



From Cassava to Capability: Community-Based Economic Empowerment through Mocaf Innovation in Rural Cilacap, Indonesia

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Abstract: Community-based economic empowerment is widely recognized as a strategic approach to fostering inclusive and sustainable rural development in the Global South. However, limited research has explored how empowerment processes unfold within agro-based innovations from a social work perspective. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of community empowerment in the development of Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) in Karangreja Village, Cilacap Regency, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving farmers, members of Women's Farmer Groups (KWT), local entrepreneurs, and community members. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that community empowerment evolves through four interrelated stages: critical awareness, capacity building, resource mobilization, and adaptive transformation. Women's Farmer Groups play a central role as agents of change by facilitating collective learning, strengthening social capital, and initiating local innovation. From a social work perspective, these processes enhance social functioning, agency, and community resilience. However, structural constraints-such as limited access to capital, market integration, and institutional support-remain significant challenges. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how local resource-based agro-industrial innovation can serve as a medium of social transformation, while highlighting the need for multi-level interventions to sustain community-driven economic empowerment.

Keywords: Community empowerment, Social work, Mocaf, Local economic development, Rural livelihoods

Abstrak: Pemberdayaan ekonomi berbasis komunitas telah diakui sebagai pendekatan strategis dalam mendorong pembangunan pedesaan yang inklusif dan berkelanjutan, khususnya di kawasan Global South. Namun demikian, kajian yang mengkaji secara mendalam bagaimana proses pemberdayaan berlangsung dalam inovasi berbasis agro dari perspektif pekerjaan sosial masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dinamika pemberdayaan komunitas dalam pengembangan Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) di Desa Karangreja, Kabupaten Cilacap, Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan petani, anggota Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT), pelaku usaha lokal, dan masyarakat. Analisis data dilakukan dengan pendekatan tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa proses pemberdayaan



berkembang melalui empat tahapan yang saling terkait, yaitu kesadaran kritis, penguatan kapasitas, mobilisasi sumber daya, dan transformasi adaptif. KWT berperan sebagai agen perubahan utama dalam memfasilitasi pembelajaran kolektif, memperkuat modal sosial, dan mendorong inovasi lokal. Dalam perspektif pekerjaan sosial, proses ini berkontribusi pada peningkatan keberfungsian sosial, agensi, dan resiliensi komunitas. Namun, keterbatasan akses terhadap modal, pasar, dan dukungan kelembagaan masih menjadi tantangan utama. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa inovasi berbasis sumber daya lokal dapat menjadi medium transformasi sosial, sekaligus menegaskan pentingnya intervensi multi-level dalam mendukung keberlanjutan pemberdayaan komunitas.

Kata kunci: pemberdayaan komunitas, pekerjaan sosial, inovasi local, Mocaf, pembangunan pedesaan

INTRODUCTION

Community-based economic empowerment has increasingly been recognized as a strategic approach to fostering inclusive and sustainable local development, particularly in rural areas across the Global South. A growing body of literature highlights that active community participation and the strengthening of local capacities are critical determinants of successful community-based development initiatives (Wahyuningrat et al., 2024; Béné et al., 2019; Barrett et al., 2022). From a social work perspective, empowerment extends beyond economic improvement; it constitutes a broader process of social transformation that emphasizes enhanced social functioning, participatory engagement, control over resources, and the capacity of individuals and communities to shape their own life trajectories (Ferguson & Heidemann, 2018; Amadasun, 2020; Kurniasih & Anjani, 2024). Furthermore, empowerment is conceptualized as a process that expands agency and broadens the range of choices available to individuals and communities in navigating structural constraints (Kabeer, 2017; Cornwall, 2016). This approach positions communities not as passive recipients of development but as active agents capable of mobilizing local assets and engaging meaningfully in sustainable development processes (Laverack, 2018; Ledwith, 2016; Yar, 2024).

Within the context of local development, strengthening economies based on local resources (local resource-based development) is essential for enhancing the resilience of rural livelihoods. Previous studies demonstrate that developing local food products contributes not only to economic diversification but also to food security and job creation at the community level (Wibowo et al., 2019; Pramana et al., 2022; Enthoven & Van den

Broeck, 2021; Woodhill, 2022). Moreover, transforming localized food systems has been shown to generate new employment opportunities, particularly through food processing industries and non-farm sectors in rural areas (IFAD, 2021; FAO, 2013). Beyond economic outcomes, community-based local food production also strengthens social networks and enhances collective capacity for sustainable resource management (Guell et al., 2022). This aligns with the sustainable livelihoods framework, which emphasizes the strategic use of local assets-natural, social, and human capital-to improve long-term well-being (Scoones, 2015; Serrat, 2017).

Cassava is one of Indonesia's most promising local commodities for community-based economic development. In many regions, including Cilacap Regency, cassava is abundantly available but generates relatively low economic value when sold as a raw product (Sophia et al., 2020). This highlights a gap between the potential of local resources and the value-added economic benefits they provide. Therefore, innovation in agricultural processing to create higher value-added products is a key strategy for promoting community economic empowerment.

Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) has emerged as a significant innovation in cassava processing, offering considerable potential to enhance the economic value of local commodities while creating new livelihood opportunities for rural communities. Beyond serving as a substitute for wheat flour, Mocaf plays a strategic role in supporting local food industries and fostering the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) (Sukoco & Handayani, 2023). Previous studies indicate that diversification of Mocaf-based products can increase household income and expand local economic networks (Susanto & Wijaya, 2018). However, the success of Mocaf development depends not only on technical production aspects but also heavily on community empowerment processes involving multiple stakeholders and complex local social dynamics.

From a social work perspective, community empowerment is understood as a multidimensional, staged process encompassing critical consciousness (conscientization), capacity building, resource mobilization, and broader social transformation (Ledwith, 2016; Laverack, 2018; Avelino et al., 2019; Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). This process emphasizes the importance of active community participation and cross-sector collaboration among stakeholders-including government institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations-as prerequisites for sustainable community development (Emerson et al.,

2012; Chen et al., 2025). In this context, social capital plays a pivotal role, with trust, norms, and social networks serving as mechanisms that strengthen social cohesion and facilitate access to external resources (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2016; Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of community-based economic empowerment largely depends on integrating internal community capacities with broader social and institutional networks.

Empirical studies further underscore the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in advancing community empowerment initiatives. For example, Utami et al. (2020) demonstrate that the pentahelix approach-integrating government, community, business sector, academia, and media-can enhance the sustainability of empowerment programs. Similarly, other research indicates that active community participation in managing local resources fosters the development of inclusive and sustainable creative economies (Djuwendah et al., 2019; Purbadi & Christophori Lake, 2019). However, much of the existing literature primarily focuses on economic outcomes or development models, with limited attention to the empowerment process itself, particularly from a social work perspective and within the context of local agro-industrial innovations such as Mocaf.

In addition, the gender dimension is a critical aspect of community economic empowerment. Women's groups, such as Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT), often serve as key drivers of household- and community-based economic activities. International evidence suggests that women's participation in community economic initiatives not only increases household income but also strengthens social capacity, leadership, and community cohesion (Kabeer, 2017; Cornwall, 2016). Therefore, examining the role of KWT in Mocaf development is essential for understanding more inclusive and gender-responsive empowerment dynamics.

Despite these insights, a significant research gap persists. There is limited scholarship that integrates local resource-based innovation with a process-oriented analysis of community empowerment from a social work perspective. Existing studies tend to emphasize economic outcomes or technical aspects of production, while the social, relational, and transformative dimensions of empowerment processes remain underexplored.

This study aims to analyze the process of community empowerment in the development of Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) in Karangreja Village, Cilacap Regency,

through the lens of social work and the framework of empowerment theory. Specifically, it examines how the stages of empowerment unfold, the role of local actors—particularly women’s farmer groups—in driving socio-economic change, and how multi-stakeholder collaboration influences empowerment outcomes. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to the advancement of community empowerment discourse within social welfare studies and practically to the development of context-sensitive social work interventions that promote community-based economic development in rural settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community empowerment is a central concept in social work, emphasizing processes through which individuals and groups enhance their capacity to gain control over their lives and actively participate in decision-making that affects their well-being (Ife & Tesoriero, 2008; Suharto, 2014). Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes empowerment not merely as an outcome but as a dynamic and relational process involving shifts in consciousness, capacity strengthening, and transformations in power relations within society (Avelino et al., 2019; Parsell et al., 2017). This perspective is rooted in the paradigm of people-centered development, which positions communities as primary agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries, and underscores the importance of collective participation and social agency in driving structural transformation (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Lombard, 2014).

Conceptually, community empowerment is closely linked to the notion of social functioning—the capacity of individuals and groups to perform their social roles effectively within their social environments (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Within the person-in-environment (PIE) framework, empowerment is understood as an intervention that extends beyond individual-level change to include the broader social systems in which individuals are embedded, such as families, communities, institutions, and policy structures. This perspective highlights that individual well-being cannot be separated from the wider social context, and that empowerment outcomes are shaped by the interaction between personal capacities and structural conditions (Miller et al., 2017; Liu & Flynn, 2023). Accordingly, community empowerment in social work practice requires an integrative approach that simultaneously strengthens individual capacities and transforms social environments.

In practice, community empowerment is often operationalized through several interrelated stages, including conscientization (critical awareness), capacity building,

resource mobilization, and the development of collective action toward community self-reliance (Ledwith, 2016; Laverack, 2018). The literature consistently emphasizes that these stages are dynamic and iterative, beginning with the development of critical awareness of social conditions, followed by the strengthening of individual and collective capacities, and culminating in enhanced agency and broader social transformation (Avelino et al., 2019; Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). The conscientization phase is particularly crucial, as it enables communities to recognize both their inherent potential and the structural inequalities they face. Capacity building then equips individuals and groups with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to enact change (Wallerstein et al., 2015; Christens, 2012). These processes ultimately lead to the mobilization of resources and the consolidation of collective action, enabling tangible and sustainable changes within communities.

