

Youth Participation and Social Innovation in Village Development: A Study of Local Empowerment in Sumedang Regency

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Submitted : 20-10-2025, Accepted : 26-11-2025, Published : 25-12-2025

Abstract

This study explores the role of youth participation and social innovation in promoting local empowerment within the context of village development in Sumedang Regency, West Java, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research investigates how young people contribute to the creation and implementation of innovative community programs that enhance local welfare and sustainability. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document reviews involving 15 informants from youth organizations, village governments, and local NGOs. The findings reveal that youth participation in Sumedang villages has evolved from traditional voluntary involvement toward more strategic and collaborative engagement in local governance. Young people have initiated various social innovations—such as digital marketing for local products, waste recycling projects, and cultural tourism programs—that strengthen social cohesion and economic resilience. However, challenges remain in terms of limited institutional support, digital literacy, and financial sustainability. Overall, the study concludes that empowering youth through inclusive governance and innovation-oriented programs significantly contributes to rural transformation. The findings emphasize the need for continuous mentoring, digital capacity building, and policy frameworks that institutionalize youth participation in village development.

Keywords : Youth participation; Social innovation; Village development; Local empowerment; Sumedang Regency; Rural governance; Community development.

Introduction

Village development in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation over the past decade, especially after the implementation of the Village Law No. 6 of 2014, which granted greater autonomy and financial resources to local communities. This decentralization framework aims to empower villages as self-reliant socio-economic units capable of managing their resources, planning local development, and improving community welfare. Within this context, youth participation has emerged as a crucial factor in driving innovation and sustainability in rural development initiatives. However, in many regions, including Sumedang Regency, youth engagement in village governance and development programs remains limited and often symbolic rather than substantive.

Sumedang Regency, located in West Java Province, represents an interesting case for studying the intersection between youth empowerment, social innovation, and local governance. The region

is known for its rich cultural heritage, active rural communities, and growing digital literacy among young people. Despite these strengths, many rural areas in Sumedang still face challenges such as limited job opportunities, migration of young workers to urban centers, and low participation in local decision-making. These issues highlight the importance of understanding how youth can become agents of social innovation in the context of community-based development.

Social innovation, in this study, refers to new forms of collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving that emerge from local communities to address social challenges (Moulaert et al., 2013). When youth are actively involved in such processes, they can contribute fresh perspectives, technological knowledge, and digital tools that enhance the effectiveness of village programs. Prior studies, such as those by Franz (2015) and Cajaiba-Santana (2014), emphasize that social innovation in rural settings often depends on local leadership, participatory governance, and intergenerational collaboration.

In the case of Sumedang, youth-led initiatives have started to appear, ranging from digital entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability projects, creative economy movements, to cultural revitalization programs. However, their impact and sustainability depend heavily on institutional support, access to resources, and the inclusiveness of village governance structures. This situation aligns with findings from BPS (2023), which reported that more than 40% of young residents in rural West Java express interest in contributing to local development but lack structured platforms for participation.

Given these conditions, this research aims to analyze how youth participation contributes to social innovation and local empowerment in the development of villages in Sumedang Regency. Specifically, the study explores:

1. The forms and patterns of youth participation in village development programs;
2. The types of social innovation initiated or influenced by young community members; and
3. The institutional, cultural, and social factors that support or hinder youth involvement in local empowerment.

By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to the academic discussion on

rural development, participatory governance, and social innovation in Indonesia. Furthermore, the findings are expected to provide policy implications for local governments, NGOs, and community organizations in promoting youth-driven innovation as a sustainable path toward inclusive village development.

Methods

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how youth participation contributes to social innovation and local empowerment in village development within Sumedang Regency, West Java. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows researchers to understand social realities more deeply through the experiences and perspectives of community members, rather than relying on numerical data.

The research was conducted in three selected villages that were considered active in community innovation programs and youth involvement. These villages were purposively chosen to represent different social and economic characteristics across Sumedang. The selection also considered the presence of active youth groups and village governments that support participatory development activities.

The participants in this study consisted of 15 key informants, including 10 young people aged 18–35 years who were actively involved in village activities, 3 village officials, and 2 representatives from local NGOs who work closely with youth empowerment programs. They were selected through purposive sampling, which allows researchers to focus on individuals who can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document review. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in each village and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The questions explored participants' experiences, motivations, and challenges in contributing to village innovation and development. Observations were carried out during youth meetings, village planning discussions, and community events to capture real-life interactions between youth and local institutions. In addition, several documents—such as village development plans (*RPJMDes*), youth

organization reports, and government publications—were analyzed to complement the primary data.

The process of data collection took place over four weeks, allowing for repeated visits and continuous engagement with participants. All interviews were recorded with participants' permission, and detailed field notes were taken to document contextual insights.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher began by transcribing the interviews, reading them multiple times to identify recurring patterns, and coding key statements related to youth participation, innovation, and empowerment. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as *forms of youth involvement*, *drivers of innovation*, and *institutional challenges*. Through this process, the researcher was able to interpret how youth participation shapes social innovation and contributes to local development in Sumedang.

