

# Empowering Rural Communities in Sabah, Malaysia: Practices and Challenges towards Sustainable Development

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000157>

Received: 14 May 2025; Accepted: 18 May 2025; Published: 05 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

Rural community empowerment is a critical element in achieving sustainable development, especially in regions with marginalised populations and limited access to basic infrastructure. In Sabah, Malaysia, rural communities such as smallholder cocoa farmers and the stateless Bajau Laut face multiple socio-economic challenges. This paper examines empowerment as both a process and an outcome, supporting rural transformation in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study focuses on three objectives: (i) to identify empowerment practices in rural settings, (ii) to explore implementation challenges, and (iii) to propose context-specific strategies for sustainable development. Using a qualitative case study approach, fieldwork was conducted in the East Coast of Sabah. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of policies and SDG-related reports. Thematic analysis revealed distinct empowerment patterns. Cocoa farmers exhibited empowerment through cooperative membership, training, and sustainable farming practices, but remained constrained by limited capital, land access, and technology. The Bajau Laut, despite being stateless, maintained cultural resilience, internal social networks, and subsistence livelihood systems. However, their lack of legal recognition severely restricted development access. Both communities reflected uneven SDG integration, most closely aligned with Goals 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, and 12. Overall, tailored, community-based empowerment is essential to ensure inclusive and sustainable rural progress.

**Keywords:** Rural empowerment, sustainable development, Sabah, community development, SDGs, qualitative case study, cocoa smallholders, Bajau Laut.

## INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a critical and multidimensional concept within the discipline of development sociology and community development, particularly in its role of enhancing the capacities, capabilities, and resilience of rural populations (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2021; Bhattacharyya 2004; Buttel 1993). It is frequently conceptualised through two primary dichotomies: empowerment as a process and empowerment as an outcome (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2021). As a process, empowerment involves participatory engagement, capacity-building, and access to decision-making structures, whereas as an outcome, it is measured through tangible improvements in community autonomy, economic well-being, and socio-political agency (Charatsari & Lioutas 2020; Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah & Fariborz Aref 2011). These dual perspectives reflect broader debates surrounding development paradigms—namely the top-down versus bottom-up approaches.

Top-down strategies, often state-led and policy-driven, may offer greater programme continuity and access to institutional resources but risk neglecting local agency and contextual nuances (Noviatin Syarifuddin, Amar Ma'ruf, & Aminuddin Mane Kandari 2021). In contrast, bottom-up approaches, which centre community-led initiatives and participatory governance, often foster local ownership but encounter challenges in terms of sustainability, resource mobilisation, and long-term policy integration (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2021; Luttrell et al. 2009; Midgley 2014; Narayan 2005). Despite these tensions, empowerment—whether as process or outcome—remains a pivotal mechanism in pursuing sustainable and inclusive development, especially in rural settings that are frequently marginalised from mainstream policy agendas.

This paper explores the dynamics of rural community empowerment in Sabah, Malaysia, in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It raises critical questions. To what extent do rural communities possess the opportunity to self-develop or be developed in tandem with national development strategies? Are they adequately equipped to navigate the increasingly complex and uncertain terrain of national and global development trends? These questions are especially salient given Malaysia's continued reliance on the agricultural and fisheries sectors—sectors that are primarily sustained by rural populations—as fundamental engines of economic growth. The study draws upon empirical fieldwork involving two rural communities located along the East Coast of Sabah: (i) smallholder cocoa farmers and (ii) the Bajau Laut community, a marginalised, stateless maritime group. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and analysis of development policies, the study documents lived experiences, empowerment practices, and the sociocultural dynamics of rural transformation. The findings indicate that while both communities face significant structural and institutional challenges, they also demonstrate adaptive strategies, local resilience, and diverse forms of participation in community development initiatives.

