DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES OF GRASSROOTS SETTLER LEADERSHIP FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN FELDA SELASIH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract. This study explores the dynamics and challenges of FELDA settler leadership exercised through three grassroots organisations in FELDA Selasih: the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) as the principal coordinating body, and the Women's Association Movement (GPW) and the Malaysian FELDA Youth Council (MBFM) as partner organisations representing women and youth. It examines leadership challenges, inter-organisational dynamics, generational involvement and adaptive strategies. A qualitative case study design was adopted, involving 10 purposively selected informants comprising leaders and active members of JKKK, GPW and MBFM. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation and document analysis, and were analysed thematically. The findings suggest that settler leadership operates within a complex social system in which trust, relationships, and social legitimacy shape how effective leaders are perceived. Leaders act not merely as administrators but as change agents who build trust and mobilise collective effort, and informants described collaboration among JKKK, GPW and MBFM as facilitating programme implementation. Key obstacles include limited funding, inconsistent community engagement, and declining youth participation, driven by changing lifestyles and social mobility, which threaten leadership continuity. Nevertheless, the community retains strong social capital through gotong-royong, waqf contributions and close cooperation, and leaders adopt adaptive approaches. However, their long-term effectiveness could not be assessed in a single-site study. The study offers a context-specific account of distributed settler leadership in a FELDA scheme. It proposes that leadership sustainability depends on extending the bonding social capital of older settlers into bridging ties with the younger generation.
Keywords: *community development, community leadership, FELDA, rural development, social capital*

Introduction

The Malaysian government has made rural community development a key agenda in its quest to attain balanced economic development between urban and rural regions, as highlighted in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016–2020 (Rami et al., 2021a). This agenda is consistent with efforts to eliminate poverty and improve the quality of life for rural populations through multifaceted, sustainable development programmes (Hashim et al., 2025; Rami et al., 2021a). Within this context, FELDA areas play a significant role in driving the socio-economic growth of settler communities, necessitating a highly efficient and responsive local governance structure capable of meeting local community needs. To this end, in FELDA settlements, the Village Development and Security Committee (Jawatankuasa Keselamatan dan Kemajuan Kampung, JKKK), the Women's Association Movement (Gerakan Persatuan Wanita, GPW), and the Malaysian FELDA Youth Council (Majlis Belia FELDA Malaysia, MBFM) are the key grassroots organisations that plan, coordinate and implement community development strategies (Rami et al., 2021a). The importance of the roles played by JKKK, GPW and MBFM has become particularly pronounced during the period of FELDA transformation driven

by several strategic initiatives, including the FELDA White Paper, the Settler Development Programme and the Smart Plantation Management System, which are aimed at achieving sustainable and competitive land management (Rashid et al., 2022). In this regard, the success of policy implementation and development programmes depends largely on the ability of local leadership to manage resources, make decisions and build strategic partnerships with various stakeholders.

However, leadership within JKKK, GPW and MBFM faces several complex challenges in delivering successful community development outcomes. Among the major problems identified are difficulties in the decision-making process, the need to strengthen external collaborative networks, and the duplication of roles across government agencies, all of which affect the successful realisation of development programmes (Rashid et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2021a). Moreover, the socio-economic circumstances of the community have become increasingly dynamic, necessitating more adaptive and innovative leadership strategies to ensure that development initiatives remain responsive to the actual needs of the settler community. In this regard, effective leadership is not confined to administrative matters; it also prioritises servant leadership, placing the community's interests above individual interests (Rami et al., 2021a). This approach requires strong commitment, communication, and integrity from local leaders to secure active and meaningful community involvement in the development process. In this study, FELDA settler leadership refers to leadership exercised by settlers and their families through these three grassroots organisations. JKKK is treated as the analytical anchor because it is the formal coordinating body for settlement development. At the same time, GPW and MBFM are examined as partner organisations through which women and youth exercise leadership and collaborate with JKKK. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate the dynamics and challenges of settler leadership within JKKK, GPW and MBFM in FELDA Selasih, and the role of these leaders as agents of community development and social change. This focus is timely, as recent scholarship on a comparable state-built settlement scheme has likewise called for closer attention to how gender and generational renewal shape grassroots leadership within FELDA communities (Mansor et al., 2026).

