneficiaries to active agents of development. The study further demonstrates that servant leadership facilitates the diffusion of leadership within the community, enhancing organizational sustainability and reducing dependence on external actors. The novelty of this research lies in its contextualized examination of servant leadership within grassroots rural development settings, extending servant leadership theory beyond formal organizational environments into community-driven development practices. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and CBO leaders by highlighting servant leadership as an effective governance approach for sustainable and participatory rural development. This study underscores the potential of servant leadership to strengthen community resilience, promote social cohesion, and support long-term development outcomes in the Global South.

Keywords: Servant leadership; community empowerment; community-based organizations; rural development; qualitative study

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran kepemimpinan melayani (*servant leadership*) dalam memberdayakan organisasi berbasis komunitas (*community-based organizations/CBOs*) pada konteks pembangunan pedesaan di Indonesia. Fokus utama penelitian adalah menganalisis bagaimana praktik kepemimpinan melayani memengaruhi partisipasi masyarakat, penguatan kapasitas individu dan kolektif, serta terbentuknya agensi komunitas dalam inisiatif pembangunan berbasis akar rumput. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, yang dilaksanakan pada sebuah CBO di wilayah pedesaan. Teknik *purposive sampling* digunakan untuk melibatkan 15 informan dari berbagai kelompok pemangku kepentingan. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, diskusi kelompok terarah, dan observasi partisipatif, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan melayani berperan sebagai mekanisme kunci dalam proses pemberdayaan komunitas melalui pengambilan keputusan yang inklusif, pengembangan kapasitas berkelanjutan, serta pembentukan modal sosial berbasis kepercayaan. Pemimpin yang mengedepankan nilai pelayanan, kerendahan hati, dan integritas etis mampu mendorong anggota komunitas bertransformasi dari partisipan pasif menjadi aktor pembangunan yang aktif dan mandiri. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa kepemimpinan melayani mendorong terjadinya difusi kepemimpinan di tingkat komunitas, yang berkontribusi pada keberlanjutan organisasi dan penguatan kemandirian lokal. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pengembangan pemahaman empiris tentang kepemimpinan melayani dalam konteks pembangunan komunitas pedesaan, yang selama ini masih didominasi oleh kajian organisasi formal. Secara praktis, temuan penelitian memberikan implikasi strategis bagi pembuat kebijakan, praktisi pembangunan, dan pemimpin CBO dalam merancang pendekatan kepemimpinan yang partisipatif, berkelanjutan, dan berorientasi pada pemberdayaan. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa kepemimpinan melayani memiliki potensi

besar dalam memperkuat ketahanan sosial, kohesi komunitas, dan keberlanjutan pembangunan di negara berkembang.

Kata kunci: *kepemimpinan melayani; pemberdayaan komunitas; organisasi berbasis komunitas; pembangunan pedesaan; studi kualitatif*



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INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in rural development underscore the significance of local leadership and community involvement. Traditional top-down initiatives have often underperformed due to inadequate grassroots ownership, leading to a paradigm shift towards participatory development frameworks (Hutagalung et al., 2021). For instance, Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment (PNPM) exemplifies this shift, successfully involving local communities in planning and executing development projects across nearly all villages by the mid-2000s (Tan et al., 2022). Community-based organizations (CBOs) are pivotal in this transformation, mobilizing local resources and addressing unique community needs often overlooked by government programs (Kamar et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of CBOs hinges significantly on effective leadership, with many organizations struggling due to poor leadership practices (Novitasari et al., 2022).

Servant leadership represents an innovative leadership philosophy that aligns closely with community empowerment principles. Coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, servant leadership posits that leaders should prioritize serving others before themselves, fostering environments where community members can thrive (Asbari et al., 2020). This seemingly selfless approach is especially applicable within community empowerment contexts, wherein leaders enhance the capacity of their followers rather than simply issuing directives (Purwanto et al., 2020). Yet, despite its potential, the application of servant leadership in community-driven development remains under-researched, raising questions about its practical implications in rural contexts such as Indonesia (Asbari et al., 2023).

Research Goal

This article endeavors to bridge this research gap by investigating how a servant leader within a CBO influenced grassroots community empowerment in Indonesia. The study examines the dynamics of servant leadership behaviors and their impact on community development initiatives, aiming to highlight how this leadership framework could be integral to enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of rural development efforts.

