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Community Leadership Practices in Neighborhood Association: Roles, Challenges, and Social Cohesion in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores community-based leadership within neighborhood associations in Indonesia, where grassroots governance leaders serve as key intermediaries between citizens and formal government institutions despite being under-theorized in public administration literature. The study aims to examine how neighborhood association leaders perceive and perform their roles, address challenges, and foster social cohesion. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on 90 in-depth interviews with neighborhood association leaders across diverse urban and rural regions in Indonesia and applies thematic analysis to identify recurring leadership values and community practices. Findings reveal that neighborhood association leadership is shaped by moral commitment, voluntary service, and social trust rather than formal authority or material incentive. The principal results underscore five core dimensions: mediating state-citizen relations, maintaining neighborhood harmony, fostering participatory governance, navigating informal constraints, and initiating micro-level innovations. These dimensions reflect a hybrid leadership model that blends administrative tasks with cultural stewardship and relational ethics. The paper concludes that neighborhood association leaders exemplify a form of community-based leadership deeply rooted in local values and collective responsibility. Their practices deepen understanding of informal leadership and everyday governance, offering insights for decentralization policy, civic engagement, and community leadership development.

Keywords

Community-Based Leadership, Grassroots Governance, Informal Leadership, Neighborhood Association, Participatory Engagement.

1. Introduction

Neighborhood Association (*Rukun Tetangga/RT*) is the smallest social and administrative unit in Indonesia, functioning as a crucial node in community governance. RTs play strategic roles in community leadership, citizen empowerment, environmental and health initiatives, disaster management, policy implementation, and facilitating communication between residents and government authorities (Fahmi et al., 2016; Andreastuti et al., 2019; Sugiharti et al., 2021; Laksmi & Perdhana, 2024). Unlike formal governance systems in other countries, the Indonesian RT structure is informal, based on cooperation, mutual assistance, and social closeness among residents. This informality allows social flexibility, strengthens cohesion, and fosters a sense of shared responsibility within communities. However, RTs continue to face persistent challenges, including limited financial and human resources, policy gaps, and socio-economic disparities (Nugrahani et al., 2019; Nasih et al., 2024; Embong & Nawi, 2024). Moreover, RTs must navigate cultural and religious diversity, encourage citizen participation, and enhance resilience against environmental and disaster risks (Japar et al., 2019; Martias et al., 2023).

At the national level, RTs operate amid multifaceted socio-political, economic, and environmental transformations. Politically, dynastic politics and the weakening of democratic norms challenge the integrity and credibility of local governance (Buehler, 2025). Socially, historical inequalities, communal conflicts, and the lingering effects of past injustices continue to shape trust, solidarity, and social cohesion in communities. Economically, Indonesia's transition from commodity-based growth toward manufacturing and value-added industries presents structural pressures that affect resource allocation, local development, and community livelihoods (Aswicahyono & Hill, 2014). Concurrently, environmental risks such as floods, droughts, and coastal degradation require adaptive strategies and sustainable local resource management (Ling & Srinivasan, 2013). These broader national dynamics emphasize the critical role of RTs as credible, adaptive, and participatory social institutions embedded within the daily lives of citizens.

Although prior studies have highlighted RTs' contributions to community empowerment, disaster management, and government program implementation (Fahmi et al., 2016; Andreastuti et al., 2019; Sugiharti et al., 2021), the literature remains largely descriptive and sectoral. There is limited insight into the lived experiences, leadership values, and adaptive strategies of RT/RW heads, and few studies systematically examine their motivations, dilemmas, innovations, and aspirations. Understanding these aspects is essential for designing evidence-based strategies to strengthen RT institutions beyond normative prescriptions. In the context of post-reform Indonesia, where trust in formal institutions is often questioned, RTs have increasingly acted as flexible informal actors capable of bridging policies, fostering social solidarity, and enhancing community resilience.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative, reflective approach, drawing on the experiences of over 4,500 RT/RW heads from diverse regions across Indonesia. Using thematic analysis, the research reconstructs local values, aspirations, and innovations, providing a micro-level perspective on grassroots governance. Unlike prior macrostructural or normative research, this study emphasizes authentic, contextually grounded leadership dynamics, conflict resolution practices, and community engagement strategies. Additionally, the research situates the Indonesian RT model in a comparative perspective, drawing insights for participatory governance and informal institutional strengthening globally.

