

Building Social Harmony through Religious and Cultural Approaches in Jorong Dusun Tuo

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Abstract. Social harmony is a crucial foundation for sustainable community life, particularly in religiously oriented communities where latent social fragmentation may emerge despite shared beliefs. This article examines a community empowerment initiative aimed at strengthening social harmony through religious and cultural approaches in Jorong Dusun Tuo, Nagari Limo Kaum. The program employed a participatory community empowerment approach that positioned community members as active agents in addressing social distance between two congregations with limited interaction. Religious engagement and local cultural activities were utilized as primary instruments for fostering inclusive interaction, trust-building, and collective participation. Data were collected through participatory observation, informal interviews, and reflective discussions, and analyzed descriptively to capture changes in social relations and community dynamics. The findings indicate that the integration of religious and cultural approaches effectively reduced social barriers, enhanced intergroup communication, and strengthened social cohesion without undermining existing identities. Religious values provided ethical motivation for unity, while cultural practices created experiential spaces for cooperation. This study concludes that empowerment-oriented social interventions grounded in local religious and cultural contexts offer a practical and adaptable model for strengthening social harmony in communities experiencing latent fragmentation.

Keywords: social harmony; community empowerment; religious approach; cultural approach; participatory community service.

1. Introduction

Social harmony is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable community development, particularly in plural societies where differences in social background, religious practices, cultural traditions, and social affiliations coexist within the same social space (Slikkerveer, 2019). Harmony is not merely the absence of open conflict, but rather the presence of mutual trust, inclusive interaction, shared responsibility, and collective commitment to common goals. In many rural communities, social fragmentation does not always manifest in the form of overt tension or violence; instead,

it often appears subtly through limited interaction, weak communication patterns, declining cooperation, and the emergence of exclusive social groups that interact only within their own circles (Rumahuru & Gaspersz, 2021). If such conditions are left unaddressed, they may gradually erode social solidarity, reduce collective participation, and weaken the social capital that is essential for community resilience and sustainable development.

In communities with a strong religious orientation, places of worship are ideally positioned as central institutions for social integration and moral development. Mosques, surau, and other religious institutions not only function as spaces for ritual worship and spiritual formation, but also serve as social arenas where values of togetherness, mutual respect, and cooperation are cultivated. Historically, religious institutions in rural Indonesia have played a vital role in mediating social relations, resolving disputes, and strengthening communal bonds. However, in certain contexts, differences in religious traditions, organizational affiliations, leadership styles, or local customs may unintentionally create social distance among congregations, even when they adhere to the same religious faith (Visser et al., 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates that religiosity alone does not automatically guarantee social cohesion without deliberate and inclusive efforts to foster dialogue and interaction.

Community empowerment emerges as a strategic and relevant approach to addressing such social challenges. Beyond its conventional association with economic improvement, community empowerment emphasizes processes that enhance community capacity, participation, critical awareness, and autonomy in managing social issues collectively. Empowerment positions community members as active agents of change who are capable of identifying problems, mobilizing local resources, and formulating solutions grounded in their own lived experiences, cultural traditions, and religious values (Dushkova et al., 2024). In this sense, empowerment functions as a form of social intervention that strengthens social bonds, nurtures collective awareness, and promotes shared ownership of development processes, rather than merely delivering material assistance or short-term programs.

From a theoretical perspective, empowerment-based approaches align with participatory development paradigms that emphasize inclusion, dialogue, and sustainability. Empowerment encourages communities to move from passive recipients of programs toward active participants who shape the direction and outcomes of interventions (Geise et al., 2024). This orientation is particularly relevant in addressing social harmony, as issues of cohesion and integration cannot be resolved through top-down mechanisms alone. Instead, they require community-driven processes that recognize diversity, negotiate differences, and build trust through continuous interaction.

Previous studies on community empowerment have predominantly focused on economic development, livelihood improvement, and capacity building through skill training, micro-enterprise development, and entrepreneurship programs (Kamal et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2022; Surya et al., 2021). While these initiatives are undeniably

important for improving material well-being, relatively limited attention has been given to empowerment models that specifically address issues of social harmony, social cohesion, and relational dynamics within communities (Bustamam & Hardivizon, 2024; Cherayi & Jose, 2016; Harmsen, 2008). In particular, empowerment initiatives that respond to latent fragmentation within religious communities remain underexplored. Studies that integrate religious values and local cultural practices as instruments of social integration are still scarce, especially in the context of community service-based interventions conducted by higher education institutions.