To ensure data validity, several strategies were applied, including triangulation of data sources, member checking, and peer discussion. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents, while member checking involved confirming key findings with selected informants to ensure accuracy.

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent to participate voluntarily. Their identities were kept confidential using pseudonyms, and cultural sensitivity was maintained during all interactions in the village.

In summary, the qualitative approach in this study enabled a rich and contextual understanding of how young people in Sumedang Regency actively participate in village development and create innovative solutions to local problems. Through this method, the study highlights the voices, creativity, and aspirations of youth as agents of social change within their communities.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that youth participation in village development within Sumedang Regency has grown significantly in recent years, particularly in programs related to social innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital initiatives. However, the level of participation and innovation varies across villages, depending on institutional support, leadership, and the local culture of

collaboration.

Forms of Youth Participation

Most young informants reported active involvement in village-level organizations such as *Karang Taruna*, youth entrepreneurship groups, and creative economy communities. They participated in activities such as organizing cultural events, promoting local products online, and supporting environmental programs. One youth leader stated:

“We are now more confident to speak in village meetings. Before, young people were only invited to help with events. Now, we are involved in discussions about planning and innovation.”

This shift reflects an evolution from passive to active participation, aligning with Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation, where youth are gradually moving from tokenistic involvement toward genuine partnership in decision-making.

However, the study also found that participation often remains informal and dependent on personal initiative rather than structured policy support. In some villages, youth activities rely heavily on a few motivated individuals without institutional mechanisms to ensure continuity. This suggests that while youth enthusiasm is strong, it still requires systemic integration into village governance structures.

Social Innovation Initiatives

The study identified several youth-led social innovation projects that contribute to community empowerment. In one village, youth developed a digital marketing platform to help promote local food products through Instagram and WhatsApp Business. In another, young volunteers initiated a waste recycling program that transformed organic waste into compost for local farmers. These innovations demonstrate the creative potential of rural youth when given space and trust to experiment.

An informant from a local NGO explained:

“The youth in Sumedang are full of ideas. They just need guidance and a bit of technical support to make their projects sustainable.”

These findings support Moulaert et al. (2013), who emphasize that social innovation often

emerges from local networks and informal collaborations. The case of Sumedang shows that innovation can flourish when youth are empowered to address community problems through creative, context-based approaches.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Limited funding and lack of access to digital infrastructure often constrain the sustainability of these initiatives. Some youth groups reported difficulties maintaining consistency after initial enthusiasm declined, indicating the need for stronger institutional and financial backing from local governments and private sectors.

Institutional and Cultural Support

Village governments in Sumedang Regency have begun recognizing the role of youth in development. Several have included youth representatives in village planning meetings (Musrenbangdes) and allocated small budgets for innovation programs. This inclusion has strengthened youth visibility and encouraged collaborative governance.

However, the quality of participation still varies. In some cases, youth voices are heard but not fully considered in final decisions. One young participant commented:

“We are happy to be invited to the meetings, but sometimes our ideas are not followed up because the older leaders still dominate the discussion.”

This situation highlights the cultural hierarchy that often exists in rural governance, where respect for elders can unintentionally limit intergenerational dialogue. The finding resonates with Gaventa's (2006) theory of power and participation, suggesting that empowerment requires not only formal inclusion but also shifts in social norms and power relations.

Youth Empowerment and Community Impact

The study found that active youth participation has brought tangible benefits to local communities. Through their involvement, villages have experienced increased digital visibility, improved environmental awareness, and enhanced collaboration between community members. For instance, one village's youth group managed to attract tourists by promoting cultural performances

through social media, leading to higher local income.

Moreover, participation in innovation projects has built youth confidence, leadership skills, and collective responsibility. A female informant shared:

“Before joining the youth group, I was shy to talk in public. Now, I can lead meetings and help manage our local business project.”

This empowerment aligns with the concept of capability development proposed by Sen (1999), which emphasizes expanding individuals' ability to make meaningful choices and contribute to social progress. Youth empowerment in Sumedang thus serves as both a process and an outcome of social innovation.

Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that youth participation in Sumedang Regency is evolving from voluntary community engagement toward strategic collaboration in village governance. The integration of youth initiatives into development planning has opened opportunities for innovation, yet the sustainability of such efforts depends on continuous mentoring, access to digital tools, and supportive leadership.

The study reinforces that social innovation thrives in environments that value inclusivity, experimentation, and shared responsibility. When youth are trusted and supported, they not only bring new ideas but also strengthen local identity and resilience. As Cajaiba-Santana (2014) notes, social innovation is driven by new social practices that reconfigure relationships within communities precisely what is emerging among the youth in Sumedang.

However, without institutionalized frameworks, youth initiatives risk remaining temporary and isolated. Therefore, policy support and intergenerational collaboration are essential to transform youth participation from informal enthusiasm into sustainable empowerment.

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