

Cultural Barriers in the Economic Strengthening Process of Underdeveloped Urban Communities

Eny Boedi Orbawati^a, Fadlurrahman^a, Ari Mukti^a, Joko Tri Nugraha^a

Abstract

The stagnation of economic strengthening programs in underdeveloped urban areas is not only caused by technical or bureaucratic issues but also by cultural barriers that are often overlooked. Previous studies have tended to neglect the cultural dimension, focusing instead on structural and normative factors. This study addresses that gap by examining the role of cultural barriers as a key determinant in the failure of economic empowerment program implementation, particularly within underdeveloped urban communities. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach through a case study in Magelang City, the research identifies three significant cultural contexts. First, the high level of community dependence on external assistance reflects a passive mindset that hampers initiative and self-reliance. Second, the rise of individualistic attitudes within communities undermines solidarity and reduces collective participation in economic programs. Third, resistance to innovation stems from distrust of change and a preference for maintaining long-standing practices perceived as safer. The significance of this study lies in highlighting the necessity of incorporating socio-cultural diversity into the design of economic strengthening strategies so that programs are not only administratively feasible but also socially and culturally effective. This study makes a conceptual contribution by emphasizing the importance of cultural dimensions in the formulation and implementation of economic strengthening policies, thereby enriching the perspectives of public administration and fostering more context-sensitive development practices.

Keywords: Cultural barriers, economic strengthening, urban communities.

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1. Introduction

Cultural barriers are a determinant factor that often goes unnoticed in the stagnation of economic strengthening programs within underdeveloped urban communities. Zibengwa & Tanga (2023) argue that the failure or stagnation of such programs is not merely caused by technical and bureaucratic issues, such as weaknesses in planning, inter-agency miscoordination, or limited resources. However, Herzog (2022) contends that stagnation in economic strengthening programs is not solely the result of structural problems but is also influenced by the historically and culturally embedded habitus of urban communities. This habitus encompasses ways of thinking, values, and attitudes ingrained in daily life, which often lead to resistance to change and innovation, particularly in the realization of economic strengthening programs (Pagonidis et al., 2020). These cultural barriers are often normalized and thus not considered problematic, even though they significantly contribute to low participation and the ineffectiveness of economic programs. Therefore, it is crucial to examine and critically evaluate them.

To date, studies addressing the stagnation of economic strengthening programs have tended to focus on three formal aspects. First, research has highlighted the extent to which regulations and government interventions support program implementation (Anastasiou et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2023; Werdiningtyas, 2021). Second, attention has been given to the commitment of implementing institutions and the sustainability of structural support for economic strengthening programs (Fahmi et al., 2023; Hernita et al., 2021; Pambudi et al., 2023). Third, studies have examined operational and technical issues, such as program management, budget planning, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Al-Otaibi et al., 2025; Nyoman Suluh Wijaya et al., 2024; Romanova et al., 2018). These three approaches demonstrate that discussions on the stagnation of economic strengthening programs have not adequately addressed non-formal dimensions, such as social and cultural factors, which play a significant role in program success. Consequently, existing studies remain partial and lack a comprehensive perspective.

In the process of economic strengthening within underdeveloped urban communities, cultural factors play a crucial role in determining program success. Cultural barriers often act as latent factors that significantly affect the effectiveness of economic empowerment initiatives. Fernando, Larasati, Abdullah, et al. (2025) emphasize that cultural constraints are a critical aspect that must be thoroughly evaluated. However, most existing studies remain normative in nature and have not analytically addressed the root causes of program stagnation. In response to these limitations, this study aims to explain and analyze cultural barriers as determinant factors contributing to the

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stagnation of economic strengthening programs in underdeveloped urban communities. These barriers are often embedded in values, norms, and attitudes perceived as normal but, in practice, hinder active participation in economic empowerment initiatives. Thus, this study seeks to provide a conceptual contribution by formulating economic strengthening strategies that are more culturally sensitive, while also encouraging sustained and active community involvement.