Specifically, this study seeks to: (i) identify the challenges faced by settler leaders in JKKK, GPW and MBFM in leading community development; (ii) examine the social dynamics and inter-organisational relationships that shape leadership among the three organisations; (iii) explore how generational involvement affects the sustainability of settler leadership; and (iv) identify the adaptive strategies adopted by leaders in responding to these challenges.

Problem statement

Despite the introduction of numerous development policies and transformation initiatives for FELDA settlements, implementation has not always yielded the anticipated results, raising questions about the capacity of grassroots leadership to spearhead community development. The challenges outlined above, namely difficulties in decision-making, limited external networks, overlapping agency functions and insufficient resources, place JKKK, GPW and MBFM leaders in a demanding position, as they must operate in a dynamic environment characterised by diverse community interests and expectations (Rashid et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2021a). Although past research identifies motivation, training and commitment as internal determinants of effective community leadership (Rami et al., 2021a, 2021b), how these attributes

translate into practice, particularly in decision-making, conflict management and programme coordination within a settlement setting, remains insufficiently understood. Changes in social relations further complicate leadership legitimacy. Collective values such as cooperation (gotong-royong) and deliberation (musyawarah) remain important in rural development (Liu et al., 2024). However, evidence suggests that they are gradually being weakened by rising individualism (Putra and Yulindrasari, 2023), which may erode trust between leaders and the community and reduce support for development programmes (Md Rami et al., 2022). In FELDA settlements, this concern is sharpened by generational change, as the second generation increasingly works outside the scheme and shows weaker attachment to settlement obligations (Ganti et al., 2024), raising questions about who will sustain grassroots leadership in the future.

However, existing studies have tended to examine rural community leadership in general village settings, treat JKKK or local leaders as a single category, or model the relationships among leadership, motivation, and social capital quantitatively (Rami et al., 2023; Md Rami et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2021a). Studies of FELDA, meanwhile, have concentrated mainly on land development, sustainability and inheritance behaviour (Ganti et al., 2024; Rashid et al., 2022) rather than on grassroots leadership. Consequently, there is limited qualitative evidence on how leadership is distributed across JKKK, GPW and MBFM within a single FELDA settlement, how these organisations interact, and how generational change affects leadership continuity. This study addresses this gap through an in-depth case study of FELDA Selasih.

Literature review

The concept of community leadership has developed from the recognition that a community is not merely a geographical entity but a social system formed through interaction, relationships and social networks among people (Rami et al., 2021a). Community leadership is thus distinguished from formal organisational leadership, as it does not rest solely on hierarchical power but is more strongly rooted in social influence, trust, and the capacity to build relationships with community members. Community leaders must therefore act as intermediaries among stakeholders and operate in a more dynamic and flexible environment. Within rural development, community leadership is widely recognised as a critical factor in the success of socio-economic programmes. Studies identify intrinsic attributes such as motivation, commitment and leadership ability, together with appropriate training, as the foundations of leaders' capacity to manage communities and act as change agents (Rami et al., 2021a, 2021b). Equally important is the ability to build working relationships founded on trust, credibility and effective communication, so that community members are treated as strategic partners rather than mere followers (Rami et al., 2021a). Leaders are also expected to act as facilitators who form social networks, coordinate resources and generate synergy among diverse stakeholders (Rami et al., 2023; Rozikin et al., 2023; Fatmawati, 2021). Conversely, a lack of accountability and transparency, along with a tendency to pursue personal interests, has been identified as a persistent barrier to effective grassroots leadership (Rami et al., 2021a).

Sociologically, community leadership is also linked to shared values and social capital. Approaches that emphasise collective well-being resonate with Amitai Etzioni's call to balance individualism with community values (Putra and Yulindrasari, 2023), and values such as gotong-royong, musyawarah and social responsibility continue to promote social cohesion in rural contexts (Liu et al., 2024). Where social trust is high,

support for development activities and social integration tend to be correspondingly high (Md Rami et al., 2022), and open dialogue between leaders and the community helps to minimise conflict and improve the organisation of development processes (Rami et al., 2021a). Within FELDA settlements, grassroots leadership is not concentrated in a single body. JKKK plans and coordinates development and security matters, while GPW mobilises women settlers and MBFM organises youth activities; together, they serve as the main channels through which settlers participate in community development (Rami et al., 2021a). FELDA transformation agenda has heightened expectations of these organisations (Rashid et al., 2022), while intergenerational change is altering the base from which future leaders are drawn (Ganti et al., 2024). Recent work on a comparable FELDA scheme further suggests that gender and generational renewal shape the exercise of grassroots leadership in state-built settlements (Mansor et al., 2026).

