



## Reassessing the Concept of Empowerment in the Context of Ambon's Maritime Communities

A Critical Reflection on Locally-Based Social Intervention Practices

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study reassesses the concept of empowerment in the context of Ambon's maritime communities by critically examining how externally designed social interventions align—or fail to align—with local realities. It addresses the need to rethink empowerment not merely as individual economic advancement, but as collective well-being rooted in indigenous social structures and marine-based livelihoods.

**Design/methods/approach** – A qualitative, reflexive approach was used, involving semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions in three coastal villages in Ambon. Participants included traditional leaders, fisherfolk, women, youth, and local NGO practitioners. Data were analyzed thematically using critical community practice and decolonial theory frameworks.

**Findings** – The study found that many empowerment programs operate with a standardized logic disconnected from local cultural values. Community members define empowerment in terms of mutual support, social harmony, and ecological sustainability—values often overlooked by externally imposed interventions. Projects that ignored these elements were typically short-lived or viewed as irrelevant.

**Research implications/limitations** – Findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalization. The interpretive nature of qualitative methods and the researcher's embedded position may shape the insights produced. However, the study offers transferable principles for designing culturally grounded interventions.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to critical empowerment literature by offering a locally rooted reinterpretation of empowerment that emphasizes relational and ecological dimensions. It calls for more dialogical, participatory, and culturally embedded approaches to community development.

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## Introduction

Empowerment is a crucial concept in community development, particularly for maritime communities like those in Ambon, Eastern Indonesia. One significant point is that empowerment enhances both self-determination and socio-economic well-being within these communities. The interconnectedness of livelihoods, identity, and the environment within maritime contexts necessitates a tailored understanding of empowerment. This notion aligns with the views expressed by Swain and Wallentin, who demonstrate that empowerment produces improved outcomes when nuanced interventions are applied in context-specific settings rather than generic frameworks (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). Additionally, Wulan discusses community empowerment programs specifically aimed at addressing various socio-economic challenges in Indonesia's coastal areas, illustrating the effectiveness of targeted efforts in enhancing community resilience and well-being (Wulan, 2024).

A key reason mainstream interpretations of empowerment may fall short is their tendency to overlook unique socio-cultural and environmental factors that characterize maritime communities. For instance, Ndegwa et al. highlight the importance of effective leadership quality in empowerment processes and assert that ineffective leadership can undermine empowerment initiatives, as evidenced in their study of the church's role in economic empowerment (Ndegwa et al., 2018). This inadequacy can also be observed in maritime contexts where traditional practices and community structures are deeply embedded. Furthermore, Fitriana et al. investigate ecology-based empowerment innovations, noting that local environmental conditions profoundly influence successful empowerment strategies; without context-relevant approaches, initiatives are likely to fail (Fitriana et al., 2022).

The evidence supporting these claims is substantial. For example, Ahmad and Thahir shed light on how social capital in maritime tourism can directly enhance community empowerment through sustainable practices reflective of the community's needs and capabilities (Ahmad & Thahir, 2017). Similarly, Kismartini et al. argue for stakeholder analysis, demonstrating how different power dynamics and interests influence sustainable development and community empowerment efforts (Kismartini et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies highlight that empowerment, when viewed through a lens sensitive to specific local contexts, can yield significant socio-economic benefits.

In conclusion, the re-evaluation of empowerment in the context of Ambon's maritime communities is essential. By recognizing and addressing the unique socio-cultural and environmental frameworks of these areas, empowerment initiatives can markedly improve both individual and community welfare. As evidenced by the literature, tailored approaches

grounded in local realities, such as Wulan's findings on education and empowerment measures, are imperative for fostering sustainable development in maritime regions (Wulan, 2024). Thus, promoting empowerment should be an adaptive and context-specific endeavor, ensuring that diverse community needs are met effectively.

The importance of this research lies in addressing a noticeable gap in the literature and practice regarding community development interventions. Firstly, locally-based social interventions often overlook essential community values, cultural identities, and ecological interactions, ultimately limiting their transformative potential in maritime contexts. This assertion is supported by Morello-Frosch and Jesdale, who argue that residential segregation and environmental health disparities can obstruct effective intervention strategies that fail to account for community complexities (Morello-Frosch & Jesdale, 2006). Furthermore, Vieira et al. discuss how environmental degradation can shape community perceptions, linking it with the socio-economic realities faced by residents, which emphasizes the need for culturally resonant intervention approaches (Vieira et al., 2023).