This paper proposes a comprehensive framework of rural empowerment that integrates social, economic, gender, technological, and environmental dimensions. The framework emphasises (i) inclusive participation, particularly among women and youth, (ii) the democratisation of access to knowledge and technology, (iii) sustainable utilisation of natural resources, and (iv) institutional support mechanisms that are culturally sensitive and context specific. By situating the empowerment discourse within the broader SDG agenda, this paper contributes to the critical understanding of rural development pathways in Malaysia and offers policy-relevant insights for achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes for marginalised communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Empowerment Approach in Rural Community Development

Community development is a strategic approach to rural development initiated by the government (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2008). This form of development is implemented through various programmes such as the provision of public amenities, education, healthcare, agricultural modernisation, transportation and communication, irrigation, housing, and more (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2021). These programmes are generally targeted at low-income groups (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2021). Some community development efforts are also implemented in the form of movements, such as the Gerakan Daya Wawasan (GDW), which serves as a foundational instrument centred on human capacity to promote rural community development. According to Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah (2021), in his inaugural lecture entitled *Empowerment through Community Development: A Reflection* on 21 November 2021 at the Al-Farabi Seminar Hall, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), rural communities rely heavily on the wisdom and leadership of local leaders. Rural communities can function as mobilisers, brokers, planners, mentors, or facilitators—whether appointed officially by the authorities or elected through democratic processes in local organisations.

Although these rural communities possess local wisdom and flexible knowledge of rural social life, their experience, skills, and access to information related to rural development application processes remain limited. As explained by Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah (2021:19), the Village Development and Security Committees have a solid understanding of the objectives and goals of rural development, are aware of their role as development enablers, and are willing to contribute substantial physical effort. However, they remain less proficient in applying for government allocations to advance rural areas. This article incorporates empirical experiences from studies on rural community empowerment to relate these findings to broader conceptual discussions. The main questions posed are: Do rural communities can develop themselves or merely to be developed in alignment with national development agendas? Are they prepared to face the uncertainties and challenges of national development?

In a field study conducted in the East Coast zone of Sabah, a case study involving smallholder cocoa farmers revealed that 195 community members owned cocoa plots of less than five hectares. These smallholders in the East Coast districts face multifaceted and complex challenges, necessitating development strategies tailored specifically to this region, as opposed to those used in Sarawak or Peninsular Malaysia. Clearly, a different empowerment approach and customised development strategies are needed to address the issues faced by

smallholder cocoa communities in the East Coast of Sabah. Furthermore, certain districts in this region are undergoing crop rehabilitation phases, while others are implementing replanting programmes to address productivity challenges (Noviatin et al. 2023).

Another case study stems from field research conducted with a stateless community, the Bajau Laut (sea gypsies). This community is mainly found in the district of Semporna, located in Sabah's East Coast zone, and may also be classified as part of the rural population. Although the Bajau Laut are not active stakeholders in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a pressing issue remains: how can awareness of sustainable fishing practices be effectively instilled within the community? The traditional fishing activity of using explosives (fish bombs) continues to be widespread among the Bajau Laut, eliciting strong reactions from local residents who question the role of government enforcement. This issue is particularly crucial given Semporna's reputation as a hub for eco-tourism, attracting both local and international visitors. The region's marine biodiversity, coral reefs, and unique water-based nomadic lifestyle of the Bajau Laut community appeal greatly to tourists. However, these social phenomena present significant socio-economic development challenges due to the nomadic presence of the Bajau Laut and their unsustainable fishing and marine resource usage practices, which persist to this day.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the dynamics of rural community empowerment within two distinct yet marginalised groups in Sabah's East Coast: smallholder cocoa farmers and the Bajau Laut (stateless maritime community). The choice of qualitative methodology was grounded in the need to understand lived experiences, contextual meanings, and the nuanced processes through which empowerment is negotiated, challenged, and sustained within rural development settings. Unlike quantitative approaches that often generalise findings, a qualitative design enabled the researchers to capture complex social realities, informal structures, and cultural practices that underpin rural transformation.

The case study design was selected due to its appropriateness in addressing exploratory research questions and its capacity to generate in-depth insights from real-life community settings. The two communities were purposefully selected based on their relevance to the study objectives and their contrasting socio-political realities. Smallholder cocoa farmers represent a structured agricultural community with semi-formal access to markets and state support, while the Bajau Laut remain largely excluded from formal citizenship and development frameworks.

Data were collected using multiple sources of evidence to enhance the richness and validity of the findings. The primary method involved semi-structured interviews with 22 informants across both communities, including community leaders, women participants, cooperative members, agricultural extension officers, and local government officials. Interviews were designed to elicit participants' perspectives on empowerment practices, perceived constraints, and their aspirations for socio-economic mobility. These were complemented by participant observation, where researchers engaged directly with the communities, attended cooperative meetings, farming activities, and informal gatherings to observe social dynamics and development interactions in situ.

