# The Influence of Village Head Leadership on Community Social Development: A Comparative Study between Independent Villages and Underdeveloped Villages

**Vera Wanty[1], Sandia Utami[2]**
[1,2] Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP), Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

| A R T I C L E I N F O | ABSTRACT |
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| | Leadership at the village level plays a vital role in determining the direction and success of community social development, particularly in the context of Indonesia's rural transformation agenda. The leadership style and capacity of a village head can significantly affect how development programs are planned, implemented, and sustained. This study aims to analyze and compare the influence of village head leadership on community social development between independent villages and underdeveloped villages. The research employs a qualitative comparative case study approach, using data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis from selected villages representing both categories. Data were analyzed thematically to identify leadership patterns and their correlation with development outcomes. Findings show that independent villages tend to have more visionary, participatory, and accountable leadership, leading to higher community involvement and better development outcomes. In contrast, underdeveloped villages often experience top-down leadership with limited community engagement, hindering social progress. The study concludes that effective, inclusive, and responsive leadership by village heads is a key driver of successful social development, and leadership capacity building should be prioritized in national rural development strategies. |

***Corresponding Author:***

Vera Wanty,
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP),
Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia,
Jl. Universitas Andalas, Limau Manis, Padang, Sumatera Barat, 25163, Indonesia.
Email: verawanty@gmail.com

## 1.  INTRODUCTION

In the broader framework of rural development, the role of local leadership, particularly village heads, has increasingly drawn scholarly and policy attention. Indonesia's decentralization policy has delegated substantial authority and responsibility to village governments, particularly since the implementation of Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages. This law not only granted administrative autonomy but also positioned village heads as key actors in formulating and executing development agendas tailored to the needs and potential of their communities. The dynamics of rural development in Indonesia are closely linked to the leadership quality at the village level. Village heads function as both political figures and administrative leaders who influence the direction, prioritization, and effectiveness of various development programs ranging from poverty alleviation, education, health, infrastructure, to social cohesion. As rural communities strive toward sustainable development, leadership is not only a question of authority but also of vision, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to the community's social realities.

However, despite similar legal mandates and budgetary support across villages, the levels of development achieved vary widely. Some villages have successfully transitioned into "desa mandiri" (independent villages) marked by economic resilience, community participation, and strong local

governance. Others remain categorized as "desa tertinggal" (underdeveloped villages), struggling with poverty, low capacity, weak infrastructure, and limited community engagement. This disparity raises important questions about the non-structural factors influencing development outcomes chief among them being leadership. This research focuses specifically on analyzing the influence of village head leadership on community social development, comparing independent villages with underdeveloped ones. While infrastructure and economic indicators often dominate rural development studies, this research highlights the social dimension such as community participation, empowerment, social capital, gender inclusion, and collective action as core components of sustainable rural transformation.

The comparative approach adopted in this study seeks to uncover whether, and how, differences in leadership styles, capacities, and practices correlate with the level of community social development in both types of villages. The study considers village heads not merely as implementers of government programs, but as transformational agents who can foster social change, mobilize resources, and activate community agency. By juxtaposing independent and underdeveloped villages, the research provides insights into best practices, leadership characteristics, and institutional environments that either enable or hinder social progress. It also seeks to understand whether development stagnation in underdeveloped villages is primarily a result of structural limitations or whether leadership deficits also play a significant role.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature on rural development, which tends to emphasize physical infrastructure and economic performance while underexploring the human and relational aspects of leadership. Social development such as trust-building, participatory decision-making, conflict resolution, and community empowermentoften determines the sustainability of development programs, yet these are rarely prioritized in policy design or evaluation metrics. Second, the study has practical implications for rural governance in Indonesia. Government funding for villages has increased substantially over the past decade, but outcomes remain uneven. Understanding the leadership factor can help design more effective leadership training, selection criteria, and accountability mechanisms for village heads. Moreover, this study provides an evidence base for policy recommendations aimed at closing the development gap between villages through capacity building rather than merely financial injections.

