

Social Impact of Culture-Based Community Empowerment Program: Qualitative Study of Maengket Program for Vulnerable Communities in Tomohon, North Sulawesi

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Keywords:	<i>Cultural empowerment, community resilience, corporate–community partnerships, psychosocial transformation</i>	Empowering vulnerable communities through a local culture-based approach has not yet gained prominence in the formulation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) program design, despite its substantial potential to create sustainable social impact. This research aims to examine the social impact of the <i>Maengket</i> Program initiated by PT PLN Indonesia Power UBP Kamojang UP PLTP Lahendong on vulnerable communities in North Sulawesi. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, FGDs, and documentation analysis, and analyzed through the Miles and Huberman model within a qualitative social impact assessment framework, the findings reveal a positive impact in three key dimensions: psychosocial transformation through increased environmental awareness, strengthening social capital through community cohesion, and indirect economic benefits through productive activities based on culture. In addition, this program strengthens the relationship between companies and communities through the integration of local cultural values into CSR strategies. This study underscores the need to mainstream cultural empowerment models in both development policies and corporate sustainability strategies to promote inclusive and contextual development.

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INTRODUCTION

Empowering vulnerable communities through a local culture-based approach has gained significant attention in the global sustainable development discourse, particularly due to its capacity to bridge structural gaps and strengthen social resilience from within communities (Zimmerman, 2000; Sen, 1999; Cornwall & Brock, 2015). In developing countries, a community-based development model that integrates local cultural values is considered more adaptive to complex and pluralistic social contexts (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Such an approach not only increases program effectiveness but also restores community agency, often marginalized by uniform and elitist technocratic intervention models (Chambers, 2012; Tsing, 2005).

Cultural empowerment is conceptualized as a transformational process extending beyond the improvement of individual and collective capacity; it also rebuilds identity, solidarity, and more equitable relational structures through cultural expression (Ife, 2013; Gaventa, 2006). From a sociocultural perspective, local culture is not merely symbolic heritage but rather a social resource (social capital) that can be leveraged to build legitimacy, participation, and ownership of the change process (Putnam, 2000; Bebbington, 2020). Therefore, development interventions aligned with local values and cultural practices can

significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of community empowerment initiatives (Narayan, 2002; Berkes & Ross, 2013).

Nevertheless, in Indonesia, many community empowerment initiatives implemented by corporations or government institutions predominantly focus on technical training and economic upliftment, often overlooking the significance of the local context and cultural potential as instruments of social change (Sumner & Tribe, 2008; Nasdira et al., 2022). This top-down and instructional approach rarely engages collective identity and local agency, resulting in inadequate program sustainability and a lack of community ownership of change (Wong, 2012; Chambers, 2012). Additionally, limited studies document how local culture, particularly traditional artistic expressions, can function as vehicles for social empowerment within corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs.

In this context, the *Maengket* Program initiated by PT PLN Indonesia Power UBP Kamojang UP PLTP Lahendong is an initiative that integrates a local cultural approach into empowerment strategies for vulnerable communities. *Maengket*, a traditional Minahasan performing art, is utilized not only as a medium for cultural preservation but also as a space for social learning, participation, and strengthening collective community values. This program offers vulnerable groups—including women, the elderly, and youth—a platform to articulate their identities, build solidarity, and negotiate social roles within the broader community. These interventions suggest the possibility of designing more holistic empowerment models based on living cultural practices (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Banks et al., 2018).

Although most literature on CSR and community empowerment primarily focuses on economic aspects, legal participation, or program effectiveness (Frynas, 2005; Idemudia, 2011), few studies examine the subjective processes and social transformations experienced by vulnerable groups through cultural approaches. This gap in community development and social impact literature underscores the importance of this study, which aims to examine the social impacts of the *Maengket* Program using a descriptive qualitative approach that explores experiences, meanings, and transformational values embedded in culture-based empowerment.

The urgency of this study lies in developing community empowerment models that are not only economically effective but also culturally relevant, socially inclusive, and rooted in local contexts. Culturally based approaches such as the *Maengket* Program serve as valuable examples for policy formulation and the design of empowerment programs that are more equitable, adaptive, and sustainable (UNESCO, 2019; Rao & Walton, 2004).

METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the social impacts of the *Maengket* Program, a local culture-based empowerment initiative run by PT PLN Indonesia Power UBP Kamojang UP PLTP Lahendong. This approach was suitable for capturing the subjective experiences, meaning constructions, and social-identity transformations of vulnerable communities in complex local contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study was conducted purposively in Tondangow Village, South Tomohon District, Tomohon City, North Sulawesi, within the operational area of PLTP Lahendong, the program's main target location. Vulnerable communities were identified based on socio-economic indicators, minority cultural status, and vulnerability to environmental changes. Participants included program

beneficiaries, activity implementers from the company and partners, and key stakeholders from sub-district government and related agencies.