The research specifically aims to explore and map the dynamics of grassroots leadership in Indonesia through the perspectives of RT/RW heads. Its objectives

are to, identify the personal motivations, values, and leadership drives underlying RT/RW engagement in community leadership, analyze the actual roles and functions of RT/RW in daily practice, including social mediation, service coordination, and enhancing community resilience, develop a thematic classification reflecting experiences, challenges, innovations, and aspirations for the future strengthening of RT institutions, and compare field findings with national and international literature to provide evidence-based policy recommendations for reinforcing RTs as pillars of inclusive, participatory, and sustainable community governance.

By achieving these objectives, the study contributes academically to the understanding of informal institutions and community-based governance in developing countries. It provides policymakers with data-driven insights to enhance the institutional capacity, accountability, and adaptability of RTs, ensuring that they remain vital actors in fostering social cohesion, participatory development, and resilient communities across Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community-Based Leadership and Grassroots Governance

Community-based leadership refers to leadership practices that emerge organically within a community and are deeply rooted in local values, social norms, and collective responsibility. Unlike formal bureaucratic leadership, which depends on hierarchical authority, codified procedures, and official positions, grassroots leadership emphasizes relational authority, trust, and legitimacy built through consistent interpersonal interactions and participation. Leaders at this level gain influence not through formal titles but through recognition, respect, and the ability to foster collaboration among community members (Bolden, 2011). In developing countries, these grassroots governance structures often act as intermediaries between the state and citizens, facilitating communication, mobilizing resources, and ensuring that policies are adapted to local contexts. By being embedded in the social fabric of the community, grassroots leaders can respond to residents' needs more effectively and navigate challenges that formal institutions may not fully address (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

In the Indonesian context, neighborhood institutions such as RT/RW provide a distinctive form of informal governance grounded in the principles of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and social cohesion (Sutadi, 2024). RT/RW leaders serve as important facilitators in public service delivery, conflict resolution, and civic engagement, often assuming these roles voluntarily out of moral responsibility and commitment to their community (Fahmi et al., 2016; Sugiharti et al., 2021). Their leadership is characterized by proximity to residents, deep knowledge of local social dynamics, and the ability to coordinate solutions effectively. This aligns with the concept of "everyday governance," in which leadership is enacted through routine interactions, negotiation, and informal problem-solving rather than formal institutional authority (Runtunuwu et al., 2018). Through these mechanisms, RT/RW leaders not only support administrative functions but also strengthen trust, cooperation, and resilience within the community.

2.2. Informal Leadership, Social Capital, and Participation

Informal leadership plays a critical role in shaping community dynamics, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are limited or lack trust. According to Putnam (2000), social capital, defined as networks, norms, and trust, serves as a foundational element for collective action and effective governance. Leaders at the neighborhood level often act as brokers of social capital, strengthening ties among residents and fostering cooperation. Such leaders can

bridge gaps between formal authorities and community members, ensuring that local needs and concerns are effectively communicated and addressed.

Research shows that participatory engagement is closely linked to the presence of trusted local leaders who can mobilize citizens and encourage inclusive decision-making (Gaventa, 2004; Cornwall, 2007). In RT/RW settings, participation is facilitated through community forums such as neighborhood meetings, mutual aid activities, and informal gatherings. These mechanisms not only enhance civic engagement but also contribute to the development of shared norms and collective identity. By fostering regular interaction and dialogue, these forums help to build a resilient social fabric that can support collective problem-solving and local initiatives.

However, challenges remain in sustaining participation, particularly in urban areas where individualism and socio-economic disparities may weaken social cohesion (Nasih et al., 2024). Informal leaders must therefore continuously adapt their strategies to maintain engagement, often relying on cultural approaches, communication skills, and trust-building practices. Maintaining this engagement is essential for ensuring that local governance remains responsive and that community members feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes.

