

Micro Social Movements: Informal Empowerment Practices in Villages as a Response to Social Inequality

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Abstract

Micro social movements in rural areas represent collective community responses to persistent social inequality, particularly when formal interventions fail to address local needs. This study explores how informal empowerment practices function as micro social movements that are adaptive, community-based, and grounded in local agency. A Systematic Literature Review was conducted following identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis using Snyder's guidelines. A total of 22 selected articles were analyzed through content analysis to examine patterns, strategies, and impacts of informal empowerment in addressing inequality. The findings indicate that micro social movements emerge through the interaction of social capital, informal structures, micro social innovations, and community participation. Social capital serves as the primary foundation enabling collective action, while informal structures such as self-help groups and traditional institutions act as social learning spaces. Social innovations, including digital technology adoption and local economic initiatives, enhance community capacity to respond to inequality. The study concludes that informal empowerment plays a strategic role in strengthening rural social resilience and fostering community autonomy. Structural implications include strengthening village policy frameworks, integrating digital technology, enhancing local leadership capacity, and promoting multi-actor collaboration to sustain micro social movements.

Keywords: Community, Empowerment, Inequality, Micro Social, Rural.

1. Introduction

Rising social inequality over the past two decades has become a global concern and has driven the emergence of new forms of social movements, including micro social movements that develop informally at the village level. Social inequality is manifested not only in the distribution of income and access to basic services but also in unequal opportunities, limited access to livelihoods, and weak social capacity among certain community groups. In rural contexts, social inequality often appears in the form of limited access to education, technology, and participatory spaces, which eventually triggers the emergence of informal initiatives as collective community responses to these issues. Apostolopoulou et al. (2022) demonstrate that grassroots movements can function as radical social innovations that emerge from local needs to address injustice and transform unequal social structures. These findings underline that informal movements in villages make significant contributions by filling gaps that formal policies are unable to reach.

In Indonesia, as a country with a predominantly rural structure, micro social movements develop through various informal empowerment practices initiated by villagers, community leaders, women's groups, youth associations, farmer groups, and other local communities. They build informal mechanisms to strengthen social capacity, mobilize social capital, and generate self-initiated solutions to structural inequality. Yunita et al. (2025) found that social capital plays a central role in promoting community empowerment toward inclusive



development, especially when it is managed through informal networks that facilitate collaboration and solidarity. This social capital enables rural communities to respond autonomously to inequality without waiting for government intervention. These findings indicate that informal empowerment practices are an integral part of micro social movements that grow from tradition, social relations, and deeply rooted communal values.

Social inequality that emerges in rural life also generates the need for local social innovation. Christmann et al. (2024) show that local social initiatives in marginalized rural areas can create meaningful change through collective action and community-based organizing. These initiatives often lack formal structure, yet they mobilize residents to improve social conditions through adaptive, flexible, and contextual strategies. In many cases, micro social movements move faster than formal institutions because of their responsiveness and grounding in real local problems. This condition strengthens the urgency of studying micro social movements that rely on informal empowerment as a strategy to address social inequality.

Informal empowerment practices in villages are highly diverse. Ahmad et al. (2024) found that village social institutions can serve as centers of community empowerment when they are able to integrate communal values, local wisdom, and citizen participation in solving social problems. Informal empowerment in the form of local economic training, the formation of micro-enterprise groups, informal cooperatives, study groups, and self-help activities exemplifies various organically developing initiatives. Marsuki et al. (2025) add that community-based empowerment, particularly in the development of community-based tourism, often utilizes informal structures to support economic empowerment and cultural preservation. These studies show that micro social movements are not simple phenomena but complex social mechanisms created through the interaction of structural conditions, social capital, and community creativity.

