

## Community-Based Social Welfare: A Sociological Study of Local Community Organizing

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### Abstract

Persistent local social welfare problems indicate the limitations of state-centered welfare approaches in addressing micro-level social dynamics and community-specific needs. This condition has encouraged the emergence of community-based social welfare practices through local community organizing as an adaptive response to the shortcomings of formal interventions. This study aims to analyze how local community organizing processes shape, sustain, and constrain community-based social welfare from a sociological perspective. The study employs a qualitative approach with a sociological design, utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and community document analysis. The findings reveal that community-based social welfare is a social construction produced through the interaction of organizational structures, power relations, and internal social capital. Community organizing functions as a mechanism for building solidarity and collective capacity, while simultaneously creating arenas of contestation that affect the inclusiveness of welfare access. Furthermore, external interventions and social change significantly influence the sustainability of community-based welfare, particularly in relation to community autonomy and social legitimacy. This study highlights the importance of positioning communities as primary actors in sustainable social welfare practices and policies..

**Keywords:** community organizing, community welfare, local community, power relations, social capital

### 1. Introduction

The persistence of social welfare problems at the local level indicates that the expansion of state intervention through various assistance and social protection programs has not been fully able to reach the complexity of community needs. Numerous studies show that poverty, social vulnerability, and inequality in access to basic services continue to persist, even in areas that have formally become primary targets of government welfare programs (Jha & Kelley, 2023; Kim et al., 2021). This condition signifies the limitations of a state-oriented welfare approach in understanding and responding to micro-level social dynamics that develop within communities.

The state-based welfare approach tends to position communities as passive beneficiaries of centrally designed policies and programs. In practice, this approach often overlooks variations in social context, local power relations, and the internal capacity of communities to manage their own welfare needs (Castrillón, 2024; Kim, 2021). As a result, many formal welfare programs face problems of sustainability, low levels of participation, and community dependence on external assistance.

In the global context, the failure of the state-centered welfare approach has encouraged a shift in welfare paradigms toward community-based social welfare and participatory development. A number of studies indicate that strengthening the role of local communities in the planning and implementation of welfare programs contributes to increased social sustainability and collective community capacity (Nordberg et al., 2020;



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Langmann et al., 2023). This shift positions communities not merely as objects of policy, but as social actors possessing knowledge, networks, and internal mechanisms to manage welfare.

In Indonesia, the relevance of a community-based welfare approach has become increasingly prominent alongside decentralization and the promotion of community-based development. Various forms of community organizing have emerged as adaptive responses to the limitations of formal programs, ranging from joint business groups and educational communities to social movements based on local solidarity (Amsi & Z., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025). These practices demonstrate that social welfare is not always produced through state intervention, but can be built through collective processes at the community level.

Nevertheless, academic studies on social welfare remain dominated by policy approaches and program evaluations that emphasize output indicators and administrative achievements. This approach tends to measure welfare based on quantitatively observable outcomes, without exploring the social processes that enable such welfare to be formed and sustained (Rizki & Suma, 2025; Rozi et al., 2025). As a consequence, communities are often understood as units of program implementation, rather than as social arenas with complex internal dynamics.

Several studies have begun to position communities as active social actors, yet they still exhibit analytical limitations. Batubara and Trianjasmara (2025) highlight the role of community organizations in character formation and social welfare, but their analysis focuses more on the normative functions of organizations than on the organizing processes themselves. Meanwhile, Sukmana (2021) emphasizes the importance of empowering actors within communities, but does not elaborate on how internal power relations and social structures shape collective welfare capacity.

International studies show a similar tendency. Kim et al. (2021) discuss the resilience of community-based welfare organizations in responding to crises, but position welfare as an outcome of organizational capacity rather than as a product of broader community social dynamics. Moraes et al. (2023) highlight post-crisis self-organization processes, but do not specifically link them to the formation of long-term social welfare. Thus, there remains an analytical gap regarding the causal relationship between community organizing and community-based social welfare.

The research gap of this study lies in the absence of in-depth sociological analysis explaining how local community organizing processes shape, sustain, and at the same time constrain community-based social welfare. Existing literature tends to assess program effectiveness or organizational roles in a partial manner, without elaborating on the dynamics of social relations, power distribution, and social capital operating within communities (Castrillón, 2024; Jha & Kelley, 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to position social welfare as a social construction produced through the internal dynamics of communities, rather than merely as the result of policy intervention or external assistance. Analytically, this study conceptualizes community organizing as a social mechanism that shapes collective welfare capacity through interactions among structures, agents, and social practices. Contextually, this study is grounded in the empirical realities of local communities through a sociological approach that emphasizes power relations, norms, and social networks. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze how local community organizing processes shape, sustain, and constrain community-based social welfare.

