



Strengthening Community Welfare through Social Institution Empowerment and Participatory Governance: A Case Study from Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the role of social institutions in strengthening community welfare through participatory governance practices in Hulu Sungai Utara Regency, Indonesia. A qualitative research design employing a case study approach was used to explore social and institutional phenomena in their natural context. Data were collected through observation, document analysis, and literature review, while thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and major themes related to participatory governance and community empowerment. The findings indicate that social institutions play an important role in facilitating community participation and supporting local development activities. However, the effectiveness of participatory governance remains constrained by several institutional and structural challenges, including weak organizational management, limited leadership regeneration, symbolic participation practices, unequal access to resources, and inconsistent stakeholder collaboration. Community participation in governance processes tends to remain procedural because decision-making authority remains dominated by administrative actors and local government institutions. In addition, financial dependence, limited access to information, and restricted institutional networking undermine the sustainability of community-based development initiatives. Despite these limitations, the study also reveals the emergence of collaborative governance practices involving local governments, social institutions, youth organizations, and community groups. Such collaboration contributes to improved coordination, strengthened local participation, and supported community empowerment activities. The study concludes that strengthening community welfare through participatory governance requires not only formal participatory mechanisms but also strong institutional capacity, equitable access to resources, meaningful community involvement, and sustainable collaboration among stakeholders. This study contributes to the broader discourse on participatory governance by highlighting the interconnected relationship between institutional capacity, participation quality, collaborative governance, and community welfare development within local governance systems.

Keywords: participatory governance, social institutions, community welfare, collaborative governance, institutional capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Community welfare has become one of the most important objectives of contemporary development policies in both developed and developing countries. In modern development discourse, welfare is no longer narrowly defined by economic growth, income generation, or poverty reduction alone. Instead, welfare is increasingly understood as a

multidimensional concept encompassing social inclusion, access to public services, participation in governance, institutional sustainability, empowerment, equality, and the overall quality of life (Midgley, 1995). This broader understanding reflects the growing recognition that sustainable development cannot be achieved solely through economic expansion, but must also strengthen social structures and ensure active public participation in development processes.

In recent decades, globalization, democratization, and decentralization have significantly transformed governance systems across many countries, including Indonesia. These transformations have shifted development paradigms from centralized, state-dominated approaches to more participatory, community-oriented governance models. In decentralized governance systems, local governments are expected to become more responsive to community needs by directly involving citizens in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. According to the Bank (1994), participatory governance improves accountability, transparency, and public trust while also increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of development programs. Communities that actively participate in governance processes are generally better able to identify local priorities and ensure that development initiatives address real social problems.

In Indonesia, the implementation of regional autonomy following the enactment of decentralization policies has provided local governments with broader authority to manage development and public administration. Decentralization was expected to reduce bureaucratic centralization and encourage more democratic governance practices at the local level. As a result, participatory development mechanisms, such as village development planning forums (*Musyawah Perencanaan Pembangunan*, or *Musrenbang*), have been institutionalized within local governance systems. These mechanisms aim to create opportunities for communities to express their aspirations, propose development priorities, and contribute to policy formulation processes. Participatory governance is therefore viewed as an essential strategy for strengthening democracy and improving community welfare at the local level.

The increasing emphasis on participatory development also emerged as a response to the limitations of conventional top-down development models. Traditional development approaches often positioned governments as the primary actors, while communities were treated as mere passive recipients of policies and programs. Such approaches often ignored local knowledge, social conditions, and community priorities, resulting in ineffective or unsustainable development outcomes. According to Robert Chambers, development policies that exclude local participation tend to reinforce dependency and marginalization because communities lack control over decisions affecting their lives. (Chambers, 1997) argued that empowerment-oriented development should prioritize the voices, experiences, and capacities of local communities to achieve equitable and sustainable social transformation.

As participatory approaches gained prominence, community-based development became increasingly recognized as an alternative framework capable of promoting inclusive and sustainable development. Community-based development emphasizes local empowerment, collective action, and collaborative decision-making processes among stakeholders. Within this framework, social institutions play a crucial role in connecting communities with governmental structures and development actors. Social institutions may include community organizations, youth groups, women's associations, religious

organizations, cooperatives, and informal social networks that facilitate communication, coordination, and collective participation.