Digitalization and technological change have further expanded the sphere of micro social movements. Ye and Yang (2020) find that digital platforms can enhance social inclusion in rural communities through technology-based empowerment and digital communication. Access to technology helps communities overcome geographic barriers and expand information networks, allowing micro social movements to grow more innovatively and become more connected. In Indonesian villages, the Smart Village approach has become one strategy for integrating technology into community empowerment. Sellang et al. (2025) explain that Smart Village implementation strengthens local capacity through the use of technology in public services, economic empowerment, and social development. Thus, informal empowerment in micro social movements now relies not only on traditional social capital but also on digital capital that creates new spaces for collaboration.

Although informal empowerment has strong potential to respond to social inequality, challenges remain. Nalikan et al. (2025) emphasize that social capital-based empowerment requires holistic and collaborative approaches to generate sustainable impacts in rural areas. Meanwhile, Wibowo et al. (2025) highlight that social change among traditional fishing communities requires strong institutional adaptation so that empowerment does not stop at the level of socialization but can build long-term social resilience. These challenges show that informal empowerment does not always function ideally but instead requires integration between community strengths, informal institutions, and structural support.

Previous studies have contributed significantly to the literature on community empowerment and social movements; however, they have not specifically examined how informal empowerment practices in villages function as micro social movements in responding to social inequality. First, Lestary and Hadi (2021), in their SLR on village-owned enterprises (BUMDes), focus on formal institutions in village economic empowerment but do not explore the dynamics of informal empowerment originating from the community. Second, Deveaux (2018) discusses social movements among the global poor but does not detail micro practices in rural contexts and local variations in responses to inequality. Third, Mardiyah et al. (2025) examine community empowerment in inclusive education, but the scope remains limited to the education sector rather than the broader spectrum of informal empowerment in social movements. Thus, the research gap lies in the lack of comprehensive studies that explore micro social movements based on informal empowerment practices as responses to social inequality in rural settings.

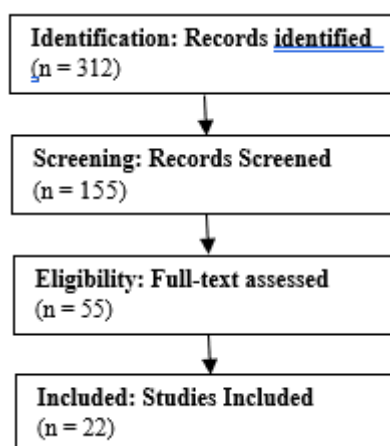
The novelty of this study lies in its effort to integrate perspectives on micro social movements with community-based informal empowerment practices in villages, producing a comprehensive understanding of how communities generate self-initiated solutions to social inequality. This study aims to analyze the processes, forms, and factors that drive the development of micro social movements through informal empowerment as a response mechanism to social inequality in rural areas.

2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review method to evaluate, organize, and synthesize scientific findings on informal empowerment practices within micro social movements in rural communities. The SLR method was chosen because it enables the researcher to produce a structured and evidence-based mapping of how rural communities develop informal initiatives to address social inequality. The SLR procedure refers to the guidelines of Snyder (2019), which emphasize process replicability, transparency in literature selection, and systematic analysis through the identification of research questions, literature search, screening, and synthesis of findings. Article searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect using the keywords rural empowerment, micro social movement, informal empowerment practices, village inequality response, and grassroots innovation.

The article selection process followed the PRISMA flow. In the Identification stage, 312 articles were found to be relevant to the search keywords. In the Screening stage, 149 articles were eliminated due to duplication and 108 others were excluded because they were not relevant to informal empowerment or micro social movements. The Eligibility stage resulted in 55 articles that met the requirements for full-text access and relevance to the rural context. The Included stage produced 22 final articles used in the analysis. Descriptively, the PRISMA flow of this study is as follows: Identification ($n = 312$) → Screening ($n = 155$) → Eligibility ($n = 55$) → Included ($n = 22$). The analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques to identify key themes such as social capital, micro social innovation, informal institutions, community capacity, inequality responses, and the dynamics of village-based social movements.