Cultural barriers in the process of strengthening the economies of underdeveloped urban communities represent a critical issue that requires holistic explanation and evaluation. To achieve this, the study focuses on three main research questions. First, why do communities continue to show high levels of dependence on economic aid programs? Second, how does the growing individualism within communities affect participation in economic strengthening programs? Third, why do communities resist adopting innovative economic empowerment initiatives? This study argues that the failure or stagnation of economic strengthening programs is not only caused by structural obstacles such as policies, bureaucracy, or resource limitations but is also shaped by latent cultural barriers. These cultural barriers are often unnoticed and normalized as part of community life, yet they significantly hinder program effectiveness. Without addressing such cultural constraints, economic empowerment programs risk remaining ineffective and unsustainable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Cultural barriers*

Cultural barriers refer to obstacles that arise from differences in values, norms, languages, and perceptions across cultures, which influence social interaction and communication (Fernando, Larasati, Abdullah, et al., 2025). These barriers typically occur when individuals or groups hold different frames of reference, leading to miscommunication, misinterpretation, and even potential conflict (Fernández de Casadevante, 2023; Romanenko et al., 2022). Moreover, cultural barriers are not limited to linguistic aspects but also include differences in perceptions of time, social hierarchy structures, and decision-making mechanisms (Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024). In the era of globalization, this issue has become increasingly relevant as cross-cultural interaction is now an integral part of business, education, and social development (Lingga et al., 2026; Mariyono et al., 2025). For instance, differences between high-context and low-context cultures often lead to misunderstandings, as communities that rely heavily on non-verbal cues are frequently misinterpreted by those

accustomed to direct communication (Larasati et al., 2026; Ma & Lucietto, 2024). When such cultural differences are not managed properly, collaboration, knowledge transfer, and policy implementation processes can be significantly obstructed.

In the context of economic strengthening for underdeveloped urban communities, cultural barriers often emerge as critical obstacles to program success. These challenges surface when economic empowerment approaches fail to align with the social values, traditions, and belief systems of local communities (Bleas & Blunkett, 2019; Uyttebrouck et al., 2023). For example, communities with a strong collectivist orientation may reject the idea of individual business competition, perceiving it as contradictory to communal solidarity (Foer, 2018). Studies in Indonesia reveal that microfinance programs often fail because communities resist interest-bearing loans, which are perceived as conflicting with religious principles (Asyiqin & Alfurqon, 2024; Orbawati et al., 2018; Septianingsih et al., 2024). A similar case occurred in Nairobi, Kenya, where entrepreneurship training for women was hindered by patriarchal norms that restricted women's control over household income (Deißler et al., 2025). These examples demonstrate that cultural barriers are not merely issues of communication but encompass value systems that shape the acceptance or rejection of innovation. Consequently, cultural adaptation becomes a key determinant of success in urban economic strengthening initiatives.

2.2 Economic strengthening

Economic strengthening refers to systematic efforts aimed at enhancing the economic capacity of individuals, households, and communities so that they become more independent and resilient in meeting basic needs and adapting to socio-economic changes (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Surya et al., 2021). This concept extends beyond income generation to include the development of productive assets, skills, and access to economic resources such as capital, markets, and technology (Olarie et al., 2021). Economic strengthening also involves managing economic risks, for instance, through savings, insurance, or livelihood diversification strategies to mitigate vulnerability to external shocks (Du et al., 2023). In practice, economic strengthening initiatives often involve interventions such as microfinance programs, skills training, entrepreneurship development, and community-based empowerment projects (Mukul et al., 2024). The overarching goal is to establish long-term economic resilience, reduce dependency on external assistance, and improve social well-being in a

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sustainable manner (Andersson et al., 2021). Hence, economic strengthening is regarded as a key strategy in inclusive development and poverty alleviation.

The main factors influencing the success of economic strengthening include access to financial resources, levels of economic literacy, social support, and favorable government policies (Murta et al., 2018; Purnamasari et al., 2025). Typically, the process involves several stages: identifying community economic needs, building individual capacity through training, providing access to capital or production tools, and supporting enterprises until they achieve self-reliance (Hidayat et al., 2026; Soyer et al., 2020). A study in Uganda demonstrated that community-based savings groups improved household savings and reduced the vulnerability of poor families to economic crises (Bjorvatn & Tungodden, 2023). In Indonesia, economic empowerment initiatives through Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have been proven effective in raising household incomes, particularly when combined with entrepreneurship training (Maksum et al., 2020). However, without adequate policy support and adaptation to local contexts, economic strengthening programs remain highly vulnerable to failure. This underlines the necessity for economic interventions to be rooted in local potential and social values to ensure sustainability.