In addition to fieldwork, the study utilised document analysis of relevant policy instruments such as the Malaysian Cocoa Industry Strategic Plan, rural development blueprints, and national SDG progress reports. These documents provided the institutional context and policy framing necessary to understand how empowerment is positioned within Malaysia's development agenda, and how it translates—or fails to translate—into community-level realities.

To analyse the data, the researchers applied thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was used to assist in coding and managing qualitative data. Themes were generated inductively, allowing for emergent patterns to be identified without being constrained by pre-existing theoretical constructs.

The thematic analysis revealed distinct empowerment trajectories. Among cocoa farmers, empowerment manifested through membership in cooperatives, participation in training programmes, and the adoption of sustainable farming techniques, especially those aligned with Malaysian Good Agricultural Practices (MyGAP). However, structural limitations—such as lack of access to capital, small landholdings, and limited exposure to technology—hindered full transformation. In contrast, the Bajau Laut displayed resilience through tight-knit social networks, traditional knowledge systems, and subsistence-based economic practices. Nonetheless, their lack of legal status fundamentally constrained their access to public services, development initiatives, and economic opportunities.

This methodological approach allowed for a grounded understanding of how empowerment is differently experienced, enacted, and limited within rural Sabah. Importantly, it underscored the need for context-sensitive, bottom-up strategies that reflect local realities rather than top-down interventions. These insights are crucial in informing inclusive rural policies that align with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Social Empowerment in Rural Communities

Social empowerment in rural communities generally manifests through social networks and relationships, fostering communities that are capable of self-governance and of securing organisational support (Ledwith 2020; Narayan 2005). In the context of community development, social empowerment is also influenced by the interpersonal ties among community members who share similar desires, interests, and goals. Among communities involved in agriculture and fisheries—such as the Bajau Laut—social support and networks are easily established, as the nature of social interactions among members reflects shared social values.

Rural communities often uphold traditional values, especially in valuing the participation of family members as successors in agricultural and fishing activities. On the one hand, the involvement of family members in these sectors facilitates the sharing of agricultural input supply networks, farming and fishing tools, and the provision of support for family members facing declining productivity in their commodities. Such intra-family social networks reduce competitive conflict within the community's economic activities.

Group-based agricultural activities also represent a key example of social empowerment in rural community contexts. The group system is critical to achieving large-scale agricultural development. Communities serve as drivers of development by efficiently allocating resources, organising production systems, processing, marketing, and transforming farming ideas. This is seen as a strategic approach to building a community-based society through the mobilisation of human resources.

This is evident from various case study findings by researchers. For example, Ramle (2012) identified several factors influencing cocoa agricultural development among communities. Group interviews revealed that the success of cocoa cultivation initiatives largely depended on group leadership, cohesion, communal labour (gotong-royong), meeting attendance, members' willingness to contribute labour and finances, cooperation, participation, communication, vision for the group's future, alignment of goals, and farmer membership in group organisations. Conversely, factors hindering agricultural development included task orientation, maintenance, and self-reliance challenges. Furthermore, detailed findings showed that community agricultural failure could be attributed to interpersonal conflict between leaders and community members, leaders' personalised rebukes, lack of communication with the Malaysian Cocoa Board, and participants' disunity and disagreement with collective decisions.

In a study conducted in Semporna, Sabah, the Bajau Laut community—featured as part of this article's case study—was found to possess a strong social network structure, a collective-based ethnic identity, and social norms nurtured through community-wide consensus. Their unbounded, nomadic lifestyle has become a value, norm, and daily routine among the Bajau Laut living in the waters around Semporna. They are often labelled as a "stateless community" by both local residents and the government (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2018; Noviatin



Syarifuddin et al. 2023). With this label, the Bajau Laut freely pursue marine resources, developing a subsistence economic subsystem rooted in ancestral practices. Their belief in embo-dilaut (sea spirits) is deeply embedded in their social institution, shaping their understanding of sustenance, life success, and the abundance of marine catches—often perceived because of obedience to embo-dilaut (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2018; Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2023).