Social capital is another critical dimension in explaining the effectiveness of community empowerment. It refers to networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation within a society (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2016). In the context of community-based economic empowerment, social capital fosters solidarity, trust, and collaboration among community members, thereby enhancing the sustainability of empowerment initiatives. Empirical studies indicate that communities with higher levels of social capital are better equipped to adapt to change, manage local resources, and develop collective economic innovations (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015).

In recent decades, community empowerment approaches have increasingly been integrated with the framework of local economic development (LED), which emphasizes the utilization of local resources to generate economic value, expand employment opportunities, and improve community well-being in a sustainable manner (Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie, 2019; Beer et al., 2019). Within this framework, empowerment is not only socially oriented but also economically driven, particularly through the development of community-based enterprises that leverage local assets and promote collective welfare (Peredo & Chrisman, 2017; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019; Vázquez-Maguirre et al., 2018).

From a social work perspective, empowerment-based economic interventions are also closely associated with the concept of community resilience—the capacity of communities to adapt to and withstand economic, social, and environmental shocks (Folke, 2016; Béné et al., 2016). Resilience is strengthened through the development of local capacities,

diversification of livelihoods, and innovation based on local resources (Speranza et al., 2014; Quandt, 2018). In this regard, the development of local products such as Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) can be understood as a strategic empowerment approach that not only increases income but also enhances economic resilience and long-term sustainability.

Participation constitutes a fundamental principle of community empowerment. It extends beyond mere involvement in activities to include engagement in decision-making processes, control over resources, and ownership of program outcomes (Cornwall, 2016; Reed et al., 2018). Meaningful participation thus becomes a key indicator of successful empowerment, as it requires genuine influence over decision-making processes and a more equitable distribution of power (Lécuyer et al., 2024). Without authentic participation, empowerment initiatives risk becoming tokenistic and top-down, ultimately undermining their sustainability.

In rural contexts, women's groups frequently play a pivotal role in driving community empowerment processes. Emerging literature highlights that women's empowerment encompasses multiple dimensions, including agency, social norms, and access to resources operating at both individual and collective levels (Raj et al., 2024). Women's participation in economic activities not only improves household welfare but also strengthens bargaining power and social cohesion through collective empowerment mechanisms (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). From a social work perspective, this aligns with feminist approaches that view women's empowerment as integral to transforming power relations and achieving social justice.

Despite its potential, community empowerment processes are not without challenges. Structural constraints, such as unequal power relations, limited access to resources, and weak institutional support, often hinder empowerment efforts (Avelino et al., 2019). Without context-sensitive interventions that address these structural inequalities, empowerment programs risk being reduced to superficial forms of participation that lack long-term sustainability.

In the context of Mocaf development as a local resource-based innovation, a community empowerment approach is particularly relevant for understanding how communities transition from raw material producers to value-added economic actors (Devaux et al., 2018). This perspective is essential, as local agro-industrial innovation is not solely determined by technical production factors but also by inclusive innovation

processes, collective capacity, and the interconnectedness of actors within agricultural and rural systems (Hoffecker, 2021; Hermans et al., 2017). However, there remains a notable gap in the literature integrating community empowerment analysis with local agro-industrial innovation from a social work perspective. Existing studies tend to focus on technical, value chain, or economic performance aspects, while the social dynamics, community agency, and transformative processes within communities are less frequently examined (Devaux et al., 2018; Parsell et al., 2017).

To address this gap, this study adopts a community empowerment framework grounded in social work perspectives to analyze the development of Mocaf in Karangreja Village. This framework emphasizes four key dimensions: critical awareness, capacity building, resource mobilization, and adaptive transformation, conceptualized as components of a broader process of transformative social innovation at the community level (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Avelino et al., 2019; Markow et al., 2023). Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how empowerment processes unfold and how community-based interventions contribute to improving social and economic well-being in rural settings.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the dynamics of community empowerment in the development of Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) in Karangreja Village, Cilacap Regency, Indonesia. A qualitative case study is particularly suitable for capturing complex social processes and understanding how empowerment unfolds within its real-life context, especially in relation to community interactions, local practices, and socio-economic conditions (Creswell, 2014). This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of actors involved in the empowerment process.

The research site was purposively selected based on its relevance to the study objectives, as Karangreja Village represents a rural community with significant cassava production and an emerging initiative in Mocaf development. The participants in this study consisted of key stakeholders involved in the empowerment process, including cassava farmers, members of Women's Farmer Groups (KWT), local entrepreneurs, and community members engaged in Mocaf-related activities. Informants were selected using purposive

sampling to ensure that participants had relevant knowledge, experience, and active involvement in the phenomenon under study. Some potential subjects for this research include Mocaf facilitators (PM), Mocaf Community (KM), Business Partners (UM), and Local Residents (MS).

