

## The Role and Importance of Empowering Rural Communities for Rural Development in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

Empowerment in Afghanistan's rural areas has the potential to significantly transform rural residents' knowledge, attitudes, and work practices. Empowerment is fundamental for achieving development, as progress without empowering marginalized Afghan communities is often deemed unattainable. Empowering rural communities can be understood as a process of enhancing individuals' capacities to utilize their autonomy and mobilize local resources in productive and innovative ways within their communities. Any community development initiative rooted in local resources should aim to reduce poverty in diverse rural settings. Therefore, to foster local development and advancement, it is imperative to focus on empowering these communities by harnessing their talents and capabilities and utilizing natural, social, and advanced technological resources. This approach paves the way for community flourishing and sustainable development. This study aims to formulate strategies for managing rural empowerment aligned with sustainable development. Using a qualitative content analysis of relevant sources, data were collected through document analysis. The research revisits past studies and theories, synthesizing them to introduce the background of empowerment while tracing the trajectory of research surrounding the necessity of empowerment with a sustainable rural development approach.

**Keywords:** empowerment, local development, rural communities, poverty, Afghanistan

### Introduction

The role of rural areas in the economic, social, and political development of developing countries, as well as the consequences of underdevelopment in these regions, has prompted a focus on rural development. Attention to rural development stems not only from the fact that a significant portion of the population in developing countries resides in these areas but also because many urban challenges in developing nations—such as unemployment, overcrowding, urban poverty, slum formation, social unrest, and broader urban crises—are closely linked to neglecting rural regions. Empowerment in rural areas can bring changes to villagers' knowledge, attitudes, and work practices. It is a critical component for achieving sustainable development, as genuine progress is often seen as unattainable without empowering marginalized community segments.

Empowerment is central to participatory development, and without its integration, growth, and development indicators cannot effectively be achieved within local communities across various domains (Vora et al., 2023; Yar & Zarghani, 2024). To achieve sustainable development and the advancement of local regions, it is essential to foster the strengths, talents, and capacities of these communities and capitalize on natural, social, and advanced technological resources. Although this path may seem complex, strategic planning and inclusive surveys can readily be implemented within any local community, sparking awareness and fostering local knowledge.

Today, there is a recognized need for organized rural communities to leverage their abilities, talents, and creativity—vital elements in the sustainable rural development process. This approach originates from the concept of sustainable development, which is contextualized within capacity development frameworks and operationalized through capacity-building and empowerment mechanisms (Russell et al., 2023). Empowerment has become a shared focus in discussions surrounding rural development, particularly over the past two decades, whether in response to poverty or as a means of fostering development in areas not fully integrated into development processes.

The term "empowerment" has become prominent in development discourse, representing a concept crucial for sustainable rural development. For individuals and various sectors, empowerment signifies different objectives, such as promoting good governance, enhancing governmental legitimacy, fostering endogenous and self-reliant economic development, and encouraging collaboration, decision-making, and community participation. Hence, empowerment has evolved into a mechanism for achieving broader development goals (Ralston et al., 2021; Yar & Yasouri, 2024).

Empowerment underscores the need to build communities' capacities to adapt to changing environments, facilitated through internal and external shifts driven by creativity, innovation, and commitment to sustainable development objectives. The core principles embedded in empowerment include inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Moreover, an effective empowerment strategy should be multidimensional, mobilizing community resources and capacities to foster awareness of inequalities and establish a mindset capable of recognizing the potential for community transformation (Govaerts et al., 2021).

In this research, empowerment is understood as providing power to rural residents and enhancing their ability to act, participate, and take initiative. Empowerment equips individuals with the means to overcome their sense of powerlessness and helplessness. In this context, empowerment motivates rural communities intrinsically, propelling rural development forward. Notably, rural development has undergone a substantial transformation over time.

In this study, rural development is considered a dynamic and enduring process aimed at increasing the capacities of rural communities, fostering human excellence, and optimizing the quality of life in rural Afghanistan (Russell et al., 2023; Yar &

Yasouri, 2023). Accordingly, this article employs a qualitative content analysis approach to define, conceptualize, and highlight the significance of empowerment within a sustainable rural development framework. The innovation of this research lies in its comprehensive exploration of empowerment within the context of sustainable rural development in Afghanistan.

Unlike previous studies that may have focused solely on economic or social aspects, this research adopts a multidimensional approach, integrating economic, social, psychological, and environmental perspectives of empowerment. By synthesizing existing literature and empirical data, the study proposes novel strategies for engaging rural communities in the development process. Furthermore, it emphasizes the role of local knowledge and cultural practices in shaping empowerment initiatives, challenging conventional top-down development approaches. This innovative framework not only contributes to academic discourse but also provides practical insights for policymakers and community leaders aiming to foster sustainable development in rural Afghanistan.

**Significance of the Research:** The significance of this research is underscored by its potential to inform and enhance rural development policies in Afghanistan. By focusing on empowerment as a central theme, the study highlights the importance of enabling local communities to actively participate in their development. This approach is particularly relevant in the Afghan context, where traditional power structures and socio-economic challenges often marginalize rural populations. The findings of this research aim to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of empowerment and its direct correlation with sustainable rural development. Additionally, the research contributes to the global discourse on rural empowerment, offering insights that can be applied to similar socio-cultural contexts in other developing nations.

