READ Methodology: Community Library and Resource Center a Transformative Instrument in Socio-Economic Development

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Abstract: READ methodology focuses on setting up the "Community Library and Resource Centers," which stimulates social and economic transformation integrating with education, enterprise, and community development, collaborations with rural communities, and to seed for-profit sustaining enterprises to ensure their durable functioning and success. Within the demand from the community, the READ CLRC service delivery mechanism of the room library model was further expanded into a children's section, women's section, youth section, information, communication and technology section, meeting hall, and audio / visual section. CLRCs also partner with local government, community people, and other stakeholders to deliver community outreach activities such as practical action programs which basically address the issues related to agriculture and livestock, income-generating skills, health sessions, literacy classes, safe migration, disaster risk reduction, social institutional and cooperative literacy and etc. The systematic review approach was used for analysis because it detects themes, theoretical perspectives, or common issues within a specific research discipline or methodology or identifies a theoretical concept's components. This paper examines the READ methodology as a transformative instrument for socio-economic development that aligns with Madon's theoretical model and the DFID Sustainable Livelihood Framework. So, in this order, various literature and focus group discussion findings have demonstrated strong evidence that READ methodology can be recommended as a transformative instrument in community development driven locally.

Keywords: *Community library and resource center, READ methodology, Socio-economic development, Sustainable development*

1. Introduction

READ Nepal, holding 32 years' legacy, is a national non - non-governmental organization that started its roots in 1991 AD in the small village of Junbeshi, Solukhambu district of Nepal. Basically, it was established at the request of a trekking guide, Domi Lama, to Dr. Toni Neubauer (Founder) as a book hub for reading and exchanging information with the community people. Later on, it was moreover a place where women and other community people regarded the library as a safe space in order to share their problems and discuss social issues existing within the community. Within the demand from the community, READ methodology of program delivery of the room library model was further expanded into several sections: library section, children section, women section, youth section, information, communication and technology section, meeting hall, and audio / visual section. Each community library and resource center provides at a minimum of the following resources;

- A library section with 3,000-5,000 books, magazines and newspapers in both English and the local language
- An information and communications technology section with computers, internet access and computer skills training
- A women empowerment section providing a safe space for women and girls to attend classes and training
- An early childhood section with child-friendly furniture, educational toys, and reading materials

- Audio and Visual section including TV, video, telephone and fax
- A training / meeting hall where staff and community partners and NGOs conduct various programs

Each section led all the age groups to receive program services from the community library and resource center (CLRCs). For instance, children section is promoting to develop the foundational literacy and the leisure activities hub. In addition, information, communication, and technology sections are advantageous, especially for youth groups to develop their skills and knowledge on using computers. This usually supports the users in building professional competency. Another interesting section is audio and visual, where persons with disabilities and illiterate persons also benefit from various programs through visual and audio devices. Consequently, CLRCs also partner with local government, community people, and other stakeholders to deliver community outreach activities such as practical action programs which basically address the issues related to agriculture and livestock, income-generating skills, health sessions, literacy classes, safe migration, disaster risk reduction, social institutional and cooperative literacy and etc. As a result, community people who are unable to reach the CLRCs could also benefit from enhancing their income and social literacy through community outreach activities. Income generation and literacy programs include various kinds of financial, entrepreneurship and livelihood, input or scale-up support, skills, and training, including linking towards service providers to the government scheme such as social security allowance, insurance, employment skills training, and so on. On the other hand, women's groups are formed with the aim of sharing their issues concerning livestock and agriculture, which are basically related to income enhancement including sexual and reproductive health. Similarly, these groups are empowered with various literacy classes and leadership skills, and these groups are formed as the credit and saving groups. This platform creates the opportunity for the women to hold a position that ultimately catalyzes their leadership and effective communication skills while these groups are also networked with the government body for the legal registration process. Many members receive cash in the low-interest amount from where they start their small-scale business or expand their income source as well. It means the READ methodology consists of an integrated approach to service delivery towards community development in collaboration with community people, governments, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, due to its strong partnership with several entities, the government also allocates the budget for the CLRCs program, and community people themselves take ownership of the CLRCs.