## 2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employs a qualitative approach with a sociological perspective to understand social dynamics, actor relations, and collective processes in community-based social welfare practices. This approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth analysis of social meanings, relational structures, and organizing practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research subjects include local communities that actively implement welfare practices based on community participation. Key informants consist of community leaders, social mobilizers, community members, and supporting actors involved in organizing processes. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation of community activities, and documentation of activities and community archives to capture everyday dynamics and ongoing collective processes (Langmann et al., 2023).

Data analysis was carried out through sociological thematic analysis involving stages of data reduction, categorization, and interpretation of social meanings, with an emphasis on the relationships among social structures, agents, and collective practices. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, as well as consistency of interpretation across analytical categories to maintain the credibility and coherence of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3. Results

#### Local Community Organizing as a Social Mechanism for the Formation of Collective Welfare

From a sociological perspective, community-based social welfare cannot be understood merely as a material condition, but rather as the outcome of social processes that shape the collective capacity of a community to meet the needs of its members. Local community organizing constitutes the primary mechanism that enables these processes to operate in a systematic and sustainable manner. Various studies indicate that communities capable of organizing themselves effectively demonstrate higher levels of social resilience and welfare capacity compared to communities that rely entirely on external intervention (Nordberg et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2023).

Local community organizing functions as an arena for the formation of social solidarity and collective identity that serve as the foundation of shared welfare. Through organizing processes, individuals no longer act in isolation, but are connected within networks of social relations that enable the collective distribution of resources, information, and social support. Jha and Kelley (2023) show that the presence of organized social relations enhances household capacity to access welfare due to the existence of trust mechanisms and reciprocal obligations within the community.

The findings of this study indicate that community organizational structures play a crucial role in determining collective welfare capacity. Communities with relatively clear organizational structures, defined role distributions, and participatory decision-making mechanisms tend to be more capable of responding to the social needs of their members. This aligns with the findings of Kim (2021), who emphasizes that empowerment-based community organizing contributes directly to the improvement of welfare among vulnerable groups through the strengthening of internal capacities.

Community organizing also functions as a medium for the formation of social norms that regulate welfare practices at the local level. Norms related to mutual cooperation, solidarity, and collective responsibility do not emerge spontaneously, but are formed and reproduced through structured interactions within community organizations. Batubara and Trianjasmara (2025) demonstrate that community organizations play a significant role in building values and norms that guide the social behavior of their members, including in welfare practices and social concern.

In addition to norms, local leadership constitutes a key element in community organizing that affects the formation of collective welfare. Community leaders act as mobilizers, mediators, and guardians of collective direction that determine how resources are managed and distributed. Amsi and Z. (2025) show that participatory and responsive leadership toward member needs is able to enhance the effectiveness of community-based welfare programs and reduce dependence on external assistance.

However, community organizing also entails structural limitations that affect collective welfare capacity. Organizational structures that are overly hierarchical or closed have the potential to restrict member participation and narrow the distribution of welfare benefits. Castrillón (2024) emphasizes that obstacles in the strategic direction of community organizations often arise from the concentration of power and weak internal accountability mechanisms, which ultimately reduce welfare inclusivity.

In the context of local communities in Indonesia, community organizing often develops as an adaptive response to the limitations of state intervention. Various community-based social movements have emerged to fill gaps in formal welfare services, such as alternative education initiatives, solidarity-based health services, and local economic strengthening (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Rozi et al., 2025). These findings indicate that community organizing is not merely a complementary mechanism, but also a strategic alternative in the production of social welfare.

Thus, this discussion confirms that local community organizing constitutes a fundamental social mechanism in the formation of collective welfare. Welfare does not emerge as a direct result of assistance or policy, but rather as a product of social processes involving organizational structures, leadership, norms, and internal social relations within the community. This perspective reinforces the argument that analyses of social welfare need to shift from a focus on program outputs toward a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that shape collective community capacity (Nordberg et al., 2020; Jha & Kelley, 2023).

