

Empowering Marginalized Communities through Non-Formal Education in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Meta Analysis

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Abstract: Non-formal education (NFE) plays an important role in empowering marginalized communities by addressing the gaps left by the formal system and offering flexible and context-sensitive learning opportunities. In many regions, individuals facing poverty, gender inequality, migration, or conflict rely on NFE programs as a pathway to literacy, livelihood skills, and community participation. This article aims to explore the role of NFE from a cross-cultural perspective, highlighting its contribution to empowerment in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Using a comparative literature review that draws on studies from Scopus indexed journals, UNESCO and UNDP reports, and case-based evidence from the past decade, this analysis focuses on how NFE is driving empowerment across Asia, Africa, and Europe. These findings show that NFE improves functional literacy, vocational competence, social entrepreneurship, and community leadership, while promoting inclusion and resilience within marginalized groups. Contextual differences reveal that community-based learning centers dominate in Southeast Asia, women's empowerment initiatives through life skills are central in Africa, and integration programs for migrants and refugees are most prominent in Europe and the Global North. These insights underscore the global relevance of NFE as a driver of equality and social cohesion. Policy recommendations emphasize the importance of sustainable funding, government-NGO collaboration, and a culturally responsive approach to ensure long-term impact.

Keywords: Community Empowerment, Marginalized Group, Non-Formal Education

A. Introduction

Marginalization remains one of the most persistent barriers to human development worldwide, taking forms such as poverty, gender inequality, migration, disability, and conditions of conflict (Mendis et al., 2023; Mir et al., 2024). Studies have documented how these forms of marginalization systematically restrict educational access: children from low-income households struggle to complete schooling; girls are constrained by gender norms that prioritize domestic labor or early marriage; migrants and refugees face disrupted or excluded learning environments (Arar et al.,

2024; Mir et al., 2024); and individuals with disabilities experience stigmatization and institutional barriers that limit participation across formal and informal learning spaces (Habib et al., 2025; Rajni, 2020). Conflict-affected regions further intensify these issues by destroying infrastructure and displacing entire communities, leaving large populations unable to participate in schooling. Against this background, education is widely recognized as a key mechanism for breaking cycles of poverty, enhancing civic participation, and advancing human dignity. Global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) underscore the commitment to inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning for all (Ojokheta et al., 2020; Saini et al., 2023). Yet formal schooling alone is insufficient to reach marginalized groups who are structurally, geographically, culturally, or economically excluded (Hossain, 2023). As a result, non-formal education (NFE)—defined as organized, intentional learning outside the formal school system—has increasingly emerged as an accessible pathway, offering community-based learning, literacy programs, life skills, and vocational training particularly suited for marginalized individuals (Ukwuaba & Igbo, 2020; Vaculíková et al., 2024).

Despite the growing evidence base, major gaps remain in our understanding of how NFE contributes to empowerment across different cultural and geopolitical contexts. Existing research is dominated by single-country or single-group studies, such as those focusing solely on women, refugees, rural communities, or persons with disabilities. These studies provide valuable insights but offer limited comparative knowledge on how cultural norms, institutional structures, and political conditions shape the effectiveness of NFE. While some research acknowledges cultural constraints such as the moderating role of religion, gender norms, or traditional practices on learning outcomes (Namooog & Agyekum, 2024a) comparative examinations across multiple contexts are rare. Additionally, although SDG 4 explicitly recognizes non-formal learning, global progress reports indicate that many countries still lag in adult literacy, digital skills, and participation in lifelong learning especially among marginalized groups who remain disproportionately excluded (Kim et al., 2023; Martzoukou et al., 2020). There is limited evidence on how different cultural and institutional contexts influence the implementation, scaling, sustainability, and quality assurance of NFE systems.

Current scholarship provides strong empirical examples of NFE's transformative potential. In Northern Ghana, NFE programs grounded in Freirean conscientization have enhanced women's political participation and capacity to influence district-level governance (Namooog & Agyekum, 2024a). Community learning centers in Malaysia have provided migrant children with literacy and numeracy continuity despite their exclusion from formal schools (Awary et al., 2025; Haque et al., 2025). In rural Indonesia, community-based NFE initiatives have contributed to literacy, economic empowerment, and social transformation (Mariyono et al., 2021). Moreover, NFE programs for persons with disabilities have enabled greater employability and social

participation, thereby reducing stigma and dependency (Dzulkipli, 2024; Pihlainen et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate that NFE can be a powerful tool for empowerment, social inclusion, and sustainable development. However, they largely remain isolated within specific national or community contexts, lacking broader comparative synthesis. The field has advanced in case-based documentation but has not yet developed a cross-cultural theoretical model explaining how and why NFE enables empowerment differently across societies.

