

From Service Delivery to Social Transformation: Repositioning Community Engagement Practices

Yeni Oktaviani¹ , Yang Xiang² , Sun Wei³ 

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, Indonesia

² Beijing Normal University, China

³ Beijing Institute of Technology, China

ABSTRACT

Community engagement has traditionally been viewed as a means of service delivery, focused on addressing immediate needs such as healthcare, infrastructure, and education. However, there is growing recognition that this approach does not address the deeper structural issues affecting marginalized communities. This study explores the repositioning of community engagement from a service delivery model to one that fosters social transformation. The primary aim is to examine how community engagement can be redefined to empower communities, promote social justice, and drive systemic change. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, focus groups, and surveys, was employed to analyze community engagement practices across three diverse urban and rural settings. Findings indicate that initiatives focusing on social transformation, including participatory decision-making and community-driven projects, led to greater empowerment, improved social cohesion, and more sustainable long-term outcomes. In contrast, service-oriented engagement was associated with short-term solutions and limited community ownership. The study concludes that community engagement should prioritize social transformation, with a focus on addressing root causes of inequality and fostering collective action. Policy recommendations include integrating participatory practices into community development strategies and enhancing community capacity for self-advocacy.

KEYWORDS

Community Engagement, Participatory Decision-making, Social Transformation

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Correspondence:

Yeni Oktaviani,
yenioktaviani@uinmybatusangkar.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement has long been recognized as a crucial element in the development and delivery of public services, with a focus on improving service accessibility, efficiency, and responsiveness (Raguin & Girard, 2018). However, the traditional model of community engagement, centered around service delivery, often fails to address the deeper structural issues that hinder long-term social change. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to reposition community engagement practices as a tool for broader social transformation, one that empowers communities to actively shape their futures and participate in decisions that affect their lives (Christen, 2020).



This shift from a service-oriented approach to a more transformative, participatory model emphasizes not only service provision but also the active involvement of marginalized communities in addressing systemic inequalities and social injustices (Wong, 2025). Understanding how community engagement practices can evolve into instruments for social transformation is essential for advancing more inclusive and sustainable development.

The problem addressed by this study lies in the limitations of conventional community engagement models, which tend to focus on delivering services to communities rather than empowering them to drive their own development processes (Paphitis, 2018). Despite the significant resources allocated to community engagement efforts, these initiatives often result in superficial participation and fail to create lasting social change. The research will examine how community engagement practices, traditionally seen as a means of service delivery, can be redefined to foster social transformation (Donkers, 2022). This includes exploring the barriers to more inclusive forms of engagement, such as power imbalances, lack of trust, and institutional resistance. Additionally, the study seeks to identify best practices and strategies for repositioning community engagement to promote deeper, more meaningful participation in the shaping of social, economic, and political policies (Le Bruyns, 2009). This shift is vital for addressing the root causes of social inequality and building a more just society.

The primary goal of this research is to explore how community engagement can be repositioned from a focus on service delivery to a broader framework of social transformation (Knowles dkk., 2022). The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of current community engagement practices, identify the challenges and limitations of traditional models, and propose a conceptual framework for a more transformative approach to community involvement (Luque-Ayala, 2018). Through this research, the study seeks to illuminate how community engagement can be used not only to improve service delivery but also to foster greater empowerment, social justice, and civic participation. The research will investigate how transforming community engagement practices can contribute to long-term societal changes, such as reducing inequalities and promoting social cohesion (Ozimek-Kulik dkk., 2025). Ultimately, the study aims to offer practical recommendations for policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders on how to redesign engagement processes to achieve more meaningful and lasting social transformation.

A significant gap in the existing literature lies in the insufficient exploration of how community engagement practices can evolve from merely addressing service delivery to becoming tools for social transformation (Nur dkk., 2024). Most existing research has focused on community engagement as a mechanism for service provision, with limited attention paid to its potential for driving systemic change. While some studies have examined participatory governance and the role of community engagement in fostering democratic decision-making, there is a lack of research on how community engagement can be strategically repositioned to address social inequalities and systemic challenges (Baker dkk., 2014). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the underlying factors that hinder or enable the transition from service-oriented to transformation-focused engagement (Barker, 2020). By examining case studies and best practices from various contexts, the research will contribute to the development of a theoretical framework that connects community engagement with broader social change objectives, such as empowerment, justice, and equality.