2.3. Leadership Challenges and Social Cohesion

Community leaders operating at the grassroots level face multifaceted challenges, including limited resources, unclear institutional support, and increasing social complexity. Studies indicate that the effectiveness of local leadership is often constrained by financial limitations, lack of formal recognition, and weak policy integration (Nugrahani et al., 2019; Embong & Nawi, 2024). These constraints create a gap between high community expectations and limited structural capacity, requiring leaders to continuously develop adaptive strategies, rely on local social networks, and exercise creativity and resilience to maintain trust, foster cooperation, and ensure the effective delivery of services despite structural shortcomings.

Despite these challenges, grassroots leaders play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, defined as the ability of a society to maintain unity, trust, and cooperation among its members (Chan et al., 2006). Social cohesion is strengthened through inclusive practices, conflict resolution mechanisms, and the promotion of shared values. In Indonesia, RT/RW leaders contribute to cohesion by facilitating dialogue, managing diversity, and encouraging collective action in addressing local issues.

Recent literature also highlights the importance of adaptive and innovative leadership in sustaining community resilience (Westley et al., 2013). Grassroots leaders often develop creative solutions, such as leveraging digital tools, forming community networks, and initiating local programs, to overcome structural limitations. These practices demonstrate that leadership at the neighborhood level is not static but evolves in response to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions.

3. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory-reflective strategy to examine the roles, challenges, and contributions of RT/RW Heads as grassroots community leaders in Indonesia. The qualitative design was selected to capture complex and contextual social realities that are often beyond the reach of structured quantitative surveys. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this research seeks to interpret the meanings, narratives, and lived experiences of grassroots actors in carrying out everyday governance functions.

The study focuses on thematic analysis of narrative data collected through an open-ended online questionnaire. Data were analyzed inductively through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns, thematic clusters, and

reflective insights emerging organically from respondents' answers. The findings are presented in the form of conceptual narratives, thematic synthesis, and selected direct quotations to preserve contextual richness and authenticity. This design allows the research to explain not only what occurs in RT/RW leadership practices but also why and how leaders respond to social, political, and administrative challenges within their communities.

The population consists of RT and RW Heads across Indonesia who actively perform community leadership functions. The final sample includes 4,171 respondents obtained through nationwide distribution of an open online questionnaire. Most respondents are active RT Heads, with a substantial proportion from the DKI Jakarta area, reflecting dense and complex urban dynamics. The dataset represents diverse geographical and socio-cultural contexts, including rural, urban, coastal, and disaster-prone areas. Although the sampling is non-probabilistic and voluntary, the large number and diversity of participants provide substantial qualitative depth and a wide range of perspectives suitable for thematic exploration.

The research instrument comprises 11 open-ended questions organized into five thematic groups: motivation and values, leadership practices and processes, challenges and learning, community culture and leadership dynamics, and future aspirations. Questions were designed using clear and contextually accessible language to ensure inclusivity across educational and regional backgrounds.

Data collection was conducted via an online survey platform over a defined period. The survey link was distributed through community networks, RT/RW forums, social media, and collaborations with government and civil society partners. Participation was voluntary, with prior explanation of the research purpose, benefits, and ethical commitments. The online format enabled broad national coverage while allowing respondents to provide reflective responses at their convenience.

Data analysis combined thematic classification with reflective narrative techniques. Following coding and theme development, thematic clusters such as leadership values, social challenges, innovation, government relations, and citizen participation were reconstructed into coherent narratives supported by illustrative quotes. Researcher triangulation was applied to enhance thematic consistency and validity.

Ethical principles were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed. Respondents were not required to provide identifying information, and all quotations are presented without personal details. Data are stored securely and not shared with third parties. The study ensures that findings are not used for political, discriminatory, or harmful purposes, and aims to contribute to evidence-based policy and community-centered governance grounded in openness, social justice, and respect for grassroots actors.