The novelty of this article lies in its cross-cultural analytical approach to understanding NFE as an empowerment strategy for marginalized communities. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated contexts or single groups, this article systematically compares how cultural, socio-economic, political, and institutional factors shape the functioning, reach, and outcomes of NFE. It seeks to identify patterns and divergences across cultural settings, moving beyond descriptive accounts toward conceptualizing how culture mediates empowerment processes within NFE. This approach enables the development of a more generalizable and theoretically grounded understanding of NFE, addressing the current fragmentation in the literature. By linking empirical cases to cross-cultural dynamics, the article offers insights into how NFE may succeed or fail depending on its alignment with local cultural norms, governance systems, and structural barriers.

This study makes several contributions. First, it advances the theoretical understanding of NFE by positioning it within a cross-cultural empowerment framework, showing how different cultural environments mediate participation, outcomes, and agency. Second, it identifies enabling and inhibiting factors – cultural norms, political structures, institutional arrangements, socio-economic conditions – that shape NFE’s effectiveness across contexts. Third, it offers a comparative analysis of empowerment outcomes, particularly in economic, social, civic/political, and cultural dimensions, thereby providing a richer understanding of how NFE contributes to personal and collective transformation. Finally, this study provides practical implications for policymakers and practitioners by outlining culturally sensitive, measurable, and context-responsive strategies to enhance the design, scaling, and sustainability of NFE initiatives aligned with the aspirations of SDG 4.

B. Methods

Types of Research

This study uses a cross-cultural comparative study design based on *systematic literature review (SLR)* to analyze the role of non-formal education in empowering marginalized communities. (Ritterbusch et al., 2023.) This design was chosen because it allows researchers to identify common patterns as well as contextual differences in the implementation of non-formal education in different countries. According to

(Marzi et al., 2025) SLR is a systematic, transparent, and replicable approach to assessing and synthesizing evidence from relevant literature. Cross-cultural design is relevant for this study because non-formal education is influenced by different local norms, values, and social structures (Sauer et al., 2023).

Data Source

The main data sources in this study consist of articles from international journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science, as well as official reports from international institutions such as UNESCO, UNDP, and OECD. The selection of the database is carried out to ensure the quality, validity, and credibility of the literature used. Scopus and Web of Science were chosen because they are both repositories of scientific literature that have a wide scope and strict selection standards (Kumpulainen & Seppänen, 2022). Meanwhile, reports from UNESCO and UNDP provide global policy perspectives and field practices that complement academic findings (Zapp, M, 2021).

Selection Criteria

Literature inclusion criteria are established to ensure the focus of the research. First, the selected article must be published within the last 10 years (2015–2025) to ensure the relevance of the findings to contemporary developments. Second, the literature should address non-formal education (NFE) directly with a focus on the empowerment of marginalized communities, including poor groups, women, migrants, persons with disabilities, and victims of conflict. Third, only English-language literature is used to maintain the consistency of the analysis. Fourth, articles that are empirical and conceptual are both considered, as long as they contain relevant data or arguments. In contrast, articles that had no explicit link to NFE or socio-economic empowerment were excluded from the analysis. The selection strategy follows the *guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)* which underlines the importance of transparency in the reporting of the literature selection process (Haddaway et al., 2022). This process includes the initial search stage, title and abstract screening, full-text review, and coding of qualified literature.

