

Transformative Leadership of Village Heads in Enhancing Public Participation (A Case Research in Paloh Gadeng Village, North Aceh)

Muhammad Balya*, Randy Mahardhika Putra, Ricky Purnomohadi, Kurniati

Universitas Islam Syekh Yusuf, Indonesia

Email: 2407010065@students.unis.ac.id*, 2407010248@students.unis.ac.id,

2407010053@students.unis.ac.id, 2407010111@students.unis.ac.id

Abstract

The leadership of the village head plays a vital role in boosting community participation in public decision-making, especially in areas characterized by strong social and cultural dynamics, such as Paloh Gadeng Village in North Aceh Regency. This research aims to assess how effective village head leadership is in encouraging citizen involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of village policies. A qualitative approach using a case research design was adopted. Data collection included in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and participatory observation involving thirty informants, such as the village head, community leaders, and residents. The results show that open communication, transparency in managing information, and the integration of local cultural practices are key factors in promoting active community involvement. The research highlights that village heads who can incorporate local values within a participative leadership framework are more likely to succeed in developing responsive and legitimate policies at the village level.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Public Decision-Making, Participatory Communication, Village Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Villages represent the smallest administrative units with the autonomy to oversee governmental affairs, development, and community issues (Kadir & Idris, 2021). As entities closest to the residents, villages have the authority to create policies that directly affect their inhabitants' lives. The village head, serving as the leader of the village government, plays a vital role in managing village policies and bridging the gap between community needs and decision-making. The village head is responsible for implementing policies and fostering community aspirations in public decision-making (Lamangida et al., 2017). Community aspirations well integrated into the public decision-making process can enhance the quality of decisions, as these decisions better reflect the real needs of the community rather than being merely policies

imposed from above. Moreover, integrating these aspirations bolsters the legitimacy of village governance because the community feels involved and has a voice in the process (Hajar, 2021). Community participation in public decision-making not only serves as an indicator of a healthy democracy but also plays a crucial role in the success of development driven by concrete local needs and potential.

In practice, community aspirations are often overlooked due to limited participatory mechanisms in villages and weak leadership that fails to foster community involvement (Bebbington, Dharmawan, Fahmi, & Guggenheim, 2015; Subejo & Supriyadi, 2020). This issue is prevalent in areas where village leadership tends to be paternalistic and does not include the community in decision-making (Zakaria, 2019; Sulaiman, 2017). Additionally, weak transformative leadership at the village level significantly restricts community participation in crucial decisions (Hermanto, 2017; Narti, 2021). Transformative leadership, which emphasizes change and community empowerment, is vital to creating opportunities for communities to share their aspirations and engage in development processes (Bass & Riggio, 2018; Burns, 2017). A thorough understanding of participation dynamics and leadership styles in villages is essential, especially after Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages was enacted, granting villages greater autonomy to manage and utilize their resources (Antlöv, Wetterberg, & Dharmawan, 2016). This increased independence offers both challenges and valuable opportunities for village heads to foster more inclusive participation methods and encourage transformational leadership (Prasetyono, 2020). Consequently, enhancing village heads' capacity to lead in a participatory and empowering way is a strategic move toward sustainable development that truly reflects community needs (Sutiyo & Maharjan, 2017).

This research seeks to address the gap in empirical studies on community participation practices in villages with distinct socio-cultural traits, like Paloh Gadeng Village. While many previous studies have examined village leadership from a normative perspective, there is a scarcity of field-based, participatory data. This situation underscores the need for research that combines practical viewpoints with leadership theories centered on community engagement, especially in culturally unique villages. Therefore, this research is both academically urgent and offers valuable theoretical insights for advancing community-participatory approaches in village leadership (Subagyo, 2020). In the village administration system, the village head plays a central role in guiding governance and development at the village level. As a leader, the village head is not only responsible for managing administration but must also respond to the aspirations and needs of the community they serve.

The village head is expected to facilitate effective communication between the village administration and the community, as well as promote community participation in various aspects of development. However, in practice, many village heads tend to overlook the vital role of the community in the public decision-making process. This occurs due to various factors, including a lack of understanding of the importance of participation, limited capacity to establish inclusive participation mechanisms, and the dominance of authoritarian leadership. As a result, decisions are often made that do

not align with the needs and aspirations of the community, which can lead to dissatisfaction and even social conflicts at the village level (Wardiyanto et al., 2016).