No.	Code	Stakeholders	Sex	Age	Experience
1.	A1	PM	Male	59	
2.	A2	PM	Male	39	
3.	B1	KM	Female	55	The interviews will be conducted between October and December 2023.
4.	B2	KM	Female	51	
5.	B3	KM	Female	48	
6.	C1	UM	Female	44	
7.	D1	MS	Male	47	

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and roles in the empowerment process. Participant observation enabled the researcher to directly examine production practices, group interactions, and the social dynamics within the community. Document analysis was used to complement primary data by reviewing relevant materials, such as group records, activity reports, and local documentation related to Mocaf development.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, following the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis began with the transcription of interview data, followed by coding to identify key themes related to the stages of community empowerment, including critical awareness, capacity building, resource mobilization, and adaptive transformation. These themes were then organized into categories to explore patterns, relationships, and underlying processes within the data. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed triangulation of data sources and methods by comparing information obtained from

interviews, observations, and documents. In addition, member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the researcher's interpretations and ensure consistency with participants' perspectives. This approach enhances the rigor of the study and provides a comprehensive understanding of the community empowerment process in the context of Mocaf development.

RESULTS

Cassava Abundance and Limited Economic Value

Karangreja Village is located in the Cipari Subdistrict of Cilacap Regency, positioned in the northern part of the subdistrict, approximately 10 kilometers from the district center. The area is predominantly characterized by hilly terrain with considerable potential for agriculture and plantation activities. The landscape of Karangreja is marked by expansive greenery, consisting of cultivated vegetation such as rubber trees, cassava, and maize, which collectively shape the rural ecological setting (Karangreja, 2023).

The village is home to 1,072 households, with an estimated population of 3,916 individuals. Compared to neighboring villages within the Cipari Subdistrict, this population size is relatively modest. Statistical data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Cilacap Regency further indicate that a substantial proportion of residents in Karangreja Village have relatively low levels of formal education (BPS Cilacap Regency, 2022), a factor that may influence livelihood strategies and access to economic opportunities.

Agriculture constitutes the primary livelihood for the majority of the population. Most residents are engaged in farming activities, relying heavily on the cultivation of staple crops such as rice, cassava, and maize, alongside plantation commodities such as rubber (Fieldnote, 2023). Agricultural practices are largely conducted on hilly land, where soil conditions are particularly suitable for certain crops, especially cassava. As a result, cassava has become a dominant commodity within the local agrarian system. As one informant explained:

“Almost every household here has cassava fields, as the soil is particularly well-suited for cassava cultivation and there are limited alternatives for crops that can grow optimally.” (A1)

This statement reflects the structural reliance of the community on cassava as a primary agricultural commodity. The widespread cultivation of cassava is evident not only in designated farmland but also in areas surrounding residential spaces and along village

roads (Fieldnote, 2023). In this sense, cassava is deeply embedded in both the economic and spatial landscape of Karangreja Village.

At the subdistrict level, cassava production represents a significant component of the local agricultural economy. Data from the Central Statistics Agency indicate that cassava is the second most produced commodity after rice in the Cipari Subdistrict. Between 2018 and 2021, cassava production reached 21,704 tons (BPS Cilacap Regency, 2022), highlighting its substantial production capacity. Observations further reveal that Karangreja Village is one of the main contributors to this output, particularly due to its location in the northern mountainous zone, where cassava cultivation is most intensive (Fieldnote, 2023). This suggests that the village plays a strategic role in the broader cassava production system of Cipari Subdistrict and, by extension, Cilacap Regency.

At the regency level, agricultural data reinforce the significance of cassava production. In 2017 and 2018, Cilacap Regency recorded production levels of 85,363 tons and 84,281 tons, respectively, supported by extensive agricultural land areas (BPS, 2019). By May 2022, cassava cultivation covered approximately 319 hectares out of 3,085 hectares of agricultural land, with a production output of 7,689 tons. Productivity levels reached 241.02 quintals per hectare, indicating relatively high efficiency in cassava farming practices (Sumarwoto, 2022). These figures demonstrate that cassava is not only abundant but also highly productive within the region.

However, despite this considerable production capacity, cassava farmers in Karangreja Village continue to face persistent economic constraints, particularly in relation to low market prices. Several informants reported that cassava prices have historically remained low, ranging between IDR 500 and 700 per kilogram (A1, B1, & B3). This condition reflects a structural imbalance between production potential and economic returns, where farmers are primarily positioned as suppliers of raw commodities with limited control over value chains.

Within this context, the idea of processing cassava into Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) has gained increasing social and economic relevance. For local actors, Mocaf is not merely understood as a processed product, but as a transformative strategy to redefine the community's relationship with cassava. It represents a shift from being raw material producers toward becoming value-added processors, thereby opening pathways for enhanced income generation and local economic empowerment.