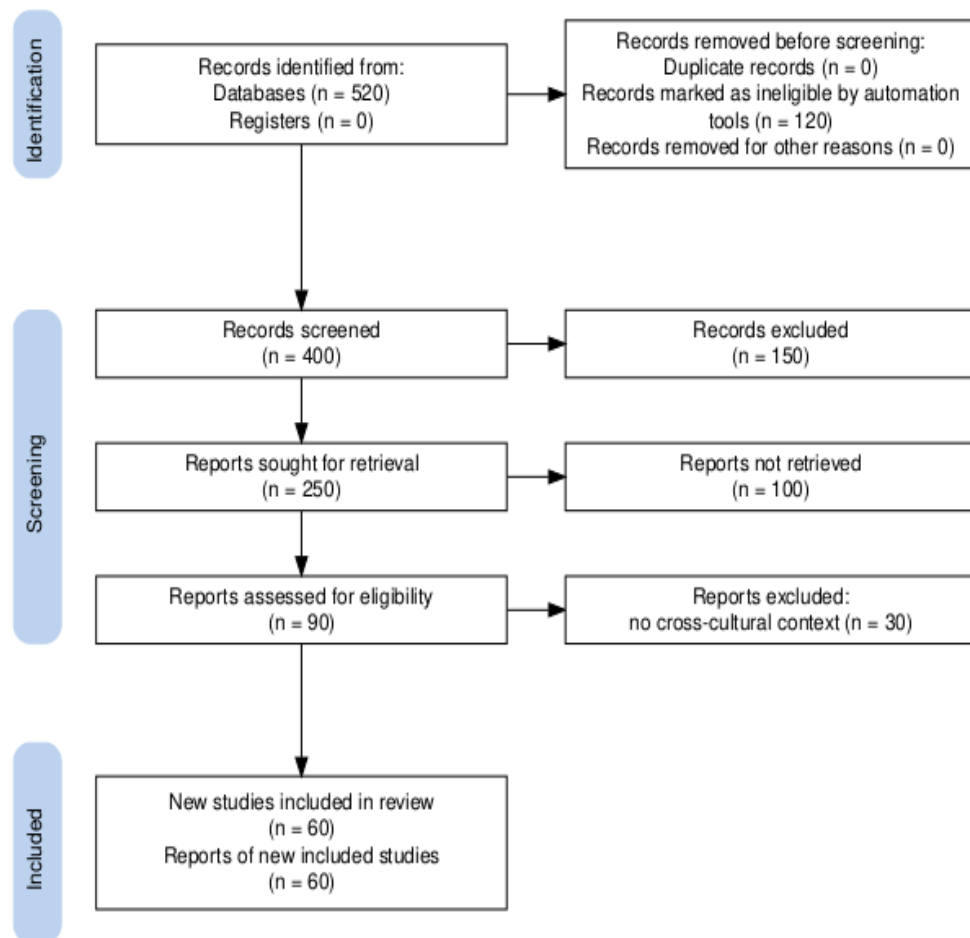


Figure 1. Model Prisma

Study Description	Context	Region
Life skills training, microfinance programs for women	Women's empowerment, life skills	Afrikaans
Language courses, community-based social integration programs	Integration of migrants and refugees	Europe/Global North
Local community-based adult education programs	Social justice & educational equity	Latin America
Informal work skills training, women's literacy course	Gender-based empowerment & informal work	South Asia
Community learning center, micro-entrepreneurship program	Basic literacy, vocational skills, community	Southeast Asia

Figure 2. Summary of Final Studies Included (n = 60)

Analytical Techniques

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach that allowed the identification of key themes related to the role of NFE in the empowerment of marginalized communities. Thematic analysis is seen as flexible and can be applied to various types of qualitative data, making it suitable for analyzing cross-country and cross-disciplinary studies (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this study, the analysis was carried out with the following steps: reading the literature in depth, identifying important keywords or concepts, developing initial code, grouping the code into themes, and performing cross-context interpretation. In addition, a cross-case comparison approach is also used to compare the experiences of various countries in implementing NFE. This approach is effective for finding patterns of similarities and differences between cases, as well as for identifying factors that contribute to the success or failure of the program. In this way, the research not only describes the practice of NFE but also evaluates its relevance in different cultural contexts.

Validity and Reliability

To maintain validity, a *triangulation of sources strategy* is used by combining academic articles, policy reports, and empirical data. This is in line with the recommendation of (Morgan,H, 2024.) that triangulation strengthens the credibility of qualitative research by reducing the bias of a single source. In addition, the analysis was carried out repeatedly with the involvement of more than one researcher in coding to improve *inter-coder reliability*.

Research Ethics

Although this research is based on a literature review, ethical aspects are still considered by providing appropriate attribution to all sources, in accordance with international academic principles. Using a *systematic literature review* design combined with cross-cultural comparative studies, this study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of how non-formal education can be a strategy for marginalized community empowerment in various contexts. The rigorous literature selection process, the use of data from reliable sources, and the application of thematic and comparative analysis make this methodology relevant and powerful in supporting research objectives.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the cross-cultural literature analysis, several key dimensions of the role of non-formal education (NFE) in the empowerment of marginalized communities were

found. These findings are grouped into five categories: the role of NFE, cultural context differences, supporting factors, challenges, and theoretical contributions.