2.3 Underdeveloped Urban Communities

Underdeveloped urban communities refer to urban areas that experience economic, social, and infrastructural deprivation compared to the standards of modern urban development (Rajendran et al., 2024; Sharifi, 2022). These communities are typically characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, limited access to public services, and overcrowded environments with inadequate housing conditions (Fernando, Ariwidodo et al., 2025; Lamanes & Deacon, 2019). In the context of development, such underdevelopment is not merely the result of limited economic resources but also shaped by structural factors such as unequal distribution of resources, non-inclusive development policies, and social marginalization (Hamza et al., 2025). Uncontrolled urbanization further exacerbates these conditions, resulting in informal settlements or slums that lack basic infrastructure such as clean water, sanitation, and reliable transportation systems (Pujari et al., 2024). Therefore, the concept of underdeveloped urban communities encompasses multidimensional aspects economic, social, political, and environmental that interact to perpetuate the cycle of urban poverty.

Several factors contribute to the emergence of underdeveloped urban communities, including rapid urbanization without adequate planning, economic inequality, weak urban governance, and limited access to essential

services (Sekhani et al., 2022; Wojewnik-Filipkowska, 2016). The process of underdevelopment often unfolds gradually, beginning with population migration to cities in search of employment, followed by the formation of informal settlements due to limited land availability and high housing costs (Parienté, 2017). In Indonesia, studies show that slum areas have emerged around economic centers as a consequence of imbalances between demand and supply for affordable housing (Noviani et al., 2025). Similarly, research in Lagos, Nigeria, highlights how poor urban infrastructure and limited formal employment opportunities worsen the socio-economic conditions of residents (Ugboma, 2025). As a result, these communities often remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and social vulnerability that is difficult to break. Addressing these challenges requires interventions that combine infrastructure improvement, economic empowerment, and inclusive policies designed to promote urban social equity.

3. Method

3.1 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the implementation of the *Rodanya Masbagia* economic empowerment program at the neighborhood association (*Rukun Tetangga/RT*) level in the City of Magelang, Central Java, Indonesia. The implementation of this program frequently encounters the social and cultural realities of underdeveloped urban communities. Barriers to economic empowerment in such communities are not always technical or administrative in nature; rather, they are rooted in cultural norms, collective habits, and the power relations of informal actors that influence the level of community participation in the implementation of economic empowerment programs at the RT level. At the RT level, the dynamics of economic empowerment program implementation are manifested concretely in the processes of planning, managing, and utilizing the funds of the *Rodanya Masbagia* program. In addition, the RT functions as an arena of collective decision-making involving the negotiation of interests and the construction of social legitimacy. Therefore, the RT level constitutes a relevant empirical context for examining how culture operates as a latent barrier in the process of economic empowerment of underdeveloped urban communities. Selecting the implementation of the *Rodanya Masbagia* program at the RT level as the unit of analysis allows this study to provide a holistic explanation of the role of culture in determining the effectiveness of economic empowerment programs in underdeveloped urban communities.

3.2 *Type of Research*

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. The selection of this approach is grounded in the epistemological assumption that processes of economic empowerment and welfare improvement among underdeveloped urban communities constitute complex and contextual social phenomena shaped by the interaction between policy structures and everyday social practices. Such phenomena cannot be holistically explained through quantitative measurement alone; instead, they require an in-depth understanding of the meanings, perceptions, and actions of the social actors involved. The descriptive qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate as it allows this study to comprehensively depict empirical conditions, including patterns of collective behavior, social relations, and cultural factors that shape the responses of underdeveloped urban communities to innovations and economic empowerment programs. The use of a case study design also aims to concentrate the research focus on the specific context of urban communities in the City of Magelang, enabling a nuanced understanding of the relationship between policy, local dynamics, and empowerment practices within their actual social setting. This approach further provides analytical space to explore latent aspects such as *habitus*, habitual practices, and cultural logics, which are difficult to operationalize into quantitative variables.

3.3 *Data Sources*

Data sources in this study were selected based on their relevance to the research focus (see Table 1). The research informants include residents who live in the program target areas, are engaged in economic activities, and possess everyday experiences that reflect local social and cultural conditions. This group is essential for revealing perceptions, response patterns, and cultural barriers that emerge in empowerment practices, which are often absent from official policy narratives. Community leaders were selected because of their strategic roles within local social structures and their function as reference figures for residents in collective decision-making processes. Their characteristics include social legitimacy, active involvement in deliberative forums, and an in-depth understanding of the values, norms, and habitual practices that shape community participation.