### 4. Discussion

#### Power Relations, Social Capital, and Access to Resources in Community-Based Welfare Practices

Community-based social welfare cannot be separated from the configuration of power relations operating within community social structures. From the perspective of community sociology, community organizing not only forms solidarity, but also creates arenas of power distribution that determine who holds authority in decision-making and welfare resource management (Kim et al., 2021; Castrillón, 2024). Therefore, community-based welfare must be understood as the outcome of social processes embedded with power relations, rather than merely as expressions of altruism or mutual cooperation.

The findings of this study indicate that internal community power structures strongly influence the level of welfare inclusivity. Communities with participatory decision-making mechanisms and relatively even distributions of authority tend to produce broader access to welfare for their members. Conversely, communities dominated by particular actors exhibit selective patterns of benefit distribution that are not always based on objective needs (Jha & Kelley, 2023; Kim, 2021). This condition underscores that community organizing does not automatically generate social justice without reflective management of power relations.

Social capital functions as the primary medium linking power relations with welfare access. Social capital within communities in the form of trust, relational networks, and reciprocal norms enables the circulation of social and material resources among community members (Jha & Kelley, 2023). However, social capital is ambivalent in nature, as it can function both as a reinforcing factor for welfare and as a mechanism of social exclusion. Strong social capital within core community groups is often not accompanied by openness toward marginalized groups or peripheral members (Kim et al., 2021).

In community-based welfare practices, social capital frequently becomes an informal criterion in determining access to resources. This study finds that relational proximity to community administrators, informal leaders, or social mobilizers often serves as a determining factor in the distribution of assistance, program access, and participation opportunities. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Sukmana (2021), which show that empowering actors and social networks function as gatekeepers in community-based welfare practices.

Power relations and social capital also determine community capacity to access external resources. Communities with dominant actors possessing extensive networks tend to be more successful in attracting support from the state, NGOs, or donors. Langmann et al. (2023) emphasize that community capacity to build external collaboration is highly dependent on internal power configurations and the social legitimacy of its leaders. However, such access does not always align proportionally with collective welfare interests.

When access to external resources becomes concentrated in particular actors, the risk of internal domination and cooptation increases. This study shows that actors who control relations with external parties often possess greater bargaining positions in determining community agendas. As a result, welfare practices may shift from collective needs orientation toward the interests of dominant groups. Derakhshan (2020) refers to this condition as an ethical dilemma in community-based care practices, when power relations are not balanced by mechanisms of social accountability.

To clarify the relationship between power relations, social capital, and welfare access, the following analytical summary is presented in the table.

Table 1. Power Relations, Social Capital, and Access to Community-Based Welfare Resources

Analytical Dimension	Inclusive Community Structure	Exclusive Community Structure
Distribution of Power	Relatively egalitarian and participatory	Concentrated among dominant actors
Role of Social Capital	Bridging social capital enabling broad access	Bonding social capital limiting access
Access to Welfare Resources	Needs-based and transparent	Relational and selective
External Resource Management	Collective decision-making	Controlled by key individuals
Impact on Welfare Outcomes	Broad and sustainable welfare benefits	Unequal and fragile welfare distribution

The table shows that power relations and dominant forms of social capital shape patterns of welfare access within communities. Inclusive community structures supported by bridging social capital enable more equitable and sustainable welfare distribution. In contrast, exclusive structures tend to

produce fragile welfare because they depend on dominant actors and personal relationships. These findings reinforce the argument of Jha and Kelley (2023) that welfare benefits are largely determined by the quality of social relations, rather than merely by the availability of resources.

Power relations within communities are also dynamic and influenced by social change. The entry of external actors, generational shifts in leadership, and transformations in local economies can alter configurations of power and social capital. Moraes et al. (2023) show that post-crisis self-organization processes often trigger the renegotiation of social relations, with direct implications for patterns of collective welfare. In this context, community-based welfare is always in the process of becoming, rather than a static condition.

Thus, this discussion confirms that community-based social welfare is the result of complex interactions among community organizing, power relations, and social capital. Community organizing creates opportunities for the production of collective welfare, but also generates arenas of contestation that determine the distribution of benefits. Therefore, sociological analysis of community-based welfare must explicitly incorporate dimensions of power and social capital as key variables in understanding both the successes and limitations of community welfare practices (Kim et al., 2021; Castrillón, 2024).

### **Sustainability of Community-Based Social Welfare in the Context of External Intervention and Social Change**

The sustainability of community-based social welfare constitutes a central issue that distinguishes temporary welfare practices from welfare that is able to endure and adapt over the long term. From a sociological perspective, sustainability is not only related to program continuity or resource availability, but to the ability of communities to maintain their collective capacity amid ongoing social change and external intervention (Nordberg et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2023). Therefore, community-based welfare must be analyzed as a dynamic process that is constantly situated within relationships with external structures and internal community transformations.