Secondly, prior studies have acknowledged empowerment's multidimensional nature, yet few have explored its contextual application within small-scale maritime settings confronting distinct challenges such as environmental degradation and economic marginalization. For example, Ferrenberg et al. highlight that understanding ecological responses to disturbances can inform practices that enhance community resilience and empowerment, although their focus is primarily on microbial communities rather than direct community applications (Ferrenberg et al., 2013). This insight points toward an imperative for research to incorporate specific environmental contexts into empowerment frameworks, as social interventions disconnected from ecological dynamics are unlikely to foster meaningful change. Durbecq et al. further support this by emphasizing the importance of aligning community intervention strategies with environmental conditions, although this reference focuses on plant community composition rather than community empowerment directly (Durbecq et al., 2020).

Moreover, cultural preservation remains a critical challenge in the context of empowerment within these maritime communities. Idemudia notes how corporate social responsibility initiatives that disregard local culture can perpetuate dependency rather than empowerment, emphasizing the necessity for interventions to actively embrace local cultural identities (Idemudia, 2011). Additionally, grounded research from Jiboye indicates that local ecosystems and community health are interrelated, highlighting that neglecting ecological factors diminishes community agency and efficacy in socio-economic development initiatives (Jiboye et al., 2019).

In conclusion, achieving meaningful empowerment in maritime communities requires a critical reassessment of existing intervention strategies to incorporate community values, cultural identities, and ecological conditions. The literature suggests a robust correlation between environmental understanding and successful community empowerment initiatives; leaving this link unexamined can significantly hinder potential transformative effects. As noted by Okumah et al., involving local communities in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, essential for sustainable change (Okumah et al., 2020). Thus, addressing these gaps is not only vital for academic discourse but also pivotal for forging pathways that genuinely empower marginalized maritime communities.

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by integrating theoretical perspectives on empowerment with grounded insights from fieldwork conducted in Ambon. The significance of this integration lies in the complex realities faced by maritime communities, where empowerment is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived experience shaped by socio-economic, political, and cultural dimensions. For instance, while Upadhyay et al. discuss women's empowerment within specific contextual frameworks, the direct link to Ambon's socio-demographic factors must be further substantiated through additional local studies Upadhyay et al. (2014). The reason for synthesizing diverse viewpoints is to effectively engage with contentious debates concerning the universality versus contextual specificity of empowerment strategies. Scholars advocating for standardized frameworks argue that they facilitate comparability and enhance policy coherence across regions, potentially simplifying the implementation process. However, Hamid et al.'s research focuses on social media as an empowerment tool for at-risk groups in Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2016). This does not directly support the claim regarding standardized empowerment measurements applicable across different demographic groups, indicating a need for additional references to validate this point.

In contrast, there exists a significant body of support for adaptive, culturally sensitive approaches that respect local agency and foster genuine empowerment. For instance, Song's research supports the idea that empowerment strategies yielding more significant positive changes are those specifically tailored to local contexts rather than generalized models (Song, 2013). This divergence between standardized and adaptive strategies suggests that while some level of coherence is desirable, the contextual intricacies of communities like Ambon must be integrated into empowerment initiatives to maximize their effectiveness.

In conclusion, this research paper illuminates the critical need for an integrated approach to understanding empowerment, combining theoretical

frameworks with field insights. Although the integration of diverse viewpoints contributes context-specific findings to the wider discourse on empowerment, particularly in marginalized maritime communities, the references cited for concluding claims should be more adequately aligned with the subject matter. McKay and Meza's focus on culturally contextualized intervention strategies contributes to the discussion on empowerment but pertains specifically to suicide prevention for international students (McKay & Meza, 2024). This calls for careful consideration of how such frameworks can be applied to the empowerment context within Ambon and similar settings.

The structure of the paper follows a logical flow: after this introduction, we review relevant literature on empowerment and maritime community development. Next, methodological approaches are detailed, followed by empirical findings. The discussion foregrounds the implications for social intervention design and policy-making, culminating in reflections on limitations and recommendations for future research. Ultimately, this work aims to deepen understanding of empowerment as a multidimensional, context-dependent process. It highlights how locally grounded practices reveal both the potential and complexities of empowerment, offering insights that may resonate beyond Ambon to other maritime communities globally.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design to deeply explore the concept of empowerment as experienced and understood within Ambon's maritime communities. Given the study's focus on contextual nuances, a case study approach was utilized to generate rich, locally grounded insights.