Taken together, the literature establishes that effective community leadership depends on leaders' personal attributes, relational trust, network-building capacity, and the community's social capital. However, three limitations are evident. First, many studies treat local leadership as a single actor, typically the JKKK or the village head, and pay less attention to how leadership is shared among several grassroots organisations. Second, much of the Malaysian evidence derives from general rural villages or from quantitative models (Rami et al., 2023; Md Rami et al., 2022), offering limited insight into the lived experience of leadership within planned settlements such as FELDA. Third, the interaction between leadership, social capital and generational succession has received little empirical attention. This study addresses these gaps by examining settler leadership across JKKK, GPW, and MBFM in FELDA Selasih through an integrated theoretical lens.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a synthesis of three principal theories: Transformational Leadership Theory, Community Leadership Theory, and Social Capital Theory. The combination of these three theories is considered appropriate for examining the dynamics of settler leadership across JKKK, GPW and MBFM within the FELDA community context, which is collective, relationship-focused, and subject to the challenges of generational change. (i) Transformational Leadership Theory: Transformational Leadership Theory was proposed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later extended by Bernard M. Bass (1985). It focuses on how leaders can alter the attitudes, values and motivations of followers towards shared objectives, encompassing four key dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Within the framework of this study, JKKK, GPW, and MBFM leaders must act as agents of change, building consensus within the community, engaging more people, and overcoming obstacles such as a lack of commitment and generational gaps. The finding that leaders must achieve trust-building and community mobilisation aligns closely with the nature of transformational leadership. Moreover, transformational leadership applies to efforts to engage younger generations in the community. Leaders should be inspirational and articulate an attractive vision of the future, in a manner that enables youths to appreciate the importance of their involvement in the development of the FELDA community.

(ii) Community Leadership Theory: Community Leadership Theory emphasises that community leadership is not hierarchical but rather rooted in social networks,

collaboration and stakeholder engagement. Pigg (1999) and Kotter (1990) define community leadership as the capacity to build relationships, mobilise resources, and generate collective action. In this study, the leadership structure of JKKK, which involves collaboration with organisations such as GPW and MBFM, demonstrates the characteristics of network leadership. Leaders are not isolated actors; rather, they function as coordinators who link various actors within the community. Moreover, this theory also emphasises the importance of interpersonal skills in community leadership. The finding that leaders must earn the community's trust and build strong social relationships aligns with the principles of community leadership theory, which prioritise trust and relationship-building as central tenets. (iii) Social Capital Theory: Social Capital Theory, introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and later developed by Robert D. Putnam (2000), focuses on social networks, norms and trust as factors that make collective action within a society more effective. Elements of social capital can be observed within the FELDA Selasih community through cooperation (gotong-royong), waqf contributions, and close cooperation among community members. Such values indicate strong social relations and a high degree of trust among residents, thereby ensuring that community activities are carried out effectively. The findings of this study show that, despite the financial constraints faced by the community, it remains able to undertake various programmes owing to sustained social support and collaboration. This illustrates that the strength of social capital can offset the deficiency of material resources, with social networks and a spirit of solidarity serving as the drivers of successful communal action. This scenario also demonstrates that social capital is a valuable asset in ensuring the sustainability of community development. However, this theory also captures the difficulties encountered in relation to youth participation. The second generation has increasingly lost access to this social capital, resulting in reduced engagement in community activities and, consequently, affecting the continuity of leadership and community development (Ganti et al., 2024). Community leaders must therefore be actively engaged in strengthening social networks, cultivating a sense of community, and capturing the attention of younger generations to ensure the community's sustainability.