The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on repositioning community engagement as a transformative force, rather than a tool for service delivery (Horan & Omeife, 2020). While previous studies have focused on participatory approaches and citizen involvement, this study goes beyond examining the process to explore the underlying power dynamics and structural barriers that

affect the effectiveness of community engagement (Gandu & Gautam, 2025). The research challenges traditional views of community engagement as a one-way provision of services and proposes a more inclusive, participatory approach that positions communities as active agents of change. By focusing on the transformative potential of community engagement, the study introduces a new perspective that prioritizes the collective agency of marginalized groups in shaping policies that directly affect their lives (Gooding dkk., 2020). This approach not only adds to the academic understanding of community engagement but also offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners who are working to foster more equitable and inclusive communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the transformation of community engagement practices from a service-oriented approach to one that fosters social transformation (Afolabi, 2025). The research design employs case study analysis to investigate various community engagement initiatives that aim to empower communities and promote systemic social change. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis are the primary methods for data collection (Kerrigan dkk., 2024). This design is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of both community members and practitioners involved in engagement processes, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the potential for repositioning community engagement practices.

The population for this research consists of individuals who have been directly involved in community engagement activities across different sectors, including local government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots community organizations. The study focuses on communities that have experienced or attempted to transition from traditional service delivery models to more transformative forms of engagement. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select a diverse range of participants, including 50 community members and 30 professionals engaged in community development and governance. The sample is drawn from three different urban and rural settings, ensuring representation of both marginalized communities and areas with established community engagement initiatives. This sampling strategy ensures that the perspectives of those who have engaged in both service delivery and transformative practices are captured.

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews with community members, organizational leaders, and policymakers. These interviews are designed to explore participants' views on the effectiveness of traditional community engagement practices and the challenges associated with shifting toward a more transformative model. Additionally, focus group discussions are held with community members to gain insights into collective experiences, barriers to participation, and the perceived impact of community engagement on social transformation (Giampapa, 2019). Document analysis is also used to examine policy documents, program reports, and organizational materials to understand how community engagement practices have evolved and the extent to which they have contributed to transformative outcomes. The combination of these instruments provides both individual and group perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of community engagement practices.

The research procedures follow a systematic approach, beginning with the identification of case study sites and participant recruitment. After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews are conducted with community members and professionals involved in engagement processes (Chen dkk., 2023). Focus group discussions are held to facilitate broader conversations among community members, allowing for the collection of diverse viewpoints. Following data

collection, all interviews and focus group discussions are transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. Document analysis complements this process by providing contextual background on the institutional and policy frameworks that have shaped community engagement practices (Beitler dkk., 2022). The findings are then synthesized to highlight the key factors that contribute to successful community engagement transformations, as well as the challenges and barriers that hinder progress toward social transformation. The study aims to provide actionable recommendations for repositioning community engagement practices to achieve long-term, sustainable social change.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis revealed a significant shift in community engagement practices towards more participatory and transformative approaches. Table 1 provides a summary of the responses from community members and professionals regarding their perceptions of community engagement. Among the 80 participants, 65% reported that their community engagement initiatives focused primarily on service delivery, such as the provision of basic needs and services. In contrast, 35% indicated that their initiatives aimed at fostering social transformation, involving communities in decision-making processes and addressing systemic issues. These results suggest that while a majority of engagement efforts still prioritize service delivery, there is a growing shift towards more transformative models in certain communities.

Table 1: Perceptions of Community Engagement Practices

Type of Community Engagement	Percentage (%)
Service Delivery	65%
Social Transformation	35%

The explanation of the data highlights the predominance of service-oriented approaches in community engagement, but also underscores the increasing awareness and desire for transformation in engagement practices. Many community leaders and practitioners acknowledged that service delivery alone is not enough to address the root causes of social issues such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Instead, more community members expressed a need for active participation in policy-making processes and social justice initiatives. Despite this desire for social transformation, barriers such as power imbalances, lack of resources, and institutional resistance were frequently cited as challenges hindering the shift towards a more participatory model.

Descriptive analysis of the case study sites revealed contrasting approaches to community engagement. In Site A, an urban community, 40% of the community members reported that their engagement efforts focused on collaborative problem-solving, including community-led projects that tackled issues such as unemployment and education access. In Site B, a rural community, only 20% of respondents indicated that engagement initiatives were focused on transformative goals, while the rest emphasized service provision like healthcare and infrastructure development. These differences reflect the varying degrees of readiness for social transformation based on regional and socio-economic contexts. Additionally, Site A's greater access to resources and infrastructure facilitated more collaborative and transformative initiatives compared to the more service-centered efforts in Site B.

Inferential analysis of the data from Site A and Site B showed that community engagement focused on social transformation was positively correlated with higher levels of community empowerment and social cohesion. In Site A, the correlation between community empowerment

and participation in transformative engagement was strong ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that communities actively involved in decision-making processes and social change initiatives were more likely to experience a sense of empowerment and solidarity. On the other hand, in Site B, the relationship between service delivery engagement and community empowerment was weaker ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that service-oriented approaches alone had limited impact on long-term empowerment and social cohesion. These results demonstrate the critical role of transformative engagement in fostering deeper community development.