**Necessity of the Research:** The necessity of this research is driven by the urgent need to address the pervasive issues of poverty, underdevelopment, and social inequality in rural Afghanistan. As the country continues to face significant socio-economic challenges, empowering rural communities emerges as a critical strategy for fostering resilience and sustainable growth.

This research is essential for several reasons: first, it addresses a gap in the existing literature regarding the holistic understanding of empowerment in rural settings. Second, it provides actionable recommendations that can support community-driven development initiatives. Finally, by emphasizing the importance of local resources and knowledge, the research advocates for a paradigm shift in development practices that prioritize the voices and needs of rural residents. In essence, this study is not only timely but also crucial for shaping effective strategies for sustainable rural development in Afghanistan.

The concept of rural empowerment as a strategy for sustainable development has received growing attention in academic and policy literature, particularly for its potential to address poverty and promote sustainable growth in underdeveloped regions

like Afghanistan. Empowerment is defined as a process that enables individuals to gain control over their lives, influencing economic, social, and environmental dimensions that drive local (Wang et al., 2023).

**Rural Empowerment in Development Theory:** Empowerment as a developmental framework has roots in several disciplines, including psychology, political science, and economics. Psychologists like Zimmerman (1995) have framed empowerment as a psychological process where increased self-efficacy enables individuals to take ownership of their environments. In the context of rural development, empowerment extends to include economic and political self-sufficiency, which allows rural communities to make decisions, participate in governance, and sustainably manage their resources (Ortiz Torres, 2020).

**Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Growth:** Economic empowerment is fundamental to rural development as it fosters a bottom-up approach, where local communities harness economic tools to meet their needs, increase productivity, and reduce dependency on external support. Scholars highlight that economic empowerment in rural areas includes skill-building, access to capital, and the establishment of small enterprises, which together enhance economic resilience. Studies on rural Afghanistan demonstrate that economic empowerment is closely linked to agricultural productivity improvements and diversification of income sources, crucial for mitigating the impact of agricultural fluctuations (Wang et al., 2021).

**Social and Institutional Dimensions of Empowerment:** Empowerment also requires strong social and institutional frameworks that promote social cohesion, trust, and participation in development processes. Social scientists argue that empowerment in rural areas is driven by equitable access to social services such as healthcare, education, and political representation.

Programs like Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP) and Citizens' Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP) illustrate how institutional support can strengthen community participation, improve resource distribution, and enhance social capital (World Bank, 2016). Empowerment in this dimension helps to break down social hierarchies and encourages a participatory approach to governance, which is essential for Afghanistan's diverse rural populations (Mahmood & Muntaner, 2020).

**Gender and Cultural Aspects of Empowerment:** Empowerment in rural development literature increasingly emphasizes the role of gender, recognizing that women's inclusion is critical to sustainable development. Empowerment programs focused on women, such as microfinance initiatives and literacy programs, have been shown to improve family health, education, and economic well-being, thereby transforming rural communities. Cultural sensitivity is also essential, as rural Afghan communities are often governed by traditional values that may restrict certain groups' participation in empowerment programs (Rogers, 2003). Addressing these cultural constraints is necessary to facilitate genuine empowerment across demographic lines in Afghanistan (Pailaha, 2023).

**Environmental Empowerment and Sustainability:** Environmental sustainability is a key pillar of rural empowerment, as many rural Afghan communities are highly dependent on natural resources. Empowerment strategies that focus on environmental education, resource management, and sustainable practices have proven effective in other developing regions and offer a framework for Afghanistan. Rural communities equipped with environmental management skills are better positioned to address ecological challenges, including soil degradation, water scarcity, and climate change (FAO, 2019).

Programs that integrate environmental empowerment with agricultural training support long-term rural sustainability by promoting resilience against environmental risks (Souissi et al., 2024). Literature on rural empowerment indicates that economic, social, and environmental empowerment collectively contribute to sustainable rural development. The empowerment approach advocates for capacity building at the grassroots level, enabling rural Afghans to participate actively in their community's development and to leverage local resources effectively. Given Afghanistan's dependence on rural economies, the importance of empowerment cannot be overstated. The multidimensional empowerment approach offers a promising pathway for addressing Afghanistan's unique development challenges by fostering resilience, inclusivity, and self-sufficiency in rural communities.

### **Method Research**

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the concept of empowerment within the framework of sustainable rural development in Afghanistan. Using a systematic review of relevant literature in English and Persian, including academic articles, books, and policy documents, the research undertakes an extensive literature review to identify key themes and gaps, analyzes government and non-governmental reports for empirical insights, synthesizes thematic patterns to uncover effective strategies, and integrates perspectives from local stakeholders such as community leaders and practitioners. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of empowerment, offering a comprehensive exploration of its role in fostering sustainable rural development in Afghanistan.