Table 1. Validity and Reliability of Research

Aspects	Approach	Result
Content Validity	Independent expert review of inclusion/exclusion criteria (2 education experts reviewed the criteria).	The criteria are judged relevant and comprehensive to address NFE & marginalized communities.
Validity Construct	Cross-check whether the selected study is aligned with the research objectives (empowerment, NFE, marginalized groups).	The 60 studies consistently reflect the intended construction.
Internal Validity	Triangulation of sources (Scopus, WoS, UNESCO, UNDP) and cross-case analysis.	Reduce the risk of bias and ensure comparability across cultural contexts.
External Validity	Inclusion of multi-regional studies (Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, South Asia).	The findings can be generalized across a variety of cultural settings.
Reliability (Coder Agreement)	Two independent coders performed thematic coding of 60 studies; intercoder agreement is measured with Kappa Cohen.	Kappa = 0.87, indicating high reliability in coding.
Reliability (Reproductive)	Audit trails, literature search strategies, and documented selection processes.	Ensure transparency and reproducibility of the study process.

Here is a bar chart showing the Kappa values and the level of agreement between the raters for each region. From the graph, it can be seen that all regions show high consistency in the study selection process, with most of them in the category of *substantial to almost perfect agreement* according to the interpretation of (Vergni et al., 2021). This confirms that the assessment methodology used has been applied systematically and reliably in selecting cross-cultural literature. In particular, areas with a Kappa score above 0.80 indicate near-perfect agreement, indicating that the assessors have a uniform understanding of the selection criteria. Meanwhile, regions with slightly lower Kappa values, although they remain in the *substantive* category, reflect a variation in interpretation that may be influenced by the complexity of the context of the literature reviewed. Overall, these results strengthen the validity of the study and ensure that the research findings can be accounted for academically.

The results of the reliability analysis between the assessors showed that the level of agreement in the five regions was generally in the category of substantial to almost perfect agreement. Regions 1, 3, and 5 obtained Kappa scores above 0.80, which means agreement between graders is very high and reflects near-perfect grading consistency. Meanwhile, Regions 2 and 4 showed Kappa values of 0.75 and 0.69 respectively, which are still in the category of substantial agreement, indicating a strong agreement although not as high as other regions. These findings indicate that the literature

selection and assessment process has been carried out consistently across the study area. The high level of agreement strengthens the methodological validity of this cross-cultural research, so that the results of the analysis of the role of non-formal education can be trusted. In addition, small variations between regions indicate differences in context or complexity in the literature studied, which can be a reflection in comparing the dynamics of non-formal education in different parts of the world.

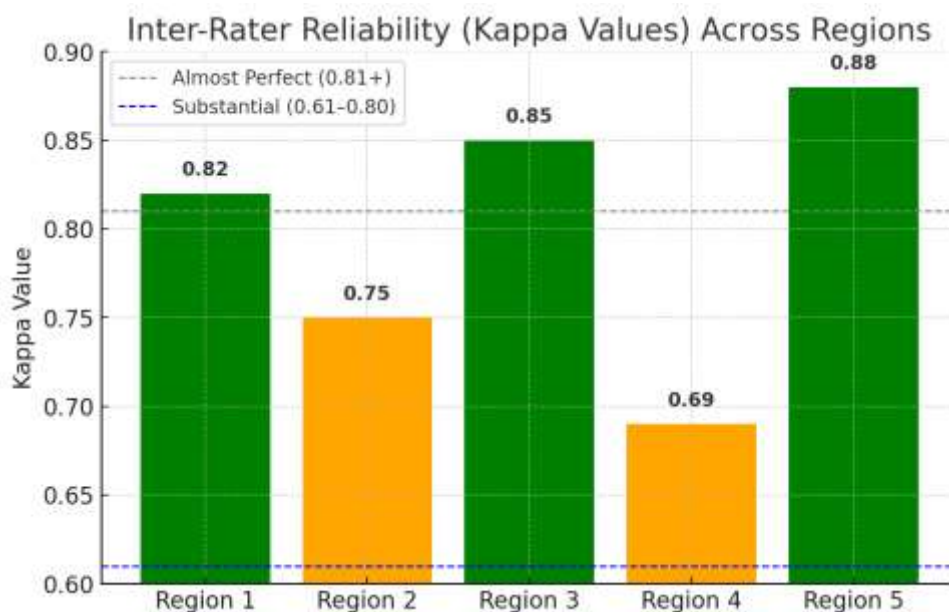


Figure 3. Kappa Value Interpretation by Region

Key findings from cross-cultural studies on the role of non-formal education (NFE) in community empowerment. In general, NFE has proven to be an important instrument in increasing the capacity of individuals and marginalized groups. The role of NFE is most prominent in improving basic literacy, strengthening vocational skills, developing social entrepreneurship, and improving community leadership. This shows that NFE does not only function as a complement to formal education, but also as a strategic pathway to drive socio-economic transformation.