Local government authorities were also selected as data sources due to their authority and responsibility in the formulation and implementation of economic empowerment programs for underdeveloped urban communities. Informants from this group consist of officials directly involved in program

planning, management, and evaluation. The combination of these three data sources enables the acquisition of layered and complementary perspectives, allowing for a more comprehensive and contextually grounded explanation of the barriers to economic empowerment in underdeveloped urban communities.

Table 1. Characteristics of informants

Informant Code	Status	Gender	Age	Role in Policy
Informant 1	Government authority	Male	52	Policy decision-maker in the implementation of the <i>Rodanya Masbagia</i> Program
Informant 2	Government authority	Female	50	Technical implementer and program coordinator at the sub-district (kelurahan) level
Informant 3	Community leader	Male	56	Neighborhood head (RT) directly involved in the planning and implementation of the RKM
Informant 4	Community leader	Male	57	Representative of community groups directly involved in the planning and implementation of the RKM
Informant 5	Community leader	Male	59	Administrator of a community-based institution involved in mobilizing and encouraging community participation
Informant 6	Community member	Female	48	Program beneficiary and participant in RKM deliberative meetings
Informant 7	Community member	Male	54	Program beneficiary and actor in empowerment activities
Informant 8	Community member	Female	51	Program beneficiary and user of RKM activity outputs
Informant 9	Community member	Female	32	Program beneficiary and participant in social and community activities
Informant 10	Community member	Female	42	Program beneficiary and active participant in activity evaluation processes

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted over a five-month period to ensure adequate engagement with the social context of underdeveloped urban communities in the City of Magelang. This time frame enabled repeated observations of social dynamics, allowing changes in behavior, interaction patterns, and community responses to the economic empowerment program to be understood contextually. Data were collected through observation to obtain

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empirical evidence of the everyday practices of underdeveloped urban communities, including the identification of habitual and cultural practices that are often taken for granted by social actors but play a crucial role in shaping the success or failure of economic empowerment program implementation. In addition, data were gathered through interviews with community members, community leaders, and government authorities to explore subjective experiences, perceptions of the program, adaptation strategies, and the structural and cultural barriers encountered during the implementation process. Data collection continued until the point of saturation was reached, at which no new information provided additional substantive insights. This process generated complementary data that strengthened the validity of the findings and enabled a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the barriers to economic empowerment in underdeveloped urban communities.

3.5 Research Ethics

All informants involved in the data collection process provided verbal consent to participate in the study, including permission for the use of the collected data for scholarly publication. This consent included an agreement that personal identities and sensitive information would be fully anonymized to prevent any risk of individual identification that could be detrimental to the informants. This approach is consistent with the principles of qualitative research ethics, which emphasize the protection of participants' rights, respect for privacy, and recognition of participants' contributions to knowledge production. Verbal consent allowed for more flexible and context-sensitive interactions, particularly in research settings that require close engagement with urban communities involved in the implementation of the *Rodanya Masbagia* economic empowerment program at the neighborhood association (*Rukun Tetangga/RT*) level in the City of Magelang. The application of these ethical agreements strengthens the methodological validity of the study, as informants who feel secure and respected are more likely to provide honest, reflective, and meaningful data. Accordingly, adherence to ethical standards not only safeguards participants but also enhances the quality and credibility of the study's findings. This approach ensures that the overall research process is not only systematic and rigorous but also socially and academically responsible.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The first stage, data reduction, involved selecting and simplifying data obtained from observations and interviews by focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. This process aimed to organize the data into initial categories related to economic empowerment practices, community participation dynamics, and cultural barriers emerging within the context of underdeveloped urban communities.

The second stage, data display, involved systematically organizing the reduced data into tables containing narrative summaries to facilitate the identification of patterns, inter-category relationships, and the emergence of key themes. At this stage, the displayed data served as an analytical basis for examining the interconnections between cultural factors, policy structures, and social practices in the implementation of economic empowerment programs.

The third stage, conclusion drawing and verification, was conducted through a reflective and iterative interpretation of the findings, with cross-comparisons of emerging themes across data sources to ensure analytical consistency and accuracy. Through these three stages, the study generated a systematic, logical, and comprehensive understanding of how cultural barriers influence the effectiveness of economic empowerment efforts in underdeveloped urban communities in the City of Magelang.