Religious and cultural approaches possess strong potential as unifying forces within society. Religious values such as brotherhood, compassion, justice, mutual respect, and collective responsibility provide ethical foundations that encourage inclusive behavior and social solidarity (Hervieu-Léger, 2006; Pradana et al., 2023). At the same time, local cultural traditions function as shared identities that transcend individual and group differences, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity within the community (Lu et al., 2025; Rizal & Kharis, 2022). Cultural practices such as communal rituals, traditional celebrations, and collective labor not only preserve heritage but also create spaces for interaction and cooperation (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016; Wiranto & Setyawan, 2025). When religious values and cultural traditions are strategically integrated into community empowerment programs, they can serve as effective tools for rebuilding trust, encouraging dialogue, reducing prejudice, and strengthening cooperation among diverse community members.

Jorong Dusun Tuo, located in Nagari Limo Kaum, represents a rural community characterized by strong religious life and rich cultural traditions rooted in local Minangkabau values. Religious activities are central to daily life, and places of worship serve as important social reference points for residents. Despite these strengths, social interaction between the congregation of the Al-Ikhlas Mosque and the congregation of the Kariang Surau was previously characterized by limited engagement and weak cross-group communication. Differences in worship practices, social routines, historical experiences, and informal group identities contributed to a subtle form of social separation that reduced opportunities for collective action and mutual cooperation. Although this separation did not result in open conflict, it reflected a form of latent fragmentation that had the potential to weaken long-term social harmony.

This condition highlighted the need for a community-based intervention aimed at strengthening social harmony without undermining existing religious and cultural identities. Rather than eliminating differences, such an intervention needed to create inclusive spaces where diversity could be acknowledged, respected, and transformed into a source of collective strength. Responding to this context, a community empowerment initiative was implemented using religious and cultural approaches as the main strategies for social integration. The initiative emphasized participatory engagement, shared religious activities, cultural interaction, and collaborative social actions as practical mechanisms for bridging social gaps between congregations.

Rather than imposing uniformity or external solutions, the program positioned community members as key actors in the empowerment process. Religious practices and cultural traditions were reframed not as markers of separation, but as shared resources that could foster unity, mutual understanding, and cooperation. Through facilitated interaction and collective activities, the initiative sought to strengthen communication, rebuild trust, and encourage a renewed sense of togetherness within the community.

This article aims to describe and analyze a community empowerment initiative designed to build social harmony through religious and cultural approaches in Jorong Dusun Tuo. Specifically, it seeks to explore how religious-based activities and local cultural practices can function as instruments of social integration, strengthen community participation, and enhance social cohesion among previously fragmented congregations. By presenting this experience, the article contributes to the discourse on community service by offering a reflective and practical model of empowerment-oriented social intervention that is rooted in local religious and cultural values and has the potential to be adapted to similar community contexts facing challenges of social fragmentation.

2. Methodology

This community service activity employed a participatory community empowerment approach aimed at strengthening social harmony through religious and cultural engagement (Powell et al., 2024). Rather than positioning the community as passive recipients, the program emphasized active participation, collective reflection, and shared ownership of the empowerment process. This approach was considered appropriate given the social context of Jorong Dusun Tuo, where latent social fragmentation existed between two religious congregations despite the absence of open conflict.

The intervention was conducted in Jorong Dusun Tuo, Nagari Limo Kaum, involving members of the Al-Ikhlas Mosque congregation and the Kariang Surau congregation as the primary beneficiaries. The participants included community leaders, religious figures, women's groups, youth, and children, representing various social segments within the community. University students acted as facilitators who supported dialogue, coordination, and reflection, rather than as dominant actors in decision-making.

2.1 Approach and Stages of Empowerment

The community empowerment process was implemented through several interconnected stages:

2.1.1 Social Assessment and Initial Engagement

The initial stage focused on understanding the social dynamics, interaction patterns, and existing challenges related to inter-congregational relations. Informal observations, unstructured conversations, and participatory discussions with community members and religious leaders were conducted to identify sources of social

distance, communication barriers, and potential entry points for intervention. This stage emphasized trust-building and mutual understanding as foundations for subsequent activities.