Awareness Stage: Transforming Perceptions of Local Potential

The first stage of the community empowerment process is characterized by the emergence of collective awareness regarding the importance of transforming cassava into value-added products. Prior to the introduction of Mocaf development initiatives, community members generally perceived cassava as a raw commodity that was sold without further processing. This practice had been sustained across generations and reflected a relatively stagnant subsistence-oriented economic pattern.

The shift toward awareness did not occur spontaneously; rather, it evolved through intensive social interactions, particularly facilitated by local actors who possessed greater knowledge of cassava's potential. As one informant noted, "People are aware that many residents here cultivate cassava, but it has always been sold in its raw form" (A1). Similarly, another informant explained, "The awareness to process it into other products has not fully developed among community members; at most, cassava is processed into simple products such as fried cassava sold in small stalls" (A2). These findings suggest that the primary challenge at this stage was not the absence of resources, but rather the lack of awareness regarding the potential for economic value transformation.

The process of raising awareness was facilitated through various community-based social forums, including farmer group meetings, religious gatherings, family planning forums, and women's community groups. These platforms functioned as key arenas for social intervention, where local actors who had already recognized the potential of cassava as a raw material for Mocaf actively disseminated knowledge and encouraged collective reflection. One informant described this process:

"We conducted socialization across multiple community forums. I was frequently involved in farmer groups, family planning extension forums, and other community meetings. We encouraged people to work together to process cassava into Mocaf products" (A1).

Another informant further highlighted the role of religious and women's forums:

"I also invited Mr. Sutarmo several times to speak at Fatayat NU gatherings, where he occasionally introduced Mocaf through religious study sessions" (B1 & B2).

Engagement in these forums played a crucial role in disseminating information and fostering shared understanding of the economic opportunities associated with cassava processing. Notably, women-particularly those involved in organizations such as Fatayat NU and Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT)-were among the most responsive groups to these

transformative ideas. This finding underscores the strategic importance of informal social spaces in facilitating shifts in community awareness.

The transformation in community perceptions—from viewing cassava as a low-value commodity to recognizing it as a strategic economic resource—reflects a broader shift in the local economic paradigm. Cassava is no longer positioned merely as a subsistence crop, but as a potential raw material for innovative products with higher market value. In social work terms, this stage represents a critical process of conscientization, where individuals and communities begin to critically reinterpret their socio-economic conditions and identify opportunities for collective change.

Capacity-Building Stage: Collective Production of Knowledge and Skills

Following the emergence of collective awareness, the empowerment process progressed to the capacity-building stage. At this phase, empowerment moved beyond the dissemination of ideas and was directed toward the formation of collective structures and the strengthening of technical knowledge. A key milestone in this stage was the establishment of the *Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT) Sumber Makmur*, which became the central platform for Mocaf-related empowerment activities in Karangreja Village. The formation of this group functioned not only as an organizational mechanism but also as a space for the collective production of knowledge and skills. As reflected by the informants: “After a long period of socialization within the community, we initiated the formation of a group. Since many women were actively involved, we established the Women’s Farmer Group (KWT) Sumber Makmur” (A1 & A2).

The establishment of this group marked a critical turning point, as it provided a clearer organizational structure for the empowerment process. KWT became a collective space for learning, sharing experiences, strengthening solidarity, and planning the development of Mocaf in a more systematic manner. In this context, KWT functioned as a central actor in social learning processes, where members actively exchanged knowledge, experiences, and technical skills related to Mocaf production.

Capacity strengthening was facilitated through training sessions, focus group discussions, and ongoing technical assistance. Field observations indicate that approximately a dozen members were involved in the initial learning phase, particularly in mastering the stages of Mocaf production, including peeling, soaking, drying, milling, and sieving cassava into flour (field notes, 2023). This stage was crucial, as participants not only

acquired technical competencies but also developed an understanding of production processes, quality standards, and collaborative work practices.

Importantly, the learning process extended beyond technical skill transfer to include critical reflection on broader economic challenges. As one informant explained:

“During the training sessions, many questions and challenges were raised by the members—such as how to access capital, how to enter markets, and other related issues. These topics were frequently discussed in our group meetings” (B3).

This finding suggests that capacity building at this stage evolved from basic skills acquisition into the development of the group’s analytical capacity to identify structural constraints and emerging opportunities. The involvement of external resource persons further strengthened this process, enabling the group to access more advanced knowledge and practical insights from experienced actors in Mocaf production.

Thus, this stage represents a significant transition from everyday, experience-based knowledge to more structured and technical forms of knowledge. It also illustrates how participatory social learning processes are constructed at the community level, reinforcing collective agency and enhancing the group’s capacity to engage in sustainable economic activities.

Resource Mobilization Stage: Leveraging Social Capital and External Support

The next stage in the empowerment process involves resource mobilization. Once the group has developed initial awareness and a basic understanding of the potential of Mocaf production, the primary challenge becomes how to initiate tangible production using available resources. In the case of Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT) Sumber Makmur, resource mobilization occurred through two main pathways: the strengthening of internal group capacities and the pursuit of external support.