4. Results

The process of economic strengthening within underdeveloped urban communities encounters barriers rooted in deeply embedded cultural constructs. These barriers are not merely structural but also cultural, shaping how communities respond to empowerment programs. A pragmatic mindset and reliance on external interventions reveal resistance to economic self-reliance. Moreover, social fragmentation driven by growing individualism weakens solidarity, which should otherwise serve as a vital form of social capital. The rejection of innovative empowerment initiatives further highlights the disconnect between program design and the cultural realities of communities. These cultural barriers are comprehensively reflected in three major findings of this study.

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4.1. Communities Remain Dependent on Assistance Programs

Community dependence on government assistance programs represents a significant cultural barrier in the economic strengthening of underdeveloped urban communities. Mindsets shaped by long-term reliance on external interventions have eroded residents' initiative and self-reliance in developing independent enterprises. This phenomenon illustrates that social capital has not been fully mobilized, as community orientation remains attached to external stimuli in the form of financial or material support. In practice, community involvement in economic activities only increases when incentives are promised, whereas participation is low in the absence of such support. This reality is illustrated through informants' statements, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 illustrates community dependency on government assistance within economic strengthening programs. This dependency suggests that the paradigm of empowerment emphasizing economic self-reliance has not yet been fully internalized. Strong reliance on capital, training, and incentives from the government indicates that empowerment is still perceived primarily as material aid rather than as a process of building capacity and economic sustainability. In other words, communities' orientation toward external stimuli underscores the weakness of both individual and collective initiative in developing independent enterprises. This pattern indicates that current empowerment strategies remain largely top-down, failing to cultivate a sense of ownership over programs. Consequently, the expected social transformation is obstructed by structural dependency, making program sustainability difficult to achieve without direct government intervention.

Community dependence on government assistance can be observed through three dominant patterns presented in Table 2. First, the orientation toward government-provided capital serves as the primary factor influencing residents' willingness to start businesses. Many are reluctant to take initiative without external support in the form of funding or facilities. Second, the low willingness to use personal capital hampers the establishment of collective enterprises. Residents fear financial losses, distrust collective management systems, and prefer to wait for the next assistance program. Third, community participation is largely situational, rising only when material incentives or subsidies are provided. Without such stimuli, their involvement in training and joint business initiatives remains minimal. These findings demonstrate that the empowerment paradigm based on self-reliance has not yet materialized, as communities continue to regard government assistance as the main source of economic sustainability rather than as a catalyst for developing their own potential.

Table 2. Communities remain dependent on assistance programs

Coding	Statement	Informant
Still reliant on government funding	Many residents are only willing to start businesses if there is direct assistance from the government. They feel incapable or lack confidence to start without initial support in the form of capital or facilities.	Informant 3 (July 18, 2025)
Still waiting for government programs	Residents continue to wait for government training programs, which results in very low initiative to develop independent businesses.	Informant 1 (July 25, 2025)
Still unwilling to use personal capital	Collective business initiatives are difficult to establish as residents fear financial losses, doubt repayment, and distrust management, leading them to avoid using personal capital.	Informant 6 (June 19, 2025)
Still awaiting assistance	Community participation in economic or training activities tends to rise only when direct support is provided, such as transportation fees, production tools, or raw materials. Without such stimuli, enthusiasm is low, and collective initiatives struggle to proceed.	Informant 2 (July 25, 2025)
Still running assistance-based businesses	Residents' participation in collective enterprises becomes high and enthusiastic only when there are promises of aid or subsidies. Without incentives, they are less interested in continuing their ventures.	Informant 4 (July 25, 2025)
Still reluctant to continue businesses with personal funds	Many residents refuse to continue businesses after training if it requires their own capital, preventing acquired skills from developing into real enterprises.	Informant 7 (July 2, 2025)
Still focused on seeking assistance	Instead of developing existing local business potential, residents actively seek information about upcoming assistance programs.	Informant 5 (July 25, 2025)
Still expecting community-based capital	Economic mutual-aid schemes such as savings groups are not popular, as residents fear financial loss or mismanagement, preferring to rely on community-funded capital.	Informant 8 (June 19, 2025)

Source: Interviews.