2.1.2 Participatory Planning

Based on the assessment findings, empowerment activities were jointly planned with community members. Religious and cultural practices familiar to the community were selected as the main instruments for social integration. The planning process encouraged inclusive participation, ensuring that both congregations were equally represented in decision-making. This stage aimed to foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the program.

2.1.3 Implementation of Empowerment Activities

The implementation stage involved a series of religious, cultural, and social activities designed to facilitate interaction, cooperation, and dialogue between congregations. These activities included joint religious gatherings, communal prayers, mutual cooperation activities (gotong royong), cultural-based events, and collaborative skill-based activities. Religious values and local cultural traditions were deliberately framed as shared resources to promote inclusivity rather than uniformity.

2.1.4 Reflection and Evaluation

Reflection and evaluation were conducted through community meetings and informal feedback sessions. Community members were encouraged to share their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions regarding changes in social interaction and collective participation. This reflective process allowed the facilitators and community to identify achievements, challenges, and opportunities for sustaining social harmony beyond the duration of the program.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected qualitatively through participatory observation, informal interviews, and reflective discussions with participants throughout the empowerment process (Lauer & Owusu, 2015). Field notes documented changes in participation levels, interaction patterns, and community responses to joint activities. The data were analyzed descriptively and interpretatively to capture emerging themes related to social cohesion, participation, and empowerment outcomes. The analysis focused on understanding how religious and cultural approaches contributed to strengthening social harmony within the community context.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring voluntary participation, mutual respect, and cultural sensitivity throughout the program. Community consent was obtained through dialogue with local leaders, and all activities were conducted in a manner that respected existing religious and cultural identities. The empowerment process prioritized inclusivity and avoided actions that could reinforce social divisions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Strengthening Inter-Congregational Interaction through Religious Engagement

The community empowerment initiative implemented in Jorong Dusun Tuo demonstrated that religious engagement can function as a powerful instrument for rebuilding social interaction in communities experiencing latent fragmentation. Prior to the intervention, interaction between the congregation of the Al-Ikhlâs Mosque and the congregation of the Kariang Surau was limited and largely confined to internal group activities. Although both congregations shared the same religious faith, differences in worship routines, social networks, and informal group identities contributed to minimal cross-group engagement. This condition did not manifest as open conflict but resulted in weak communication and reduced opportunities for collective action.

Through the introduction of joint religious activities—such as collective Yasin recitations, communal prayers, and large-scale religious gatherings—the empowerment program created inclusive spaces that facilitated sustained interaction. These activities were intentionally designed to rotate leadership roles, locations, and responsibilities between the two congregations, thereby fostering a sense of equality and shared ownership. As participation increased over time, members from both groups began to attend activities not merely as observers but as active contributors, indicating a growing sense of comfort and trust.

Religious engagement in this context functioned beyond ritual performance. It became a social medium through which participants could encounter one another regularly, exchange perspectives, and build interpersonal familiarity. The shared experience of worship helped reduce psychological distance and reinforced values of brotherhood, humility, and mutual respect. This finding supports the argument that religious values, when framed inclusively and facilitated participatorily, can serve as effective foundations for social cohesion rather than sources of division.

3.2 Mutual Cooperation as a Medium for Building Social Solidarity

In addition to religious engagement, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) emerged as a central mechanism for strengthening social solidarity between congregations. Activities such as cleaning communal spaces, maintaining mosques and surau, and improving neighborhood facilities required direct collaboration and collective effort. These activities created informal yet meaningful opportunities for interaction, allowing community members to work side by side toward shared goals.

Observations during the program revealed a gradual shift in social dynamics. Initially, participation in mutual cooperation activities was characterized by group-based clustering, with individuals gravitating toward familiar members of their own congregation. However, as activities progressed and facilitation emphasized inclusivity, these boundaries began to dissolve. Participants started to communicate more openly, share tasks, and coordinate efforts across group lines. Simple practices—such as sharing meals after communal work or jointly planning future activities—played a significant role in fostering interpersonal trust.