Through the implementation of this SLR, the study obtained an in-depth understanding of how informal empowerment practices function as micro social movements that respond to social inequality, thereby providing the analytical foundation for the subsequent discussion.



3. Results

Dynamics of Micro Social Movements in Informal Rural Empowerment

Micro social movements in rural communities arise as locally grounded responses to structural inequality, marginalization, and restricted access to economic, political, and educational resources. Unlike formal social movements that operate through institutionalized structures, micro movements grow organically, remain fluid, and often emerge without formal organizational frameworks. Apostolopoulou et al. (2022) describe such grassroots initiatives as radical forms of social innovation driven by lived experiences of injustice and collective aspirations for social change. In rural settings, these dynamics are embodied in informal empowerment practices enacted by youth groups, women's collectives, customary institutions, and various community networks.

The operation of these movements is closely tied to the mobilization of social capital. Yunita et al. (2025) demonstrate that trust, reciprocity, and community solidarity function not only as relational resources but also as transformative capacities that enable villagers to organize local responses to inequality. In contexts where state interventions remain uneven or inaccessible, these social networks become informal governance systems that coordinate collective action, distribute responsibilities, and facilitate adaptive strategies to social and economic pressures.

Informal empowerment activities form the everyday infrastructure of micro social movements. These include community mentoring, microenterprise development, informal cooperatives, learning circles, and locally

organized support systems. Ahmad et al. (2024) highlight that even nonformal village institutions often assume critical empowerment roles by stimulating participation and strengthening local agency. Such initiatives frequently emerge because formal mechanisms do not adequately address disparities, prompting communities to cultivate self-organized solutions that enhance both economic well-being and social capacity.

Rising economic vulnerability and shifting livelihoods further accelerate the need for community-driven innovation. Initiatives such as informal women's cooperatives, youth microbusiness groups, and creative rural enterprises demonstrate the capacity of villagers to navigate structural constraints through collective improvisation. Wibowo et al. (2025) show that, in fishing communities, informal empowerment becomes an essential adaptive tool for confronting socio-economic transitions, underscoring the proactive nature of micro social movements as mechanisms of social resilience.

Beyond economic concerns, micro movements also address nonmaterial dimensions of inequality, particularly in education, social literacy, and leadership development. Mardiyah et al. (2025) reveal that community-based empowerment efforts enhance inclusive education practices in rural areas, illustrating how grassroots innovation can generate sustained social transformation even without strong institutional support. This demonstrates that informal empowerment acts as a strategic response to structural inequality by cultivating local capabilities and strengthening community agency.

Digitalization further reshapes these dynamics by broadening the reach, resources, and visibility of micro social movements. Ye and Yang (2020) show that digital tools promote rural social inclusion by expanding access to information, communication, and opportunities. In Indonesia, Smart Village initiatives exemplify how technological integration amplifies local capacity and accelerates community-driven innovation (Sellang et al., 2025). When combined with existing cultural and social capital, digital technology enables informal empowerment practices to evolve into more adaptive and interconnected forms of micro social activism.

Conceptually, micro social movements in rural settings operate through intertwined processes involving the use of social capital, the emergence of informal empowerment practices, and the development of micro-level social innovation shaped by community creativity and technological adaptation. Apostolopoulou et al. (2022) argue that such innovation often emerges most strongly among marginalized groups who face the greatest urgency for change, a pattern clearly reflected in rural communities developing informal strategies to overcome structural barriers.

Despite their strengths, sustaining micro social movements presents challenges. Nalikan et al. (2025) emphasize that empowerment relying solely on social capital may be fragile without broader collaborative or institutional support, which can limit long-term impact. Munawaroh's (2016) study of community craft-based empowerment further shows that informal initiatives often require consistent facilitation and organizational stability to grow effectively. These insights reveal that informal empowerment, while agile and contextually appropriate, benefits from hybrid arrangements that link community initiative with structural reinforcement.