Internally, resource mobilization began with identifying the assets possessed by individual members, including land, labor, cassava harvests, and social networks. Each member contributed according to their respective capacities, resulting in a collectively organized production system. This collective approach enabled the group to maximize limited resources while fostering shared responsibility. Externally, the group actively sought support by establishing connections with village authorities, social organizations, and small-scale entrepreneurs to access production equipment, training opportunities, and market linkages.

As one informant explained, “Initially, we received production equipment assistance from the village government. With that support, I personally invested additional capital for other needs” (A1). Another informant added, “We also encouraged members to utilize their unused land for cassava cultivation” (B1). These accounts indicate that resource mobilization followed a gradual and adaptive logic-optimizing existing local assets while simultaneously engaging institutional support.

Field observations further revealed that cassava harvested by group members was collectively pooled as the primary raw material for Mocaf production. This mechanism reflects a strong sense of trust and shared commitment among members. In this context, social capital emerged as a critical enabling factor, allowing the group to function despite limited financial resources. Trust among members facilitated coordination in production processes, division of labor, and willingness to contribute during the initial stages of enterprise development (field notes, 2023).

Beyond village government support, additional assistance was provided by social organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) at both district and sub-district levels. This support primarily focused on strengthening group development through promotional activities, training programs, and network expansion. Concurrently, the group began to establish relationships with small-scale businesses that utilize flour as a key input, thereby gradually introducing Mocaf to broader market channels.

Despite these advancements, the resource mobilization stage also revealed significant constraints. Field observations indicate that production remained limited in scale due to insufficient equipment and working capital. Moreover, public awareness and understanding of Mocaf products were still relatively low, resulting in weak market demand (field notes, 2023). These findings suggest that resource mobilization represents both a critical and vulnerable phase in the empowerment process, where the sustainability of collective efforts depends on the group’s ability to balance internal capacities with external support mechanisms.

Implementation and Adaptation Stage: Innovation and the Transformation of Local Economic Practices

The subsequent stage of community empowerment is characterized by the application of acquired skills and the capacity to adapt to both production demands and market dynamics. At this stage, members of the *Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT)* move

beyond basic learning and enter a phase marked by repetitive practice, the institutionalization of collective work, and the emergence of product innovation. Mocaf production is carried out collaboratively through clearly defined divisions of labor. As one informant explained:

“During the harvest season, cassava is collected in one place. After that, KWT members come together to process it—from peeling, cutting, soaking, and drying to milling. In the process, each member takes on specific roles at each stage” (B1).

This account indicates that the production process has evolved into an institutionalized form of collective labor, where each member understands their role and contributes to the production chain according to their capacity.

Field observations further reveal that KWT members do not merely replicate production procedures but have begun to introduce innovations aimed at improving the quality of Mocaf. For instance, facilitators documented experimental efforts to incorporate additional elements into the production process to enhance product quality (field notes, 2023). This suggests that adaptation extends beyond the ability to reproduce techniques; it reflects an emerging capacity to refine and modify practices based on experiential learning.

At this stage, the development of derivative products from Mocaf also becomes evident. Mocaf is no longer marketed solely as flour but is increasingly utilized in the production of various value-added goods such as chips, cakes, egg rolls, and noodles. This expansion is closely linked to cross-community training initiatives. As one informant noted: “Previously, we produced Mocaf mainly for demonstration purposes and had not fully commercialized it. We often used it as part of educational activities in community forums” (A1).

Another informant added:

“We have conducted several joint training sessions with Fatayat women’s groups on making cakes using Mocaf flour” (B3).

These findings indicate that adaptation occurs along two interconnected dimensions. First, internal adaptation, which involves improvements in production capacity and product quality. Second, external adaptation, reflected in the diversification of Mocaf-based products and the expansion of its use as both an economic commodity and a medium for community education and promotion.

For some members, these adaptive capacities have further evolved into small-scale, home-based enterprises. Observational data show that several participants have begun producing Mocaf-based goods with improved packaging, and some have initiated limited

marketing efforts, including the use of online platforms. Nevertheless, most remain reliant on conventional market channels (field notes, 2023).

From a social work perspective, this stage represents a critical transition from capacity building to agency-driven practice, where individuals and groups actively apply, adapt, and innovate within their socio-economic environment. It reflects not only increased technical competence but also the strengthening of collective efficacy and local entrepreneurship as key components of sustainable community empowerment.

The Central Role of Women's Farmer Groups in Driving Empowerment and Internal Dynamics

The findings indicate that Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT, Women's Farmer Groups) play a central role as key actors in initiating, organizing, and sustaining the community empowerment process through Mocaf development, particularly in Karangreja Village. KWT functions not merely as a production unit, but also as a social space that facilitates knowledge transformation, capacity building, and the strengthening of collective solidarity among its members. From the early stages of empowerment, KWT acted as the primary driver in disseminating the idea of transforming cassava into Mocaf. This role is reflected in a range of activities, including socialization, training, and collective production practices. As one participant noted:

“Without the group, it probably would not have worked. In the group, we learn together, support each other, and share experiences” (B2).