The importance of social institutions is closely related to the concept of social capital. (Putnam et al., 2001) defined social capital as networks, trust, and social norms that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Communities with strong social capital are generally better able to organize collective action, resolve conflicts, and participate effectively in governance processes. Social capital also strengthens institutional effectiveness by fostering trust and social cohesion, encouraging collaboration among community members and public institutions. In the context of local development, social institutions with strong social capital can serve as mediators that bridge the relationship between governments and citizens.

Nevertheless, despite the growing implementation of participatory governance mechanisms in Indonesia, meaningful community participation remains difficult to achieve in practice. In many cases, participation remains limited to formal consultation processes rather than to genuine involvement in decision-making. Communities may attend planning meetings and provide suggestions, yet their influence on final policy decisions often remains minimal. This phenomenon reflects what Arnstein (1969) described as “tokenism,” a condition in which participation exists only symbolically, without a real redistribution of power. Under tokenistic participation, communities are formally included in governance procedures but lack the authority to substantially shape development priorities or policy outcomes.

In addition to symbolic participation, many local social institutions continue to face serious institutional challenges. Weak organizational management, inadequate leadership capacity, limited financial resources, lack of technical skills, and insufficient access to information frequently reduce the effectiveness of community organizations in participating in governance processes. Institutional weakness often prevents social institutions from sustaining programs, mobilizing resources, or effectively representing community interests. Consequently, participatory governance mechanisms alone are insufficient to improve welfare outcomes unless they are accompanied by institutional strengthening and capacity development initiatives.

Another challenge concerns unequal access to resources and development opportunities among community groups. Marginalized communities frequently experience difficulties accessing funding, information, education, and external partnerships needed to support local development initiatives. Such inequalities may weaken the quality of participation and reinforce social exclusion within governance processes. According to the United Nations Development Programme, effective governance is essential for ensuring inclusive participation, accountability, and sustainable development processes (UNDP, 2015). Without adequate institutional and structural support, participatory governance risks reproducing existing inequalities rather than empowering marginalized populations.

Previous studies have extensively explored empowerment, participation, and social capital as important dimensions of community development. Empowerment theory emphasizes the importance of enabling communities to gain greater control over decisions and resources affecting their lives (Zimmerman, 1995). Participation theory focuses on the degree of citizen involvement in governance and public policy processes, while social capital theory highlights the significance of trust, networks, and social cooperation in promoting

institutional effectiveness. However, most previous research has examined these concepts separately, resulting in a limited understanding of how empowerment, participation, social capital, and institutional capacity interact simultaneously within local governance systems.

Furthermore, relatively few studies have specifically examined the role of social institutions as mediating actors that connect empowerment processes, participatory governance, and community welfare outcomes within decentralized governance contexts. Existing studies often focus either on government performance or on community participation, without comprehensively examining the institutional conditions that influence the effectiveness of participation. Consequently, there remains a significant research gap regarding how institutional capacity and collaborative governance mechanisms shape the relationship between participation and welfare improvement at the local level.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how social institutions strengthen community welfare through empowerment strategies and participatory governance mechanisms. Using a qualitative case study approach in Kabupaten Hulu Sungai Utara, this research investigates how institutional capacity, participation dynamics, social capital, and access to resources influence the effectiveness of community-based development practices. This study also proposes an integrated analytical framework combining empowerment theory, participation theory, and social capital theory within a collaborative governance perspective. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of the participatory governance literature and, practically, to the formulation of more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable local development policies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case-study design to examine the role of social institutions in strengthening community welfare through empowerment strategies and participatory governance mechanisms in Kabupaten Hulu Sungai Utara. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand social phenomena, institutional dynamics, and participatory practices within their natural social context. According to Creswell & Creswell (2017), qualitative research enables researchers to explore and interpret social realities based on participants' experiences, institutional interactions, and contextual conditions. The case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of contemporary social phenomena in real-life settings, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin et al., n.d.). The selection of Hulu Sungai Utara Regency as the research site was based on the consideration that the region has actively implemented participatory development practices involving community-based social institutions in local governance and empowerment programs.