### **Results and Discussion**

The term "empowerment" is derived from the English word "empowerment," which is sometimes also translated as "capacity building" or "enabling" in Persian. According to Webster's Dictionary, "empowerment" can be broken down into three parts: "Em" signifies placing into, initiating an action, or embarking upon; "power" denotes the ability to influence others to adapt behaviors or activities to meet expected outcomes, providing the empowered individual an opportunity to alert or deter others before engaging in certain actions; "ment" refers to a condition arising from a specific act, such as initiating, evolving, expanding, or empowering. In the Aryanpour Dictionary, "empowerment" is defined in two parts: "empower," meaning to grant power, authority,

or enablement, and "ment," a suffix often forming nouns from verbs, collectively giving the meaning of "empowerment."

Additionally, in Dekhoda's Dictionary, empowerment is synonymous with strength and capability, and in Mo'in's Dictionary, empowerment is equated to enabling or empowering. Finally, in the Geography and Planning Glossary, empowerment denotes the distribution of power, knowledge, information, and rewards within organizations, institutions, communities, businesses, and residential areas (Souissi et al., 2024). The concept of empowerment took form in the 1950s, reached its peak in the 1970s, and, by the 1990s, became central to rural development theories. In its modern sense, empowerment positions individuals as the primary actors.

Empowerment is a qualitative and transformative discussion; it is seen as a process by which individuals gain greater control over their actions. Through acquiring higher levels of power, resource control, trust-building, capacity-building, and active participation, individuals can effectively direct their life paths. Empowerment strategies assist people in playing an active role in self-awareness (Souissi et al., 2024). Various definitions of empowerment exist, stemming from its multidimensionality and applications across multiple fields, including management, psychology, geography, agriculture, and sociology.

Klinger, for instance, defines empowerment as providing individuals with a sense of self-confidence to overcome feelings of powerlessness or helplessness. Thus, empowerment is not something given but is a process arising from an individual's awareness of existing conditions within a specific community. This process enables individuals to gain autonomy, control, and confidence, facilitating a collective effort to overcome current limitations (Yar, 2024). The dimensions of empowerment are commonly summarized in six aspects: economic, political, psychological, social, legal, and cultural.

Empowerment entails teaching others to act independently and reducing reliance on external entities. It implies a level of freedom to act while also holding accountability for results. Empowerment resembles a marathon more than a sprint, suggesting a need for long-term goals over weeks and months with an ongoing, evolving process. In rural communities, economic, social, and psychological empowerment are notably significant. Several factors influence empowerment, among which the capabilities and contextual characteristics of individuals play a critical role.

### **Definition of Empowerment from Experts' Perspectives**

Kiefer's research on personal empowerment is among the few significant empirical studies investigating empowerment as a process, defining it as a developmental sequence encompassing four stages: entry, progress, integration, and commitment. The Cornell Empowerment Group similarly views empowerment as an increasingly recognized process of transformation. Whitmore defines empowerment as an interactive process that enables individuals to influence organizations and institutions that impact their lives and communities through personal experience and social transformations.

McClelland suggests that for individuals to gain power, they need to gain self-knowledge and understanding of their environment and be willing to engage with others for change. Wallerstein regards empowerment as a social action process that enhances the participation of individuals, organizations, and communities toward the goals of personal and community control, political efficacy, social quality, and social justice (Mahmood & Muntaner, 2020). While Whitmore calls for a clearer definition of empowerment, he posits some common assumptions in the field:

Accordingly, empowerment is defined as the processes through which individuals increasingly gain control over various aspects of their lives. It is a process where members of a society become aware of their needs and demands, attaining a sense of confidence and self-reliance to address these needs. This in turn enables them to achieve the capabilities required for realizing their goals. In another definition, empowerment implies reaching a level of personal development that allows individuals to make choices based on their desires. A foundational study concluded that factors such as work, autonomy, power, commitment, and culture influence empowerment.

Stein (referencing Call and White) notes that empowerment involves concepts such as alignment, purpose, awareness of goals, and willingness to participate. Some definitions emphasize that empowerment is not about the superiority of one individual over another or one gender over another; rather, it involves enhancing self-belief and collective and individual self-reliance. He also observes that Yargey Ramney considers empowerment a powerful spotlight illuminating all aspects of private and social life.

John Stein perceives empowerment as a group-driven process guiding both social and individual changes, which typically lead to outcomes such as higher status attainment, enhanced self-esteem, or surplus control over personal income. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen contends that freedom of expression is not merely a political variable; its economic and social impacts outweigh its political effects. He adds that there is a meaningful relationship between freedom of expression and development, as free expression combats obstacles to development, such as information censorship, famine, and restricted access to information.

According to him, the free flow of information, public awareness, access to health services, and prevention of institutional disasters significantly contribute to the empowerment of rural communities (Wu et al., 2019). Rosemary believes there is a direct, significant relationship between empowerment and rural development through poverty reduction, power and wealth distribution, improved economic information, job creation, and more. Additionally, it is evident that rural development partially stems from the empowerment of rural inhabitants. In other words, rural development is a function of the evolution of farmers' knowledge and skills as they embrace newer and more innovative methods, transforming their thinking toward agricultural activities.

These transformations raise rural inhabitants' self-confidence, contributing to rural development. Consequently, empowerment is viewed as the primary foundation for achieving rural development. Considering the aforementioned points, the term empowerment is complex, multifaceted, and interdisciplinary in application, making

consensus on its definition challenging. However, through a sustainable development and planning approach, it is possible to comprehend empowerment as a collective power concept with a defined goal. As Eftekhari and Sarban suggest, empowerment is a process likened to a powerful spotlight for enhancing all social, economic, physical, and environmental aspects of communities and human habitats. This approach emphasizes individual and collective psychological elements, and organizational, spatial, and legal empowerment, highlighting aspects such as capacity-building, participatory engagement, lawful authority, leadership, and risk-taking (Jay et al., 2022).

