



Humanistic Perspectives on Social Inequality and Community Development

Irwan Syamsuddin¹

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

Corresponding Author: Irwan Syamsuddin

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Abstract

This study explores social inequality and community development through a humanistic perspective, emphasizing lived experience, dignity, and social recognition. While inequality is often examined through economic indicators and structural analysis, this research foregrounds the subjective realities of individuals navigating unequal social conditions. Using a qualitative design, the study captures in-depth narratives from community members experiencing socio-economic disparities and actively engaging in local development initiatives. The findings reveal that inequality is not only material but also relational and psychological, affecting self-worth, belonging, and perceived social value. Participants described experiences of marginalization in institutional settings, limited access to opportunities, and emotional burdens associated with exclusion. However, the study also identifies participation in community initiatives as a transformative process that fosters empowerment, restores dignity, and strengthens collective solidarity. Meaningful involvement in decision-making and collaborative activities enhanced participants' sense of agency and social recognition. The results suggest that human dignity and participatory engagement are central to sustainable and inclusive community development. By integrating structural awareness with a humanistic emphasis on empathy, recognition, and agency, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of inequality. It underscores that addressing social disparities requires not only economic redistribution but also relational transformation grounded in respect and inclusion.

Introduction

Social inequality remains one of the most persistent and complex challenges confronting contemporary societies. Across global and local contexts, disparities in income, education, access to health services, housing, and political participation continue to shape life chances and social mobility (Alam & Aslam, 2023; Heath & Li, 2023). International reports consistently demonstrate widening economic gaps within and between countries, revealing structural patterns that reproduce disadvantage across generations (Linsi & Mügge, 2019). While macroeconomic analyses provide valuable statistical portraits of inequality, they often fail to capture how inequality is experienced, internalized, and negotiated in everyday life. Social inequality is not merely a matter of distribution; it is also a matter of dignity, recognition, belonging, and human potential (Sernau, 2019).

Classical sociological thought has long examined inequality as an outcome of structural arrangements embedded in economic and political systems. Conceptualized inequality as rooted in class relations and ownership of the means of production, arguing that exploitation and alienation were inherent in capitalist societies. Similarly, Max Weber expanded the analysis by highlighting the multidimensional nature of stratification, emphasizing class, status, and power as intersecting dimensions of inequality (Ghosh et al., 2023). These foundational perspectives underscore that inequality is not accidental but systematically produced and maintained through institutional arrangements. Later, Pierre Bourdieu further illuminated how cultural capital, habitus, and symbolic power perpetuate social hierarchies, often subtly and invisibly.

However, structural explanations alone are insufficient to fully understand the human consequences of inequality (Chmielewski, 2019). Beyond material deprivation, inequality influences self-perception, aspirations, and social relationships. Individuals who face persistent marginalization may internalize feelings of inferiority or exclusion, affecting their sense of agency and participation in community life. In this regard, the humanistic perspective offers an important complementary lens. Humanistic psychology, as articulated by Abraham Maslow, emphasizes the hierarchy of needs and the fundamental drive toward self-actualization. When basic needs such as safety, belonging, and esteem are unmet due to structural inequality, individuals' capacity to achieve their full potential becomes constrained. Likewise, Carl Rogers stressed the importance of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and authentic relationships in fostering personal growth. Applied to social contexts, these insights suggest that development efforts must go beyond economic metrics and address the psychosocial dimensions of human well-being.

Contemporary analyses reinforce the urgency of re-centering human dignity within discussions of inequality. Sarkodie et al. (2020) demonstrates how capital accumulation can exacerbate wealth concentration, while Tolliver et al. (2019) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms rather than solely income growth. Sen's capability approach highlights that true development occurs when individuals have genuine opportunities to pursue lives, they value. In parallel, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the ethical obligation to secure basic capabilities that uphold human dignity. These perspectives converge in asserting that inequality undermines not only economic stability but also the moral foundations of society.