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through observations of community activities, institutional practices, and participatory development processes conducted by local social institutions. Observation was used to identify patterns of community participation, institutional interaction, and stakeholder collaboration within development activities. Secondary data were collected from various official and academic sources, including regional development planning documents, government reports, policy regulations, institutional records, books, scientific

journal articles, and prior studies on participatory governance, empowerment, and social capital. The use of multiple data sources was intended to strengthen the comprehensiveness and credibility of the findings through triangulation. According to Denzin (2017), triangulation enhances research validity by combining multiple sources and perspectives to examine the same social phenomenon.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis, literature review, and direct observation. Document analysis was conducted by examining policy documents, development plans, institutional reports, and administrative records related to community empowerment and participatory governance. This technique enabled the researcher to understand formal governance mechanisms, institutional structures, and local-level development policies. In addition, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to empowerment theory, participation theory, social capital, and collaborative governance. Relevant academic publications were reviewed to strengthen the analytical framework and the study's contextual understanding. An observation was conducted to examine actual community participation practices and institutional interactions within local development activities. Through direct observation, the researcher identified practical challenges faced by social institutions, including limitations in organizational capacity, access to resources, and stakeholder collaboration.

The analytical framework of this study integrated empowerment theory, participation theory, and social capital theory within a collaborative governance perspective. Empowerment theory emphasizes the importance of enabling communities to gain greater control over decisions and resources affecting their lives (Zimmerman, 1995). Participation theory highlights the degree and quality of citizen involvement in governance processes, particularly regarding decision-making authority and power distribution (Arnstein, 1969). Meanwhile, social capital theory explains how trust, social networks, and norms of reciprocity facilitate cooperation and collective action within society (Putnam et al., 2001). To complement these perspectives, the study also adopted the concept of collaborative governance proposed by Ansell & Gash (2008), which emphasizes collective decision-making processes among governments, civil society, and other stakeholders to address public issues.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and themes related to institutional capacity, participation dynamics, social capital, and welfare outcomes. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative analytical method for systematically identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The analysis process involved several stages, including data organization, data familiarization, coding, theme categorization, interpretation of findings, and conclusion drawing. Throughout the analysis, observational findings, documentary evidence, and theoretical perspectives were continually compared to ensure analytical consistency and interpretative accuracy.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data and theoretical triangulation. Information obtained from observations, official documents, and academic literature was cross-checked and compared to minimize bias and improve data reliability. The integration of multiple theoretical perspectives also enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between institutional capacity,

participation, empowerment, and community welfare within participatory governance practices.

RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that social institutions in Kabupaten Hulu Sungai Utara play a significant role in facilitating community participation and supporting local development activities. However, the effectiveness of these institutions in strengthening community welfare remains constrained by several institutional and structural challenges. Thematic analysis revealed four major findings: institutional capacity constraints, symbolic participation practices, limited access to resources, and collaborative governance dynamics. These findings demonstrate that the implementation of participatory governance at the local level has not yet achieved meaningful, sustainable community empowerment outcomes.

Institutional Capacity Constraints

The study found that many community-based social institutions continue to experience limitations in organizational management, administrative capability, leadership quality, and long-term program sustainability (Table 1). Several institutions operate primarily through voluntary participation without sufficient organizational planning or institutional development strategies. As a result, institutional activities often depend heavily on a limited number of active individuals, while broader community involvement remains inconsistent.

The findings also indicate that leadership regeneration within local organizations remains relatively weak. Younger community members are still minimally involved in institutional management and decision-making processes. Consequently, leadership responsibilities tend to remain concentrated among senior community figures, reducing institutional adaptability and long-term organizational continuity.