Even so, micro social movements remain a vital component of rural development ecologies. They expand collective capacity, foster locally grounded social innovation, and enhance community resilience in the face of persistent inequality. Rather than serving only as reactive responses to structural injustice, these movements reflect proactive strategies through which rural communities claim space for participation, autonomy, and social rights. Sukmana et al. (2025) affirm that such grassroots efforts play a key role in reconfiguring local power relations and advancing more inclusive forms of rural development.

Patterns, Strategies, and Impacts of Informal Empowerment as a Mechanism of Micro Social Movements

This discussion elaborates the patterns, strategies, and impacts of informal empowerment as a central mechanism of micro social movements in responding to social inequality. Informal empowerment is understood as a social process emerging from community-initiated actions and driven by collective needs to address forms of inequality that formal institutions fail to resolve. According to Ahmad et al. (2024), informal empowerment is characterized by its adaptive, community-based, and flexible nature in responding to local dynamics. These characteristics make it an effective mechanism for reaching vulnerable groups that are often overlooked by formal governmental programs.

The first identifiable pattern is the formation of self-help groups or small community collectives that function as engines of social change. These groups arise from shared needs, such as women's collectives developing microenterprises, youth groups implementing literacy programs, or farmer groups creating food-sharing solidarity systems. Lestary and Hadi (2021) emphasize that community-based empowerment, including through BUMDes and other organizational forms, can strengthen the social and economic capacity of rural communities. Although their work focuses on formal institutions, their findings are relevant for understanding

that community capacity is a foundational element for informal empowerment practices within micro social movements.

The second pattern involves the emergence of micro social innovations, namely new practices developed by communities to address inequality. Apostolopoulou et al. (2022) note that radical grassroots social innovations can generate long-term structural change. In rural contexts, such innovation may take the form of leveraging local resources, utilizing simple technologies, or adopting collaborative strategies to tackle social problems. For example, rural communities may use digital platforms to market local products or to organize empowerment activities. This aligns with the findings of Ye and Yang (2020), who demonstrate the role of digital platforms in enhancing social inclusion among rural populations.

To provide a more structured mapping of previous studies related to informal empowerment strategies in rural contexts, the following table summarizes key studies from your reference list. The table helps illustrate differences in focus, context, and scholarly contribution across the literature.

Author(s)	Year	Context of Study	Focus of Informal Empowerment	Key Findings
Ahmad et al.	2024	Village social institutions (Indonesia)	Informal strengthening of community social structures	Informal institutions enhance community participation and social cohesion
Yunita et al.	2025	Rural communities (Indonesia)	Social capital as a driver of empowerment	Social capital fosters inclusive and sustainable village development
Ye & Yang	2020	Rural China	Digital platforms for empowerment	Digital inclusion significantly enhances rural social empowerment
Sellang et al.	2025	Smart programs Village	Technology-based informal empowerment	Digital innovation strengthens local capacity and community adaptability
Christmann et al.	2024	Rural Europe	Grassroots empowerment initiatives	Informal grassroots initiatives improve community resilience and social equity

The table illustrates that informal empowerment practices across various rural contexts differ in focus yet consistently aim to strengthen community capacity. A synthesis of the literature reveals several core strategies that characterize micro social movements. The first strategy is the mobilization of strong social capital as the primary engine of empowerment. Social capital enables communities to cultivate trust, networks, and shared norms that sustain collaboration. Yunita et al. (2025) emphasize that social capital constitutes one of the most essential elements for achieving sustainable and inclusive development..

4. Discussion

The second strategy involves revitalizing existing informal structures. Ahmad et al. (2024) show that non-formal village social institutions can play a significant role in enhancing social interaction and reinforcing community capacity. Informal bodies such as religious study groups, cultural collectives, or customary institutions possess emotional proximity to residents and are often more capable of fostering trust compared with formal institutions. Consequently, empowerment rooted in informal structures is more readily accepted by community members and tends to generate rapid, tangible results.