4. Results

4.1. Motivation, Values, and Responsibility in Community Leadership

The RT and Citizens Association (*Rukun Warga/RW*) systems in Indonesia are rooted in the tradition of communal and participatory village governance predating the colonial era, where local leaders played a key role in managing community affairs (Kusumastuti, 2017). During the Dutch colonial period, this structure became more hierarchical and centralized to meet administrative needs (Fox, 2011). After independence, especially during the New Order era (1965–1998), RT/RW was formalized to strengthen state control, including through new village formation and transmigration programs (Allerton, 2012). Following the Reform Era post-1998, the system emphasized community participation and local autonomy (Bunnell et al., 2013), culminating in the Village Law of 2014, which reinforced community-based governance and local autonomy (Vel et al., 2017).

A total of 4,171 respondents participated in this study, predominantly active Neighborhood Association Heads, along with RW Heads, former RT/RW Heads, and residents involved in community management. The majority held the RT Chairman position, reflecting the focus on the smallest community governance unit. Respondents' tenure varied, with most serving 1–3 years, while a substantial group served over five years, and some over a decade, providing a spectrum of short- and long-term perspectives in managing social life. Most respondents came from DKI Jakarta, an urban area with a dense population and a relatively active RT/RW system in local public services (Bunnell et al., 2013).

The motivation of RT/RW Heads reflects social commitment, moral encouragement, and a sense of responsibility towards their environment. Thematic analysis identified five main motivational themes: citizen service, community demand, moral and spiritual encouragement, environmental improvement, and a sense of calling as a social role (Nugrahani et al., 2019). Leaders demonstrated a high spirit of dedication, motivated by a desire to serve their communities and contribute to both worldly and spiritual well-being. Many accepted the position as a social duty without financial compensation, perceiving it as a form of service. Community trust and pressure also influenced their acceptance, positioning leaders as intermediaries between residents and government authorities. Spirituality underpinned their commitment, with actions performed for the sake of good deeds rather than power, while reflective and strategic motivations guided efforts to improve local conditions, organize neighborhoods, and maintain harmony in diverse societies (Fahmi et al., 2016).

Pride among RT/RW leaders was derived from meaningful service and the tangible impact of their work rather than social status. Leaders expressed satisfaction when resolving residents' issues, mediating conflicts, assisting with administrative matters, and facilitating environmental programs, demonstrating sincere devotion. Cooperation emerged as a central value, emphasizing collective effort as key to success, while sincerity and integrity were maintained even without fixed salaries or adequate support. Duties were often interpreted as forms of worship and spiritual devotion, providing inner strength amid daily challenges. Appreciation from residents, even through simple gestures, enhanced leaders' satisfaction and reinforced their dedication. The closeness to the community and the practical impact of their service contributed to enduring ideals of social responsibility, reflecting the significant role of RT/RW leaders in fostering cohesion, trust, and civic engagement at the grassroots level (Embong & Nawi, 2024).

4.2. Roles and Functions of Local Leadership in Community Life

Various regions around the world have grassroots governance structures similar to *Rukun Tetangga* in Indonesia, with a focus on community participation and local decision-making. In Africa, ward committees in South Africa and village development committees in Botswana provide participatory spaces for citizens in the local governance process (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018). In Latin America, citizen associations in cities such as Buenos Aires and Lima play an active role in local politics, while participatory budgeting practices in Porto Alegre and Mexico City enable citizens to directly determine budget allocations (King, 2004; Postigo, 2011; Moore & McGregor, 2021).

In North America, neighborhood councils, such as those in Los Angeles, enhance civic participation and citizen influence in policy, while homeowners' associations also play a role in environmental governance and local planning projects (Scheller, 2016; Collins & Del Rey, 2022; Collins & Medrano, 2022). In Southeast Asia, community associations in Thailand and Vietnam partner with the government for local services and management (Read & Pekkanen, 2009). All these models emphasize citizen participation, local decision-making, as well as transparency and accountability in community governance.

For grassroots actors, being the head of a neighborhood unit or community unit is not merely about performing administrative functions. This role is understood as a social and moral responsibility that arises from proximity to the residents. In daily life, the RT/RW heads become the first face of the state to the community, connecting interests, maintaining harmony, and serving as role models within it (Read & Pekkanen, 2009).