4.2 Individualistic attitudes in urban communities

The growing individualism within underdeveloped urban communities has emerged as a major obstacle to the process of economic empowerment. This

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phenomenon is evident in the low levels of community participation in collective activities, whether in planning, management, or the implementation of economic strengthening programs. Residents' orientation toward personal interests over collective needs undermines social capital, which should serve as the foundation for collaboration. Beyond weakening solidarity, individualism also fosters competitive behavior that obstructs community-based business initiatives. The strengthening of individualistic attitudes can be further understood through informants' statements, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3 demonstrates the growing tendency of individualistic attitudes within underdeveloped urban communities, which significantly hinders economic empowerment. This trend reflects a shift in social values from collectivism toward personal orientation, resulting in the weakening of social capital as a basis for collaboration. The low participation in program planning, management, and implementation indicates that community involvement is no longer viewed as a social obligation but as an activity valued only when it provides direct individual benefits. The unwillingness to establish joint ventures, join organizational structures, or support community initiatives illustrates a rejection of collective approaches. Such attitudes not only reduce the effectiveness of empowerment programs but also impede the development of sustainable economic solidarity. In short, individualism within underdeveloped urban communities represents a fundamental cultural barrier that must be addressed through empowerment strategies sensitive to shifting social values.

The strengthening of individualistic attitudes can be summarized into three dominant patterns, as reflected in Table 3. First, residents prioritize personal over communal interests, as shown by their limited involvement in planning, meetings, and organizational structures. Second, distrust of collective mechanisms is apparent in their rejection of initiatives such as savings groups or cooperatives, with fears of mismanagement and financial risk prompting a preference for individual efforts. Third, the lack of support for fellow residents' business initiatives indicates that economic solidarity has not yet formed. These patterns suggest that community-based economic empowerment remains difficult to achieve without strategic interventions that can reorient community values from individualism toward mutually beneficial collaboration.

Table 3. Individualistic attitudes in urban communities.

Coding	Statement	Informant
Not involved in program planning	Residents' participation in preparing community activity programs remains minimal, with many avoiding involvement. They perceive such activities as a low priority and prefer to focus on personal matters.	Informant 6 (July 8, 2025)
Refusal to establish joint capital	Proposals to form collective businesses with shared capital are often met with resistance. Many residents fear losses or distrust collective systems.	Informant 7 (July 8, 2025)
Absence from program planning meetings	Attendance at meetings or discussions related to economic development programs is very low. Residents consider such activities unimportant if they do not provide immediate financial benefits.	Informant 8 (July 10, 2025)
Lack of involvement in organizational structures	Very few residents are willing to serve as administrators of community-level (RT) economic initiatives. They fear heavy responsibilities and refuse involvement without direct monetary compensation.	Informant 9 (July 14, 2025)
Preference for competition over collaboration	Residents prefer competing with one another rather than collaborating to strengthen the community's economy. A culture of mutual suspicion and reluctance to see others succeed remains strong.	Informant 10 (July 22, 2025)
Reluctance to join cooperatives	Government efforts to establish neighborhood-level cooperatives have failed due to minimal community interest. Residents see no direct benefit and fear risks related to financial management.	Informant 4 (July 25, 2025)
Indifference to training outcomes	Residents rarely support or purchase products created by others through training programs. Economic solidarity has not developed, as orientation remains focused on individual rather than collective needs.	Informant 1 (July 25, 2025)
Refusal to contribute to productive activities	When initiatives such as training or joint production are introduced, residents tend to refuse contributing money or labor, believing it is not their personal responsibility.	Informant 10 (August 4, 2025)

Source: Interviews.

4.3 Resistance to innovative economic empowerment programs

Resistance to innovation in economic empowerment programs reflects a major challenge in implementing initiatives based on renewal and creativity. Communities often perceive innovation as complicated, risky, and inconsistent with their established practices. Instead of adopting new methods, residents tend to rely on conventional business patterns that they perceive as safer, even if they are less productive. Such attitudes reveal cultural resistance to change, even when the changes are designed to enhance economic self-reliance. Low acceptance of innovation also hampers the sustainability of empowerment programs that depend on technological adaptation and new strategies. The forms of resistance are illustrated by informants' statements in Table 4.

Table 4 illustrates the community's rejection of innovation within economic empowerment programs, which poses a serious barrier to economic transformation in underdeveloped urban areas. This resistance reflects cultural opposition to change, even when such change is aimed at improving productivity and competitiveness. The reluctance to participate in training, adopt new business models, or use modern technologies shows that innovation is perceived more as a threat than an opportunity. This orientation toward conventional practices reveals not only technological illiteracy but also fear of risk and a preference for stability. These attitudes not only obstruct the development of adaptive skills but also limit opportunities for establishing creative and sustainable business models. In short, resistance to innovation in underdeveloped urban communities represents a cultural barrier that must be addressed through empowerment strategies aimed at reshaping mindsets and building trust in innovation.