External interventions from the state, non-governmental organizations, and donors are often positioned as supporting factors for the sustainability of community welfare. Numerous studies indicate that external support can expand access to resources, enhance organizational capacity, and accelerate the achievement of welfare objectives (Langmann et al., 2023; Awoonor, 2025). However, this study shows that external intervention also carries complex sociological consequences because it has the potential to alter power relations, goal orientations, and the logic of community organizing.

One of the main risks of external intervention is the cooptation of community structures. When external resources become dominant, community actors tend to adjust their agendas and practices to the interests of supporting parties. Derakhshan (2020) emphasizes that community-based care practices may experience a shift in meaning when external accountability logic replaces internal social accountability. In this context, welfare is no longer determined by community needs, but by indicators of success defined by external actors.

Dependence on external intervention also affects community autonomy in the long term. This study finds that communities that rely excessively on external assistance experience a decline in organizing capacity when such support is reduced or withdrawn. This finding is consistent with Nordberg et al. (2020), who show that the sustainability of community-based social innovation is highly dependent on the ability of communities to maintain control over their own processes and resources.

In addition to the risks of cooptation and dependency, internal social change within communities also affects the sustainability of community-based welfare. Demographic changes, intergenerational value shifts, and transformations in local economies alter configurations of social relations and social capital that support welfare practices. Moraes et al. (2023) show that post-crisis self-organization processes often generate new actors and logics that can either strengthen or weaken collective solidarity.

This study shows that communities capable of sustaining welfare are those that are adaptive to social change without losing their collective orientation. Such adaptation is reflected in the ability of communities to negotiate relationships with external actors, revise organizational structures, and reproduce welfare norms in accordance with new contexts. Kim et al. (2021) emphasize that the

resilience of community-based welfare organizations is strongly determined by structural flexibility and the reflective capacity of internal actors.

Community adaptation strategies are often manifested through resource diversification and the strengthening of internal social bases. This study finds that communities that combine external support with the strengthening of local resources tend to demonstrate higher levels of sustainability. This finding is consistent with Langmann et al. (2023), who show that capacity building focused on strengthening organizations and local leadership is more sustainable than short-term project-based approaches.

However, adaptation also contains internal tensions because it requires the renegotiation of roles and interests within communities. This process does not always proceed harmoniously and often generates conflict related to resource distribution and collective direction. Castrillón (2024) emphasizes that internal conflict is an inherent part of community organizing and is not necessarily destructive, as long as mechanisms of deliberation and social accountability are functioning.

In the context of community-based social welfare, sustainability is also determined by the ability of communities to maintain social legitimacy in the eyes of their members. When welfare practices are perceived as unfair or dominated by particular interests, social trust erodes and weakens collective capacity. Jha and Kelley (2023) show that social trust is a primary prerequisite for welfare sustainability because it forms the basis of participation and commitment among community members.

Thus, this discussion confirms that the sustainability of community-based social welfare is the result of complex interactions among community organizing, power relations, external intervention, and social change. Sustainable welfare cannot be achieved solely through assistance or programs, but requires community capacity to manage external relations, adapt to change, and maintain internal social legitimacy (Nordberg et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2023).

## 5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

### Conclusion

This study shows that community-based social welfare does not emerge spontaneously, but rather is the result of complex and layered community organizing processes. Community organizational structures, internal power relations, and configurations of social capital determine the collective capacity of communities to manage and distribute welfare. These findings emphasize that social welfare should be understood as a social construction produced through interactions between agents and structures within local communities, rather than merely as an output of policy or external assistance. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of social welfare scholarship by integrating perspectives from community sociology and social organizing theory. This approach expands the understanding of welfare beyond program evaluation and output achievement toward analysis of the social processes that shape collective capacity, internal legitimacy, and the sustainability of community-based welfare practices. Practically, this study suggests that policy designers and welfare program implementers should position communities as primary actors rather than merely as beneficiaries. External interventions should be focused on strengthening community organizational capacity, reflectively managing power relations, and protecting community autonomy to ensure that the resulting welfare is inclusive and sustainable. Future research is recommended to develop comparative and longitudinal studies in order to capture variations and dynamics in the sustainability of community-based social welfare across different social contexts.

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