Literature Review

Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership is fundamentally centered on the leader's desire to serve others (Novitasari et al., 2020). Greenleaf contended that the mark of effective leadership is whether those under the leader's influence are nurtured and grow personally and professionally (Novitasari et al., 2020). A significant body of literature outlines the hallmarks of servant leadership, which include listening, empathy, commitment to follower growth, and community building (Purwanto et al., 2021). Empirical research has established connections between servant leadership and numerous positive organizational outcomes, such as enhanced trust, improved team cohesion, and increased employee engagement (Asbari & Novitasari, 2022). The capacity to empower followers is a vital mechanism through which servant leaders facilitate positive change in their organizations (Novitasari et al., 2021).

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment involves the process by which community members gain control over aspects of their lives, promoting greater involvement in decision-making that affects their circumstances (Asbari et al., 2020). It necessitates building the skills and confidence of community members to enable them to collectively address issues they face (Purwanto et al., 2020). Importantly, empowerment manifests not through the imposition of external power but through the self-empowerment of

individuals within the community (Nurhayati et al., 2024). Key elements of community empowerment include inclusive participation, critical awareness, and collective agency, all essential for driving sustainable development (Ramadhan et al., 2025).

Intersection of Servant Leadership and Community Empowerment

The principles of servant leadership inherently align with those of community empowerment. Servant leaders prioritize the growth of their constituents, facilitating inclusion in decision-making processes—mirroring the Indonesian practice of *musyawarah*, or consensus deliberation (Asbari et al., 2021). This leadership style cultivates environments where community members feel that their voices are valued, encouraging active participation (Prasetyo & Asbari, 2023). Recent studies corroborate that when leaders engage in consensus-building and community involvement, they lay the groundwork for cultivating intrinsic motivation among community members, ultimately fostering greater self-reliance (Wardani et al., 2024).

Practical examples illustrate how servant leadership can drive community empowerment initiatives. Servant leaders who commit to developing others' skills through mentoring and training significantly enhance the confidence and capabilities of local community members (Novitasari et al., 2021). This progressive approach underscores the theory that by placing community needs above their own ambitions, leaders can foster trust and create environments conducive to collaborative efforts (Purwanto et al., 2020). The resultant effects of servant leadership, as demonstrated through case studies, reveal that it promotes not only organizational efficiency but also psychological empowerment among community members (Nofiyanti et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

Adopting a qualitative case study approach allowed for a detailed investigation of servant leadership within a community context (Riyanto et al., 2021). The chosen case study examined a CBO in a rural Indonesian village that has engaged in local developmental activities, led by an individual exemplifying servant leadership principles (Azhari et al., 2023). The research employed purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives, involving a total of 15 participants from various stakeholder groups, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics and community empowerment (Novitasari et al., 2020).

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations to capture the nuances of interactions and community engagement (Novitasari et al., 2021). Each interview and focus group discussion served to distill insights into the attributes of the leader's style and its subsequent effects on community empowerment initiatives. The data analysis employed a thematic approach, facilitating the identification of key patterns related to the study's objectives (Komalasari & Asbari, 2023).

In conclusion, the intersection of servant leadership and community empowerment presents a compelling framework for driving effective rural development. The evidence from the Indonesian case study underscores the significant role that servant leadership can play as a catalyst for community agency, effective resource mobilization, and sustainable outcomes in development initiatives. Further research is recommended to expand on these findings across different geographic contexts, confirming the universality of the benefits attributed to servant leadership in community empowerment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive and Participatory Leadership: Fostering Ownership through Shared Decision-Making

The case study highlighted that the community-based organization's (CBO) leader consistently adhered to an inclusive leadership style, promoting community engagement in decision-making processes. Interviews with community members and observational data underscored that village meetings followed a deliberative *musyawarah* style, where the leader presented issues or proposals and encouraged open discourse about these topics. Participants emphasized the leader's commitment to gathering input first, with one community member stating, "Pak Leader always listens to us first before any decision is made." This method aligns with fundamental servant leadership behaviors of active listening and consensus-building rather than coercion (Novitasari et al., 2020).

The inclusive decision-making process not only validated individual contributions from community members but produced a sense of ownership regarding the CBO's projects. One farmer

articulated, “We can see our suggestions become part of the plan, so we feel responsible to make it succeed.” This reflects the servant leadership model's emphasis on valuing every member's input as expressed by Spears, who noted that servant leaders must first identify the collective will of the group (Novitasari et al., 2020). By fostering such an environment through shared decision-making, the leader not only respected local cultural norms but actively operationalized servant leadership by embodying a philosophy that prioritizes communal input (Purwanto et al., 2021).