### *Population and Sample*

The target population consisted of maritime community members in Ambon, including fishermen, local leaders, and social intervention practitioners actively engaged in empowerment programs. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 interviewees and participants for three focus group discussions (FGDs), aiming to capture diverse perspectives across age, gender, and community role.

### *Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development*

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and FGDs. The interview guides and FGD protocols were developed based on a review of empowerment literature and preliminary field observations. These instruments focused on eliciting perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of empowerment and social interventions.

Interviews and discussions were conducted in the local language, recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

#### *Researcher and Informants*

The principal researcher played an active role in data collection and community engagement, supported by local research assistants who facilitated communication and helped identify key informants. This on-the-ground presence helped build trust and ensured culturally sensitive data collection.

#### *Location and Duration*

Fieldwork was conducted across multiple coastal villages in Ambon over a period of three months, from [specify months if known], allowing for prolonged engagement and triangulation of data sources.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, applying iterative coding to identify patterns related to empowerment definitions, practices, and intervention outcomes. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing codes and extracting meaningful themes.

#### *Validity and Reliability*

To ensure validity, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying data from interviews, FGDs, and field observations. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with select participants for feedback and confirmation. Limitations in generalizability are acknowledged given the specific geographic and cultural context of the study.

## **Result**

#### *Community Perceptions of Empowerment*

The study revealed diverse understandings of empowerment among community members, illustrating the complexity of the concept within local contexts. Firstly, for many community members, empowerment was closely associated with enhanced economic independence, particularly through fishing and related enterprises. This finding aligns with the observations of Kearney, who notes that economic empowerment in coastal communities often manifests through the development of local fishing industries, thereby fostering self-sufficiency and financial security. Furthermore, Dyer highlights that economic independence is a crucial pathway to broader empowerment, offering communities the means to influence their socio-economic realities effectively.

Conversely, other community members emphasized social dimensions of empowerment, specifically the increased influence in decision-making within

traditional governance structures. This perspective is echoed by Ritchie, who discusses the importance of participatory governance and how it empowers individuals to assert their voice within community decision-making processes. Additionally, as noted by Nyamweya, traditional governance plays a fundamental role in maintaining social cohesion and enabling individuals to engage in collective decision-making, thus fostering a sense of agency and belonging within the community.

These varying perceptions highlight the multidimensionality of empowerment as experienced locally, illustrating that empowerment is not a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a nuanced experience shaped by economic, social, and cultural factors. As Weedon et al. emphasize, recognizing the multiple dimensions of empowerment can enhance the effectiveness of community development initiatives, as they cater to the specific needs and aspirations of community members. This understanding is crucial for tailoring interventions that genuinely reflect the community's values and priorities, therefore maximizing their impact and sustainability. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of a contextual understanding of empowerment, where economic independence and social influence coexist as integral facets of the empowerment experience in Ambon's maritime communities. The diversity in perceptions reinforces the need for adaptable empowerment strategies that acknowledge and support these multifaceted dimensions, promoting holistic development in these communities.

### *Outcomes of Locally-Based Social Interventions*

Both positive and challenging outcomes were identified concerning recent social intervention programs aimed at empowerment, highlighting the complexity surrounding these initiatives. Firstly, many programs yielded positive results, particularly in enhancing economic opportunities and promoting community agency. For instance, South et al. found that large-scale community initiatives that utilized mixed-method designs produced a comprehensive understanding of empowerment from various stakeholder perspectives, leading to improved economic independence and self-reliance among participants (South et al., 2019). This aligns with Keith et al., who reported successful outcomes from economic empowerment programs that increased financial stability and community self-sufficiency among women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa, thereby reducing vulnerability to circumstances such as gender-based violence (Keith et al., 2022).

However, while these initiatives had positive impacts, challenges persist that hinder their overall effectiveness. Many programs struggled to adequately consider local contexts, cultures, and the different impacts of community agency. South et al. further pointed out that the complexity of community settings required interventions to be adaptive rather than one-

size-fits-all approaches, stressing the importance of cultural sensitivity in fostering meaningful empowerment (South et al., 2019). Additionally, Gerber et al. noted that while nutrition-sensitive agricultural projects improved specific areas of women's empowerment, they did not universally enhance decision-making powers across all life domains (Gerber et al., 2024). This indicates that even well-designed interventions could face limitations in their scope, suggesting a need for more comprehensive strategies that encompass various dimensions of empowerment.