The harmony within the Bajau Laut community is clearly illustrated by their willingness to share resources with kin who live on boats—known locally in Semporna as lepa. This is celebrated annually through the Regatta Lepa, a festive event in the district. This example encapsulates the social bonds and networks shaped by the nomadic way of life within the Bajau Laut community in Semporna, Sabah.

### **Economic Empowerment in Rural Communities**

Economic empowerment refers to the capacity of rural communities to access capital, credit, incentives, and subsidies for agricultural inputs (Kenny 2021; Charatsari & Lioutas 2020; Asnarulkhadi & Fazilah 2004). In this regard, rural communities can benefit from participation in cooperatives or local associations. Participation in such cooperatives strengthens the bargaining power of members, particularly in negotiating agricultural commodity prices. Economic empowerment also refers to the community's ability to derive profit or benefits from specific economic activities or ventures (Buttel 1993). Economic sustainability can be measured by a community's ability to generate income, purchase agricultural inputs, possess sufficient assets and logistics for agricultural operations, and access information regarding prices, employment opportunities, markets, and economic development programmes for farmers (Luttrell et al. 2009).

Through economic empowerment, communities also gain opportunities to participate in various training sessions and workshops to enhance their skills and knowledge in innovation, technology transfer, downstream processing, marketing, and the sustainable use of smart technologies. Indirectly, this adds value to the sectors in which the communities are involved. For instance, consistent agricultural activities guided by agricultural extension agents can ensure continuous income generation (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2025). Agriculture opens doors for entrepreneurship and enhances household economies. However, if agricultural or fisheries activities are only pursued as secondary sources of income, they may still be insufficient to eradicate poverty or significantly enhance community capacities.

The involvement of rural communities in economic sectors, particularly in agricultural commodities, provides members with direct access to information regarding market conditions, price trends, high-quality agricultural inputs, and opportunities to attend agricultural training and seminars, all of which influence community economic sustainability (Christenson & Robinson 1989). Regular information sharing and discussions with agricultural agencies ensure that rural communities remain informed about buyers who are willing to pay premium prices for their produce (Lindell 2021; Midgley 2014). High commodity prices enable rural communities to achieve self-sufficiency and recover capital for reinvestment in agricultural inputs (Loconto et al. 2022; Kenny 2021).

In summary, economic empowerment through agriculture and fisheries can stimulate local economies, especially in generating household income and creating job opportunities. Communities engaged in agriculture can promote local food production, reduce household expenditures, and play a direct role in farm development. Nevertheless, not all communities are equally able to generate income from agriculture due to social and physical environmental factors. Limitations in land ownership and space mean that not all communities can develop family economies through farming.

Ultimately, exploring the opportunities and benefits of economic empowerment is closely tied to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), through efforts to strengthen the economic position of smallholders and lift rural communities out of the poverty cycle. In the context of the Bajau Laut community, their subsistence-based fishing activities are often complemented by the sale of marine products to nearby local residents (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2018). At times, they also engage in barter systems to obtain essential goods beyond what they harvest from the sea. Furthermore, this relates to the achievement of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as rural community participation in agriculture and fisheries creates stable

employment opportunities and enhances income levels without requiring migration to urban areas. For the Bajau Laut, the sea and islands are central to their way of life. Thus, livelihoods centred around marine environments often involve work as fishermen, boat operators, tour assistants, or traders of marine products around the larger islands.

### **Women's Empowerment in Rural Communities**

In contemporary rural economies, women's participation in agriculture and fisheries is no longer a novel occurrence (Zimmerman 2000; Perkins & Zimmerman 1995). Women have transcended traditional domestic roles and now actively contribute to the socio-economic advancement of their households. For example, in several districts across Sabah's East Coast—namely Pulau Sebatik, Tawau, Semporna, Kunak, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan—women engaged in the cocoa sector demonstrate notable competencies in cocoa processing, seedling cultivation, and direct marketing of products without reliance on intermediaries. Through their economic networks, these women have established a foothold in the cocoa value chain and market access.

Women also serve as active members of cooperatives, where they contribute to economic development initiatives and participate in collective decision-making processes. Their involvement in cooperative meetings enables them to influence key strategies that empower communities and enhance the economic stability of smallholder households. Additionally, their participation yields dividends that benefit cooperative members, particularly in supporting the educational aspirations of smallholders' children (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. 2025).