The role of RT and RW leaders was frequently described as a two-way bridge between the community and the government, with responsibilities extending beyond the mere conveyance of information to include mediating aspirations, defusing conflicts, and serving as communication hubs that maintain social connections. This function was also associated with creating order and maintaining harmony, positioning RT/RW leaders as vigilant social guardians and facilitators of deliberation amid the dynamics of the residents. In many instances, they were required to act as mediators, exercising patience, fairness, and wisdom despite limited structural support (King, 2004).

Additionally, the position was interpreted by several leaders as a form of service and a space for self-actualization, where engagement in community service activities and conflict resolution allowed tangible contributions to local improvement. This role enabled them to make a positive impact on a small scale within their immediate living environment, reflecting the meaningful and socially responsible nature of their leadership (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018). Amidst challenges and limitations, the RT and RW heads continue to carry out their duties with sincere dedication. They are present not to be served, but to serve with heart, empathy, and a spirit of togetherness. Incentives or awards do not always accompany this position, but it embodies it in a tangible form of trust-based, humanitarian, and socially responsible leadership (Gisevius et al., 2025).

4.3. Challenges and Innovations in Performing Functions

On the contrary, various countries adopt a more structured and formal approach to community governance. In Belgium, urban empowerment projects involve government actors and formal intermediaries to systematically build citizen engagement (Uyttebrouck et al., 2023). In rural Norway, culture-based development strategies adapt local structures to historical contexts and power relations (Vasstrøm & Normann, 2019). Scotland applies adaptive governance in marine planning, combining hierarchical and collaborative methods, whereas Chile integrates community-based disaster education with local knowledge and interdisciplinary perspectives (Greenhill et al., 2020; Palma et al., 2025). Similarly, in Kenya, mangrove management relies on community participation through policy awareness and gender considerations, while in Cambodia, citizen engagement in recreational forests is shaped by complex institutional and social contexts (Ahmed et al., 2023; Padilla et al., 2025). International literature underscores the importance of a holistic understanding of local institutions when designing contextual, participatory policies (Uyttebrouck et al., 2023).

Carrying out the role of RT or RW Chairman in Indonesia is not an easy task. Behind their dedication, RT/RW heads face structural, social, and personal challenges. Budget and resource limitations are nearly universal, with many leaders relying on self-funding to sustain community programs. Government incentives often do not align with the workload, forcing leaders to cover costs themselves. Minimal policy support and unclear role definitions create uncertainty, while inconsistent regulations and weak coordination between government levels hinder effective leadership. Social challenges are also prominent, particularly in mobilizing citizen participation in an increasingly individualistic context. Additionally, the invisible workload, such as responding to deaths, conflicts, and administrative needs at any hour, remains unrecorded and unacknowledged. High social expectations

compound these pressures, requiring leaders to act as role models and problem solvers despite limited resources (Nugrahani et al., 2019).

To address these challenges, RT/RW leaders actively develop innovative strategies to strengthen community resilience. Many implement digital service solutions, using WhatsApp, Google Forms, and simple information systems to record residents, manage complaints, and disseminate important information efficiently. These tools accelerate response times and ensure documentation of citizen reports, reflecting an adaptive approach to limited resources (Sugiana et al., 2025). Self-reliance and cooperation strategies are central to local program development, including the establishment of waste banks, independent food posts, and community-based environmental cooperatives, often relying on voluntary participation. Cultural approaches to conflict resolution, family-based mediation, and traditional rituals are also adapted to local contexts, preventing escalation and preserving social harmony. Cross-unit networks further facilitate experience-sharing and advocacy (Fajarwati et al., 2020).

Cross-sector collaboration has emerged as another key approach. RT/RW leaders partner with MSMEs, universities, NGOs, and volunteer communities to organize training, educational programs, and social initiatives. Examples include job training and digital literacy programs, engaging youth and local organizations to strengthen social resilience and development. These strategies demonstrate that RT/RW units remain vibrant laboratories of social innovation, going beyond administrative functions to act as resilient, solution-oriented, locally rooted agents of social change (Basyar et al., 2025).