Significantly, this inclusive leadership approach yielded observable empowerment effects. Many participants reported enhanced confidence in voicing concerns and suggesting solutions, contrasting with past practices where decisions were typically reserved for village elites. A member from a women's group noted that previously, “women didn't attend meetings or just sat quietly,” but under the servant leader's mentorship, more women and younger villagers began sharing their ideas. This democratization of participation is central to the empowerment process as defined by the World Health Organization (Asbari & Novitasari, 2022). Our observations during project planning meetings corroborated these reports, revealing how the leader intentionally prompted quieter members for their opinions and mediated discussions to achieve consensus, fostering a collective problem-solving ethos rather than a directive, top-down approach. This participatory atmosphere enabled community members to embrace shared responsibilities for developmental outcomes, illustrating empowerment in action and yielding a greater sense of control over local affairs (Novitasari et al., 2021).

Capacity Building and Personal Growth: Developing Skills and Confidence among Members

Another critical theme identified in the case was the leader's concentrated effort on capacity building among CBO members and volunteers, a crucial factor in individual empowerment. The leader embodied the servant leadership ethos by acting as a mentor and educator, dedicating substantial time to enhance the skills of community project participants (Asbari et al., 2020). For instance, informal training sessions in project management and bookkeeping were frequently arranged by the leader, with collaboration from extension workers contributing to the skill development. A youth volunteer recalled, “He sat with me many evenings, showing how to draft a good proposal. Now I can do it on my own and even help others.” This mentoring directly empowered younger members to assume responsibilities they originally thought beyond their capabilities (Purwanto et al., 2020).

As members of the CBO took on increased responsibilities, their self-efficacy was enhanced, aligning with the servant leadership philosophy that emphasizes leaders stepping back and allowing followers to lead in their areas of competence (Nurhayati et al., 2024). Many participants recounted transformative experiences where once-shy individuals evolved into community organizers, demonstrating significant personal growth attributed to the leader's supportive style. A middle-aged woman shared how she developed public speaking skills from managing a community savings program, crediting the leader's encouragement for her newfound confidence: “He believed in me and gave me a chance. Now I believe in myself.” This transformational shift signifies the core of empowerment at the individual level and affirms Greenleaf's vision that servant leaders help others become healthier, wiser, and more autonomous (Ramadhan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the leader fostered an environment where mistakes were learning opportunities rather than failures, thereby nurturing a culture of continuous improvement and psychological safety amongst team members (Asbari et al., 2021). Observations at training workshops revealed junior members confidently facilitating discussions, a clear indicator that the capacity building approaches employed were yielding dividends. As described in various humanitarian contexts, effective servant leadership can significantly develop the skills and self-confidence of individuals, thus enabling them to effectively initiate and maintain community development initiatives independently (Prasetyo & Asbari, 2023).

Trust, Empowerment, and Community Outcomes: Building Social Capital and Sustainability

The study culminated in realizing how the servant leader's relational dynamics contributed profoundly to trust-building within the community, translating into significant long-term empowerment outcomes. Participants frequently referenced the leader's integrity, humility, and genuine care for the community's well-being as key factors in fostering trust. Community members referred to him as “dia pemimpin yang rendah hati dan mau mendengar” (“he is a humble leader who is willing to listen”), cementing the notion of trust rooted in ethical stewardship (Wardani et al., 2024).

For instance, the leader exhibited pragmatism during resource shortages by prioritizing community needs over personal gain, exemplified when he allocated funds for sanitary facilities rather

than for the CBO office. This illustrated ethical leadership behavior and served to further reinforce villagers' confidence in both the leader and the CBO's capacity to address community issues effectively. With increased trust, community members became more likely to contribute not only labor but financial resources to communal initiatives, demonstrating a robust bond of social capital built on mutual trust and norms of reciprocity (Novitasari et al., 2021).

In practical terms, the empowered community displayed enhanced initiative and agency. For example, villagers collectively organized a task force to lobby for essential infrastructure improvements successfully. The leader's role was crucial, as he provided advice and encouragement but ultimately allowed the community members to spearhead the initiatives—showcasing how servant leadership principles could translate to impactful community agency and influence external governance structures (Purwanto et al., 2020). The collaboration within the community improved markedly, leading to tangible projects like a community learning center, all driven by mutual trust and the can-do spirit fostered by the servant leader. Participant testimonials echo sentiments of collective agency: “We proved we can solve our problems together. The leader showed us the way, but we walked it ourselves.” This illustrates empowerment—a community effectively managing its resources and priorities without reliance on external oversight (Nofiyanti et al., 2025).