Community development emerges within this discourse as a strategic and ethical response to inequality (Adeleye et al., 2020). Traditionally, community development initiatives have aimed to improve infrastructure, livelihoods, and service delivery at the local level. Yet scholars such as Paulo Freire remind us that development must also be emancipatory. Freire's concept of conscientization underscores the importance of critical awareness and dialogue in empowering marginalized communities to challenge oppressive structures. Similarly, Robert Chambers advocates participatory approaches that prioritize the voices and knowledge of local people rather than imposing top-down solutions. These approaches resonate strongly with humanistic values, as they recognize community members as active subjects rather than passive beneficiaries (Xu et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence further indicates that community-based initiatives grounded in participation and social solidarity can mitigate some of the adverse effects of inequality (Dolamore & Kline, 2020). Programs that foster social capital, trust, and collective efficacy

contribute not only to improved material outcomes but also to strengthened social cohesion. Maeder et al. (2024) argues that social networks and civic engagement are crucial resources that enable communities to cooperate and thrive. In unequal settings, rebuilding social trust becomes essential for sustainable development.

Despite these advances, many development policies remain predominantly technocratic, emphasizing measurable outputs while neglecting lived experiences (Vine & Greenwood, 2022). Quantitative indicators such as poverty rates or income distribution indices, although important, cannot fully capture the subtle forms of exclusion that individuals encounter daily. Feelings of shame, marginalization, or invisibility often escape statistical representation. Therefore, a humanistic perspective is indispensable for understanding how inequality shapes identities, relationships, and aspirations within communities. By foregrounding empathy, dialogue, and recognition, such a perspective seeks to restore the centrality of human beings in development discourse.

In diverse societies, including those undergoing rapid urbanization and socio-economic transformation, inequality manifests in layered and context-specific ways (Pratt et al., 2020). Local communities frequently navigate tensions between traditional solidarity and emerging competitive pressures. In these contexts, development initiatives that fail to engage with cultural values and human experiences risk reproducing existing hierarchies. Conversely, initiatives grounded in mutual respect and participatory engagement can foster resilience and collective agency. The integration of structural analysis with humanistic insight thus provides a more holistic understanding of inequality and development.

This study situates itself within this intellectual and moral landscape (Esteves et al., 2021). By examining social inequality through a humanistic lens, it seeks to illuminate how individuals and communities interpret their circumstances, negotiate challenges, and cultivate pathways toward empowerment. Rather than reducing inequality to abstract indicators, the study foregrounds human dignity, lived experience, and communal relationships as central elements of development. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly and practical debates on how societies might move toward more just, inclusive, and compassionate forms of community development (Apostolopoulou et al., 2022).

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a humanistic paradigm to explore how social inequality is experienced and interpreted within community development processes. A qualitative approach was selected because the focus of the study was not to measure inequality through statistical indicators but to understand the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and relational dynamics that shape community life. The research was specifically informed by phenomenological principles, which emphasize the exploration of participants lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to social realities. This design allowed the researcher to capture nuanced accounts of dignity, marginalization, participation, and empowerment as articulated by community members themselves.

The humanistic orientation of this research aligns with the emphasis on empathy, authenticity, and the recognition of individuals as active meaning-makers. Rather than treating participants

as objects of study, the design positioned them as co-constructors of knowledge. This approach ensured that the findings reflect the voices, interpretations, and aspirations of the community, consistent with the study's commitment to human dignity and social recognition.

Research Site and Context

The study was conducted in a community characterized by visible socio-economic disparities, including unequal access to employment opportunities, education, and social services. The site was selected purposively based on preliminary observations indicating both persistent inequality and active community development initiatives. This dual condition made the site particularly suitable for examining how inequality is negotiated within ongoing efforts toward collective improvement.

Contextual analysis was undertaken to understand the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional background of the community. Attention was given to local governance structures, social networks, informal support systems, and existing development programs. Understanding these contextual factors was essential for interpreting participants' narratives within their broader structural environment.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences and insights were included. The selection criteria focused on three primary groups: (1) community members who directly experience socio-economic inequality, (2) local leaders or facilitators involved in development initiatives, and (3) representatives of community-based organizations. This diversity of participants enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on inequality and development.

In total, participants were recruited until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Efforts were made to ensure variation in gender, age, occupation, and socio-economic background to reflect the heterogeneity of the community. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate and provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to share personal experiences, reflections, and interpretations of inequality and community development. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Participant observation complemented interview data by capturing social interactions, community meetings, and development activities as they naturally unfolded. This method enabled the researcher to observe expressions of solidarity, power dynamics, participation patterns, and informal leadership roles. Field notes were recorded systematically to document observations, contextual details, and reflexive insights.