### **Empowerment from the Perspective of Various Disciplines**

Several fields have explored the concept of empowerment, including psychology, political science, social sciences, economics, and geography. From a psychological standpoint, Conger and Kanungo were pioneers in examining empowerment, introducing it as a construct related to psychological well-being. Mark Zimmerman further developed this idea into a theory, defining psychological empowerment as a process in which individuals gain a positive self-image, recognize their competencies, and achieve control over their personal and social lives.

Spreitzer expanded this concept, presenting psychological empowerment as an intrinsic motivation comprising four cognitive elements: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four dimensions form the structure of psychological empowerment. It is generally agreed that while the absence of any of these dimensions may reduce perceived empowerment, it does not negate it entirely. Thus, these four elements constitute a "comprehensive set of cognitions" that aid in understanding psychological empowerment (Mahmood & Muntaner, 2020).

In political science, scholars have addressed the concept of political empowerment, particularly concerning citizen engagement. They argue that for citizens to play an active, impactful role across societal domains, they must acquire certain essential skills—a process referred to as political empowerment. Political empowerment of citizens serves as a mechanism to address critiques of democratic formation and development, fostering environments conducive to societal advancement. This process occurs in two stages: initially, public knowledge and awareness of political issues must be enhanced, followed by education on effective selection criteria, decision-making strategies, and methods for constructive political engagement (YAR et al., 2024).

Social scientists, meanwhile, define empowerment as a shift in power distribution, which results in increased access to services, resources, and opportunities for political participation. Empowerment is sometimes seen as the acquisition of skills that allow individuals to exert greater control in various situations. From this perspective, empowerment fosters participatory capacity and self-efficacy, encouraging individuals to take part in decision-making processes that impact their lives. In other words, creating an environment where individuals can develop and act on their ideas is essential for empowerment (Olsen, 2023).



Economists view empowerment as a bottom-up process that enables individuals—especially those in poverty—to respond to their needs and attain equality in rights and power. Economic empowerment, in this sense, involves building the necessary capacities for individuals, communities, and even nations to assume collective responsibility for economic activities that promote a better quality of life and facilitate self-directed development (Lopes et al., 2022). Finally, experts in geography, sustainable development, and urban and rural planning emphasize that empowerment requires collective responsibility over individualism, prioritizing the collective welfare of society over purely economic development and personal well-being.

They advocate decentralization over centralization, emphasizing environmental control rather than passivity, strengthening civil organizations, poverty reduction, social welfare metrics, involvement of rural communities in decision-making, environmental capacity-building, environmental preservation, promotion of bioethics, and ensuring environmental sustainability. These experts call for replacing hierarchical and vertical structures with networked and horizontal frameworks, redefining regulations to suit evolving conditions, marginalizing resistance groups, and strengthening economic, social, environmental, institutional, ecological, and physical infrastructure to achieve sustainable urban and rural development.

### **Empowerment and Sustainable Rural Development**

Development is inherently a multi-dimensional concept, as any progress or improvement within complex systems can occur in various sectors through different means, at varying speeds, and driven by multiple forces. The primary goal of development is to enhance the quality of life; any form of development that fails to facilitate an improved quality of life is merely pseudo-development and does not represent true progress (Søndergaard et al., 2023). Sustainable development, as a future-oriented development model, emphasizes a positive transformation path rooted in social, economic, and environmental factors. Over the years, numerous models of growth and development have been implemented, often with limited success.

Rural communities have faced the brunt of these challenges, frequently benefiting less from growth and development efforts compared to other segments of society. Environmental and human factors specific to rural areas often result in their isolation, reducing their share of development initiatives. This is most evident in the lack of employment opportunities, job instability, and limited occupational diversity in rural areas, all of which contribute to migration from these communities.

In light of these issues, a new rural paradigm was adopted by OECD member countries in 2006, proposing a conceptual framework that regards rural policy as an investment strategy aimed at strengthening rural competitiveness. This approach signifies a fundamental shift away from the traditional subsidy programs that targeted specific sectors. Instead, it focuses on rural policy reforms that align with this new paradigm (Droste et al., 2024)

The new rural policy paradigm is a people-centered approach focusing on the well-being of rural residents. This shift reflects an awareness among OECD countries of the importance of well-being as a central objective in the development of rural communities, incorporating a new perspective on sustainable rural development (OECD, 2019). One of the innovative policies and programs introduced in this paradigm is a new model of rural development that emphasizes the empowerment of rural populations. Empowerment has become a central element of contemporary development concepts and is integral to strategies for poverty reduction, particularly in rural areas. The various causes of rural poverty and disempowerment can be observed in the following forms.