(iv) Integration of the Theoretical Framework in the Study: The integration of the three theories – Transformational Leadership Theory, Community Leadership Theory and Social Capital Theory – forms a comprehensive conceptual framework for explaining the role of settler leaders in JKKK, GPW and MBFM. Transformational Leadership Theory highlights the importance of leaders as change agents who inspire and motivate community members towards meaningful transformation. Here, leaders are not merely administrators but agents of positive and progressive social change within the community. Community Leadership Theory, meanwhile, concerns the organisation, functions and relationships of leadership within a community. It describes the roles of JKKK, GPW, and MBFM leaders in leadership management, collective decision-making, and community participation. This framework also helps to explain how relationships between leaders and the community are formed inclusively, thereby strengthening trust and collaboration within the local community. Social Capital Theory is therefore significant for explaining the strengths and weaknesses inherent in a community's social relations. Through social networks, trust, and shared norms, leaders in JKKK, GPW and MBFM can establish strong relationships and mobilise community development effectively. Taken together, the integration of these three theories provides an understanding that these settler leaders are not only able to address leadership

challenges and establish social relations but can also secure leadership sustainability by engaging and nurturing the growth of new generations within the community.

Materials and Methods

A case study design was adopted, employing a qualitative approach to examine in depth the dynamics and challenges of settler leadership within JKKK, GPW and MBFM in the development of the FELDA Selasih community. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to study social phenomena in their natural settings and to analyse informants' subjective experiences in a thorough and nuanced manner (Islam et al., 2020). The case study design was considered appropriate as it focuses on a specific context and enables in-depth analysis of the issues under investigation within a real-life setting (Makmun et al., 2025; Pahleviannur et al., 2022). This study involved 10 informants, comprising leaders (committee members) and active members of JKKK, GPW, and MBFM in FELDA Selasih, to represent the perspectives of the coordinating body as well as those of the women's and youth organisations. Informants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in community leadership and development activities in the settlement, ensuring they possessed relevant experience and knowledge of the issues under study. This approach enabled the researchers to obtain detailed information regarding the roles, experiences, and challenges faced by community leaders in carrying out their duties (Rami et al., 2021a). To protect anonymity, informants are referred to by the codes IR1-IR10 throughout the Results section.

Data were collected through a combination of methods to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the findings. These included face-to-face semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth information from informants (Hermawan et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2020). In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to examine group attitudes towards the issues under study and to capture the community's shared perspectives. Participant observation was also employed to directly observe social interactions and leadership practices within the community, complemented by document analysis to further enrich the research findings. The resulting data were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 software. The analytical process began with the complete transcription of interview and FGD recordings, followed by repeated reading of the transcripts to identify initial codes reflecting significant concepts (Pahleviannur et al., 2022). These codes were subsequently organised into categories and key themes, enabling the researchers to interpret the data inductively and develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Jamil and Santoso, 2023; Firman, 2021). The findings were then reported according to the themes identified, in a manner designed to address the research questions (Rami et al., 2021a; Resmi and Hasanah, 2020).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, various verification strategies were applied throughout the research process. Triangulation was employed by comparing data collected from different sources, interviews, FGDs, observations and documents, to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Pahleviannur et al., 2022). Member checking was also conducted by returning transcripts and interpretations to informants to confirm that the information captured accurately reflected their experiences (Rakhman et al., 2021). This practice helped to improve the accuracy of data interpretation and minimise researcher bias. In addition, the researchers maintained rigour through sustained

observation and consistent data-gathering procedures to ensure that the findings genuinely reflected field realities (Hasim et al., 2023). Such data validation procedures were necessary to ensure that the results obtained were valid, reliable and of high scholarly value (Hasim et al., 2023). Overall, the qualitative approach with a case study design enabled the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the leadership processes and challenges confronting settler leaders in JKKK, GPW, and MBFM as they developed the FELDA Selasih community.

Results and Discussion

Challenges of settler leadership in JKKK, GPW and MBFM

The primary challenge facing settler leaders across JKKK, GPW and MBFM in the FELDA Selasih community is building trust and legitimacy among community members. In this sense, leadership is not based solely on formal position but is also shaped by the community's perception of an individual's credibility. Before leaders are accepted as legitimate by the community, they are expected to demonstrate exemplary conduct, honesty and dedication. This is evident in the explanations offered by informants, who consistently highlighted trust as the foundation of leadership. IR1 stated:

> *"The challenges are certainly big as a leader; we desire to lead people, but first, people need to see how we act. They need to trust and respect us, and unless they are sure about us, they will not be ready to unite and follow us."*

Moreover, leadership challenges are gender-related, particularly in communities where women hold leadership roles and are still shaped by traditional norms. IR2 explained:

> *"The barriers are definitely felt as a woman in a leadership role; members, particularly men, want to know about our abilities, and therefore we have to work extra hard to demonstrate that we can also lead effectively."*

The issue of community consensus also presents a significant challenge. In the early stages, the community was found to be less cohesive, with individuals largely operating independently. IR3 stated:

> *"When we look back, there was actually no unity in the community. Everyone was doing whatever they wanted. So, when we attempted to bring them together for a programme, it was very challenging, but today we can see some changes, as most of the community is coming together."*

Lastly, leaders must also contend with community members' attitudes of incomplete commitment. IR4 explained:

> *"In this society, we cannot assume everyone will agree and attend; the fact that we hold a programme and 30 or 40 per cent attend is already a success, since we will carry on with the work and not be easily discouraged."*

Social dynamics and leadership structure

Interpersonal relationships within the FELDA Selasih community indicate that leadership is more relationship-oriented than formally structured. Leaders must possess strong interpersonal skills to build good relationships with the community, including the ability to understand community members' feelings, backgrounds, and needs. IR5 emphasised the importance of social relationships in leadership, stating:

> *"We should learn how to win people's hearts in this community; we have older people, younger people and different kinds of people, and so the manner in which we communicate and interact matters. Without maintaining good relationships, the community would push you away, and you would find it hard to mobilise programmes."*

The leadership system in this community is also collaborative rather than concentrated within a single organisation. JKKK, GPW and MBFM are among the bodies involved in community development. IR6 stated:

> *"In this case, programmes are not coordinated by a single party. We unify all organisations, including JKKK, GPW and youth groups. When we tackle it together, the programmes become bigger and benefit everyone."*

The findings also reveal leaders' role as mobilisers of community activities. To sustain active community participation, various social and religious activities are organised. IR7 explained:

> *"Some of the activities we hold include weekly gotong-royong, house-to-house Yasin recitations and health programmes, all aimed at keeping the community together and ensuring close relations."*

However, social dynamics and leadership structures are also affected by demographic change. IR8 stated:

> *"Today, a lot of the older generation has passed away, and this is reducing the population, which impacts the activities in the community and the current leadership as well."*

Overall, these social processes suggest that settler leadership across the three organisations operates within a multifaceted structure of social relations that continually evolves in response to changing community conditions. This pattern of gendered and relationship-based leadership dynamics mirrors recent findings from a comparable state-built settlement scheme, where gender and generational renewal were similarly identified as central forces shaping grassroots leadership (Mansor et al., 2026).

Generational involvement and leadership sustainability

The engagement of the second generation is one of the key issues affecting the sustainability of community leadership. The findings show that younger generations are increasingly disengaged from community activities and local leadership, raising

concerns over the continuity of leadership in the future. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence on intergenerational disengagement within FELDA communities, where shifting priorities among younger settlers have been shown to weaken continuity even in areas such as land and asset succession (Ganti et al., 2024). IR9 stated:

> *"Looking at the present scenario, the second generation is not as interested in engaging in community activities; they are more involved in working outside the area and are not much involved in the programmes run here."*

This situation requires leaders to engage in sustained efforts to capture the attention of younger generations. IR10 explained:

> *"To whom shall we hand over leadership in the next generation? We must cultivate this second generation so that they become interested in joining us. Thus, we need to identify methods of involving them in community activities."*

Moreover, the changing lifestyles of younger generations, who tend to work beyond the settlement, further compound this problem. They also tend to have a weaker emotional attachment to their original community, which subsequently affects their level of involvement. Nevertheless, youths retain potential that can be realised through appropriate means. Leaders must identify individuals with leadership potential and provide them with exposure and opportunities to lead. In general, the sustainability of settler leadership in JKKK, GPW, and MBFM appears to hinge on whether the interests and participation of younger generations, as future leaders, can be effectively cultivated. This concern for generational renewal echoes recent findings from a comparable FELDA scheme, which likewise identified generational succession as a defining challenge for the long-term continuity of settler leadership (Mansor et al., 2026).