Beyond its productive function, KWT serves as a collective learning environment where members develop both technical skills and self-confidence. Learning occurs not only at the individual level but also through intensive social interaction within group activities such as training sessions, joint production, and routine discussions. Field observations confirm that, particularly in the initial stages, these processes fostered strong solidarity, with members supporting one another and sharing responsibilities according to their respective capacities (field notes, 2023).

However, group dynamics did not remain stable over time. A gradual decline in member participation became evident, influenced by both structural and internal factors. One of the primary constraints identified was limited access to financial capital, which hindered the sustainability and scaling-up of production. As expressed by an informant:

“The main issue is capital. Sometimes we want to increase production, but we do not have sufficient funds to purchase additional materials or equipment. So production remains limited” (B3).

This financial constraint directly affects production capacity. Although cassava as a raw material is relatively abundant, Mocaf production requires equipment and operational costs that are not insignificant. Much of the production equipment remains basic and limited, thereby reducing efficiency and affecting product quality (field notes, 2023). In addition to financial limitations, inadequate production facilities constitute another significant barrier. While some equipment assistance had been provided by the village government, both the quantity and quality were insufficient to support larger-scale production. As one informant explained:

“We did receive some equipment assistance, but it did not cover all our needs. We still rely on simple tools, sometimes even sharing them among members” (A1).

This situation indicates that existing support remains partial and poorly aligned with the actual needs of the group, resulting in slow production processes and an inability to meet market demand consistently.

Internal group dynamics also present ongoing challenges. As production intensity declined and economic returns remained limited, some members gradually reduced their involvement in group activities. One informant observed:

“At the beginning, many members participated, but over time the numbers declined. Since the economic benefits were not immediately visible, some chose to pursue other work” (B1).

This finding suggests that the sustainability of member participation is closely tied to the tangible economic incentives generated by group activities. When financial benefits are not perceived as significant, member commitment tends to weaken. Field observations further confirm a decline in active membership compared to the initial formation phase (field notes, 2023).

In addition to internal challenges, limited market access emerged as a critical constraint affecting the sustainability of empowerment efforts. Mocaf products and their derivatives have yet to establish stable market channels, resulting in inconsistent production cycles. As noted by an informant:

“Sometimes we have already produced, but we do not know where to sell it. The market is still unclear, so we hesitate to produce in larger quantities” (B3).

This limited market network restricts Mocaf's competitiveness against wheat-based products, which are more widely recognized and consumed. The absence of effective branding and promotional strategies further weakens the product's market position. Observational findings indicate that Mocaf products are predominantly marketed within local areas, with minimal expansion into broader distribution networks (field notes, 2023).

Furthermore, the study reveals that support from government institutions and other stakeholders remains suboptimal in sustaining the empowerment initiative. While initial assistance was provided in the form of production equipment, it was not accompanied by continuous mentoring, access to financing, or market facilitation. As one participant stated: "There was initial support from the government, but no follow-up assistance. We have had to continue on our own, and sometimes we are unsure how to develop further" (B2).

Despite these challenges, KWT continues to play a crucial role as the primary driver in maintaining the Mocaf initiative at the local level. The group remains the main platform sustaining production practices, albeit at a limited scale. Some active members have demonstrated adaptive strategies by diversifying Mocaf-based products and exploring alternative market channels, including informal sales and online platforms (field notes, 2023).

These findings highlight KWT's strategic position as an agent of community empowerment. However, the sustainability of its role is highly contingent upon structural factors, including access to capital, institutional support, production infrastructure, and market access. In the absence of adequate support systems, group dynamics tend to weaken, as reflected in declining participation and limited production capacity. Therefore, the role of KWT as a driver of empowerment cannot be understood in isolation from the broader ecosystem of support at the local level.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that community empowerment in the development of Mocaf in Karangreja Village constitutes a relational, non-linear, and contextually embedded social process. This reinforces a central argument in social work scholarship that empowerment should not be understood merely as an economic outcome, but as a

transformative process involving the enhancement of community capacity, agency, and control over resources (Ife & Tesoriero, 2008; Ledwith, 2016; Avelino et al., 2019).

Conceptually, the transformation of community perceptions toward cassava illustrates that empowerment begins with a shift in the community's meaning structures. In line with the notion of conscientization, this transformation is not only cognitive but also inherently political, as it enables communities to reposition themselves from passive economic actors to active subjects of development (Freire, as cited in Ledwith, 2016). From a person-in-environment perspective, this shift reflects the dynamic interaction between structural conditions—such as poverty and low commodity prices—and individuals' capacity to reinterpret opportunities within their socio-economic context (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). In this sense, Mofaf innovation can be understood as a form of socially constructed innovation, where economic value emerges through the social redefinition of local resources.