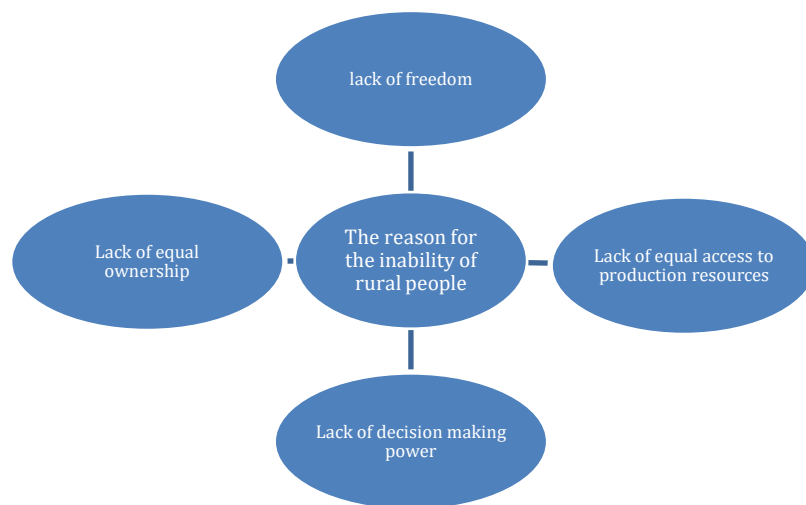


Figure 1. Causes of rural people's disability (Quilliam et al., 2022)

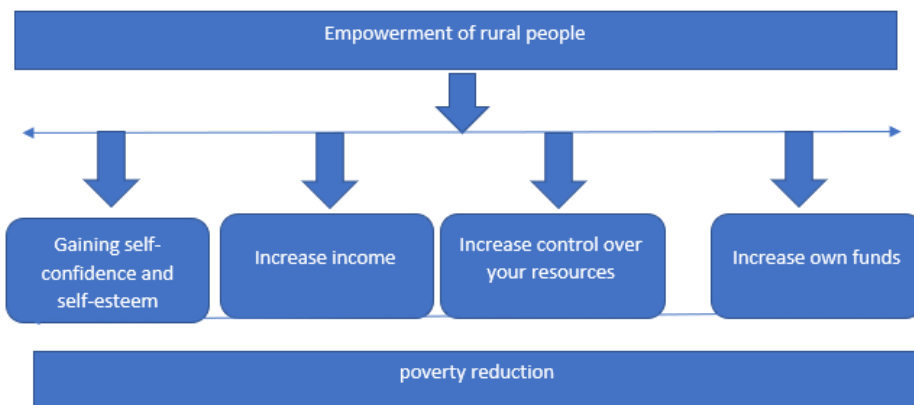


Figure 2. Reducing rural poverty through empowering villagers(Furrer et al., 2018)  
Empowerment and Sustainable Rural Development

One of the factors that can accelerate rural development is the mobilization of rural inhabitants' internal motivation. This people-centered approach aligns with the policies of sustainable rural development, emphasizing improved living standards, enhanced quality of life, expansion of agriculture-related industries, provision of goods and services, and access to amenities that elevate living standards. Sustainable rural

development also supports public participation in development programs, respect for human dignity, confidence-building, and the creation of environmental conditions conducive to increased agricultural yields, poverty reduction, and prevention of excessive migration to urban areas(Yar & Muzammil, 2024).

As rural inhabitants welcome new and innovative methods, their perspectives evolve, fostering a new outlook on agricultural and economic activities in rural areas. By enhancing their cognitive capacities (knowledge and awareness), they lay the foundation for sustainable rural development. One approach that effectively aligns with the goals of the sustainable rural development system is empowerment. This process strengthens individuals by fostering their motivation to perform duties through an increased sense of competence and a reduction of feelings of powerlessness.

Empowerment also encourages participation in information and resource sharing, thereby contributing to the diversification of economic activities and, particularly, the development of rural sectors(Vora et al., 2023). Moreover, social and spatial justice—a significant aspect of development and valuable in its own right—refers to the equitable distribution of services according to the needs, preferences, and priorities of residents and established service standards.

Empowerment facilitates social and spatial justice in rural areas, making it essential for rural inhabitants to achieve sustainable development goals. In this context, empowerment is a core component of rural development management, fostering self-reliance, cultural exchange, access to economic, social, and cultural rights, food self-sufficiency, knowledge and technology access, and a participatory environment in all aspects of human endeavor.

In the context of sustainable rural development, the term “integrated” signifies methods that involve most rural residents in the development process, blending activities aimed at increasing production with those focused on reducing poverty and inequality. This integrated approach, key to empowerment, addresses various rural challenges, including poverty reduction, entrepreneurship, well-being improvement, and economic development. True empowerment of rural communities can be understood as a process that increases individuals’ capacity to use their independence and local resources productively and creatively.

As outlined in the goals of sustainable development, individuals act as democratic citizens, empowered with knowledge of their rights and motivated to participate actively in community affairs. As active citizens, they contribute to the community through economic participation, public service, volunteerism, and other social activities that ultimately enhance the quality of life for all residents. Empowerment requires active, self-sufficient citizens who are engaged in the process to be effectively implemented within rural communities(Zhang et al., 2022).