Community development issues

Several limitations affect community development within FELDA Selasih, particularly in terms of funding and support. Community programmes are constrained in terms of allocation and require the support of multiple stakeholders to be implemented effectively. Informants indicated that programme provision is heavily dependent on available budget and cooperation with other agencies, reflecting the community's continued reliance on external resources to sustain successful development initiatives. In terms of infrastructure, basic facilities are generally considered satisfactory, although constraints remain, particularly among youths. The absence of dedicated spaces for youth activities hinders their engagement in the community. Moreover, economic development opportunities for the community, and for youths in particular, remain limited. IR9 stated:

> *"So far, we have no special economic programmes targeted at youths. Most youths work on their own, but there are no programmes that fully assist them in realising their economic potential."*

Nonetheless, the community also possesses notable social capital strengths, including waqf donations and a culture of cooperation (gotong-royong). This demonstrates that the community can continue to advance, provided its resources and planning are used

effectively. In this respect, digital marketing has been shown to offer rural entrepreneurs, including youths, a low-cost route to expanding market reach and strengthening product identity, suggesting a practical avenue through which FELDA Selasih could address its current gap in youth-focused economic programmes (Awang et al., 2026).

Adaptive leadership strategies

In addressing the various challenges they face, leaders across JKKK, GPW and MBFM employ practical, flexible, adaptive leadership strategies that enable them to respond to the community's evolving circumstances. Establishing realistic participation goals is one such strategy. IR4 stated:

> *"We do not expect everyone to join in; as long as a certain part of the community supports us, that is already enough. The thing is that we should not stop what we have started doing."*

Moreover, leaders employ strategies designed to attract youth through programmes offering direct benefits, including recreational, leisure and incentive-based activities, which are considered more aligned with the interests of the younger generation today. Leaders also leverage collaborative networks with external agencies and internal organisations to acquire additional resources, and informants regarded this participative approach as enhancing the quality of community programme implementation. Furthermore, the mobilisation of social capital, including cooperation among people (gotong-royong) and community contributions, represents an effective approach to overcoming resource limitations. This strategy strengthens social relations and fosters a sense of mutual responsibility among community members. Overall, these adaptive strategies suggest that settler leadership in FELDA Selasih can adjust to changing circumstances and may support the continuity of community development. However, their long-term effectiveness could not be assessed within the scope of this study.

The findings study

The findings of this study illustrate that settler leadership, anchored in JKKK and extended through GPW and MBFM within the FELDA Selasih community, cannot be fully explained through traditional leadership concepts; rather, it is multidimensional, incorporating social, structural, and psychological aspects of the community. These results suggest that strong leadership within the FELDA community rests on the capacity to build trust and social relationships, resonating with Bernard M. Bass's (1985) vision of transformational leadership. Leaders are not merely administrators but change agents who shape community norms and behaviours. Moreover, the findings also support Community Leadership Theory, which emphasises the role of networks and cooperation among various actors. Here, JKKK leadership does not operate hierarchically but through partnerships with other organisations such as GPW and MBFM. This suggests that, in this case, leadership effectiveness as perceived by informants depends substantially on the capacity to create synergy among stakeholders, consistent with the views of Kotter (1990) and Pigg (1999). In terms of social capital, this study suggests that the FELDA Selasih community remains strong, maintaining close social relationships and a strong spirit of cooperation (gotong-royong), thereby

enabling it to sustain social support activities despite resource limitations. This finding reinforces the view that social capital is a significant resource in rural community development, as emphasised by Putnam (2000) and further supported by recent empirical evidence linking community leadership styles to social capital outcomes in rural Malaysia (Md Rami et al., 2022). The principal challenge, however, lies in sustaining this social capital among younger generations.

Second-generation involvement emerged as a critical issue in this study, corroborating recent evidence that generational renewal remains a defining leadership challenge across FELDA settlements more broadly (Mansor et al., 2026). Changes in values and lifestyles are evident in the diminished interest of youths in community activities. This observation is consistent with prior studies indicating that urbanisation and social mobility contribute to declining community participation among younger generations, including evidence that FELDA's second and third generations increasingly display weaker engagement with community and inheritance obligations tied to the settlement (Ganti et al., 2024). Leadership approaches should therefore be better adapted to meet the needs and interests of the younger generation. Lastly, this study underscores the need for settler leadership to remain dynamic and responsive to contemporary challenges. The willingness to accommodate community realities is evident through realistic approaches, such as accepting modest levels of participation and adopting incentive-based strategies. Overall, these findings suggest that in FELDA Selasih, the sustainability of community development is likely to depend on how effectively leaders combine transformational qualities, inter-organisational networks, and the renewal of social capital across generations.