4.4. Aspirations, Social Relations, and Community Transformation

Amidst the spirit of service and strong values of dedication, the heads of neighborhood units harbor various hopes for the government. These aspirations reflect a desire for a support system that can tangibly and sustainably strengthen them. The heads of RT/RW units expressed aspirations for greater support and recognition from the government. Formal acknowledgment and appropriate appreciation were frequently mentioned, as many felt their roles, though vital, were structurally undervalued. Concerns were also raised regarding the fairness and consistency of incentives and allowances, noting that the constant workload often exceeds the honorarium provided (Nasih et al., 2024). Access to training and capacity-building opportunities emerged as another significant need, with neighborhood heads emphasizing the importance of skill development to perform tasks confidently and accurately. Improved synergy with authorities and related departments was also highlighted, as delays in government responses hindered effective service delivery. Furthermore, RT/RW leaders expressed a desire for genuine involvement in local policy planning and evaluation, advocating for participatory decision-making rather than merely implementing top-down directives (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018).

These aspirations are not merely administrative demands, but a reflection of the grassroots collaborative spirit that seeks to be accommodated reasonably and with dignity. The central and regional governments are expected to respond with adaptive, participatory policies that support community-based social resilience. Behind their administrative roles, RT and RW play a crucial role as social connectors in the community. They become guardians of social harmony, managing diversity, and fostering the growth of solidarity and transformation of collective behavior among the residents. The relationships among residents are reported to be primarily nurtured through informal forums that are continuously maintained. Social gatherings, night watch activities, community service, and study groups function as important mechanisms for fostering camaraderie and building robust mutual assistance networks, particularly in times of disaster or conflict. These forums also provide opportunities for residents to interact across ethnic, religious, and socio-

economic boundaries, with RT/RW heads often facilitating mediation and encouraging daily neighborly exchanges (Japar et al., 2019).

The social role of RT/RW leaders extends beyond mediation, as they are seen as catalysts for subtle yet meaningful transformations. The exemplary behavior of local leaders in promoting cleanliness, discipline, and digitalization has contributed to gradual improvements in community practices. For instance, residents in Bandung have reportedly shifted from littering freely to adhering to scheduled waste management routines, illustrating the tangible impact of leadership on community behavior. Citizen participation has increasingly become proactive, with residents not merely following instructions but actively contributing to the planning and execution of local initiatives. Meetings, idea-sharing sessions, and collaborative projects have encouraged a sense of collective ownership. These dynamics have strengthened social cohesion from the grassroots, demonstrating that social transformation can grow from everyday interactions and sustained community engagement (Cenderadewi et al., 2025).

In addition, the role of RT/RW heads in fostering trust and recognition among residents has reinforced the sense of unity and cooperation. Small gestures of acknowledgment, such as expressions of gratitude or communal support, have been reported to enhance motivation and encourage continued participation in community activities, highlighting the intertwined nature of leadership, social bonds, and transformative change. RT and RW prove that solidarity, inclusion, and social learning do not always arise from formal policies. In the small spaces of daily life, they embody the spirit of cooperation and demonstrate that social transformation can grow from the simplest interactions, starting with greetings in the narrow alleys of the settlement (Tahara et al., 2023).

4. Discussion

The results of this study confirm and extend previous findings regarding the strategic role of RT/RW in community governance and citizen empowerment. Consistent with Fahmi et al. (2016) and Gisevius et al. (2025), neighborhood units have been identified as crucial local leadership hubs that maintain social connectivity and serve as communication bridges between residents and government institutions. The data collected from 4,171 respondents indicate that these roles are not merely symbolic. They are tangible in problem-solving, information dissemination, and mitigation of horizontal conflicts. The position of RT/RW heads emerges as both socially and morally significant, reflecting responsibilities that extend beyond administrative duties to include fostering collective awareness, resolving disputes, and supporting residents in daily life. In this sense, the work of RT/RW heads aligns with Nasih et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of neighborhood units in promoting citizen participation and initiating grassroots-level innovations.