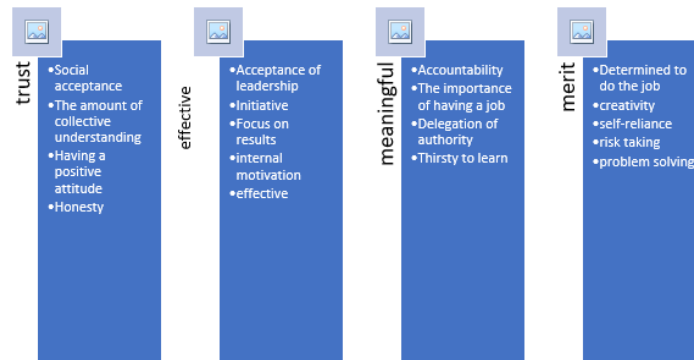


Figure 3. The most important indicators of empowerment (Richardson, 2018)

### Dimensions of Rural Empowerment

Rural empowerment within the framework of sustainable development includes economic, institutional, social, cultural, psychological, and environmental dimensions. Each of these dimensions is explained as follows: Economic Empowerment: Economic empowerment is a bottom-up process whereby the poor increase their economic capacities, enabling them to meet their needs and achieve equal rights and power. Sustainable spatial development includes enhancing regional economic competitiveness and improving quality of life. Economic empowerment results from a balance of power in spatial relationships. By facilitating changes in knowledge, attitudes, emotions, activities, skills, and values, empowerment leads to sustainable development.

Social and institutional empowerment: Rural poverty is not solely a result of low income; lack of power, trust, self-confidence, and social acceptance are key contributors to poverty in rural areas. Therefore, social issues are inseparable from sustainable development models. In this context, the social aspect of sustainable development implies equal resource distribution and access to social services, such as health, education, gender equality, political accountability, and participation.

Social empowerment, as an approach, emphasizes power redistribution, leading to greater access to services, products, and opportunities for political participation. Social empowerment reduces inequalities in access to resources, fosters equilibrium in rural environments, and promotes social cohesion. Consequently, rural families adopt cooperative practices in facing life's challenges, learning to address obstacles collectively. (Yar & Muzammil, 2024)

Psychological Empowerment: The psychological dimension is a recognized aspect of sustainable development. It includes values, norms, laws, identity, and behavioral expectations (preferences, attitudes, behaviors, etc.). Psychological empowerment serves as a crucial tool, providing emotional support to reduce stress, internalizing goals to enhance loyalty, and fostering positive attitudes. As rural inhabitants' cognitive capacities (awareness and knowledge) improve, they can better participate in shaping their social, political, and economic destinies. In other words, psychological empowerment enables individuals to shape activities and influence work. (Daraz et al., 2023)

**Cultural Empowerment:** Cultural empowerment strengthens cultural foundations through expanding social networks and establishing connections with others. Sustainable spatial development also emphasizes preserving cultural heritage. Without understanding rural communities' cultures, it is impossible to gauge the impact of development initiatives on rural livelihoods. Hence, rural communities' development relies on understanding the social and cultural constructs of these communities. Since cultural values differ across societies, empowerment processes must consider these differences to prevent failure.

Rogers identifies ten primary elements in peasant subcultures that hinder development, such as distrust, lack of innovation, low aspirations, and dependence on government power. Empowerment should free rural inhabitants from such beliefs, fostering intellectual independence and self-confidence, dispelling misconceptions that inhibit progress, and enhancing individuals' abilities to plan for future well-being (Govaerts et al., 2021).

**Environmental Empowerment:** Rural development achieves sustainability when it aligns with "equity," "economic growth," and "environmental sustainability." A core goal of sustainable rural development is creating livable spaces for current and future generations, with a particular focus on improving human-environment relations and increasing rural residents' well-being. Environmental capacity building and empowerment are necessary to achieve rural sustainability, involving awareness of ecological and physical constraints and opportunities, adapting regulations, and addressing resistive elements. Without environmental empowerment or in the absence of a supportive environment, sustainable rural development is unattainable (Yar & Muzammil, 2024).

**Approaches to Empowerment:** Research indicates that three major approaches are critical to empowerment: **The Communicative Approach:** This approach views empowerment as a process of delegating authority, where a leader or manager shares their power with subordinates. Empowerment, here, involves granting employees the autonomy to make necessary decisions without prior approval from higher authorities.

**The Motivational Approach:** This approach roots empowerment in the motivational desires of individuals. Scholars Conger and Kanungo define empowerment as the process of enhancing a sense of self-efficacy in individuals by identifying and removing the conditions that lead to their disempowerment. They regard empowerment as a motivational strategy aimed at enabling individuals, fostering self-confidence, and reducing feelings of powerlessness.

**The Cognitive Approach:** Theorists of this approach, particularly Thomas and Velthouse, argue that empowerment is multifaceted, describing it as the intrinsic motivation individuals feel towards assigned tasks. More broadly, they define empowerment as a state of intrinsic motivation relating to one's job, encompassing five core feelings: 1) meaningfulness, 2) competence, 3) impact, 4) self-determination, and 5) trust (Lee et al., 2021). In their book on rural empowerment from the perspective of sustainable rural development, the authors analyze these three approaches.