From a community empowerment perspective, mutual cooperation reinforced a sense of shared ownership over communal spaces and collective responsibility for community well-being. These experiences strengthened social capital by promoting reciprocity, trust, and cooperation. Importantly, the empowerment process enabled community members to recognize that collaboration across congregations was not only possible but also beneficial for addressing common challenges.

3.3 Cultural-Based Activities and the Reframing of Social Identity

Cultural engagement, particularly through the Anyang Gulai cooking competition, proved to be an effective strategy for reframing social identity and fostering social harmony. As a traditional Minangkabau culinary practice, the activity emphasized shared cultural heritage rather than religious subgroup affiliation. The competition encouraged creativity, teamwork, and informal interaction in a relaxed environment, reducing social tension and hierarchical distinctions.

Participation in cultural activities allowed community members to interact on a more personal level, facilitating conversations and laughter that rarely occurred in more formal religious settings. The cultural context created a neutral platform where differences in worship practices or organizational backgrounds became less salient. Instead, participants experienced a collective identity rooted in locality, tradition, and shared cultural values.

This finding highlights the importance of integrating local wisdom into community empowerment initiatives. Cultural practices functioned as social bridges that complemented religious engagement by offering alternative entry points for interaction. By combining religious and cultural approaches, the empowerment program addressed social harmony at multiple levels—normative, emotional, and experiential.

3.4 Youth and Children as Agents of Social Integration

The involvement of children and youth emerged as a critical component of the empowerment initiative. Joint activities such as Qur'anic learning sessions, religious competitions, sports events, and reading stalls facilitated cross-group interaction among younger generations. These activities fostered friendships and cooperation that transcended congregational boundaries, contributing to the development of inclusive social norms from an early age.

Youth participation also played a strategic role in expanding the reach of the empowerment program. Young participants often acted as connectors between families, conveying positive experiences and encouraging parental involvement. From a developmental perspective, early exposure to inclusive interaction promotes empathy, tolerance, and collaborative behavior, which are essential for sustaining long-term social harmony.

Moreover, youth engagement enhanced the sustainability potential of the empowerment initiative. As future community leaders, young people who internalize values of inclusivity and cooperation are more likely to continue and expand

empowerment efforts. This underscores the importance of involving younger generations as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries in community service programs.

3.5 Changes in Community Perceptions and Interaction Patterns

Reflective discussions and informal evaluations conducted with community members revealed perceptible changes in social perceptions and interaction patterns. Participants reported feeling more comfortable engaging with members of the other congregation and expressed a reduced tendency to categorize individuals based on place of worship. Increased participation in joint activities and spontaneous collaboration outside scheduled programs further indicated a shift toward more inclusive social relations.

These changes reflect the effectiveness of empowerment-oriented interventions in addressing latent fragmentation. Rather than focusing on structural reorganization, the program targeted relational dynamics by fostering regular interaction and shared experiences. The empowerment process enabled community members to reconstruct social meanings and redefine group boundaries in more inclusive terms.

3.6 Sustainability and Challenges of Empowerment

Despite positive outcomes, sustainability emerged as a critical challenge. Community members expressed concerns about maintaining momentum after the conclusion of the program, particularly in the absence of external facilitators. This highlights the importance of institutionalizing empowerment practices within existing community structures and identifying local leaders who can assume facilitative roles.

From an empowerment standpoint, sustainability depends on the community's capacity to internalize inclusive practices and continue collective initiatives autonomously. While the program successfully initiated social change, long-term impact requires ongoing commitment and leadership. This finding underscores the need for follow-up strategies and capacity-building efforts to support local facilitators.

3.7 Discussion: Integrating Religious and Cultural Approaches in Community Empowerment

The findings of this community service initiative demonstrate that the integration of religious and cultural approaches constitutes an effective strategy for strengthening social harmony in communities experiencing latent social fragmentation. In contexts where social divisions are subtle and embedded within daily interaction patterns, interventions that rely solely on structural or economic mechanisms often prove insufficient. The experience in Jorong Dusun Tuo indicates that social harmony can be more effectively cultivated by engaging the moral, emotional, and relational dimensions of community life through values and practices that are already deeply embedded in the local social fabric.