Among the Bajau Laut community, women's domestic responsibilities encompass sorting and processing the marine catch brought in by male household members and children. Tasks such as cleaning fish, preparing dried fish for food storage, cooking, bathing, tidying, laundering, childcare, and other daily routines are all carried out aboard boats using rudimentary equipment. Over time, adaptations have occurred; for instance, cooking has shifted from wood stoves to gas stoves powered by gas cylinders purchased from mainland towns. Notably, personal grooming remains a priority—Bajau Laut women frequently apply homemade face powder, typically a light yellowish-brown paste, to their faces and arms to protect against sun exposure (Noviatin Syarifuddin 2024; Noviatin Syarifuddin 2019).

Opportunities for women's economic participation in rural settings are closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Gender Equality, which seeks to expand women's roles in economic sectors. Economic empowerment also correlates with SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, as it enables rural women to access better healthcare due to more stable incomes. However, these opportunities are not equally accessible to the Bajau Laut, whose stateless status excludes them from full citizenship rights and access to public healthcare services.

Within the Bajau Laut community, motherhood unfolds entirely on water. Pregnancy, childbirth, postnatal care, and child-rearing are carried out on boats in accordance with community customs. Older women are relied upon for advice regarding illnesses or complications. For minor ailments, remedies are limited to basic over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol and traditional oils like Cap Kapak. Injuries are treated using a combination of modern and traditional methods—plasters, oils such as Minyak Batu Cap Sai Kong, and spiritual healing provided by community shamans to address internal afflictions (Noviatin Syarifuddin 2024).

### **Rural Community Empowerment through Technology Transfer Initiatives**

Knowledge, attitudes, and skills are essential for enabling rural communities to participate meaningfully in technology transfer activities (Narayan 2005; World Bank 2002; Zimmerman 2000). This is particularly true in the agriculture and fisheries sectors, where technological adoption supports key operations such as harvesting, processing, production, and marketing. The application of smart agricultural technologies can significantly streamline on-farm and plantation activities. For instance, digital agriculture systems provide new employment opportunities for younger generations, especially rural youth. These new avenues created through technology transfer also enhance the capacity of rural communities to engage in sustainable farming practices.

Rural communities' knowledge of agricultural technology is influenced by factors such as education level, age, occupation, environment, and socio-cultural context (Baccar et al., 2020; Agbarevo & Benjamin, 2013). Knowledge can be both subjective and objective, and measurable through qualitative or quantitative means depending on the level of understanding of a given subject (Bahfiarti & Unde, 2021). It may also be acquired through formal or informal means, shaped by how the knowledge is obtained (Sail et al., 2021).

Several studies have examined rural communities' use of agricultural technologies. Research by Noviatin Syarifuddin et al. (2024), Bymolt et al. (2018), Cho et al. (2018) and Tiraieyari et al. (2014), found that these communities often lack up-to-date knowledge on technologies that support good agricultural practices (GAP). This knowledge gap limits their ability to enhance the productivity, quality, and quantity of dry cocoa beans to meet grading standards. Such a situation presents a challenge for the Malaysian Cocoa Board (MCB), as nearly 90 percent of cocoa cultivation in the country is undertaken by smallholders with limited knowledge of high-tech agricultural innovations (Abdullah, 2019; Kasin, Suandi & Krauss, 2012).

In the case of the Bajau Laut community in Semporna, Sabah, modern technology is not widely used in their fishing activities, aside from boat engines. Moreover, their fishing methods remain unsustainable. For instance, field experiences reveal the use of homemade fish bombs to catch large quantities of fish. These explosives, made with granite, damage coral reefs and fish breeding grounds, posing a threat to marine ecosystems. Additionally, consumers may unknowingly ingest chemically contaminated fish, raising food safety concerns. Despite governmental efforts to curb these destructive fishing practices, the Bajau Laut continue to pass down such methods to younger generations due to persistent economic necessity.

Opportunities for community empowerment through technology transfer align with SDG 4: Quality Education, particularly by offering technical training to smallholders to improve their production capacity. In this regard, Transfer of Technology Extension (ToTE) officers must intensify efforts to introduce suitable agricultural innovations tailored to the capabilities of cocoa smallholders. Additionally, these initiatives are in line with SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, where the application of technology in agriculture enhances productivity and competitiveness. Nonetheless, the sustainability of such efforts depends on the community's willingness and ability to take ownership of the agricultural sector they engage in—ensuring that long-term benefits can be achieved through consistent and committed implementation.