They characterize the communicative approach as a top-down, mechanistic process that highlights the interdependence of power with others. Thus, in this approach, empowerment means delegating authority and can contribute to rural sustainable development by providing the foundation for economic growth (diversifying economic activities, optimizing income distribution, marketing capability, etc.), social and institutional development (enhancing quality of life, raising satisfaction, increasing knowledge levels), and environmental and ecological organization (spatial organization, conservation of natural resources in rural areas)(Palash et al., 2024).

The motivational approach, meanwhile, implies empowerment by creating conditions necessary for motivating rural communities to perform tasks by fostering self-confidence and reducing feelings of powerlessness. Finally, the psychological approach, which emphasizes meaningfulness, competence, impact, self-determination, and trust, aids rural sustainable development across economic (familiarity with production, processing, and marketing processes, support for the modernization of small and medium-sized industries, ease of access to capital, etc.), social-institutional (strengthening social capital for rural participation in development plans, strengthening local-civil institutions, coordination between executive, educational, research, and extension agencies), and environmental-ecological dimensions (integrated agriculture to optimize water use and pest control, management of natural hazards, long- and mid-term strategic planning (Wang et al., 2021)

**Objectives of Empowerment in Rural Communities:** In development literature, empowerment involves transferring initiatives to rural communities through a decentralized approach. Decentralization is a modern approach where governments delegate executive power, economic responsibility, and some political matters to citizens, particularly the poor, to embed a participatory concept. In empowerment, the goal is to achieve participatory development in its various dimensions, and this participation cannot occur without distributing part of the authority and power within rural communities. Thus, empowering isolated individuals or those residing in remote areas is one of the goals of empowerment programs.

This concept of empowerment aims to achieve participatory development, which is both a goal and a means of development. Participation is considered a critical element in the sustainable development process and is often regarded as the missing link(Catley, 2020). Participation signifies engagement with the times and a true understanding of the community's needs, conditions, and capabilities, which is what empowerment seeks. For a genuine and sustainable participation process, certain prerequisites are necessary, such as awareness, freedom, autonomy, and decentralization. These elements are essential for implementing empowerment processes in rural communities.

Finally, empowerment: 1) Is an essential component of sustainable development; 2) Acts as a driving force for sustainable development; 3) Is also considered a result of sustainable development. Thus, in these three approaches, empowerment serves as both a cause and effect of sustainable development, playing an irreplaceable role in this process. Recognizing empowerment as a necessity for a global society, including Afghan

society and rural and agricultural communities, is vital for guiding these communities towards sustainable development, dignified living, and fostering responsible citizenship through a multidimensional approach (Carmona et al., 2024).

Empowering rural communities is essential for achieving sustainable development in Afghanistan, where rural areas form the backbone of the economy and livelihood. Here is a comprehensive overview of the role and importance of rural empowerment for development in Afghanistan, along with supporting elements from current development theories and studies.

**Rural Empowerment in Afghanistan:** Afghanistan's rural population, constituting approximately 70% of the total, depends heavily on agriculture and small-scale industries. These communities face significant challenges, including poverty, limited infrastructure, low literacy rates, and restricted access to healthcare and markets. Empowering these communities involves providing the resources, education, and decision-making power necessary for self-sufficiency and economic growth.

**Empowerment Approaches and Theories:** Rural empowerment encompasses multiple approaches, each playing a unique role: **Community-Based Empowerment:** This approach emphasizes the role of local governance and community involvement, where residents make decisions, participate in planning, and manage resources. It's proven effective in developing nations where top-down governance fails to meet rural needs.

**Capacity Building and Skills Development:** Offering skill-building opportunities enhances individual self-efficacy, enabling rural residents to improve agricultural productivity, manage small enterprises, and develop new income sources. **Access to Resources and Decentralized Decision-Making:** This approach argues for decentralizing control, providing communities with more direct access to financial, educational, and technological resources.

### **Role of Empowerment in Rural Development**

**Economic Diversification:** By empowering individuals, rural economies can diversify beyond traditional agriculture, encouraging micro-enterprises and local industries. Studies show that economic diversity reduces vulnerability to agricultural fluctuations, increasing overall resilience. **Improved Agricultural Productivity:** Empowerment through education, training, and access to modern tools improves agricultural techniques, leading to higher productivity and income stability for farming communities.

**Social Capital and Community Bonds:** Empowered communities are more likely to collaborate, share knowledge, and support local initiatives, which fosters a culture of collective improvement and social trust. Such cohesion is vital for cooperative farming, infrastructure projects, and resource management.

### **The importance of empowering women in rural areas**

Rural development success is often tied to gender inclusivity. Empowering rural Afghan women, particularly in regions where gender-based roles limit economic

participation, can transform community health, literacy, and child development. Programs focusing on female literacy, skills training, and microfinance have demonstrated that empowered women invest more in family health and education, creating a positive cycle of development.

**Challenges to Rural Empowerment in Afghanistan: Security and Political Stability:** Frequent conflicts in rural Afghanistan deter investment, disrupt local economies, and limit government and NGO support. **Cultural Constraints:** Traditional customs in many rural areas restrict certain population segments, such as women, from participating in empowerment programs. **Resource Limitations:** Limited infrastructure and financial resources hinder empowerment efforts, with inadequate roads, electricity, and internet access posing significant obstacles.