The study reveals that a strong service ethos underlies the motivations of RT/RW leaders, which include non-economic factors such as social commitment, spiritual devotion, and collective responsibility. The dimension of “hidden pride” appears prominently, with respondents expressing satisfaction in contributing to community well-being without expectation of formal recognition or material reward. Such findings expand the literature on grassroots leadership, where motivations are often underrepresented in conventional analyses. The emergence of social innovations, including waste management initiatives, food cooperatives, children’s learning forums, and digital literacy programs, further demonstrates the adaptability of RT/RW structures in responding to resource limitations. These small-scale interventions, rooted in local social capital, have been observed to enhance trust, solidarity, and resilience among residents, complementing Andreastuti et al. (2019), who emphasized RT’s role in disaster management and culturally-informed local practices. The current findings extend this perspective to post-disaster recovery and

social healing, highlighting the ways in which neighborhood units contribute to community cohesion and mutual assistance (Andreastuti et al., 2019).

The study highlights systemic challenges faced by RT/RW leaders, including political pressure, dual expectations, unclear role boundaries, and limited structural support, demonstrating that their strength lies in flexible social capacity rather than formal authority. Leadership is exercised through relational and moral influence, grounded in emotional closeness to the community, where routine responsibilities like maintaining cleanliness, security, and social assistance coexist with transformative roles in cultivating values, fostering solidarity, and enhancing collective resilience (Gisevius et al., 2025).

The findings have significant practical implications. For policymakers, strengthening the RT/RW system requires not only administrative recognition but also social and psychological support, including incentives, capacity-building programs, and digital platforms for participatory governance. The study suggests reevaluating RT/RW as strategic actors bridging resident needs and public policy, rather than mere extensions of authority. It expands theories on informal leadership, social capital, and community-based governance in developing countries, while demonstrating the value of big data for participatory, field-based research. RT/RW units also emerge as laboratories for civic innovation, where leadership, community participation, and social transformation intersect (Uyttebrouck et al., 2023).

The research underscores that the essence of community leadership is defined not by power but by service. Statements from respondents, such as “out of a sense of responsibility,” “because of a calling,” or “for the sake of a more harmonious community,” illustrate that the moral and social dimensions of leadership are fundamental to the functioning of the state at the grassroots level. The capacity of RT/RW leaders to mediate conflicts, promote cooperation, and foster social cohesion suggests that inclusive, adaptive governance must begin with the recognition, support, and empowerment of these local actors. Thus, neighborhood units are positioned not merely as administrative bodies but as central pillars of social resilience, community solidarity, and participatory governance in Indonesia (Vasstrøm & Normann, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that RT/RW leaders function not merely as administrative agents but as vital grassroots leadership actors rooted in social values, voluntary commitment, and close community ties. Based on 4,171 respondents, predominantly from DKI Jakarta, the findings show that their motivations are largely driven by moral responsibility and participatory spirit. Despite facing multidimensional challenges, including limited resources and uneven policy support, RT/RW leaders demonstrate strong adaptive capacity, social mediation skills, and local innovation in responding to urban and rural complexities. Strengthening RT/RW institutions is therefore essential for building contextual, inclusive, and sustainable participatory governance in Indonesia.

Policy implications include the need for structured capacity-building programs in leadership, conflict management, and digital-administrative literacy. Clearer financial and non-financial incentives are necessary to acknowledge their strategic role. Governments should develop adaptive regulations sensitive to local social dynamics, gender inclusivity, and collaborative practices. Establishing formal two-way communication forums between RT/RW and government institutions is crucial to ensure responsive policymaking. Multi-stakeholder collaboration with academics and NGOs, as well as the development of integrated digital information systems, can further enhance transparency, accountability, and community participation.

This study has several limitations. Respondents were disproportionately concentrated in DKI Jakarta, limiting full national representation. Data were

collected through open-ended online questionnaires without direct verification, potentially introducing narrative bias. The study focuses solely on RT/RW perspectives, excluding citizen and government viewpoints. Variations in narrative depth may affect interpretive consistency, and the cross-sectional design does not capture longitudinal changes. Future studies should incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives, conduct region-specific and longitudinal research, explore cross-country comparisons, examine digital transformation in community governance, and assess the measurable social impact of RT/RW leadership on community resilience and cohesion.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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