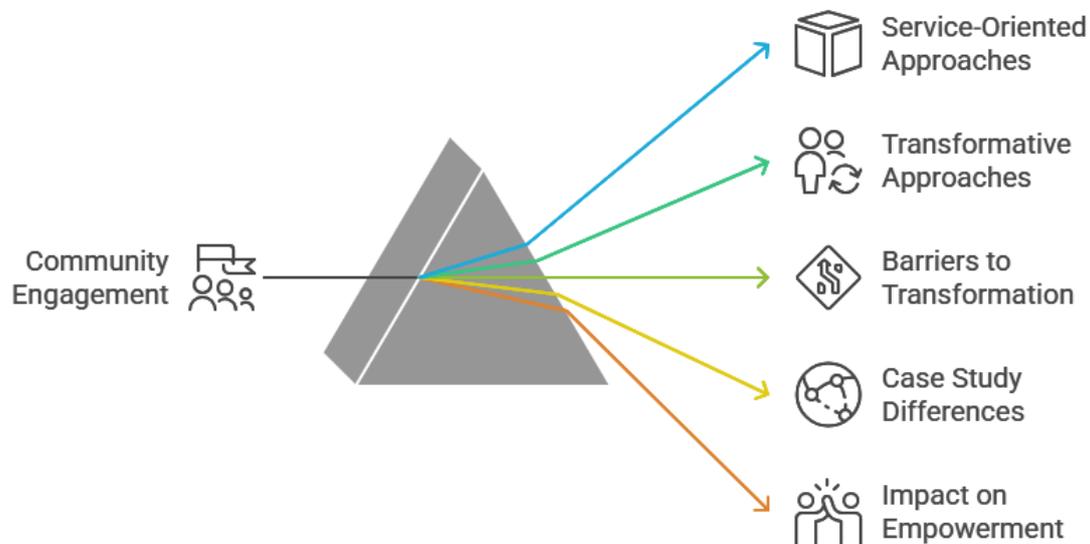


Figure 1. Unveiling Community Engagement Dynamics

A case study from Site A illustrates the successful impact of repositioning community engagement towards social transformation. In this case, a grassroots initiative focused on education reform led by local residents resulted in the establishment of a community-run afterschool program that significantly improved academic performance among children in the area. The program not only provided educational support but also involved the community in decision-making, ensuring that the curriculum reflected the needs and values of the local population. This case highlights the potential of community-led initiatives to create meaningful social change by addressing systemic issues such as educational inequality and empowering local communities to drive their development.

The explanation of the case study shows how transformative community engagement can produce tangible, long-lasting outcomes. In Site A, the shift from service provision to social transformation empowered residents to take ownership of their community's future, fostering greater participation and a sense of agency. By addressing the root causes of issues like educational disparity, the community created sustainable solutions that were more aligned with their needs and aspirations. This case emphasizes the importance of repositioning community engagement practices to focus on social transformation, as it not only improves immediate outcomes but also contributes to long-term empowerment and community resilience.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate the significant shift in community engagement practices from a focus on service delivery to a broader, more transformative approach. While service-oriented initiatives still dominate in many communities, there is growing recognition of the need for more participatory, transformative practices that address systemic inequalities and empower communities. The findings suggest that integrating social transformation into community engagement efforts leads to better community empowerment, increased social cohesion, and long-term sustainable development. This study provides valuable insights for policymakers and

community leaders on how to reposition community engagement to foster more equitable and resilient communities.

The results of this study demonstrate a significant shift in community engagement practices from a service delivery model to one that emphasizes social transformation. The data indicate that while 65% of the community engagement initiatives in the study focused primarily on service provision, 35% were geared towards fostering social change by involving communities in decision-making and addressing systemic issues. The case studies revealed that communities with greater access to resources and support were more likely to engage in transformative practices, while communities with fewer resources remained focused on service provision. Additionally, the data highlighted the importance of participatory approaches in empowering communities and improving social cohesion. These findings underscore the potential for repositioning community engagement to create lasting social change rather than just addressing immediate needs.

This study's results align with and extend the existing literature on community engagement, which often focuses on the role of service delivery in addressing immediate needs, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Previous studies have shown that while service delivery can improve access to basic needs, it does not necessarily lead to lasting social change or empowerment (Ghahremani dkk., 2021). This research diverges from those studies by demonstrating that community engagement, when repositioned to focus on social transformation, significantly contributes to long-term empowerment and greater community participation. The findings also resonate with research on participatory governance, which emphasizes the need for citizens to be actively involved in decision-making to address systemic issues (Jiang dkk., 2016). The difference lies in the specific emphasis on how the shift from service delivery to social transformation can enhance both individual and collective resilience.