SuDiscussion of Theory and Research Findings

The findings of this study suggest that settler leadership in the FELDA Selasih community aligns closely with the tenets of Transformational Leadership Theory. Leaders do not merely function as managers but as change agents who build trust and shape community attitudes. Notably, the finding that leaders must earn respect before being accepted aligns with the idealised influence dimension proposed by Bass (1985). Furthermore, the inspirational motivation dimension of transformational leadership is evident in leaders' efforts to motivate the community, even when participation remains limited. In addition, the findings on cooperation among JKKK, GPW, and MBFM are consistent with Community Leadership Theory. The non-hierarchical, collaborative leadership model demonstrates that leadership operates through social networks rather than formal authority alone. This is reflected in leaders' roles as coordinators of community activities, rather than as sole decision-makers, aligning with Pigg's (1999) view of community leadership as a collective process. This pattern of network-based coordination across community organisations has also been documented in rural Terengganu, where knowledge management and social capital were found to sustain community leadership effectiveness jointly (Rami et al., 2023).

The findings also confirm the relevance of Social Capital Theory to community development. Although financially constrained, the community can implement programmes through joint effort (gotong-royong) and contributions such as waqf. This observation aligns with Putnam's (2000) theory of collective action, which posits that collective action is more effective where trust and social networks are present. Nevertheless, the issue of youth participation exposes a shortcoming in social capital, particularly in bridging social capital: the second generation appears less attached to the

community, posing a threat to leadership continuity. This suggests that, while bonding social capital among the older generation remains strong, it has not been effectively transmitted to the younger generation. Overall, the integration of these three theories suggests that transformational leadership qualities, community networks, and the prevailing level of social capital jointly condition the success of settler leadership across JKKK, GPW, and MBFM.

Implications of the study

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on community leadership by integrating Transformational Leadership Theory, Community Leadership Theory, and Social Capital Theory into a situational analysis framework applicable to the FELDA community. The findings suggest that leadership in this FELDA community cannot be adequately explained by a single theory but requires a multidimensional approach that accounts for the social, cultural and structural facets of the community. Moreover, this research supports the applicability of Transformational Leadership Theory beyond formal organisations to community settings. FELDA settler leaders were found to act as agents of change who build trust, shape attitudes, and mobilise collective action within the community, thereby extending the theory's relevance to rural community development. This study is also pertinent to the study of social capital within the FELDA community, particularly in light of strong social relations that nonetheless encounter difficulties in intergenerational continuity. The findings demonstrate that social capital is not a fixed entity but may decline where it is not consistently reinforced through the engagement of younger generations. Lastly, this research contributes to the discourse on Community Leadership Theory by emphasising the role of network leadership, whereby various community organisations play complementary and substantial roles together; illustrating that community leadership is a dynamic process involving the interaction of multiple social actors.

Practical implications

In practical terms, this research offers guidance to JKKK leaders and FELDA community organisations on how to become more effective leaders. Leaders should place greater emphasis on building trust and social relationships as the foundation of leadership, rather than relying solely on formal positions of authority. Moreover, the findings point to the need for more structured schemes to engage young people in community processes. Community programmes should align with the interests and needs of the younger generation, incorporating skills-based activities, entrepreneurship programmes, and incentives that resonate with contemporary youth lifestyles. Another important aspect highlighted by this study is the need to strengthen cooperation among community organisations such as JKKK, GPW and MBFM. Such collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of resource use and broaden the reach of community development programmes. Furthermore, community leaders should leverage the social capital already present within the community – including the spirit of cooperation (gotong-royong) and community contributions – to overcome resource limitations. This can be achieved by fostering active community involvement across all stages of programme planning and implementation.

Policy implications

This research carries significant implications for policymakers, including FELDA, government agencies and rural development stakeholders. First, it is necessary to develop policies that focus on the continuous development of community leadership, such as leadership training programmes for FELDA settler leaders and their descendants. Second, community development policies should place greater emphasis on youth participation as a long-term strategy to ensure the sustainability of FELDA communities, including providing platforms, financing, and opportunities for youth engagement in community and economic activities. Third, this study recommends that community development strategies be based not only on physical development but also on the development of social and human capital, with the building of social relationships and community values placed at the centre of rural development policy. Lastly, policymakers should promote a bottom-up approach to community development, whereby communities can plan and implement programmes grounded in their actual needs. This would foster a greater sense of ownership and enhance the effectiveness of development programmes.