READ Nepal won the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Access to Learning Award (ALTA) in 2006, in recognition of the innovative efforts to connect people to information. Additionally, next year, a replication grant was also awarded to bring its unique and sustainable model to Bhutan and India (Our Story - READ Global, 2022). On this note, to date, India has supported the establishment of 58 Community Library and Resource Centers (READ India - READ Global, 2023); Bhutan has reached eight while Nepal has stretched to 70, and three of them are in the construction phase. READ methodology emphasizes the locally led-driven approach, which means from the initial phase of the development of the CLRCs, community people and local government, including other stakeholders, are involved. As per the need of the community, READ Nepal delivers financial and technical support to develop the CLRCs where the community people, in coordination with local government, manage the land for construction of CLRCs and 10-15% of community funding contribution as a co-investment concept. This ensures the community engagement and ownership to fully integrate to build up the community trust and the READ stimulation process. During the full phase of the construction to handover period, the library management committee led the process; thorough capacity building training, social mobilization, policy development, registration, library sections set-up, and finally, sustainable enterprise is also settled to ensure the sustainability of the library. A sustainable enterprise is formed in order to bear the operation cost of the library on its own. The library management committee is the autonomous democratic body that functions and is elected every three years by the community people themselves. READ methodology focuses on the setting up of CLRC, which stimulates social and economic transformation integrating with education, enterprise and community development, collaborations with rural communities, and seeding for-profit sustaining enterprises to ensure their durable functioning and success (Shrestha, 2013). Many READ-supported community libraries have various kinds of sustainable enterprises such as fish ponds, rental stores, ambulances, community radio, cooperatives, and store frontal are some of them.

In addition, due to its physical infrastructure and sustainable enterprises holding long-term benefits for the community people as on a regular basis, various kinds of these services are provided. Thus, this methodology also ensures the community people take the initiative to discuss the issues within themselves and solve by themselves within the local leadership of the library management community. In addition, this paper demonstrates the outcome of the focus group discussion findings conducted with the two CLRCs (i.e., Shrijana CLRCs, Lahan Municipality, Siraha and Jahada CLRCs, Bardaghat Municipality, Nawalparasi), which reveals on how the community development has been achieved in terms of socio-economic aspects. This includes contributing to education and livelihood opportunities. This paper aims to evident the READ methodology as a transformative community development approach in unlocking socio-economic aspects.

2. Materials and methods

This study focuses on linking the READ methodology as a transformative community development approach using existing development concepts or frameworks and theories. The author used a semi-systematic review approach to search the keywords such as "community library", "READ Global", "READ Nepal", "READ Bhutan", "READ India", "development theory", "socio-economic development concept" for secondary literature in various database; "Google Scholar", "Research Gate" and "Sage Journal". On the other hand, focused group discussion findings have been cast off to align with the thematic statement. The semi-systematic review approach is used because of its having a qualitative analysis approach, such as the thematic approach to comparing and defining. This type of analysis is useful for detecting themes, theoretical perspectives, or common issues within a specific research discipline or methodology or for identifying components of a theoretical concept (Ward et al., 2009). Since the paper scrutinizes the development theory and framework, this review approach seems much more appropriate and utilized to analyze accordingly.

2.1. Theoretical approach

To define socio-economic development, it is appropriate to first understand the development and a closely associated and sometimes interchangeably used term, growth. Development is identified as a progressive course of growth (Palvia et al., 2018). Within the changing notion of development, there are various concepts adopted by different nations or organizations to ensure growth. Several theories explain the process of development in developing countries, e.g., the modernization theory, dependency theory, works system theory, state theory, economic development theory, comprehensive theory of social development, post-development theory, and social development theory.