### **Empowering Rural Communities through Sustainable Agricultural Practices**

Rural community empowerment can also be explored through their participation in sustainable agricultural practices. Knowledge in sustainable agriculture plays a significant role in shaping self-reliant communities capable of making independent decisions regarding innovations or changes introduced through community development programmes (Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah 2021). Equipped with relevant knowledge, individuals are more likely to develop open behaviour towards new approaches and practices (Du-Monde 2011). Communities that receive guidance from agricultural agencies are more adept at implementing sustainable farming practices related to fertilisation, drainage and irrigation systems, crop management, harvesting, and productivity enhancement (Noviatin Syarifuddin et al., 2024). Nevertheless, some smallholder communities still lack focus on integrated pest and disease management (IPDM) for cocoa crops, leading to productivity outcomes that fall short of targets set by agricultural authorities such as the Malaysian Cocoa Board (2024).

Barriers to sustainable agricultural practices are also linked to low education levels. A lack of knowledge about organic inputs and the relatively high cost of purchasing organic farming supplies hinder rural communities from fully engaging in sustainable agriculture. Although ToTE (Transfer of Technology Extension) officers actively disseminate guidance on obtaining MyGAP (Malaysian Good Agricultural Practices) certification, community awareness of the certification's significance remains low. This is further complicated by the small size of smallholders' plots—typically under five hectares—and the fact that cocoa is often cultivated as a secondary crop, with many relying on family members for farm management.

While the MyGAP system outlines twelve core activities, most smallholder communities are only able to adopt selected components, such as proper drainage management, effective farm recordkeeping, sound pest control strategies, and basic understanding of integrated disease management (IPDM). From an environmental

perspective, issues related to sustainable cocoa farming are increasingly drawing scholarly attention in countries such as Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria. Studies by Cappelle (2009) and Franzen & Mulder (2007), which explored global cocoa supply and the chocolate industry, concluded that cocoa is predominantly cultivated by smallholder farmers in lowland tropical regions, including parts of Latin America, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. As a result, cocoa bean quality—particularly flavour, aroma, and weight—varies greatly due to differences in pH levels and the technical capabilities of farming communities.

In summary, empowering rural communities through sustainable agricultural practices contributes directly to SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. Smallholder communities that are systematic and skilled in managing their farms are better positioned to adopt good agricultural practices. The use of environmentally harmful pesticides and chemical fertilisers can be reduced, while the agricultural commodities produced are safer for consumption and more aligned with ecological sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

Rural community empowerment is a key strategy for enhancing the socio-economic status and quality of life of targeted populations. This paper has examined multiple dimensions of empowerment, including social, economic, women's empowerment, and community empowerment through technology transfer. In the context of rural development, social empowerment is driven by strong social networks, effective leadership, and active community involvement in planning and executing development initiatives. Case studies of smallholder cocoa farmers in Sabah's East Coast and the Bajau Laut community highlight the need for context-specific empowerment strategies tailored to each group's socio-economic background and unique challenges. While smallholders benefit from collective leadership and efficient resource management for sustainable agriculture, the Bajau Laut face obstacles such as unsustainable fishing practices and statelessness, which hinder their access to social and economic opportunities.

Economic empowerment in rural areas hinges on access to capital, employment opportunities, participation in cooperatives, and effective technology transfer in agriculture and fisheries. Technical education and training are essential to build community capacity for adopting innovations and improving competitiveness. Women's empowerment strengthens household economic stability and increases their involvement in farming and micro-enterprises. Equally important is community empowerment through sustainable agricultural practices, which supports both economic resilience and social well-being. Sustainable farming reduces reliance on harmful chemicals, while knowledge of organic agriculture and smart technologies can boost productivity and lower costs. With support from agricultural agencies and research institutions, smallholders can adopt more sustainable practices, and certifications like MyGAP enhance marketability. Despite ongoing challenges such as high costs and limited technical know-how, training and extension services can help bridge these gaps. These efforts are aligned with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12, and 13. Ultimately, achieving sustainable rural development demands a multidimensional strategy that balances economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity for the long-term well-being of rural communities.

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