The third strategy centers on technology-driven social innovation. Ye and Yang (2020) and Sellang et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital technologies open new avenues for empowerment by improving access to information, education, marketing, and social participation. Within micro social movements, digital innovation often emerges as a response to unequal access to resources, enabling communities to broaden networks of solidarity and strengthen their bargaining position in the socio-economic landscape.

A fourth strategy is the enhancement of community capacity through participatory, community-based activities. Suryawan and Mahagangga (2024) find that community involvement in planning rural tourism initiatives strengthens collective identity and builds local economic capacity. Although situated within the tourism context, these findings are relevant for understanding how informal empowerment supports community sustainability by fostering active resident engagement in social and economic processes.

The impacts of informal empowerment are also evident in the rise of community social resilience. Christmann et al. (2024) show that informal initiatives emerging in rural environments can heighten community resilience by reinforcing local ownership, solidarity, and autonomy. These outcomes are crucial in situations of social inequality, where communities must rely on internal mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of structural disparities.

Moreover, informal empowerment provides space for collective action toward the pursuit of social rights. Deveaux (2018) argues that social movements driven by marginalized groups possess strong moral and political force in advancing social justice. Although his analysis is situated at the global level, the principle holds true for micro social movements in rural contexts, where communities leverage local resources to build political and social agency.

Nevertheless, challenges persist in sustaining informal empowerment efforts. Nalikan et al. (2025) find that without collaborative approaches and structural support, empowerment initiatives rooted in social capital often stagnate or fail to reach optimal development. Additional challenges stem from internal community dynamics, such as conflicts of interest and unequal social relations, which can erode solidarity. These issues indicate that the long-term sustainability of micro social movements requires institutional support that acknowledges and complements the vital role of informal initiatives within the broader empowerment ecosystem.

Overall, informal empowerment as a mechanism of micro social movements exhibits diverse patterns and strategies, yet all share a common orientation toward strengthening community capacity in confronting social inequality. Through the mobilization of social capital, the development of social innovations, the utilization of digital technologies, and the cultivation of community-based capacities, micro social movements play a critical role in shaping the social resilience of rural communities (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Conceptual Model of Micro Social Movements Based on Informal Empowerment and Their Structural Implications for Social Inequality

This discussion synthesizes insights from the literature to construct a conceptual model explaining how informal empowerment functions as the operative mechanism of micro social movements in rural contexts. These movements emerge organically from community needs and develop outside formal institutional structures, forming adaptive systems of collective action grounded in social relations, local values, and community-based initiative. As Apostolopoulou et al. (2022) argue, radical social innovation often originates from marginalized groups whose urgent need for change drives grassroots responses to structural inequality. In rural settings, this dynamic materializes in micro social movements that mobilize informal empowerment practices as a means of negotiating and reshaping unequal social conditions.

A core component of this model is the mobilization of social capital, which operates through bonding, bridging, and linking relationships that collectively sustain community action. Yunita et al. (2025) highlight that bonding capital solidifies internal cohesion, bridging capital expands intergroup networks, and linking capital connects communities to formal structures and external resources. These forms of social capital interact fluidly within micro social movements, enabling communities to maintain adaptive collective action even under structural constraints. Informal women's groups, youth collectives, and communal work networks exemplify how social capital is operationalized to anchor empowerment efforts.

Informal social structures serve as the sociocultural medium where these movements take shape. Ahmad et al. (2024) show that village-based social institutions whether formal or informal, play a central role in developing community capacity. Informal structures such as rotating savings groups, handicraft collectives, study circles, and customary institutions function not only as platforms for social interaction but also as loci of learning, identity formation, and legitimacy. These spaces allow collective action to grow organically, as demonstrated by Munawaroh (2016), who found that community-based activities strengthen household resilience through the reinforcement of local values and social norms.