Table 1: Institutional Capacity Challenges Identified in the Study

No	Institutional Issue	Findings	Implications
1	Weak organizational management	Limited administrative and managerial capability	Reduced institutional effectiveness
2	Leadership limitations	Dependence on a few active members	Weak institutional sustainability
3	Limited institutional regeneration	Low involvement of younger members	Reduced organizational continuity
4	Insufficient training programs	Training focused mainly on administration	Limited organizational innovation
5	Weak strategic planning	Lack of long-term institutional planning	Inconsistent community participation

In addition, although local governments have implemented several institutional assistance and empowerment programs, most activities remain administrative in nature and focus primarily on reporting procedures rather than strengthening participatory leadership,

organizational innovation, and managerial capacity. These conditions reduce social institutions' ability to sustain community empowerment initiatives independently. According to Morgan (2006), institutional effectiveness is strongly influenced by organizational capacity, leadership quality, and the ability of institutions to adapt to changing governance environments.

The findings suggest that limited institutional capacity significantly affects the sustainability of participatory governance practices and reduces the effectiveness of community-based development programs.

Symbolic Participation Practices

Another major finding concerns the quality of community participation within local governance processes. Although participatory forums such as *Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan (Musrenbang)* have been formally implemented, community participation remains largely procedural rather than substantive.

The study found that communities are generally invited to attend planning meetings and provide suggestions regarding development priorities (Table 2). However, final decisions on budget allocation, program implementation, and development priorities remain dominated by local government authorities and administrative actors. Community proposals discussed during participatory forums are often not fully incorporated into final policy decisions. Participation, therefore, tends to operate symbolically, with attendance and consultation emphasized over actual community influence on governance outcomes. These findings align with Fun's (2015) argument that participatory governance may become procedural when citizens are formally involved but have limited influence over decision-making processes.

Table 2: Characteristics of Community Participation Practices

Participation Dimension	Observed Practice	Participation Level
Community attendance	Communities invited to formal meetings	High
Opinion submission	Communities allowed to provide suggestions	Moderate
Decision-making authority	Limited community influence on final decisions	Low
Budget allocation involvement	Dominated by government authorities	Low
Program evaluation participation	Minimal community involvement	Low

The findings indicate that participatory governance mechanisms in the research area have not yet fully achieved inclusive, collaborative decision-making. Community participation remains concentrated at the consultation level rather than in active governance.

Limited Access to Resources

The study further reveals that limited access to resources remains a primary obstacle to the performance of social institutions in implementing community-based development programs

(Table 3). Resource-related challenges include financial limitations, restricted access to information, inadequate technological support, and limited institutional networking opportunities.

Most community organizations remain highly dependent on government assistance or short-term project funding. Independent financial sustainability is relatively weak because many institutions lack productive economic programs or stable funding mechanisms to support long-term organizational activities. Several institutions located in rural areas also experience difficulties accessing digital communication facilities, institutional training programs, and external partnership opportunities.

Limited access to resources reduces organizational responsiveness and weakens social institutions' ability to sustain development initiatives effectively. According to Woolcock (2001), social capital alone is insufficient to strengthen institutional performance without adequate structural support and equitable access to resources.

Table 3: Resource-Related Challenges Faced by Social Institutions

Resource Dimension	Identified Condition	Institutional Impact
Financial resources	Heavy dependence on government funding	Weak program sustainability
Information access	Unequal access to development information	Reduced institutional responsiveness
Technological support	Limited digital infrastructure and facilities	Weak communication and coordination
External partnerships	Limited collaboration with external stakeholders	Restricted institutional networking
Human resources	Limited technical and managerial capability	Reduced organizational performance

These findings demonstrate that unequal resource distribution continues to affect the effectiveness and sustainability of participatory development initiatives at the local level.

Collaborative Governance Dynamics

Despite the various institutional and structural challenges identified, the findings also demonstrate the emergence of collaborative governance practices involving local governments, social institutions, youth groups, and other community actors (Table 4). Collaborative activities were particularly evident in community empowerment programs, social assistance distribution, educational campaigns, neighborhood development, and disaster response initiatives.