Document analysis was conducted on relevant community records, program reports, and policy documents. These materials provided additional context and allowed triangulation of findings.

Together, these three techniques ensured a comprehensive understanding of both lived experiences and institutional frameworks shaping community development.

Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation. Recognizing this, the study incorporated reflexive practices to enhance transparency and credibility. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to document assumptions, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations. This practice helped minimize bias and allowed for critical self-awareness regarding positionality.

Building trust with participants was central to the research process. The researcher engaged respectfully with community members, prioritized empathetic listening, and ensured that participants felt safe sharing their experiences. This relational approach was consistent with the humanistic foundation of the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis procedure. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes to gain holistic familiarity with the data. Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of text related to experiences of inequality, dignity, participation, empowerment, and community relationships.

Subsequently, codes were organized into broader categories through axial coding, identifying patterns and connections among emerging themes. Themes were then refined and interpreted in relation to the study's humanistic perspective. Throughout the process, constant comparison was applied to ensure consistency and depth in theme development.

Interpretation moved beyond description to explore the underlying meanings embedded in participants' narratives. Particular attention was given to expressions of self-worth, recognition, social exclusion, and collective agency, as these dimensions reflect the core humanistic concerns of the study.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on how social inequality is experienced, interpreted, and transformed within the context of community development. Drawing from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and community documentation, the results illuminate the lived realities of individuals navigating structural disadvantage while actively engaging in collective initiatives. The analysis is organized around three interconnected themes: lived experiences of social inequality, human dignity and social recognition, and participation as humanistic empowerment. Together, these themes reflect the central argument of the study that inequality is not only a structural condition but also a relational and experiential phenomenon, and that meaningful participation plays a critical role in restoring dignity and strengthening community resilience.

Lived Experiences of Social Inequality

The lived experiences of social inequality in this study reveal that inequality is not merely a structural condition but a deeply embodied and emotional reality. Participants described inequality as something they encounter daily through limited access to stable employment, unequal educational opportunities, and differential treatment in public services. These experiences were not articulated primarily in terms of abstract economic indicators but through narratives of struggle, exclusion, and resilience. Inequality was felt in moments of comparison, when individuals measured their circumstances against those of more privileged groups, and in institutional encounters where they perceived subtle or explicit discrimination.

Several participants emphasized that inequality shapes not only their material conditions but also their sense of self-worth. Repeated exposure to economic hardship and social marginalization led some to internalize feelings of inadequacy. One participant explained,

“Sometimes it is not just about not having enough money. It is about feeling that you are not seen, that your effort does not matter as much as others.”

This statement illustrates how inequality operates symbolically, affecting recognition and dignity. Participants frequently linked economic exclusion to social invisibility, suggesting that the absence of acknowledgment from institutions and wider society deepened their sense of marginalization.

Educational disparities emerged as a significant dimension of lived inequality. Several participants recounted interrupted schooling due to financial constraints, which subsequently limited employment prospects. For many, this created a cycle in which structural barriers were reproduced across generations. However, the narratives also revealed strong aspirations for their children’s futures, reflecting a desire to break the cycle of disadvantage. A parent shared,

“I could not continue my education because my family had no resources, but I do not want my children to feel the same limits that I felt.”

This expression highlights how inequality is experienced not only as a present hardship but also as a concern for future opportunities.

Employment insecurity further intensified feelings of vulnerability. Informal work arrangements, unstable income, and lack of social protection contributed to ongoing uncertainty. Participants described how precarious employment conditions affected their psychological well-being, often generating stress and anxiety. Despite these challenges, many demonstrated resilience and adaptive strategies, such as forming mutual aid networks within the community. These informal solidarities functioned as coping mechanisms, mitigating the harshest effects of inequality while reinforcing collective bonds.

Gender and age also intersected with socio-economic status to produce differentiated experiences of inequality. Women participants, for example, described balancing unpaid domestic labor with income-generating activities, often without recognition or institutional support. Younger participants expressed frustration at limited job opportunities, which they perceived as constrained by both economic conditions and social connections. These layered experiences illustrate that inequality is multidimensional, shaped by intersecting identities and social positions.