**International and Local Support Initiatives:** International organizations, NGOs, and Afghan government initiatives have been pivotal in promoting rural empowerment. The National Solidarity Program (NSP) and Citizens' Charter National Priority Program (CCNPP) have been instrumental in empowering rural populations by providing infrastructure, microfinancing, and support for small enterprises. **UNDP and USAID Programs:** Focused on literacy, agricultural training, and female empowerment, these initiatives provide financial and technical support to local projects that build capacity and offer new livelihoods.

**Impact on Sustainable Rural Development:** Empowering rural Afghan communities is directly linked to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, quality education, gender equality, and climate resilience. Empowered communities tend to have more sustainable agricultural practices, better health and education outcomes, and improved infrastructure, all of which are vital for Afghanistan's future stability and growth.

**Empowerment as a Path to Stability and Growth:** Rural empowerment in Afghanistan is not merely an economic strategy but a transformative approach toward creating a stable and resilient society. By prioritizing local leadership, skill development, and resource access, empowerment initiatives can foster rural prosperity, reduce urban migration, and contribute to national stability. For Afghanistan, where rural communities are the lifeblood of the economy, empowerment is essential for achieving lasting and inclusive development.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this research demonstrate the critical role of empowerment in fostering sustainable rural development in Afghanistan. Empowering rural communities not only addresses immediate economic and social needs but also builds a foundation for long-term stability, resilience, and self-sufficiency. This section discusses the multidimensional impacts of empowerment on rural development, examining how economic, social, cultural, psychological, and environmental dimensions contribute to sustainable development in Afghanistan's unique rural context.

**Economic Empowerment as a Driver of Self-Sufficiency:** Economic empowerment is essential for improving the livelihood of Afghanistan's rural population,



where limited access to resources often hinders growth. Empowerment programs that focus on enhancing economic skills, such as entrepreneurship training and small-business management, provide rural residents with the tools to diversify income sources and reduce reliance on subsistence farming (Wang et al., 2023). By promoting economic self-sufficiency, these programs help stabilize local economies and mitigate the drivers of rural-to-urban migration, which is a common trend due to limited opportunities in rural areas (Souissi et al., 2024). Consequently, economic empowerment aligns with sustainable development goals by fostering income stability and local economic resilience.

**Social Empowerment and Community Cohesion:** Social empowerment in Afghanistan's rural regions enhances community cohesion, as individuals develop stronger connections and collaborate in local governance and decision-making. This empowerment model enables equitable resource distribution and collective problem-solving, fostering a sense of shared responsibility among community members (Govaerts et al., 2021). Social cohesion has proven to be essential for successful rural development initiatives, as it reduces social hierarchies and creates an inclusive environment conducive to participatory development (Russell et al., 2023). By encouraging active community involvement, social empowerment strengthens rural communities' ability to address their challenges through a united approach.

**Cultural and Gender Inclusivity in Empowerment Initiatives:** In Afghanistan, the success of empowerment initiatives is closely tied to cultural sensitivity and gender inclusivity. Traditional norms in rural communities often limit women's participation, but studies show that programs encouraging female empowerment lead to substantial improvements in community health, literacy, and overall well-being (Richardson, 2018). Empowering women through access to education and microfinance programs promotes gender equality, transforming family structures and enhancing social stability. Addressing cultural constraints is necessary to ensure genuine empowerment across demographic lines, as culturally inclusive approaches increase the acceptance and effectiveness of development programs (Pailaha, 2023).

**Psychological Empowerment and Rural Resilience:** Psychological empowerment significantly influences the motivation of rural residents, enhancing their capacity to participate in sustainable development initiatives. By fostering self-efficacy and independence, psychological empowerment inspires rural communities to adopt innovative agricultural practices, engage in local governance, and contribute actively to community welfare (Daraz et al., 2023). This intrinsic motivation is critical for resilience, as it prepares individuals to face socio-economic challenges with adaptability and a sense of agency, which are essential for sustainable rural development (Mahmood & Muntaner, 2020).

**Environmental Empowerment for Sustainable Resource Management:** Empowering rural communities in environmental stewardship is crucial in Afghanistan, where many communities rely heavily on natural resources. Training on sustainable agricultural practices, water conservation, and resource management equips rural

populations with the knowledge needed to preserve their environment while boosting productivity (FAO, 2019). Environmental empowerment aligns with sustainable development by promoting resilience against climate change and ecological degradation, which are vital for Afghanistan's long-term development goals (Wu et al., 2019) By fostering a sustainable relationship with the environment, rural communities contribute to the preservation of natural resources, ensuring these assets remain viable for future generations.

## Conclusion

Empowering rural communities is a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development in Afghanistan, encompassing economic, social, cultural, psychological, and environmental dimensions that collectively enhance livelihoods and foster self-sufficiency. This research emphasizes that investment in empowerment not only addresses existing socio-economic challenges but also acts as a transformative force, enabling communities to become resilient, self-reliant, and actively engaged in their development.

Key recommendations include developing inclusive policies to ensure equitable access to resources, enhancing local capacities through training programs, fostering community engagement in decision-making, integrating local knowledge into development strategies, implementing robust monitoring frameworks, and strengthening collaborations with NGOs. These strategies aim to cultivate empowered rural populations, contributing to national stability and long-term sustainable growth in Afghanistan.

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