Furthermore, the role of *Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT)* as a space for collective learning highlights that empowerment operates through mechanisms of collective capability building rather than merely individual skill enhancement. This finding extends conventional, often technocratic, notions of capacity building by demonstrating that social learning processes are central to the formation of collective agency (Laverack, 2018; Wallerstein et al., 2015). *KWT* functions as a site of knowledge production, where lived experiences, practical engagement, and collective reflection serve as the foundation for capacity development. From a social work perspective, this contributes to improved social functioning, as individuals gain not only economic skills but also the ability to participate, collaborate, and engage in collective decision-making.

In addition, the findings regarding social capital confirm that community-based empowerment is highly dependent on the quality of social relations. Trust, networks, and shared norms enable communities to navigate limitations in formal resources, as emphasized in social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2016; Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). However, this study also reveals an important paradox: strong social capital does not automatically translate into sustainable economic outcomes in the absence of structural support. Constraints related to access to capital, technology, and markets indicate the presence of a structural ceiling—a threshold beyond which community-based initiatives cannot progress without policy intervention and institutional support (Parsell et al., 2017;

Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). This finding underscores the necessity of multi-level social work interventions that integrate micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level strategies.

Moreover, the observed dynamics of adaptation and innovation in Mocaf product diversification reflect the community's resilience capacity. In the literature, resilience is understood as the ability not only to adapt but also to transform in response to external pressures (Folke, 2016; Béné et al., 2019). The findings indicate that the community does not merely adopt innovations but actively develops bottom-up innovations grounded in local knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, limited market access and weak integration into broader value chains suggest that the community's economic resilience remains partial. This supports the argument that livelihood strengthening in social work must incorporate systemic dimensions, including market access, distribution systems, and broader economic ecosystems (Barrett et al., 2022).

From a feminist social work perspective, the role of KWT underscores the centrality of women's empowerment in community transformation. Women's participation in economic activities not only contributes to increased household income but also enhances agency, leadership, and social cohesion (Kabeer, 2017; Cornwall, 2016). However, the findings also reveal that women's empowerment remains constrained by structural limitations, particularly in relation to business scale and access to strategic resources. This suggests that empowerment requires a transformative approach that goes beyond capacity building to challenge broader systems of inequality (Avelino et al., 2019). Furthermore, the observed decline in participation among KWT members highlights a critical yet often overlooked dimension in empowerment discourse: the tension between participatory ideals and economic realities. When tangible economic benefits are not immediately realized, participation tends to decline. This indicates that empowerment processes cannot be detached from material considerations, and that program sustainability depends on the ability to generate consistent and meaningful economic value.

Overall, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of community empowerment within social work by emphasizing the need to conceptualize empowerment as a multidimensional process that simultaneously integrates cognitive, relational, economic, and structural dimensions. Local resource-based innovations such as Mocaf hold significant potential as vehicles for empowerment; however, their success is contingent upon the ability to link community capacities with broader systemic support. Therefore,

effective empowerment strategies must adopt a holistic, context-sensitive, and transformative approach aimed at achieving sustainable social change.

This study demonstrates that community empowerment in the development of Modified Cassava Flour (Mocaf) in Karangreja Village is a complex, gradual, and multidimensional social process. Empowerment is not solely focused on increasing the economic value of local commodities; rather, it involves transforming community awareness, strengthening collective capacities, mobilizing resources, and enhancing the ability to adapt to broader economic dynamics. These findings reaffirm that, from a social work perspective, empowerment should not be narrowly defined as an economic intervention but understood as a comprehensive process of social transformation that improves community social functioning.

The findings further reveal that Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT) plays a strategic role as a key agent of change in the empowerment process. Beyond functioning as a production unit, KWT serves as a space for collective learning, the reinforcement of social solidarity, and the organization of community-based resources. The active involvement of women in KWT highlights that community-based economic empowerment also contributes to strengthening women's agency and reshaping local social relations.

However, this study also identifies structural constraints that hinder the sustainability of empowerment initiatives. Limited access to capital, production facilities, and markets, combined with weak institutional support, indicates that internal community capacity alone is insufficient to drive sustained economic transformation. Additionally, group dynamics marked by declining member participation suggest that the continuity of empowerment efforts depends heavily on the ability to generate tangible economic benefits alongside consistent systemic support.

Theoretically, this study advances the discourse on community empowerment within social welfare by demonstrating that local resource-based innovation can serve as a strategic means to enhance community capacity, participation, and resilience. Simultaneously, the findings highlight the structural limitations of empowerment, emphasizing the need for a multi-level approach that integrates community-based interventions with broader policy frameworks and institutional support systems. Practically, this study offers significant implications for social work practice, especially in designing community-based interventions in rural settings. Effective empowerment strategies should incorporate

critical awareness-raising, participatory learning processes, and the development of collaborative networks that enhance access to resources and markets. Moreover, active engagement from government agencies and other stakeholders is essential to create an enabling ecosystem that supports the sustainability of local innovations. Future research should explore the integration of community empowerment within broader economic systems, particularly concerning value chain development and market access. This approach would enable empowerment to extend beyond the community level and evolve into a development model that is inclusive, sustainable, and socially just.

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