Social development is basically defined as opportunities for education, social interactions, and the evolution of social customs, fashion, and trends (Palvia et al., 2018). On the other hand, economic development refers to the creation of better-paying / jobs, widespread and sustained increases in living standards, and accelerated economic activities (Palvia et al., 2018).
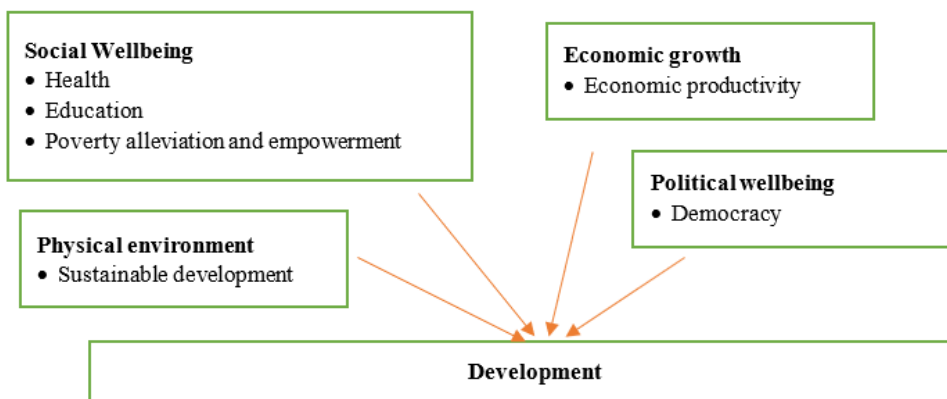

Figure 1: Madon's Theoretical Model (Madon, 2000)

## 2.2. The Sustainable Livelihood Development Framework

The Department for International Development, UK government framework illustrates that household livelihoods are based on the use of assets in livelihood strategies and activities. Along with that, it also stresses how people operate within a vulnerable context that is shaped by different factors-shifting season constraints and opportunities, economic shocks, and longer-term trends (Allison et al., 2009). Households employ the productive capital in combination with their labor allocation in livelihood strategies in order to generate incomes and well-being. The various components (Fig 2) mentioned in the concept are;

- Human capital refers to household members, capabilities in terms with their age, health, education, knowledge, and skills.
- Physical capital refers to household level to the physical equipment and tools used for production. Basic level includes house, livestock, bicycle, road networks, clinics, schools and so on.
- Natural capital refers to access to natural resources such as river, water, agricultural land, forest and so on.
- Financial capital refers to savings and credit, income generations, employment and so on.
- Social capital refers to kinship networks, associations, membership organizations and peer-group networks and so on.
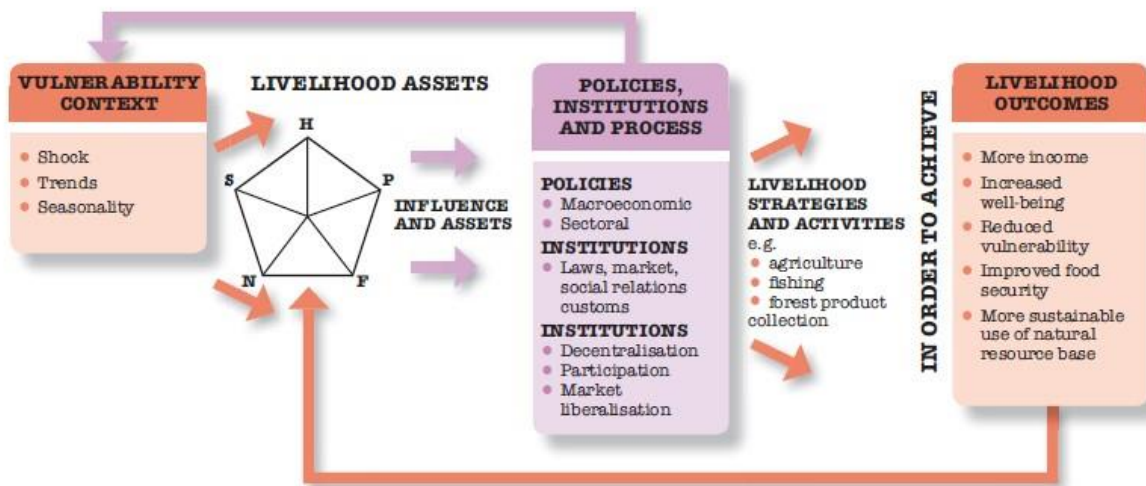
Figure 2: The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DFID, 2000)