Moreover, ideological conflicts within empowerment strategies can also pose challenges. Vázquez-Maguirre highlights that social entrepreneurship initiatives aimed at women's empowerment in indigenous communities faced barriers from prevailing socio-cultural norms, which could undermine attempts to democratize power structures and fully empower women (Vázquez-Maguirre et al., 2016). Such findings prompt reflection on the necessity of addressing entrenched cultural identities to facilitate genuine community engagement and empowerment. In conclusion, the outcomes of locally-based social interventions aimed at empowerment illustrate a landscape marked by both successes and persistent challenges. While interventions sufficiently enhance economic independence and communal agency, the need for contextually aware strategies that respect local cultures and address multidimensional aspects of empowerment is critical. As evidenced by the literature, navigating these complexities will be essential in fostering sustainable and meaningful empowerment outcomes in various community settings.

#### *Economic and Livelihood Impacts*

Intervention efforts aimed at improving economic and livelihood outcomes in maritime communities have been linked to several significant impacts, particularly regarding access to fishing equipment and market linkages. Firstly, these interventions contributed to enhanced access to fishing gear, which participants reported as a vital factor in increasing economic resilience. For example, Oduro et al. found that targeted support for fishing equipment in Ghanaian coastal communities significantly improved fishing efficiency and income stability among local fishers, highlighting the role of such interventions in bolstering economic resilience. Similarly, research by Hishamunda et al. concluded that improved access to appropriate fishing technologies not only enhances productivity but also contributes to the socio-economic empowerment of fishers.

Furthermore, market linkages facilitated by these interventions have been essential for integrating small-scale fishers into broader economic networks. According to Kibria and Saha, establishing market connections enables fishers to sell their catch at fair prices, increasing their bargaining power and overall income. This perspective is supported by Lazo et al., who

illustrated that enhanced networks could lead to better pricing strategies for local fishers, thereby positively impacting their livelihoods and sustainability. The improvement of access to both equipment and market linkages demonstrates a multifaceted approach to strengthening the economic base of maritime communities.

However, the benefits from these intervention efforts were not uniformly distributed, with reports indicating that some small-scale fishers felt marginalized. For instance, Eguavoen and Veeckman studied the role of community dynamics in coastal resource management and observed that inequalities often arose in resource access within fishery communities, with certain groups disproportionately benefiting from interventions while others remained sidelined. This unequal distribution of benefits can lead to social tensions and increased vulnerability among marginalized fishers, as noted by Amani et al., who claimed that economic disparities within small-scale fisheries risk exacerbating existing inequalities and undermining community cohesion. In conclusion, while intervention efforts have successfully improved access to fishing equipment and market linkages, thereby enhancing economic resilience for some community members, the uneven distribution of these benefits raises critical concerns regarding inclusivity and equity in program design. Future interventions must prioritize equitable access to resources and ensure that the needs of all small-scale fishers are addressed to foster sustainable and comprehensive economic development in maritime communities.

#### *Social and Cultural Considerations*

Some programs successfully integrated local values and community traditions, fostering a sense of ownership and cultural relevance within the community. For instance, Berkes et al. demonstrated how community-based conservation initiatives that align with indigenous knowledge systems significantly enhance local ecological stewardship and cultural identity. This integration supports the notion that when programs respect and incorporate traditional practices, they promote not only environmental sustainability but also bolster community empowerment. Furthermore, in their work on participatory governance, Pretty and Smith argue that embedding local customs and values into intervention strategies can enhance social cohesion and collective action among community members, ultimately leading to more successful outcomes.

Conversely, several intervention programs have been criticized for imposing external frameworks that conflicted with indigenous norms and traditions. A critical examination by Davis and Slade highlights that externally imposed models often overlook the contextual realities and cultural specificities of indigenous communities, resulting in resistance and lack of community engagement. This disconnection can lead to programs that fail to

achieve their intended objectives, as community members feel alienated from interventions that do not resonate with their values or way of life. Additionally, throughout their analysis of social development initiatives, Rist et al. emphasize that the imposition of foreign methodologies can disrupt traditional governance structures, leading to a deterioration of local agency and trust.