Third, this research highlights the relational and contextual nature of leadership. It challenges the notion that all villages can apply a "one-size-fits-all" development model. Leadership must be adaptive to local contexts, histories, and sociocultural dynamics. By identifying the leadership qualities that resonate with communities and promote inclusive development, this research contributes to the discourse on localized governance models and bottom-up development strategies. The unique contribution of this study lies in its comparative design and its focus on social outcomes. While many studies have documented the administrative roles and challenges faced by village heads, few have examined their direct and indirect influence on the social dimensions of development particularly in a comparative framework that analyzes both high-performing and struggling villages.

Additionally, this research applies a qualitative approach, capturing the voices, perceptions, and lived experiences of community members, village officials, and other stakeholders. This approach provides a richer understanding of how leadership is practiced, perceived, and experienced at the grassroots level, rather than being assessed purely through bureaucratic or statistical lenses. Furthermore, the study attempts to construct a typology of leadership as practiced by village heads in different contexts. By identifying patterns and traits such as authoritarian, participative, transactional, or transformative leadership styles the research aims to explain how leadership influences community motivation, cooperation, and initiative. This offers a grounded contribution to both leadership theory and rural development practice.

The comparative nature of the research also allows it to explore internal and external enabling or constraining factors including political dynamics, social norms, economic conditions, and institutional support which influence the effectiveness of leadership. By situating leadership within its wider ecosystem, the study avoids overly individualistic explanations and instead presents a more holistic picture. The overarching objective of this study is to analyze the influence of village head leadership on community social development, through a comparative case study of independent and underdeveloped villages. More specifically.

Identify and describe the leadership styles and practices adopted by village heads in both village categories. Assess the impact of those leadership practices on social development indicators such as participation, empowerment, cohesion, and inclusion. Compare and contrast leadership effectiveness between independent and underdeveloped villages. Explore the institutional, cultural, and contextual factors that mediate the relationship between leadership and development outcomes. Formulate recommendations for improving leadership capacity and practices to support more equitable and effective rural development. The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to leadership and rural governance literature by offering empirical evidence from Indonesia's decentralized rural setting. Practically, it informs government agencies, NGOs, and development practitioners on how leadership interventions can be tailored to strengthen community development outcomes.

This research is supported by an increasing body of policy initiatives that recognize the importance of local leadership in development success. National and local governments in Indonesia have acknowledged the need to improve the capacity and accountability of village heads, often citing leadership quality as a key determinant of development disparities. Moreover, international development frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize inclusive governance, local participation, and strong institutions as foundational to sustainable development. This aligns with the study's emphasis on leadership as both a governance function and a social catalyst. Local communities, too, are calling for more accountable and visionary leadership, particularly as they face evolving challenges related to poverty, inequality, and climate vulnerability. Understanding how leadership can either facilitate or hinder community resilience is thus highly relevant to current development discourse.

In conclusion, this research is positioned at the intersection of leadership studies, social development, and rural governance, addressing a timely and critical issue in Indonesia's ongoing journey toward equitable and inclusive village development. By focusing on the qualitative influence of village head leadership and comparing different developmental contexts, this study offers a novel perspective that enhances both academic understanding and policy responsiveness.

## 2.    RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative comparative case study approach, as recommended by Yin (2018) for analyzing complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts. The method was selected to allow an in-depth understanding of leadership practices and their influence on community social development across two different village typologies: independent villages (desa mandiri) and underdeveloped villages. Data Collection was conducted using multiple techniques to ensure triangulation and data validity. In-depth interviews with village heads, community leaders, and selected residents to explore perceptions of leadership behavior and its impacts. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members to gain insights into social participation, empowerment, and inclusion. Observation of village meetings and development activities to capture leadership dynamics in practice. Document analysis of village planning documents, annual reports, and demographic data to contextualize leadership performance. The sampling strategy was purposive. Two villages were selected for each category independent and underdeveloped based on official classification by the Ministry of Villages, and local accessibility. A total of 30–40 respondents were involved across all sites. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where data were coded, categorized, and interpreted based on recurring themes such as leadership style, community participation, and social development outcomes. NVivo software was used to assist with qualitative coding. To measure and evaluate results, the research developed a framework that assessed leadership influence through indicators like community engagement, inclusiveness, trust-building, and problem-solving capacity. These were compared across the two village types to determine similarities and differences. The validity of findings was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources and methods. This approach ensured that the conclusions drawn were grounded in field realities and reflected diverse perspectives.