Importantly, participants did not portray themselves solely as victims of structural forces. While acknowledging systemic barriers, they also articulated agency and hope. Community initiatives, such as local skill-sharing programs and cooperative enterprises, were described as spaces where individuals could reclaim a sense of competence and contribution. Through participation in these initiatives, some participants reported renewed confidence and strengthened social ties. These experiences suggest that while inequality constrains opportunities, collective engagement can partially restore dignity and empowerment.

The emotional dimension of inequality was particularly salient. Feelings of shame, comparison, and exclusion were recurrent themes. Participants described moments when they hesitated to attend social gatherings due to financial limitations or felt uncomfortable in interactions with wealthier groups. Yet, these emotional burdens coexisted with strong communal solidarity. Shared hardship fostered empathy among neighbors, creating an environment where mutual understanding reduced isolation.

Overall, the lived experiences documented in this study demonstrate that social inequality extends beyond measurable disparities. It penetrates daily interactions, shapes identities, influences aspirations, and affects emotional well-being. At the same time, these narratives reveal resilience, collective agency, and the transformative potential of community-based engagement. By centering these lived experiences, the study underscores the importance of approaching inequality not solely as a structural issue but as a profoundly human one embedded in relationships, recognition, and the ongoing struggle for dignity.

Human Dignity and Social Recognition

Human dignity emerged in this study as a central theme in understanding how individuals navigate social inequality within their community. Participants consistently described dignity not in abstract philosophical terms, but as a lived condition rooted in respect, acknowledgment, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to collective life. For many, dignity was closely tied to being treated fairly in everyday interactions whether in public offices, workplaces, or neighborhood gatherings. When respect was absent, participants felt that inequality became more than economic disparity; it became a denial of their humanity.

Several narratives revealed that social recognition plays a crucial role in sustaining self-worth amid structural disadvantage. Participants expressed that even when financial limitations persisted, being listened to and included in decision-making processes restored a sense of value. One community member reflected,

“What makes me feel equal is when someone asks for my opinion and truly listens. Even if my situation is difficult, I feel respected.”

This statement illustrates how recognition operates as a powerful counterbalance to material deprivation. The acknowledgment of voice and perspective reinforced participants’ sense of belonging and social presence.

Conversely, the absence of recognition intensified experiences of exclusion. Some participants recounted interactions with institutions where they perceived dismissive attitudes or bureaucratic indifference. These encounters were interpreted as symbolic affirmations of lower status. A participant explained,

“When officials speak to us without patience, it feels like they already assume we are less important. It is not just about the service; it is about how they look at us.”

Such experiences demonstrate that inequality is reproduced not only through economic structures but also through everyday communicative practices that convey hierarchy and marginality.

Within the community itself, however, alternative forms of recognition were cultivated. Informal networks and collective activities provided spaces where individuals could demonstrate competence and solidarity. Participation in local initiatives such as neighborhood clean-up efforts, cooperative enterprises, or mutual aid groups enabled members to contribute skills and labor that were publicly appreciated. In these contexts, recognition was expressed through gratitude, trust, and shared responsibility. Participants described how these interactions affirmed their capabilities, countering narratives of dependency often associated with marginalized populations.

Gender dynamics also influenced experiences of dignity and recognition. Women participants emphasized the importance of having their domestic and caregiving labor acknowledged as valuable contributions to the community’s well-being. In settings where such labor was recognized, women reported stronger self-confidence and social standing. Where it was overlooked, feelings of invisibility persisted. These accounts suggest that recognition must extend beyond formal economic roles to encompass diverse forms of contribution.

The study also found that dignity is closely connected to autonomy. Participants articulated that being able to make choices even small ones regarding work, education, or community involvement enhanced their sense of control over life circumstances. Development initiatives that fostered participatory engagement were therefore perceived not merely as economic support but as affirmations of agency. Recognition in this sense was not passive praise but active inclusion in processes of collective decision-making.