The research is supported by comparative studies, such as Winarno's (2020) work on participatory democracy in local governance and Sulistiyani's (2015) analysis of inclusive leadership in villages, which similarly underscore the importance of two-way communication and social trust. Additionally, the study aligns with Hermanto's (2017) exploration of local wisdom in community empowerment, reinforcing the value of cultural integration in leadership practices. The practical benefits of this research are manifold: it equips policymakers with actionable strategies to design more inclusive village governance models, empowers village heads to leverage local traditions for better community engagement, and contributes to academic discourse by offering empirical evidence from a culturally unique setting. Ultimately, the research promotes sustainable development by ensuring that public policies are rooted in the actual needs and aspirations of the community, thereby strengthening social cohesion and democratic legitimacy at the grassroots level.

This research offers novelty by focusing on the transformative leadership of village heads in Paloh Gadeng Village, North Aceh, a region with distinct socio-cultural dynamics that shape community participation in public decision-making. Unlike previous studies that often adopt a normative or top-down perspective, this study employs a qualitative, case-based approach to capture the lived experiences of both leaders and community members, emphasizing the integration of local values like deliberation and mutual cooperation into participatory governance. The research also highlights the understudied role of informal communication channels, such as social gatherings, in fostering trust and inclusivity, which is particularly relevant in rural Indonesian contexts where formal mechanisms may fall short. By bridging the gap between traditional leadership theories and on-the-ground practices, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how culturally sensitive leadership can enhance public participation.

This research aims to thoroughly examine the role of village head leadership in enhancing community aspirations through more inclusive and participatory public decision-making. It will investigate the factors influencing village head leadership in managing community involvement and how this affects the quality of public decisions. As a result, the research hopes to identify effective leadership strategies and models for village heads to boost community participation and aspirations in the public decision-making process. Through this more participatory leadership approach, it is anticipated that a village government that is more responsive, transparent, and legitimate will be established, ultimately accelerating sustainable development aligned with the actual needs of the village community (Syafitri et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted in Paloh Gadeng Village, Dewantara Subdistrict, North Aceh Regency. The village was selected due to its distinctive social and cultural characteristics, providing a suitable context to examine the village head's role in

engaging the community in public decision-making. The diversity of social groups within the village made it an ideal setting to explore how community aspirations are gathered and incorporated into local governance.

The research spanned one month, covering proposal writing, data collection, processing, and report writing. The relatively short timeframe aimed to ensure a focused and efficient study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, questionnaires distributed to community members, and direct observations of village leadership activities. These methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of the village head's role and the factors influencing community participation.

A qualitative intrinsic case study approach was used to explore the unique social, cultural, and political dynamics influencing community participation in Paloh Gadeng Village. This approach allowed for an in-depth description of the village's context without generalizing findings to other settings. Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Relevant information from interviews, questionnaires, and observations was sorted and summarized, organized into a systematic narrative, and interpreted to identify patterns.

To ensure data accuracy, source triangulation involved multiple informants such as the village head, community leaders, and residents, while technique triangulation combined interviews, observations, and questionnaires. Member checking was conducted by validating initial analyses with primary informants to confirm consistency.

By applying this qualitative approach and rigorous analysis, the research aimed to deepen understanding of how village leadership enhances community involvement in public decision-making. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for developing more inclusive village leadership policies and practices aligned with community aspirations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In an interview with the village head, he said, "I always try to facilitate discussions with the community, especially on matters like budgets or infrastructure projects. However, many residents do not attend for several key reasons related to the community's circumstances" (Informant 1, 2025). This illustrates the village head's good faith in promoting communication and highlights the significant obstacles to full participation. He strives to create opportunities for community involvement in decisions affecting their lives, such as budget allocations and infrastructure initiatives. Despite these efforts, many community members cannot participate because of personal or logistical issues, including inconvenient meeting times, transportation barriers, or lack of awareness. This underscores the need for a more inclusive participation approach, enabling community members who face such obstacles to engage effectively.