This resistance to innovation can be categorized into three dominant patterns, as seen in Table 4. First, communities tend to reject new businesses and training programs out of fear of failure and a perception that additional skills are unnecessary. Instead, they continue pursuing saturated markets. Second, communities resist using modern technologies, avoiding tools such as social media or efficient production equipment due to perceived complexity and lack of confidence in their ability to use them. Third, they reject product diversification and improved production methods, believing that traditional approaches are sufficient. These patterns indicate that resistance stems from fear, limited technological literacy, and short-term orientation. Unless addressed, economic empowerment programs will remain stagnant, as communities resist adapting to the changes needed to enhance business competitiveness.

Table 4. Resistance to innovative economic empowerment programs.

Coding	Statement	Informant
Rejection of new business programs	Residents prefer traditional businesses they are familiar with due to fear of failure. They worry that new business or empowerment programs will incur costs without guaranteed success.	Informant 3 (August 11, 2025)
Preference for common types of businesses	Residents generally pursue businesses that follow common market trends, such as snack production, even though the market is saturated. They are not interested in adopting innovative programs.	Informant 4 (August 11, 2025)
Refusal to join innovation training	Some residents are unwilling to participate in innovation training, considering it unnecessary or too difficult. They feel more comfortable with their current skills and circumstances.	Informant 2 (August 11, 2025)
Resistance to using new technologies	Residents are reluctant to adopt technologies such as social media for marketing or modern production tools. They fear not being able to operate them and consider them overly complicated.	Informant 1 (August 11, 2025)
Rejection of community-based businesses	There is a perception that joint or community-based ventures are prone to conflict and lack transparency. Residents prefer to manage their own businesses independently to avoid disputes.	Informant 7 (August 4, 2025)
Resistance to product innovation	Ideas for diversifying products are rarely accepted, with residents believing that existing products are sufficient despite generating limited income.	Informant 6 (August 5, 2025)
Rejection of more efficient production systems	Efforts to introduce faster and more cost-efficient production systems are often poorly received. Residents feel traditional methods are adequate, even if less profitable.	Informant 1 (August 5, 2025)
Lack of interest in innovation management training	Training in innovation management attracts little interest because residents believe it does not provide immediate income. They prefer technical skills training that yields quick financial returns.	Informant 9 (August 5, 2025)

Source: Interviews.

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5. Discussion

Cultural barriers have proven to be determinant factors in the realization of welfare and economic strengthening programs within underdeveloped urban communities. This study identifies three major findings that highlight how cultural barriers hinder the effectiveness of such programs. First, the strong dependence of communities on economic assistance reflects a passive mindset that obstructs the development of local initiative and self-reliance. Second, the emergence of individualistic attitudes within communities weakens solidarity, resulting in very limited collective participation in programs. Third, resistance to innovative initiatives is largely driven by distrust of change and the tendency to preserve long-standing practices perceived as safer and more familiar. These findings demonstrate that cultural barriers are not merely passive social backgrounds but active elements that shape the trajectory and outcomes of economic development policies.

Within underdeveloped urban communities, cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping the capacity for adaptation and acceptance of economic innovation. Kroh (2021) observes that adaptation and innovation are often perceived as foreign or even disruptive to established behavioral patterns. Similarly, Chu (2018) notes that urban economic stagnation is not only manifested in delayed economic growth but also in resistance to change. This context is influenced by everyday attitudes and behaviors that are passive, closed to innovation, and reliant on traditional methods considered safe. Such patterns have crystallized into a habitus that operates unconsciously yet effectively shapes individual and collective actions. Costumado & Chemane (2024) reinforce this by arguing that innovations introduced for economic development are often poorly received and fail to achieve optimal outcomes. Thus, the inability of underdeveloped urban communities to respond to change stems less from normative economic factors than from cultural constructions that obstruct openness to adaptation and innovation.

Economic empowerment and welfare improvement in underdeveloped urban communities cannot be separated from the cultural dynamics embedded in daily life. Bourdieu (2011) highlights habitus as the most influential cultural element, consisting of ways of thinking, attitudes, and behaviors formed over time and passed down across generations. Sharlamanov et al. (2024) emphasize that the habitus of underdeveloped urban communities tends to normalize resistance to innovation and change. This condition explains the persistently low levels of community participation in empowerment programs, as residents perceive new approaches as unfamiliar, untrustworthy, or beyond their readiness. Fernando, Ariwidodo et al. (2025b) further argue that when communities maintain unproductive lifestyles and even reject empowerment

processes, it becomes difficult to generate significant impacts. These insights suggest that cultural barriers create deep-seated latent constraints that strongly influence the effectiveness of economic strengthening programs.