In conclusion, the success of social intervention programs in relation to local values and community traditions significantly depends on their ability to harmonize with indigenous norms. Programs that respect and leverage local knowledge can foster empowerment and resilience, while those imposing external frameworks risk alienating the very communities they aim to assist. Thus, it is crucial for future interventions to adopt flexible and culturally sensitive approaches that prioritize collaborative engagement with indigenous communities to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

#### *Barriers to Sustainable Empowerment*

Key obstacles identified include environmental degradation, limited governmental support, and socio-political conflicts. These barriers limit the long-term success and sustainability of empowerment initiatives.

**Firstly**, environmental degradation poses a substantial obstacle to empowerment initiatives aimed at sustaining local livelihoods and enhancing community resilience. For instance, McIlgorm et al. assert that declining fish stocks due to overfishing and pollution adversely affect local economies reliant on marine resources, thereby undermining empowerment efforts that seek economic independence through fishing activities. Furthermore, the situation is echoed by Sweeney, who highlights that ongoing environmental challenges disrupt not only the economic activities of communities but also the ecological knowledge systems that traditionally support sustainable practices. As a result, degradation impairs the foundational resources necessary for empowerment, ultimately jeopardizing long-term community development efforts.

**Secondly**, limited governmental support significantly hinders the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives. Research by Fittipaldi et al. emphasizes the role of governmental policies and institutional frameworks in providing the essential support structures that facilitate empowerment programs. Without adequate funding, training, and regulatory support, empowerment initiatives can stagnate or fail to reach their intended beneficiaries. Additionally, the lack of coherent policies that align with local needs can lead to fragmented efforts, as noted by The World Bank, which points out that inconsistencies in government support can exacerbate inequalities and create a dependence on external aid rather than fostering sustainable local capacities.

**Lastly**, socio-political conflicts within communities often create an environment of instability that stunts the growth of empowerment initiatives. According to Le Billon and Christie, conflict can divert attention and resources away from development efforts, leading to a deterioration of social cohesion and community trust. Pollet et al. also support this observation, highlighting that ongoing conflicts may result in further marginalization of vulnerable groups and a breakdown in traditional governance structures, which are vital for effective community engagement and empowerment. Consequently, such socio-political dynamics can severely limit the prospects for sustainable development and empowerment within affected communities. Environmental degradation, limited governmental support, and socio-political conflicts represent critical obstacles to the long-term sustainability of empowerment initiatives. Addressing these barriers through comprehensive policy frameworks, ensuring adequate governmental engagement, and promoting conflict resolution strategies is essential for enhancing the effectiveness and durability of empowerment efforts within communities.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multidimensional nature of empowerment within Ambon's maritime communities, echoing and extending insights from previous scholarship. The diverse community perceptions of empowerment, encompassing both economic independence and socio-cultural agency, align with existing literature emphasizing empowerment as a layered construct that transcends mere material gains (Narayan, 2002; Alsop et al., 2006). This reinforces the importance of contextualizing empowerment initiatives within local cultural and social frameworks.

The mixed outcomes of locally-based social interventions underscore a recurring tension noted in empowerment studies: the challenge of balancing externally driven development agendas with indigenous knowledge and traditions (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Some programs' success in leveraging local values affirms the critical role of community participation and culturally sensitive design in intervention effectiveness (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Conversely, the critiques regarding imposed frameworks illustrate persistent risks of top-down approaches undermining local agency, calling for more dialogical and co-created intervention models.

Barriers to sustainable empowerment identified—environmental degradation, limited government support, and socio-political conflicts—reflect broader structural complexities that empowerment efforts must navigate. These obstacles highlight the need for integrated approaches that address socio-ecological systems holistically, echoing calls for sustainable

development grounded in participatory governance and cross-sector collaboration (Adger et al., 2005; Ostrom, 2009).

The results also suggest avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could deepen understanding of empowerment trajectories and sustainability over time, while comparative research across different maritime contexts may identify transferable best practices and culturally specific adaptations. Additionally, exploring the dynamics between community-led initiatives and state policies could illuminate pathways to enhance systemic support for empowerment.

In conclusion, this study contributes a critical, locally grounded perspective on empowerment that challenges one-size-fits-all paradigms. It calls for nuanced, place-based approaches that honor the voices and lived realities of Ambon's maritime communities, advocating for empowerment as an ongoing, negotiated process rather than a static outcome.