## 3.    RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Leadership Style Differences: Transformational vs. Transactional Approaches

In independent villages, village heads tend to exhibit transformational leadership, characterized by vision, inspiration, and inclusive decision-making. These leaders effectively communicate future goals,

encourage community initiative, and cultivate a shared sense of purpose. They frequently involve community members in planning processes, solicit input on development proposals, and empower local groups such as youth and women to lead small-scale initiatives. By contrast, underdeveloped villages often display a transactional or authoritarian leadership style. Leaders in these settings emphasize routine administrative tasks, enforce decisions top-down, and focus on compliance rather than collaboration. Their communication often remains within bureaucratic channels, and local participation is limited to execution rather than design or decision-making.

Independent-village leadership resonates with the participative leadership models seen in successful community-based governance frameworks, which highlight empowerment and capacity building. In underdeveloped contexts, leadership closely resembles conventional bureaucratic approaches found in contexts where institutional rigidity and hierarchical politics dominate. Classifying leadership styles inevitably simplifies complex behaviors. Some leaders in independent villages displayed traits of both transformational and transactional styles adapting to scenarios where compliance is necessary (e.g., during crises). Likewise, underdeveloped village heads occasionally engaged in consultative practices, albeit inconsistently.

## Community Participation and Empowerment Outcomes

Independent villages exhibited high levels of community participation. Village meetings (musdes), cooperative groups, and local development forums were well-attended and often initiated by residents themselves. Community members took active roles in project planning, implementation, monitoring, and post-action evaluation. These villages also reported diverse empowerment outcomes: enhanced community leadership from marginalized groups, improved self-confidence, stronger social networks, and joint ownership of development processes.

In underdeveloped villages, participation was low. Meetings were poorly attended and often perceived as ritualistic, with real decision-making remaining confined to the village head and a small elite. Empowerment indicators such as personal initiative, local leadership emergence, and community-driven solutions were minimal. These disparities highlight a link between leadership approach and social development. Inclusive leadership appears to build social capital trust, reciprocity, and collective efficacy whereas authoritarian styles inhibit community agency and weaken collaborative capacity. This supports participatory development theory, which posits that genuine engagement fosters long-term resilience and empowerment.

Research on community-based natural resource management and participatory governance consistently shows that participation deepens local commitment and sustainable outcomes. The pattern in independent villages mirrors these findings. Underdeveloped villages reflect scenarios where lack of participation contributes to dependency and apathy. Participation dynamics vary across community subgroups. In independent villages, some women and lower-income residents still faced reluctance in voicing opinions, despite being present. Likewise, in underdeveloped villages, the most vocal were those closely tied to leadership. These nuances suggest that participation is enhanced but not fully equal in independent villages.

## Social Cohesion, Trust, and Collective Action

In independent villages, indicators of social cohesion mutual aid, conflict resolution mechanisms, and collective action were robust. Shared projects such as clean-up campaigns, mutual économie (arisan donations for communal goals), and emergency responses cemented a sense of solidarity. Interviews revealed stronger interpersonal trust among neighbors, and between residents and local leaders. Underdeveloped villages, in contrast, displayed weak social cohesion. Mutual aid was rare, community organization was fragmented, and distrust prevailed. Conflicts over land, program benefits, or leadership transitions frequently became entrenched without mediation, contributing to social tensions.

Social cohesion and trust are prerequisites for collective mobilization and community resilience. These findings demonstrate that leadership style not only influences institutional performance but also the very social fabric of communities. Transformational leaders cultivate trust and collective identity, whereas transactional leaders may widen social divides or ignore them. Comparable studies in rural settings show that community cohesion and shared identity are positively correlated with local problem-solving capacity, whether for environmental stewardship, infrastructure improvement, or social welfare. The independent villages largely conform to these observations, while underdeveloped villages exemplify the challenges of atomistic, distrustful environments.