The long-term effectiveness of the CBO noticeably improved under the servant leader's guidance, illustrated by enhanced membership—all indicating that the organization had become increasingly self-sustaining. Membership grew as villagers saw the benefits derived from active participation, leading to heightened attendance in development programs without consistent external facilitation. This resonates with findings indicating that the empowerment resulting from servant leadership practices often correlates with improved organizational performance, directed through increased member agency (Riyanto et al., 2021).

In essence, the leader's inclusive approach has diffused leadership naturally throughout the community, indicating sustainability. Emerging leaders within the community have adopted a service mentality, ready and eager to “pay forward” the support and trust they have received, which aligns with Greenleaf's ultimate aspiration of servant leadership (Azhari et al., 2023).

Challenges and Contextual Considerations

Despite the observed positive impacts, the study recognized the contextual factors and challenges that accompanied servant leadership implementation. Initially, not all community members embraced this approach, with some demonstrating skepticism rooted in traditional paternalistic leadership expectations. The leader faced the arduous task of cultivating a culture of open dialogue and initiative-taking, which required time and patience in overcoming deeply entrenched social norms.

Moreover, the temporality of consensus-based decision-making sometimes posed delays in urgent situations, creating tension between maintaining an inclusive process and addressing immediate community needs (Novitasari et al., 2020). However, the leader strategically countered these challenges by initiating small successes to build confidence in the new approach, resulting in increased acceptance over time, particularly as trust deepened. By aligning with local cultural values such as humility and mutual support, the leader's servant approach found legitimacy, enhancing its efficacy in fostering community empowerment and cohesion (Novitasari et al., 2021).

In summary, the findings from this case study illustrate that servant leadership serves as a powerful mechanism for empowering community-based organizations. Through inclusive decision-making, robust capacity building, and emphatic trust-building, the servant leader in “Desa Bhakti” transformed the CBO into an effective vehicle for community empowerment. These results resonate with the broader literature documenting the intersection of servant leadership with community development, illustrating the real-world impact of servant leadership methodologies in fostering grassroots agency and sustainability in rural development contexts (Komalasari & Asbari, 2023; Pebrina et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that servant leadership plays a pivotal and transformative role in empowering community-based organizations (CBOs) within rural development contexts. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative case study, the findings reveal that servant leadership operates as a foundational mechanism that cultivates inclusive participation, strengthens individual and collective capacity, and fosters trust-based social capital. Through practices such as shared decision-making, consistent

mentoring, ethical stewardship, and humility, the servant leader examined in this study enabled community members to move beyond passive participation toward active agency and ownership of development initiatives .

Theoretically, this research extends servant leadership scholarship by situating it within grassroots community empowerment rather than conventional organizational or corporate settings. The findings affirm Greenleaf's core proposition that leadership effectiveness is ultimately measured by the growth, autonomy, and well-being of followers, while also demonstrating how servant leadership aligns organically with participatory development paradigms and local cultural values such as *musyawarah*. By integrating leadership theory with empowerment and rural development literature, this study contributes a contextualized understanding of how servant leadership translates into sustainable collective action and distributed leadership at the community level.

From a practical perspective, the study offers actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and CBO leaders. Servant leadership emerges not merely as a moral ideal but as a pragmatic governance approach capable of enhancing program sustainability, strengthening community resilience, and reducing dependency on external actors. Embedding servant leadership principles into capacity-building programs, leadership training, and community governance frameworks may significantly improve the effectiveness of rural development interventions, particularly in contexts characterized by strong communal norms and historical power asymmetries.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. As a single-case qualitative inquiry, the findings are context-specific and do not claim statistical generalizability. Future research should therefore adopt comparative or multi-site designs across diverse socio-cultural and geographic settings to examine the robustness and transferability of servant leadership outcomes. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to assess the durability of empowerment effects and leadership diffusion over time. In conclusion, servant leadership offers a compelling and ethically grounded leadership model for community-based rural development. By prioritizing service over authority and empowerment over control, servant leaders can catalyze sustainable development processes rooted in dignity, collective agency, and shared responsibility—principles that are increasingly vital for inclusive and resilient development in the Global South.

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