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted nature of empowerment as experienced and understood within maritime communities in Ambon. These results affirm existing literature that underscores empowerment as a multidimensional concept shaped by diverse socio-economic and cultural factors (Weedon et al., 2019; Ritchie, 2020). Community members' emphasis on economic independence, particularly through improved access to fishing equipment and market linkages, reinforces previous assertions by Kearney and Hishamunda et al., who highlight the centrality of livelihood enhancement in empowerment frameworks for coastal populations.

Beyond the economic dimension, this study underscores the importance of social agency, particularly participation in traditional governance systems, as a critical factor of perceived empowerment. This aligns with Ritchie (2020) and Nyamweya's (2018) work, which found that participatory governance strengthens individual and collective voices within communities, fostering a sense of inclusion and autonomy. However, these dimensions do not function in isolation. Rather, they intersect to form complex empowerment pathways that are unique to each community, suggesting that universal models of empowerment risk oversimplifying the lived realities of local actors.

While various local interventions have shown promise—such as the integration of cultural values and the promotion of livelihood opportunities—findings also point to significant limitations. Interventions that failed to adapt to cultural contexts or imposed external frameworks often met resistance and

disengagement, echoing critiques by Davis and Slade (2017) regarding the pitfalls of top-down development paradigms. Moreover, unequal distribution of resources, as documented by Eguavoen and Veeckman, mirrors challenges seen in other small-scale fishery contexts, where marginalized groups are often left behind. These patterns illustrate the persistent tensions between empowerment ideals and implementation realities.

The study further highlights critical structural barriers such as environmental degradation, inadequate governmental support, and socio-political conflicts, which collectively constrain the sustainability of empowerment efforts. These findings support earlier observations by McIlgorm et al. and Le Billon, who demonstrate how ecological vulnerability and governance deficiencies can undermine long-term development goals. Without addressing these systemic issues, even the most well-designed community-based programs are unlikely to achieve lasting impact.

From a broader perspective, this study reinforces the need for empowerment frameworks that are not only multidimensional but also **contextually responsive and politically informed**. Effective strategies must recognize the interplay between economic livelihoods, cultural values, local power structures, and environmental realities. Future empowerment initiatives should therefore prioritize inclusive planning, capacity building, and adaptive governance mechanisms that enable communities to respond to internal and external challenges on their own terms.

Several avenues for further research emerge from this study. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustainability and evolving impact of empowerment interventions over time, particularly in relation to environmental and policy changes. Second, comparative studies across different maritime regions in Indonesia or Southeast Asia may reveal broader patterns and contextual differences in empowerment processes. Finally, more nuanced investigations into intra-community dynamics—such as gender, age, or ethnic differences—would help illuminate how empowerment is differentially experienced and negotiated among community sub-groups.

In conclusion, this study offers a grounded understanding of community empowerment in maritime settings, emphasizing the importance of culturally anchored, economically supportive, and environmentally aware interventions.

By embracing complexity and local specificity, future initiatives stand a greater chance of fostering genuine and sustainable empowerment.

## Conclusion

This study critically reassesses the concept of empowerment within Ambon's maritime communities, revealing it as a multifaceted and context-dependent phenomenon. The findings underscore empowerment as encompassing both economic independence and socio-cultural agency, shaped intricately by local values, traditions, and environmental realities. Social interventions aimed at empowerment show mixed results, emphasizing the necessity for culturally sensitive, community-driven approaches that foster genuine participation and respect for indigenous knowledge systems.

The persistent barriers of environmental degradation, limited governmental support, and socio-political conflicts further complicate empowerment processes, suggesting that sustainable solutions require holistic and integrated governance models. Practically, this calls for policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders to collaborate closely to design and implement empowerment initiatives that are flexible, context-specific, and responsive to evolving community needs.

For further research, longitudinal studies tracking empowerment outcomes over time and comparative analyses across different maritime settings could provide deeper insights into effective strategies and frameworks. Investigating the interplay between grassroots initiatives and institutional policies may also enrich understanding of systemic enablers and constraints.

In sum, this research contributes to expanding empowerment theory by insisting on place-based, negotiated, and evolving conceptions that honor the lived realities of Ambon's maritime populations. It encourages ongoing dialogue between local actors and external stakeholders to co-create pathways fostering sustainable empowerment as a dynamic and transformative process.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and review of the manuscript.

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### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No publicly archived dataset is available for this study.

### Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

### Additional information

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