The (Fig. 1 & 2) concepts and theories can support the explanation of the READ methodology as a transformative instrument for socio-economic development. Furthermore, Madon's theoretical model (Madon, 2000) seems closest to defining the concept of socio-economic development in developing countries and its dimensions of socio-economic development with the context of READ methodology. She has mentioned four dimensions of socio-economic development: social well-being, economic growth, political well-being, and physical environment. Several application areas are identified within these dimensions, i.e., economic productivity, health, education, poverty alleviation and empowerment, democracy, and sustainable development (Fig 1). READ methodology involves these four extensions of socio-economic development, which closely align with Madon's concept. Her ideas connect the READ program methodology in social components such as education, health, networking, and income well-being. On the other hand, DIFID Sustainable Livelihood Development Framework involves the use of all five livelihood capitals to enhance the socio-economic development of the individual people. Apart from that, CLRCs are the platform that keeps on existing within the community and functioning by themselves in continuous practices. Figure 3 is the conceptual, theoretical framework to align with the READ methodology as a transformative instrument for socio-economic development.
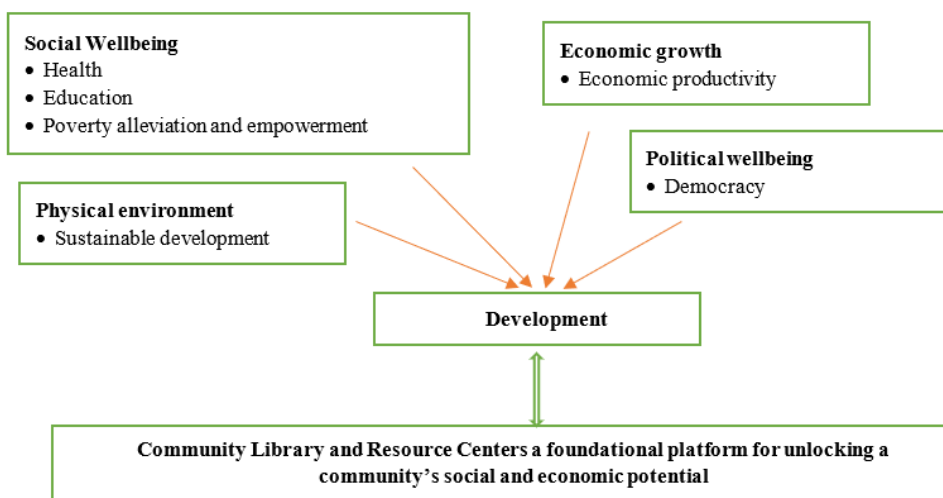
Figure 3: Theoretical Framework for READ Methodology as a Transformative Instrument to Socio-Economic Development

3. Results and discussion

READ methodology aligns with the concept and theories described above. It stresses the various facets (i.e., social well-being, economic opportunities, physical environment, and political well-being) of development to enhance community development. It also emphasizes the use of livelihood capital to enhance the development of the individual.

3.1. Social wellbeing

Social well-being refers to health, education, poverty alleviation, and empowerment. CLRCs offer basic health services to communities by organizing a wide array of health-related activities such as regular health camps, eye clinics, dental clinics, reproductive health awareness programs for women, safe motherhood training, blood donation programs, and counseling to provide health-related information. Besides that, READ CLRCs also provide access not only to reading materials but also to knowledge and information through various educational events such as educational competitions, National Reading Campaigns, educational outreach projects through mobile libraries and schools, book exhibitions and much more. READ CLRCs also conduct regular literacy classes for women and elderly citizens, providing educational opportunities relevant to their needs.

Discussion with the community women has revealed that the participants regard learning not only through the literacy class but through participation in various programs, specifically training. In other words, they have been able to see beyond other than the brick kiln.

"Previously we just used to stay at home or roam around. But after getting into community group we have understand a knowledge on how improved poultry, goat keeping, vegetable farming, animal husbandry can generate alternative income and look after family, children education etc. can secure the future."- Focused Group Discussion, Jahada CLRC, Nawalparasi

Participants asserted that they had gained knowledge on various livelihood options like poultry farming, goat raising, vegetable farming, and so on. As an underlying impact of these changes, participants mentioned that they have gained confidence in interacting with people and even getting access to local government agencies. A sense of independence and the ability to make self-decisions is another underlying impact on the same line. Not only that, but they have also been able to voice their opinions and pledge for their rights. For instance, one participant mentioned that they stated their disapproval of the wage amount they had been getting from the brick kiln, and as a result, the wage was increased.

"The confidence to voice with other person has built up after going to a meeting and interacting with other people which was not possible for me in the past. I get courage and confidence through group meeting. These are the benefits of the meeting."- Focused Group Discussion, Srijana CLRC Siraha.