A community leader echoed this sentiment: "We feel involved, but youth groups often do not attend because of a lack of information sharing among themselves"

(Informant 2, 2025). This highlights that communication gaps persist despite good intentions to engage the community, especially between older generations and youth. The youth community, a vital part of society, frequently remains uninvolved due to limited access to information and communication channels. Successful community participation largely relies on the village head's ability to connect different groups and ensure that information is communicated clearly and effectively across all societal levels. The youth group's lack of awareness about meetings or discussions is a key indicator of the effectiveness of the communication mechanisms. This finding aligns with Winarno's (2020) research, which emphasises that successful community participation depends heavily on open, two-way communication and empowerment. Two-way dialogue fosters mutual understanding between the village government and residents. When communication is effective, it enables the community not only to receive policies or decisions from the government but also to share opinions, criticisms, and suggestions that can influence those decisions. Therefore, community participation's success is determined by meeting attendance and how well the process incorporates diverse community voices.

From the survey results, 23 out of 30 respondents stated that the decisions made by the village government reflected their aspirations. However, there were five respondents who felt that they were not involved in the decision-making process. This finding highlights a gap in community participation, where although the majority feel that the decisions made reflect their aspirations, a segment of the community still feels marginalised or does not have the same opportunity to participate. This group that feels excluded requires more attention to prevent disparities in the decision-making process. This also emphasises the importance of evaluating who is actively involved in the decision-making process and why certain groups tend to be excluded. Regarding transparency, data shows that 83% of residents rate the decision-making process in the village as good or very good. However, three respondents felt the process lacked transparency. While most community members believe decisions are made transparently, this small group's perception points to issues in how information is shared or communicated. These respondents might think there is not enough information available, or that the details are unclear or difficult to understand. This underscores the need for better communication methods that not only provide information but also ensure it is received and comprehended by everyone involved.

Achieving maximum transparency largely depends on the village head's effort to communicate clearly and accurately about decision-making processes. Using a variety of communication channels, including digital tools like village websites, social media, or other applications, can help reach the entire community, especially those less exposed to information. Moreover, organising meetings more effectively- for example, by providing advance notices and explanations afterwards- can enhance the community's understanding of the decisions made. In light of these findings, the results of the research indicate that village heads play a significant role in raising community aspirations through several key approaches, namely:

1. Effective communication

The village head can enhance communication with the community by choosing suitable channels and promoting transparent, two-way dialogue. To boost community participation, they should ensure that information is clear and accessible to all societal levels, with communication platforms that all groups can access. Additionally, to improve interactions between different community factions, like youths and elders, village heads can organise targeted discussion forums to address each group's specific needs.

2. Community participation

The village head can boost community involvement in public decision-making by engaging residents more actively in all phases of village development planning and implementation. Participation goes beyond simply attending meetings; it entails influence over every decision. This can be accomplished by directly listening to the community's aspirations through discussion forums, questionnaires, or village social media platforms that enable feedback at any time.

3. Transparency

To enhance transparency in village management, village heads should provide clear and accurate information about decision-making and budget allocation. Using digital platforms accessible to the entire village community to publish important decisions and financial reports can strengthen transparency. Village heads should also involve the community in regular evaluations of the results achieved, so that the community feels directly engaged in monitoring and decision-making processes.

By enabling more effective communication, fostering inclusive participation, and ensuring greater transparency, village heads can more effectively address community aspirations and make targeted public decisions. Consequently, this approach will enhance social bonds and build greater trust between the village authorities and residents.

CONCLUSION

The village head plays a critical and multifaceted role in fostering community aspirations and participation in public decision-making by acting as both an administrative leader and a cultural mediator who links community interests with development policies. Effective village heads enhance participation by employing strong interpersonal communication skills and building social trust through transparency, responsiveness, and fairness, which encourage residents to engage actively throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. In Paloh Gadeng Village, informal gatherings and local values such as deliberation, mutual cooperation, and customary norms significantly shape participation patterns, with village heads who respect and integrate these traditions more successfully mobilizing collective involvement and social solidarity. Moreover, village heads balance modern development demands with traditional values, ensuring that policies reflect the community's social and cultural context to promote sustainable and inclusive growth.

Given the complexity of their role bridging tradition and modernity, future research should explore how village heads can adapt leadership strategies to evolving social, economic, and environmental challenges while sustaining cultural integrity and community cohesion in diverse village settings.

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