Religious engagement played a crucial role in providing ethical justification and moral motivation for unity among community members. Religious values such as brotherhood, compassion, mutual respect, and collective responsibility functioned as

normative references that legitimized inclusive interaction and cooperation (Chaudhary et al., 2025). When religious activities were designed as shared and participatory experiences, they facilitated regular encounters between members of different congregations, reducing social distance and fostering trust. Importantly, religious practices were not imposed as instruments of uniformity but were framed as common spiritual resources that could accommodate diversity within a shared faith tradition (Braunstein et al., 2014). This approach enabled religious engagement to serve as a unifying force rather than a source of exclusion.

Complementing religious engagement, cultural activities offered practical and experiential opportunities for interaction that transcended existing group boundaries (Maimun et al., 2025). Local cultural practices, particularly those rooted in shared traditions and collective participation, created informal and inclusive spaces where community members could interact without the constraints often associated with formal religious settings. Cultural engagement emphasized shared identity and locality, allowing participants to experience a sense of togetherness based on common heritage rather than institutional affiliation (Zabulis et al., 2025). Through these activities, cultural traditions functioned as social bridges that facilitated dialogue, cooperation, and emotional connection.

The integration of religious and cultural approaches allowed the empowerment initiative to address social cohesion at multiple levels (Bustamam & Hardivizon, 2024; Saputra et al., 2022). At the normative level, religious values reinforced ethical commitments to unity and solidarity. At the relational level, cultural and social activities enabled repeated interaction and collaboration, strengthening interpersonal relationships. This multi-layered approach aligns with participatory empowerment principles that emphasize inclusivity, dialogue, and local relevance (Corbin, 2020). By actively involving community members in planning, implementation, and reflection, the initiative fostered a sense of ownership and collective responsibility that is essential for sustainable social change.

Furthermore, acknowledging diversity as an inherent aspect of community life proved to be a critical factor in the success of the initiative. Rather than attempting to eliminate differences in religious practices or social identities, the program recognized these differences as potential resources for mutual learning and enrichment. By leveraging shared religious values and cultural traditions, the empowerment process transformed potential sources of division into foundations for cooperation and collective action. This approach contributed to the reconstruction of social meanings and the redefinition of group boundaries in more inclusive terms.

The experience from Jorong Dusun Tuo suggests that empowerment-oriented social interventions rooted in local religious and cultural contexts can serve as effective and adaptable models for addressing social fragmentation in similar communities. Such interventions highlight the importance of context-sensitive strategies that prioritize relational dynamics and community participation over externally imposed solutions. In this regard, the integration of religious and cultural approaches offers valuable insights

for community service initiatives seeking to strengthen social harmony, enhance social capital, and promote sustainable community empowerment in diverse social settings.

4. Conclusion

This community service initiative demonstrates that community empowerment grounded in religious and cultural approaches can serve as an effective strategy for strengthening social harmony in communities experiencing latent social fragmentation. The experience in Jorong Dusun Tuo shows that social divisions, even when subtle and non-confrontational, can undermine collective participation and weaken social cohesion if not addressed through inclusive and context-sensitive interventions.

The integration of religious engagement and cultural participation proved instrumental in fostering inclusive interaction and rebuilding trust among previously segmented congregations. Religious activities provided ethical foundations and moral motivation for unity, while cultural practices created experiential spaces for dialogue and cooperation beyond formal boundaries. Together, these approaches enabled community members to reframe differences not as sources of separation, but as shared resources for collective action and mutual understanding.

From an empowerment perspective, the initiative highlights the importance of participatory processes that position communities as active agents of social change. By involving community members in planning, implementation, and reflection, the program strengthened a sense of ownership and collective responsibility, which are essential for sustaining social harmony. Rather than imposing uniformity or external solutions, the empowerment process facilitated the internalization of inclusive values and practices rooted in local religious and cultural contexts.

Despite its positive outcomes, the initiative also revealed challenges related to sustainability, particularly the need for local facilitators and institutional support to maintain inclusive activities beyond the program period. This underscores the importance of capacity-building and leadership development as integral components of community empowerment aimed at long-term social cohesion.

Overall, this article contributes to the field of community service by offering a practical and reflective model of empowerment-oriented social intervention that integrates religious and cultural approaches. The findings suggest that similar strategies may be adapted to other communities facing latent social fragmentation, especially in contexts where religion and culture play central roles in social life. Future community service initiatives are encouraged to further explore and refine participatory, value-based approaches to strengthening social harmony and community resilience.

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