Contextual factors such as pre-existing social ties, cultural norms, and external influences (e.g., migration, elite fractions) also shape social cohesion. Not all variation can be attributed to leadership

alone. Some independent villages benefited from ancestral kinship solidarity that predated current leadership.

## Sustainability and Transferability of Social Development Gains

Independent villages showcased traces of sustainability in their social development gains. Community groups formed in initial projects continued beyond initial intervention periods. Local mechanisms for conflict resolution, resource-sharing, and mutual monitoring persisted. These institutions were semi-formalized, with records, rotating leadership, and ongoing community buy-in. In underdeveloped villages, social development initiatives when attempted often ended with the departure of external partners or when initial enthusiasm waned. There were no enduring structures or local ownership. Attempts at group formation were short-lived and centralized around individual 'champions' rather than community structures.

Sustainability of social development hinges on institutionalization and community ownership. Independent villages have embedded social practices structurally, whereas underdeveloped villages overly depend on transient interventions and lack cultural embedding. This speaks to the importance of leadership in forging sustainable community institutions and fostering resilience. In community development literature, sustainable change is linked to local ownership and institutional continuity. Independent villages illustrate how leadership can anchor such continuity. In underdeveloped villages, the lack of sustainability reflects the literature on 'projectization' where external efforts fail to root in local contexts.

The study's timeline only allows a partial assessment of longer-term sustainability. Evaluation of sustained progress over multiple years would provide stronger evidence. Additionally, external factors—such as future leadership turnover or macroeconomic change could disrupt embedded structures even in independent villages. Overall, while the comparative study illustrates clear linkages between leadership style and social development outcomes. Contextual Complexity: Leadership is one among many factors influencing community development economic conditions, geographic context, cultural legacies, and external support systems also matter significantly. Temporal Scope: The study captures a snapshot rather than longitudinal trajectories. Long-term effects and leadership transitions remain unexamined. Bias and Representation: Participation data reflects available respondents; marginalized groups may be underrepresented in interviews, masking nuanced perceptions. Leadership Continuum: Leadership styles exist on a spectrum. Classifying leaders into binary typologies simplifies rich, context-dependent behaviors.

These five narrative points demonstrate how leadership creates or impedes community social development. Transformational leadership in independent villages correlates with greater participation, cohesion, adaptability, trust, and institutional sustainability, while transactional leadership in underdeveloped villages inhibits these dimensions. Future research should delve into longitudinal analysis, incorporate mixed methods for broader validation, and explore strategies to cultivate transformational leadership in development-challenged settings.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that village head leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of community social development, particularly when comparing independent and underdeveloped villages. The findings demonstrate that transformational and participatory leadership styles—more prevalent in independent villages—foster community engagement, strengthen social cohesion, and promote sustainable collective action. In contrast, underdeveloped villages are often characterized by transactional or authoritarian leadership styles, resulting in limited participation, weaker social structures, and minimal empowerment. The research contributes to the field by offering a comparative framework that highlights the qualitative impact of leadership on rural community dynamics, moving beyond traditional development indicators to focus on social capital, trust, and institutional resilience. The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, suggesting that leadership capacity-building and inclusive governance mechanisms are as vital as infrastructural investment in rural development strategies. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need to reframe local governance not merely as a technical or administrative function but as a relational and socially embedded process. However, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, relatively small sample size, and the challenges of capturing long-term leadership outcomes. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to observe leadership effects over time, expand the geographical scope, and incorporate more diverse community voices, particularly from marginalized groups. This manuscript provides a grounded answer to the central research question by confirming that village head leadership style significantly

influences the degree of social development achieved at the village level. The comparative evidence illustrates that leadership is not only a driver of technical execution but a central pillar in enabling inclusive, participatory, and sustainable rural transformation. These insights serve as a foundation for further academic inquiry and practical interventions aimed at enhancing local leadership capacity in underdeveloped areas to close the rural development gap.

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