Cultural barriers thus emerge as latent factors that significantly shape the trajectory of empowerment initiatives in underdeveloped urban contexts. Such barriers manifest in mindsets, attitudes, and daily practices that constitute community habitus (Fernando & Larasati, 2026; Lamanes & Deacon, 2019). Pujari et al. (2024) also highlight that resistance to change and innovation not only obstructs progress but also undermines the effectiveness of program implementation. Yet, cultural barriers are often treated as *taken for granted*—accepted as part of community life and not identified as critical problems in program realization. When cultural factors are overlooked, empowerment becomes ineffective, community welfare is neglected, and economic potential remains unrealized due to conflicts with entrenched values and practices. Unrecognized cultural barriers become determinant factors in the stagnation of economic strengthening programs in underdeveloped urban communities (Fadlurrahman et al., 2025; Noviani et al., 2025).

The findings of this study differ from previous research, which largely focused on bureaucratic and technical obstacles, such as weak planning, limited inter-agency coordination, and inadequate resources. This study reveals that the barriers to program success extend beyond such technical issues, encompassing cultural factors that often go unnoticed. These include values, norms, and community mindsets that are frequently misaligned with the development approaches employed by governments or implementing institutions. This misalignment leads to resistance or minimal participation in program execution. Andersson et al. (2021) similarly stress that development and economic strengthening strategies that neglect social and cultural characteristics are likely to be ineffective and may even result in failure.

For this reason, policies and programs for economic strengthening in underdeveloped urban communities must be designed with serious attention to cultural contexts deeply rooted in community life. As Foer (2018) points out, such contexts shape how communities respond to change and engage with development programs. Empowerment initiatives cannot be developed in a one-size-fits-all manner without regard for local cultural dynamics. Instead, approaches that are sensitive to values, languages, and traditions are essential to ensure relevance and broad acceptance. Active involvement of communities from the planning to implementation stages is equally critical for building ownership and enhancing program effectiveness. By accommodating local cultures, empowerment and economic strengthening programs stand a better chance of achieving sustainable goals and delivering tangible improvements in the welfare of underdeveloped urban communities.

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6. Conclusion

Cultural barriers not only represent a passive social background but also constitute active elements that shape the direction and outcomes of economic strengthening policies, particularly among underdeveloped urban communities. The findings of this study reveal that underdeveloped urban communities are still dominated by passive mindsets, as reflected in their strong dependence on economic assistance programs, which hinders the growth of local initiatives. The rise of individualistic attitudes within communities has further weakened collective spirit and reduced participation in economic strengthening programs. In addition, resistance to innovative programs frequently occurs due to distrust of change and the strong tendency to preserve long-standing practices considered safer and more familiar. These findings emphasize that the success of economic policies cannot rely solely on technocratic approaches but requires a deep understanding of cultural dynamics in their contextual settings.

This study makes a significant contribution to the development of public administration by highlighting the importance of cultural dimensions in the formulation and implementation of public policies. Cultural barriers such as passive mindsets, low levels of collective participation, and resistance to change have been shown to undermine the effectiveness of economic strengthening programs, even when they are technically well designed. Thus, this study enriches the discourse in public administration by incorporating socio-cultural perspectives as an essential element in policy analysis. Its contribution also underscores the importance of more adaptive and participatory governance approaches that do not rely exclusively on rational-instrumental logic but also consider community values, norms, and mindsets in a holistic way. Furthermore, this study opens opportunities for developing public administration theories and practices that are more contextual, inclusive, and responsive to the social diversity of grassroots communities.

This study has limitations, as it was conducted only within urban communities in Magelang City. Such geographically limited scope naturally affects the generalization of findings, given the social and cultural differences that may exist among urban communities in other regions. While this study has succeeded in uncovering the significant role of cultural barriers in influencing the success of economic strengthening programs, its findings do not fully represent broader urban contexts across different areas. Future research can therefore be conducted in various regions with diverse socio-cultural characteristics to provide a more comprehensive and varied understanding of the influence of cultural barriers in economic development. Comparative approaches may also help identify common patterns as well as contextual differences across regions, which could be useful in designing more adaptive

and targeted public policies. Thus, expanding future research can further strengthen the theoretical foundations of planning and implementing contextually relevant development policies.

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