Twenty-five key informants were selected for in-depth interviews to obtain narrative accounts of social changes they experienced. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held based on age and gender to capture diverse experiences across demographic groups. Data collection employed three main strategies: semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and secondary document review. Interview guides were developed from literature on empowerment and local cultural values. FGDs focused on social change, collective participation, and strengthening cultural identity as impacts of program involvement. Secondary materials included program reports, proposals, implementation minutes, and communication archives between the company and local partners (Murdiyanto, 2020). All primary data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Conclusions were drawn inductively from thematic patterns across multiple data sources and verified through reflective, iterative processes.

To ensure credibility, the study employed triangulation of data sources and methods, cross-checked interview data with documents, and conducted member-checking whereby key informants reviewed and confirmed summaries of their interview responses. An audit trail documented the entire research process to maintain traceability. Ethical standards were upheld: participants received detailed study explanations, provided informed consent before interviews, and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Maengket Program represents an innovative model of community empowerment that demonstrate a multi-sectoral integration as a central novelty by fostering interconnectedness among all participating beneficiary groups that was run partially previously. Maengket program illustrate the key feature of interconnectedness throughout the integration of waste management practices with the Banana Plantation Ecosystem, specifically involving the cultivation of Goroho bananas. These bananas have a unique potato-like taste and hold significance part of the culture of the Tomohon community. Goroho Bananas are commonly consumed as a daily-snacks by the Tomohon community. The Maengket program manages waste by processing leftover of goroho bananas into goroho banana chips. The organic waste subsequently utilized as organic fertilizer which is also used to cultivate goroho bananas. This process involves maintenance, commodity utilization, and waste management once more.

In addition to its multisectoral method, the Maengket Program also empowers multispectrum communities, targeting a wide range of social groups and addressing multilayered social problems within communities. Designed to be inclusive and engaging diverse population, this program interventions includes women at risk of socioeconomic disadvantages, farmers, the elderly, and children as educational targets. Maengket program ensures the empowerment efforts are carried out comprehensively and reached all of the society level.

The Social Impact of Maengket Program

The results of this study indicate that the Maengket Program has a significant social impact on vulnerable communities around the Lahendong PLTP, especially in the psychosocial, socio-communal, and economic dimensions. The culture-based approach used in this program allows for the creation of a transformative and sustainable empowerment process.

There has been a noticeable change in individual's awareness and behavior regarding environmental management in the psychosocial domain. Prioritizing the practice of mutual cooperation (Mapalus), the culture-based training program has been successful in raising ecological awareness in communities that were previously indifferent to waste and cleanliness issues. This finding backs up Chouinard and Milley (2018) theory that remarks psychosocial transformation as the initial stage for a broader social change process. Maengket Program not only increases environmental literacy but also strengthens individual self-efficacy in dealing with community issues.

Furthermore, from the dimensions of social capital and community cohesion, the Maengket Program has succeeded in forming and strengthening social networks between community members. Training groups, community forums, and cooperative activities have brought together participants who did not previously know one another. This connection has creates a new social spaces that are inclusive of all ages and gender that facilitate social solidarity, economic coopertaion, and the exchange of ideas. This is consistent with Putnam's (2000) account on bonding and bridging social capital, where the intensification of social relations can build a foundation for social cohesion and community resilience.

This study also finds indications of indirect economic impact. Although the Maengket Programme was not explicitly designed to generate direct economic outcomes, several participants reported increased income as a result of their engagement in MSME activities and business initiatives related to organic fertilizer production from waste management. This aligns with the concept of proximal economic benefit as stated by Arvidson et al, (2013) which suggests that economic outcomes emerge as secondary results of more fundamental social changes.

PT PLN Indonesia Power is recognized as a corporate stakeholder that embraces a progressive approach to sustainability and stakeholder relations through Maengket Program. Local stakeholders including traditional leaders and local authorities, perceive the Maengket Programme as a meaningful initiative that revitalizes the community's socio-cultural functions and reinforces social cohesion, stated in "revive the almost lost Maengket spirit". This dynamic reflects a clear alignment between local cultural values and corporate sustainability strategies. This strengthens Hall et al.'s (2021) argument regarding the importance of integrating local wisdom or culture in community-based program design to integrate corporate values and local community values.

The analysis derived from the accounts of key informants indicates that involvement in the Maengket Program initiates a cascading sequence of impacts within the frame of *ripple effect model* (Chouinard & Milley, 2018). This transformative cycle begins with personal change, such as enhanced self-confidence among participants, progresses to relational change, marked by the strengthening of social bonds, and culminates in structural change within the community, reflected by increased civic engagement and participation in local development

initiatives. This transformation reflects a social dynamic that progresses from internal motivation toward the development of social constructions involving new norms, roles, and institutional structures at the local level. To summarize the various dimensions of findings that emerged from the data analysis, Table 1 below presents a summary of the dimensions of impact, key findings, and representative quotes from research participants:

Tabel 1. Summary of Main Findings of the Maengket Program on Empowering Vulnerable Communities

Impact Dimension	Key Finding
Psychosocial Empowerment	Changes in awareness and behavior towards environmental management; increased individual self-efficacy
Strengthening Social Capital	Form a new social networks, strengthening social cohesion across all ages and genders
Indirect Economic Impact	The emergence of waste-based economic initiatives such as organic fertilizer production; increased income opportunities
Sustainability and Stakeholder Relations	Integration of cultural and environmental values into corporate CSR strategies; strengthening local social identity and structures
Theory of Social Change	Layered changes from personal to structural; active participation in forums and community management

Overall, these findings suggest that the Maengket Program is not merely a symbolic CSR strategy, but a culture-based empowerment model capable of creating deep-rooted, sustainable, and inclusive social transformation. The program emphasizes that empowerment is not only built through material support, but also through strengthening social relations, recognizing cultural identity, and meaningful participation in the process of change.