In several observed activities, social institutions served as effective intermediaries, facilitating communication and coordination between local governments and communities. Stakeholder cooperation increased community participation and improved program implementation at the local level.

However, the sustainability of collaborative governance practices remains inconsistent. Collaboration tends to be more active during temporary programs and government projects than through long-term institutional partnerships. Unequal institutional capacity and limited stakeholder commitment continue to reduce the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives. These findings support the collaborative governance framework proposed by Emerson & Nabatchi (2015), who argued that effective collaborative governance requires institutional trust, shared commitment, balanced participation, and sustainable coordination among stakeholders.

Table 4: Forms of Collaborative Governance Identified in the Study

Collaborative Activity	Involved Stakeholders	Observed Outcome
Community empowerment programs	Government and community organizations	Increased public participation
Social assistance distribution	Government and local institutions	Improved coordination efficiency
Educational campaigns	Schools, youth organizations, and local authorities	Increased public awareness
Community development activities	Government and residents	Strengthened collective participation
Disaster response initiatives	Government and volunteer organizations	Faster community mobilization

Overall, the findings demonstrate that strengthening community welfare through participatory governance depends not only on the formal existence of participatory institutions but also on institutional capacity, equitable access to resources, and sustainable stakeholder collaboration. While social institutions in Hulu Sungai Utara Regency continue to play an important role in supporting local participation and development activities, their effectiveness remains constrained by organizational limitations and unequal governance practices. Therefore, strengthening institutional capacity, improving access to resources, and developing more inclusive collaborative governance mechanisms are essential to achieving sustainable, inclusive community welfare outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the effectiveness of participatory governance in strengthening community welfare is strongly influenced by institutional capacity, the quality of participation, resource accessibility, and collaborative governance dynamics. Although social institutions in Kabupaten Hulu Sungai Utara have actively participated in local development activities, the study found that participatory practices remain constrained by structural and organizational limitations. These findings indicate that the existence of participatory mechanisms alone is insufficient to achieve sustainable community empowerment without strong institutional support and inclusive governance arrangements.

The study found that limited institutional capacity remains a primary barrier to the sustainability of community-based development initiatives. Weak organizational management, inadequate leadership regeneration, and limited strategic planning reduce

the ability of social institutions to function effectively within participatory governance systems. This finding supports Morgan's (2006) argument that institutional capacity is determined not only by organizational structure but also by leadership quality, adaptive capability, and institutional learning processes (Moore, 2013). Similarly, Moore (2013) emphasized that public institutions require managerial competence and organizational effectiveness to generate sustainable public value within governance systems.

The findings further indicate that institutional weaknesses significantly affect the continuity of community participation. In many observed cases, organizational activities depended heavily on a limited number of active individuals, while broader community engagement remained inconsistent. Such conditions demonstrate that participatory governance at the local level still faces difficulties in developing inclusive and sustainable institutional participation. This condition is particularly important because community participation requires not only formal involvement but also institutional empowerment that supports collective action and organizational sustainability.

Another important finding concerns the persistence of symbolic participation practices within local governance processes. Although participatory forums such as *Musrenbang* formally provide opportunities for public involvement, community influence over decision-making processes remains relatively limited. Participation, therefore, tends to operate procedurally rather than substantively. These findings align with the participatory governance framework developed by Fung (2015), who argued that participation may become symbolic when institutional arrangements allow public consultation without redistributing actual decision-making authority.

The dominance of administrative actors in determining development priorities and budget allocation also indicates the persistence of hierarchical governance patterns within local governance systems. This condition limits the transformative potential of participatory governance because communities remain primarily positioned as policy recipients rather than as active policy actors. Effective participatory governance requires institutional mechanisms that allow citizens to influence policy processes substantively rather than merely participate symbolically (Fung, 2015).

The study also demonstrates that limited access to resources significantly affects the effectiveness of social institutions in implementing community empowerment programs. Financial dependence on government assistance, unequal access to information, limited technological infrastructure, and restricted institutional networking reduce community organizations' capacity to sustain development initiatives independently. These findings reinforce Woolcock's (2001) argument that social capital cannot function effectively without structural support and equitable resource distribution within governance systems. Likewise, Fukuyama (2001) emphasized that trust and social networks alone are insufficient to strengthen institutional performance when organizations lack economic support and institutional capability.