3.2. Economic growth or opportunities

In addition, READ CLRCs enhance the economic capabilities and independence of rural communities by providing training in livelihood skills, as well as microfinance programs and savings cooperatives. Livelihood skills training such as vegetable farming, beekeeping, and animal husbandry encourage the economic empowerment of rural communities. Savings cooperatives provide access to credit to run small businesses. Similarly, READ CLRCs offer social services to meet the basic needs of the entire community -regardless of caste, language, religion, and region. Social services include health activities, women's empowerment training, ICT activities, and childhood development programs.

"My financial condition was much weak. Thus, was struggling to support livelihood. After taking the training provided by CLRC, I have started a business of selling potato and onion. Now, I have been able to afford food for consumption and support livelihood." – Focused Group Discussion, Jahada CLRC, Nawalparasi

Most of the target people have adopted alternative sources of income other than working in the brick kiln. Participants mentioned due to the support from the library through livelihood skill development training and orientation programs such as agriculture, goat raising, and vocational training like tailoring and driving. As a result, many participants have started their own side business (i.e., goat raising, grocery shop, vegetable shop, & poultry farm) either through seed support from the project or by taking loans from the savings and cooperative group. Similarly, the target people earning from the brick kiln was only limited for six months, and they wouldn't have any source of income for the rest of the year. But now, they no longer have to stress over finding a source of income since they don't have to depend upon brick kilns solely for income generation. They further notified that their livelihood has improved, and they no longer have to work at the brick kiln.

3.3. Physical environment and political wellbeing

Likewise, every READ CLRC practices the democratic process of electing its president from the community, and the library constitution governs this process. The Library Management Committee is the executive committee that executes the decisions and stimulates the network with the four tiers of government administration. READ Nepal identifies potential leaders, supports them in developing leadership skills, and provides the tools they need to be effective as leaders. When equipped with the right leadership skills, these committed and active adult and youth residents can guide their communities to new levels of development (Achieving Self-Sustaining Development in Rural Communities: A Case Study of the READ Model in Nepal, n.d.). This process allows every citizen to be part of it, and anyone can participate. Similarly, physical sustainability is ensured when the library has its own infrastructure, social sustainability is ensured when the library has maintained social trust, linkages, and partnerships with local organizations, and financial sustainability is ensured by sustaining enterprises and partnerships (Shrestha, 2013). On the other hand, READ CLRCs sustaining enterprises often generate income for local villagers in addition to meeting the operational cost of the CLRCs.

So far, there are more than 79 sustaining enterprises have been created, which include rental services, room rent, shops, ambulance, fish pond, community radio, cooperatives, and so on. CLRCs.

Currently, READ Nepal is implementing five development projects (i.e., safe migration, practical community solution, tech-age girls, technical education, and vocational education through community library and inclusive disaster risk reduction), and regular services through the community library and resource center are ongoing (Current Projects, n.d.). On this note, READ methodology has been evident to develop the capacity of community in four domains; sense of community, shared commitment, ability to solve problems, and access to resources.

3.4. Sense of community

The individuals described increased connections, trust, and teamwork among community members as a result of the process of building and operating the READ CLRCs. In some cases, groups that used to be divided because of class, caste, or politics before the CLRCs were built reported increased connectedness and a sense of community through working together to establish new READ CLRCs. Community members described gaining a sense of ownership, belonging, and trust in the READ CLRCs itself along with a shared vision of the CLRCs as a resource for future generations. CLRCs were described as "safe spaces" where "everyone feels welcome" and "the separate sections (women, youth, computing) are not isolated but connected so that everyone is exposed to everyone else."

3.5. Shared commitment

A willingness among community members to invest concretely in a common goal. This includes participation in income-generating enterprises needed to support READ CLRCs, involvement in co-designing the READ CLRCs building, contributing a small amount of money and even the bricks toward building the CLRCs, volunteering in CLRC operations and community outreach roles, and numerous other community engagement activities. Once operational, READ CLRCs institutionalize the commitment by community members that was initially developed through the process of mobilizing the community to work together to build a CLRC.