Maengket as a traditional Minahasan performing art that revitalizes the communal ethic of *gotong royong* (Mapalus) and the implementation of Maengket Program demonstrates that cultural empowerment initiatives can generate multilevel changes at the individual, relational, and community level. This outcome affirms the *ripple effect* framework, wherein social impacts emerge progressively, starting with psychological shifts and extending to the structural changes through dynamic, iterative interactions among community actors (Chouinard & Milley, 2018). By embedding cultural identity within the intervention design, the program enhances collective learning capacities, trust-based social networks, and adaptive responses to challenges as a core components of organic community resilience, as conceptualized by Berkes and Ross (2013). By fostering local agency, the program produces sustainable transformations that are more difficult to achieve through technocratic approaches.

Unlike conventional CSR practices that focus on short-term financial indicators (Frynas, 2005), The Maengket Program demonstrates how participatory, culture-based processes can foster deep, context-sensitive social change. Creative dialogue and cultural expression enable the internalization of new values as well as the formation of community social agency. This reinforces the concept of corporate–community resonance, where alignment between corporate objectives and community values is essential for achieving long-term social sustainability (Hall et al., 2021). Thus, transformative CSR reframes communities as active agents and equal partners, moving beyond the traditional model that positions them as passive recipients of corporate interventions (Banks et al., 2018; McLennan & Banks, 2018).

The most noticeable early shifts occurred in the psychosocial dimension: increased awareness of the environment and a sense of group responsibility which shows as a reflection of *power within* activation through identity and self-assurance that drive social action (Gaventa, 2006). According to Ife (2013), cultural expressions produced emotional resonance that bolstered people's ties to the community. Strong bonds and bridging social capital were further developed during Maengket training through intensive interactions, which replicated Bebbington's (2020) findings on the function of traditional networks in inclusive development (Putnam, 2000). Waste-based economic initiatives, like the production of organic fertilizer, are an example of proximal economic benefits, where economic value arises as a derivative of socio-psychological empowerment, even though they do not aim to target income. Evaluations based on SROI narratives revealed hidden social values that quantitative metrics frequently overlook, such as cohesiveness, trust, and dignity (Krlev et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2017).

Practical and Theoretical Implications

For practical purpose, the Maengket Program model can be used as a reference for designing participatory and contextual CSR interventions, especially in areas that still have local cultural richness. For CSR actors and policy makers, this finding emphasizes the importance of a rights-based and culture-based development approach. Communities should be positioned as owners of the development process, therefore having voice and choice, while companies or supporting institutions act as facilitators. Thus, CSR programs can transform into social partnerships that are adaptive to the local context. In addition, empowerment programs with a cultural perspective have the potential to create multi-benefits: in addition to social targets (e.g. waste reduction, cultural preservation), they also strengthen community social capital which in turn supports economic and environmental goals in a sustainable manner.

Academically, this study extends the social impact evaluation approach by integrating several theoretical frameworks into qualitative SROI. Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) helps explain the mechanism of strengthening networks and trust; agency and power within theory (Gaventa, 2006) explain changes in individual empowerment; and the ripple effect model (Chouinard & Milley, 2018) explains the pattern of impact spread. This combination produces a more holistic evaluation framework for community development studies. The findings of this study support the use of analytical generalizations in case studies: that is, although the results of this study are specific to one community, the concepts and transformation patterns identified can be applied to other contexts that are analytically similar. This analytical approach allows for the development of theory from concrete cases, which can then be tested on other cases (analytic generalization). In other words, the contribution of this study is not in statistical generalization, but in compiling lessons learned that can inspire practices in other communities with adjustments to local socio-cultural conditions.

CONCLUSION

This research on the *Maengket* Program near the Lahendong Geothermal Power Plant reveals that this culture-based intervention fosters deep, lasting social transformations by enhancing psychosocial capacities—particularly environmental awareness and personal empowerment—strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital to boost community resilience, and generating indirect economic benefits like household composting enterprises

rooted in increased social collaboration. By aligning corporate values with local cultural practices, the program moves beyond symbolic corporate social responsibility (CSR) to serve as a meaningful empowerment model that cultivates collective agency and promotes social values often neglected by conventional quantitative assessments. Future research should explore the sustainability and scalability of similar initiatives across diverse socio-ecological settings using mixed-methods and longitudinal designs. Practically, corporations and local governments are encouraged to engage in co-creation with cultural actors, incorporate participatory monitoring, and support funding for culture-driven ventures, thereby enhancing empirical knowledge of culture-development linkages and fostering empowerment that is equitable, contextually grounded, and enduring.

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