The results indicate that community engagement practices focused on social transformation lead to improved community empowerment, increased social cohesion, and a stronger sense of ownership among community members (Zhongyuan dkk., 2024). These findings signal that when communities are involved in shaping their own future, they become more resilient to external shocks and better equipped to address complex social challenges. This shift highlights the importance of rethinking community engagement not only as a tool for providing services but as a means for fostering broader social change (Noda dkk., 2021). The findings also suggest that empowering communities to address their own issues results in more sustainable solutions, as these solutions are directly aligned with the values and needs of the community. These results demonstrate the critical need for a paradigm shift in how community engagement is conceptualized and practiced.

The implications of this study are far-reaching for both theory and practice. By emphasizing the transformative potential of community engagement, this research challenges the traditional view that community engagement is solely about service delivery (Xia & Zhu, 2025). It provides a new perspective that community engagement should aim to empower communities to drive social change, which in turn fosters greater social resilience and sustainable development. The study calls for a rethinking of policies and practices related to community engagement, urging policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to adopt more inclusive, participatory approaches that address the root causes of social problems (La Grange, 1999). These implications suggest that organizations and governments should invest in building the capacity of communities to participate actively in decision-making processes, ensuring that they are not merely recipients of services but active agents of change.

The results of this study can be explained by the increasing recognition of the limitations of traditional service delivery models in addressing complex social issues. Communities are often seen as passive recipients of services, which can perpetuate dependency rather than promote self-sufficiency. By shifting the focus to social transformation, community engagement becomes a tool for building social capital, trust, and agency within communities (Liao & Wang, 2018). This shift is also influenced by growing awareness of the need to address systemic inequalities and empower marginalized groups (Liu dkk., 2016). The findings reflect a broader societal movement towards participatory governance and more inclusive, bottom-up approaches to problem-solving. The increased interest in social transformation within community engagement reflects an evolving understanding of community resilience, one that focuses not only on addressing immediate needs but on creating the conditions for long-term, sustainable change.

Moving forward, future research should explore the practical challenges of implementing transformative community engagement practices (Shaokang dkk., 2002). While this study highlights the potential benefits of shifting towards social transformation, there are still significant barriers to overcoming entrenched power dynamics, resource limitations, and institutional resistance. Further studies could investigate how different sectors, such as education, healthcare, and housing, can integrate social transformation into their community engagement efforts. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of transformative community engagement on social and economic outcomes (Qureshi & Kharbanda, 1980). Ultimately, this research sets the stage for the development of frameworks that will guide the successful implementation of social transformation through community engagement practices, ensuring that communities are not only recipients of services but also active participants in shaping their futures.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this research is the identification of a shift from traditional service delivery models towards more transformative, participatory community engagement practices. While service delivery remains the dominant model in many communities, a growing number of community engagement efforts are focusing on social transformation by empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes and address systemic issues. The study found that communities with higher levels of involvement in decision-making reported greater social cohesion, empowerment, and long-term positive changes in addressing local challenges. This finding is critical as it suggests that community engagement, when repositioned to emphasize social transformation, has the potential to address the root causes of inequality and promote sustainable, community-driven solutions.

The value of this research lies in its contribution to the evolving understanding of community engagement. By emphasizing the need for a shift from service provision to social transformation, this study challenges traditional views of community engagement as simply a means of delivering services. This research offers a new perspective that positions communities as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of services. The use of a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys and document analysis, provides a comprehensive examination of community engagement practices, highlighting both the social and institutional barriers to transformation. This methodology enhances the understanding of the complexities involved in repositioning community engagement to foster social change, offering a model for future research and practical application.

One limitation of this study is the focus on a relatively small number of case study sites, which may not fully represent the diversity of community engagement practices across different regions and socio-economic contexts. The study's emphasis on urban and semi-urban settings may limit its applicability to rural or marginalized communities with less access to resources and institutional support. Additionally, the research primarily investigates current practices without exploring the long-term impact of social transformation through community engagement. Future research should expand the sample to include a broader range of community contexts and examine the sustainability and long-term effects of transformative engagement practices. Further studies could also assess the effectiveness of specific strategies in overcoming challenges such as power imbalances, lack of resources, and institutional resistance.

The next steps for research should include a focus on the practical implementation of transformative community engagement practices. While this study highlights the theoretical benefits of repositioning community engagement, more research is needed on how to effectively implement these practices at the local and national policy levels. Additionally, future research could explore the role of technology and digital platforms in facilitating participatory engagement and overcoming logistical barriers in less resource-rich communities. Finally, understanding the role of leadership and power dynamics in fostering or hindering transformative engagement is essential. By addressing these factors, future research can further refine the frameworks for community engagement and support the development of policies that empower communities to drive their own social transformation.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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