Micro social movements also generate micro-level social innovations that arise from the intersection of social capital and informal structures. These innovations often take the form of local strategies rather than formal technologies, such as the development of microenterprises, the use of communal spaces for capacity building, or the creation of cooperative food security mechanisms. Christmann et al. (2024) document how such community-driven innovations enhance social cohesion and economic opportunity, illustrating the community's capacity to creatively mitigate structural inequality. The growth of digital tools within rural settings has further expanded this innovation landscape. Research by Ye and Yang (2020) and Sellang et al. (2025) shows that digital platforms and smart village initiatives increase social participation, improve information access, and enable new forms of localized problem-solving.

Another dimension of the model concerns the community's social response to inequality. Micro social movements emerge when communities recognize forms of exclusion that remain unaddressed by formal

institutions. Deveaux (2018) notes that movements led by the poor possess strong normative force precisely because their claims derive directly from lived experience. In Indonesian villages, these responses materialize in movements addressing disparities in education, economic opportunity, gender roles, and spatial marginalization. Such movements do not require formal political scaffolding; they operate through everyday social interaction and incremental collective action.

Civic participation forms an additional layer in the conceptual model. As Suryawan and Mahagangga (2024) demonstrate, participatory engagement fosters a strong sense of collective identity and shared responsibility for community development. Within informal empowerment practices, participation becomes a mechanism through which residents exercise civic agency, reflect on inequality, and negotiate change. Participation thus shifts from mere involvement to a deeper practice of citizenship embedded in community life.

The long-term sustainability of micro social movements depends on the community's ability to cultivate collaborative capacity. Nalikan et al. (2025) emphasize that social-capital-based empowerment must be supported by multistakeholder cooperation to prevent stagnation. Without structural reinforcement, informal initiatives may weaken due to internal tensions or resource limitations. Consequently, sustainable micro social movements require an ecosystem that nurtures social capital, maintains informal structures, and facilitates ongoing collaboration between communities, local governments, and external actors.

Taken together, these dimensions depict micro social movements as adaptive community systems that operate from the bottom up, leveraging social relations, informal structures, and continuous innovation to confront inequality. Marsuki et al. (2025) show that the most resilient community initiatives draw strength from distinct local characteristics and internally mobilized resources, underscoring the strategic nature of informal empowerment as both an immediate response and a long-term adaptive mechanism within rural development.

The conceptual model carries significant implications for policy and rural development practice. Informal structures must be recognized and integrated into village empowerment frameworks; social capital should be strengthened through leadership development and collaborative programs; community-driven innovation requires facilitated access to technology and resources; and participatory frameworks must position communities as co-creators rather than beneficiaries. Such integration between formal and informal systems is central to building an inclusive, sustainable empowerment ecosystem capable of reducing rural inequality (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that micro social movements in rural settings function as a critical mechanism for responding to social inequality through organically developed informal empowerment practices. Strong social capital, dynamic informal structures, micro-level social innovations, and active citizen participation collectively drive adaptive forms of collective action that address inequality beyond the capacities of formal institutions. The synthesis of prior research indicates that these movements operate through the interplay of community solidarity, local creativity, and the community's ability to organize social action independently of formal governance structures. Consequently, informal empowerment not only enhances material well-being but also strengthens the social and political capacities of rural communities to pursue greater equity.

Structurally, the study recommends strengthening the role of informal institutions within rural development policy, expanding technological access to support social innovation, improving local leadership capacity, and fostering collaborative mechanisms among communities, village governments, and supporting organizations. Institutional space must be provided for micro social movements so they can become an integral component of inequality-reduction strategies. Sustaining these movements requires consistent support through empowerment programs oriented toward social capital, citizen participation, and community capacity-building. Through such measures, rural communities are better positioned to cultivate an inclusive, autonomous, and sustainable empowerment system.

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