Resource inequality also contributes to unequal participation capacity among community organizations. Institutions with greater access to information, training opportunities, and external partnerships tend to perform better than smaller or rural institutions. Consequently, participatory governance practices risk reproducing institutional inequalities if access to resources remains uneven. This finding suggests that improving

access to institutional resources is essential for strengthening equitable community participation and sustainable governance practices.

Despite these limitations, the findings also reveal the emergence of collaborative governance practices involving local governments, social institutions, youth organizations, and community groups. Collaborative activities contributed to improved coordination, facilitated communication, and strengthened local participation in development programs. These findings support the collaborative governance model proposed by Emerson & Nabatchi (2015), who argued that collaborative governance depends on institutional trust, shared commitment, balanced stakeholder participation, and continuous interaction among actors.

However, the study found that collaborative governance practices remain largely temporary and program-oriented rather than institutionalized within long-term governance arrangements. Collaboration frequently intensifies during specific government programs or emergencies but weakens once projects are completed. Such conditions indicate that sustainable collaborative governance requires stronger institutional integration and more consistent stakeholder commitment. Without sustainable coordination mechanisms, collaborative initiatives are likely to remain fragmented and unable to generate long-term welfare impacts.

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of participatory governance by demonstrating that participation quality, institutional capacity, resource accessibility, and collaborative governance are closely interconnected dimensions of community welfare development. The study also highlights that participatory governance should not be understood merely as the formal inclusion of communities in development forums, but rather as a process of institutional empowerment that enables communities to meaningfully influence governance outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings imply that local governments need to strengthen institutional development programs focusing on leadership regeneration, organizational management, resource accessibility, and participatory decision-making mechanisms. Greater investment in institutional capacity-building and collaborative governance structures is necessary to sustain community empowerment initiatives. In addition, participatory forums should be redesigned to ensure broader community influence in policy formulation and development planning.

Overall, this study demonstrates that strengthening community welfare through participatory governance requires not only formal participation mechanisms but also strong institutional capacity, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable collaborative relationships among stakeholders. Without these supporting conditions, participatory governance risks remaining procedural and unable to produce inclusive and sustainable welfare outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social institutions play a significant role in supporting participatory governance and strengthening community welfare in Hulu Sungai Utara Regency. The findings demonstrate that participatory governance mechanisms have provided opportunities for community involvement in local development processes; however, their effectiveness is constrained by limited institutional capacity, symbolic participation

practices, unequal access to resources, and inconsistent collaborative governance arrangements.

The study found that weak organizational management, inadequate leadership regeneration, and limited strategic planning reduce social institutions' ability to sustain community empowerment initiatives effectively. In addition, community participation in governance processes remains largely procedural because decision-making authority remains dominated by administrative actors and local government institutions. Resource limitations, including financial dependence, unequal access to information, and restricted institutional networking, further undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of community-based development programs.

Despite these challenges, the findings also reveal the emergence of collaborative governance practices involving governments, social institutions, and community groups. Such collaboration contributes to improved coordination, strengthened local participation, and support for community development activities. However, collaborative governance remains largely program-oriented and has not yet been fully institutionalized within sustainable governance structures.

This study, therefore, emphasizes that strengthening community welfare through participatory governance requires more than the formal establishment of participatory forums. Effective participatory governance depends on strong institutional capacity, equitable access to resources, meaningful community involvement in decision-making processes, and sustainable collaboration among stakeholders. Strengthening leadership development, organizational management, institutional networking, and inclusive governance mechanisms is essential for improving the effectiveness of social institutions in promoting sustainable community welfare.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discussion of participatory governance by demonstrating the interconnectedness of institutional capacity, participation quality, social collaboration, and welfare development within local governance systems. Future studies are recommended to explore participatory governance practices across broader regional contexts and examine the long-term impact of institutional-strengthening programs on sustainable community development.

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