3.6. Ability to solve problems

READ Nepal familiarizes community members with prioritization and decision-making at an early stage to help them ensure the CLRC is open to all members of the community. Once the residents decide to work together to build a CLRC, they form a subcommittee to select and manage income-generating enterprises that will fund the construction and ongoing costs of the CLRC. This and other subcommittees related to each of the CLRC's programs and activities, along with the Management Committee, are formed to make decisions, identify priorities, and solve problems. Both community members and READ described the problem-solving and decision-making capacity of the CLRCs various committees as critical to reinforcing the community's trust in the CLRC as well as its ability to create and adapt programming to address the evolving needs of the local population over time.

3.7. Access to external resources

CLRCs have been able to access resources in the broader community, such as other local organizations, government agencies, experts, and funders in support of services at the READ CLRCs. READ CLRC was described as a "bridge" between the local community and district government offices, resulting in ongoing mutually beneficial collaboration and financial resources for some CLRCs. A particularly striking example of this ongoing collaborative capacity occurred in the aftermath of the devastating 2015 earthquake. READ CLRCs in affected villages immediately became hubs for disaster relief and recovery where residents registered for government benefits, non-governmental organizations (e.g., UNICEF) provided funds and services, rebuilding efforts were coordinated, and local schools temporarily held classes. This combined benefit of collaboration and access to resources within and beyond the local area was documented for NGOs, local hospitals, schools, other READ CLRCs, local Village Development Committees, government services, political groups, and national networks such as the human rights network and the library network.

Grassroots development puts forward the idea that people living in developing countries should have a say in how their countries or communities should develop. That is, the process should be more "people centered' so that the communities whom the development project would affect are now the driving force in the process (David C. Koretn, 1995). Community people are immensely engaged in the construction of the CLRC. This includes door-to-door fundraising camping and choosing the potential leader committee to complete the full construction phase. During this phase, the local leader mitigates the issues faced on their own within the community discussion. Once the CLRC is fully equipped, CLRC will design an organizational three-year strategic plan. This promotes the CLRC to guide the planned activities as per the needs of the community where, whereas READ facilitates the technical expertise in the effective development and delivery methodology. Post-development theory also denotes the people-centered approach to growth, which ultimately encourages the active involvement of the community people in decision-making. Thus, this approach ultimately results in

an impact on the ownership and community-led development. Within the READ methodology concept, locally led is the major phenomenon, and sustainable enterprise is the eventual income generating for sustainable functioning.

Overall, the READ methodology is reframing the definition of the typical library scope of work. Basically, addressing the dissemination of information and exchange of the books. READ is revolutionizing the very definitions of library and outreach in communities that hunger for resources and greater empowerment by partnering with communities to develop self-sustaining Community Library and Resource Centers (Neuman et al., 2008). Nevertheless, READ CLRC has been a platform for unlocking the socio-economic aspects of the community people, which seems to align with the theory of socio-economic development or a various framework. However, READ CLRCs, facing some challenges due to its inadequate staff, need to enroll in every administrative and programmatic activity, which needs to be considered. Apart from that, READ CLRCs need to adapt to the changing dynamic of the community needs (Shrestha, 2013). In many CLRCs, to fulfill the presence of the staff, the local government has been supporting their salary, and apart from that, many volunteer programs have been adopted to mitigate the challenges of human manpower. Similarly, due to community dynamic characteristics, CLRC sections are built accordingly. For instance, in Dhankuta district, ChatarJorpati rural municipality, a separate training hall is integrated into the CLRC's various sections with the aim to provide Technical, Vocational, and Education Training. Similarly, in the early stage, there were women and book section services towards the community as a major approach to the READ program delivery. Later on, due to the demand of the community, these two sections were broadened into further sections: youth, information communication and technology, children, and audio/visual.

4. Conclusion

The study found the READ methodology to be a transformative instrument in community development driven locally. Moreover, due to its dynamic nature, READ methodology contributes to every aspect of the socio-economic facets. It signifies the durable foundation of community empowerment and self-reliance because READ methodology is itself community-led. The community themselves have the freedom of choice in order to decide on what kinds of programs are needed and solve the problems within the community. Moreover, CLRCs are autonomous bodies that are democratically led, which gives the opportunity to practice political well-being through the ever-annual general meeting and election. Other striking dynamics of the CLRCs are that from early childhood development to senior citizens, access to persons with disabilities, getting services, and women having a safe space also denote the strong features of Gender and Social Inclusion. There are many development practices that have been practiced within the context. Therefore, exploring further comparative studies to enhance this kind of methodology can be impactful in community development.

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