Future research implications

This study provides a platform for further research into community leadership, particularly within the FELDA context and rural communities more broadly. Future research could pursue comparative studies across various FELDA settlements to identify more generalisable leadership trends. Moreover, quantitative studies could be undertaken to empirically examine the relationship between leadership style, social capital levels and community development effectiveness, thereby reinforcing the findings of this qualitative study. Another promising area for future research is youth participation in community leadership – the factors that drive their involvement, and the most effective methods of encouraging their participation, including the potential of digital and entrepreneurship-based interventions to re-engage rural youth economically (Awang et al., 2026). Overall, this research provides a significant foundation for advancing scholarship on community leadership and rural development in Malaysia.

Contribution of the study

This study offers three specific contributions. Empirically, it provides an in-depth qualitative account of how FELDA settler leadership is distributed across three grassroots organisations, JKKK, GPW and MBFM, within a single settlement. Whereas earlier Malaysian studies have generally examined local leaders as a single category or in general village settings, this study shows how a formal coordinating body works alongside women's and youth organisations, and how gender norms, demographic change and limited funding shape leadership in practice in FELDA Selasih. Theoretically, the study integrates Transformational Leadership Theory, Community Leadership Theory and Social Capital Theory to explain these dynamics. The findings point to a linked process in which leaders' personal credibility generates legitimacy, network-based collaboration extends that legitimacy across organisations, and strong bonding social capital among older settlers partly compensates for limited material resources. The study further proposes that the weak transmission of this social capital to the second generation, that is, insufficient bridging capital, is a key constraint on leadership succession in FELDA settlements. This mechanism has received little

attention in existing studies. Lastly, this research offers a practical contribution by providing context-specific insights for community leaders and policymakers on developing more effective community development strategies. The emphasis on trust-building, strengthening inter-organisational cooperation, and enhancing youth involvement can serve as a foundation for empowering the leadership system of FELDA settlers. As these contributions derive from a single case with a small number of informants, they are offered as analytical propositions to be tested in other FELDA settlements rather than as generalisable conclusions.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. It is based on a single FELDA settlement and ten informants, so the findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of leaders and active members in FELDA Selasih and cannot be generalised statistically to other FELDA schemes. Leadership effectiveness was assessed through informants' accounts and the researchers' observations, rather than through objective measures of programme outcomes, and the views of less active settlers and of second-generation residents working outside the scheme may be under-represented. Future studies could address these limitations through multi-site comparisons and mixed-method designs.

Conclusion

This study suggests that settler leadership, exercised through JKKK as the coordinating body together with GPW and MBFM, plays a central role in community development in FELDA Selasih. In this setting, leadership rests less on formal position than on leaders' capacity to build trust, serve as good role models, and form strong social relationships with the community (Rami et al., 2023; Md Rami et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2021a). The findings indicate that trust and legitimacy are the principal pillars determining community support for development programmes. Moreover, this study highlights that leadership processes within the FELDA community are multifaceted and grounded in social relations and cooperation among various stakeholders. JKKK leadership is not hierarchical but rather collaborative, working alongside organisations such as GPW and MBFM. This implies that the success of community leadership depends on leaders' competency in managing social networks, activating community involvement, and adapting to demographic and social change within the community (Mansor et al., 2026; Rozikin et al., 2023; Rami et al., 2021a). Furthermore, the primary challenges identified in this study are youth participation and the lack of funding for community development. The limited interest of young people in community activities carries serious consequences for the sustainability of future leadership (Mansor et al., 2026; Ganti et al., 2024). Despite the community's strengths in social capital, including the spirit of cooperation and collaboration, financial constraints and the absence of dedicated youth-focused programmes remain obstacles to more comprehensive development. Finally, this study found that leaders across JKKK, GPW, and MBFM adopt adaptive, flexible leadership strategies to address a range of challenges. Realistic strategies such as accepting modest levels of participation, leveraging collaborative networks, and drawing on existing community social capital suggest that local leadership can adapt to prevailing changes (Rami et al., 2023; Md Rami et al., 2022; Rami et al., 2021a). Therefore, to ensure the sustainability of FELDA community

development, it is essential to strengthen transformational leadership roles, enhance youth participation, and optimise the use of existing resources and social networks.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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