Importantly, participants did not equate dignity solely with upward mobility or wealth accumulation. Rather, dignity was framed as relational and communal. It was experienced when mutual respect characterized interactions, when differences in economic status did not translate into social distance, and when individuals felt seen as whole persons rather than as statistics or beneficiaries. This relational understanding underscores that human dignity cannot be secured through material improvement alone; it requires cultural and social transformation that values every member of the community.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social recognition functions as both a protective and transformative factor within contexts of inequality. While structural disparities persist, the affirmation of voice, contribution, and personhood strengthens resilience and social cohesion. By foregrounding dignity as a lived experience, the study highlights that equitable community development must attend not only to redistribution of resources but also to the restoration and protection of human worth in everyday life.

Participation as Humanistic Empowerment

Participation emerged in this study not merely as a procedural component of community development but as a deeply humanistic process that restores agency, dignity, and collective meaning. Participants described involvement in community initiatives as transformative

experiences that shifted their self-perception from passive recipients of assistance to active contributors to social change. In contexts marked by inequality, opportunities to participate in decision-making and collective action became powerful expressions of empowerment.

Many participants explained that before engaging in community programs, they often felt marginalized and excluded from formal structures of authority. Development decisions were typically made by external actors or local elites without meaningful consultation. However, participatory forums such as community meetings, cooperative planning sessions, and local working groups created spaces where individuals could articulate concerns, propose ideas, and influence outcomes. This shift from exclusion to inclusion had profound psychological implications. One participant shared,

“When I was invited to speak in the meeting, I realized that my experience was important. It made me feel that I am part of this community, not just someone who receives help.”

This reflection illustrates how participation fosters recognition and reinforces a sense of belonging.

Participation also strengthened collective efficacy. As community members collaborated on small-scale development projects such as skill-training workshops, neighborhood improvements, or income-generating activities they witnessed tangible outcomes of their joint efforts. These shared accomplishments cultivated trust and mutual respect, reinforcing the belief that change is possible through collective action. A participant involved in a cooperative initiative explained,

“Before, I thought nothing would change because we have always struggled. But when we worked together and saw the results, I felt confident that we can improve our situation step by step.”

This statement underscores how participation nurtures hope and resilience in environments shaped by inequality.

Importantly, participation functioned as a learning process. Through dialogue and collaboration, participants developed communication skills, organizational abilities, and greater awareness of their rights and capacities. These experiences expanded their sense of agency beyond the immediate scope of community projects. Several participants described becoming more confident in interacting with local authorities or advocating for their needs after participating in collective initiatives. Thus, empowerment was not limited to material benefits but extended to personal growth and enhanced civic engagement.

The study also found that participatory processes reduced social distance within the community. In settings where socio-economic disparities had previously created divisions, collaborative activities fostered interaction across different backgrounds. Shared responsibilities and open discussions encouraged empathy and mutual understanding. Participation therefore served as a bridge that connected individuals who might otherwise remain socially fragmented. This relational dimension aligns closely with the humanistic emphasis on dialogue, respect, and authentic engagement.

Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that meaningful participation requires supportive conditions. Transparent leadership, inclusive communication, and equitable access to information were identified as essential factors. When participation was symbolic or limited to a small group, feelings of exclusion resurfaced. Therefore, empowerment depends not only on the existence of participatory spaces but also on the quality and sincerity of engagement within those spaces.

Overall, participation in this study functioned as a mechanism of humanistic empowerment by restoring voice, strengthening agency, and reinforcing communal solidarity. In contexts of social inequality, such processes challenge narratives of dependency and marginality. By positioning individuals as capable actors in shaping their collective future, participatory development affirms both human dignity and the transformative potential of community action.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social inequality is not only a structural or economic condition but a deeply human experience that shapes dignity, recognition, participation, and collective identity within community life. The findings reveal that inequality is lived through everyday interactions, institutional encounters, and internalized perceptions of worth, affecting both material opportunities and psychosocial well-being. At the same time, the study highlights the transformative potential of community-based participation as a form of humanistic empowerment. When individuals are recognized, listened to, and meaningfully involved in decision-making processes, they reclaim agency and reaffirm their value within the social fabric. Human dignity and social recognition emerge as essential foundations for sustainable community development, demonstrating that equitable progress requires more than resource redistribution it requires relational transformation grounded in respect, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Ultimately, approaching inequality through a humanistic lens offers a more holistic and ethically grounded pathway toward strengthening communities and fostering enduring social justice.

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