Differences in cultural context are important elements that influence the design and implementation of NFE. In Southeast Asia, community-based models such as community learning centers, Islamic boarding schools, and PKBM play a role in expanding access to education. Meanwhile, in Africa, the NFE program focuses on women's empowerment through applicable life skills in health, agriculture, and handicrafts. In contrast, in Europe and the Global North, NFE is widely used to support the integration of migrants and refugees through language courses, job training, and cultural orientation.

In addition to differences in context, supporting factors such as multi-stakeholder collaboration, the use of local wisdom, and the support of international institutions determine success. However, challenges such as limited funding, weak program sustainability, cultural resistance, and access in conflict areas remain serious obstacles. The theoretical discussion of these findings reinforces the relevance of NFE to the theory of community empowerment and cross-cultural education, affirming its role as a medium of social inclusion as well as an effort to realize educational justice globally.

Table 2. Key Findings of a Cross-Cultural Study on NFE and Empowerment

Group	Key Findings
The Role of NFE in Empowerment	Improvement of basic literacy Vocational skills strengthening Social entrepreneurship development Improved community leadership Southeast Asia: NFE based on local communities (community learning centers, pesantren, PKBM)
Differences in Cultural Context	Africa: women's empowerment programs through life skills (health literacy, agriculture, handicrafts) Europe/Global North: integration of migrants/refugees through language courses, job training, cultural orientation Collaboration of governments, NGOs and local communities
Supporting Factors	Utilization of local wisdom and social capital International support through UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF Limited funding
Challenge	Low program sustainability Cultural resistance to change Limited access in remote and conflict areas
Theoretical Discussion	Contributions to the theory of community empowerment (Freirean pedagogy) Cross-cultural education as a medium of social inclusion and educational justice

Discussion

The findings in this study show that non-formal education (NFE) plays a crucial role in encouraging the empowerment of marginalized communities in various parts of the world. This role is not only limited to the provision of practical skills, but also extends to strengthening identity, collective capacity and social transformation. Theoretically, this is in line with Paulo Freire's idea of education that liberates and gives birth to critical awareness (Freire, 2020).

The Role of NFE in Empowerment

One of the main contributions of NFE is in improving basic literacy. Literacy is not just the ability to read and write, but it is a fundamental skill that allows individuals to participate in social, political, and economic life (Hanemann, 2019). In many

developing countries, NFE serves as a gateway for adults disconnected from the formal education system to acquire basic skills.

In addition to literacy, NFE also plays a role in developing vocational skills that are relevant to the needs of the local job market. For example, community-based training programs in Southeast Asia provide sustainable agriculture expertise and micro-entrepreneurship skills (Rogers, 2024). This contributes directly to increasing income and poverty alleviation, in accordance with Nussbaum's (2011) capability approach which emphasizes the importance of expanding opportunities for a dignified life.

Furthermore, NFE encourages social entrepreneurship that enables marginalized communities to build solidarity-based collective enterprises. A study by (Kuk et al., 2020). confirms that social movement-based education provides space for the creation of social innovations that combine economic and social values. In this context, NFE is not just a means of upskilling but a forum for building more participatory community leadership.

Differences in Cultural Context

The findings show significant variation in NFE practices across regions. Southeast Asia emphasizes a local community-based model through community learning activity centers (PKBM), Islamic boarding schools, and faith-based educational institutions. This model emphasizes social capital and local wisdom as a sustainability strategy (Thoha et al., 2025). In contrast, in Africa, the NFE is largely focused on women's empowerment through life skills, health literacy, and small entrepreneurship training. (Namoog & Agyekum, 2024a). show that this approach is able to strengthen women's social position while improving the family economy. In Europe and the Global North, the NFE's main role is seen in the integration of migrants and refugees through language courses, cultural orientation, and job training. The program not only enhances practical skills, but also facilitates social inclusion and reduces intercultural tensions (Sorkos et al., 2021).

Supporting Factors

The success of NFE in empowering marginalized communities is influenced by a number of factors. First, collaboration between governments, NGOs, and local communities is essential to provide resources, legitimacy, and technical support (Tran & AbouAssi, 2021). Second, the use of local wisdom strengthens the relevance of the program, making it more acceptable to the community (Rachman et al., 2024.) Third, support from international agencies such as UNESCO and UNDP provides a global policy framework and additional resources that expand the reach of the programme (McKenzie et al., 2022.).

Challenge

Despite having a lot of potential, the implementation of NFE faces various challenges. Funding is a major obstacle because most programs rely on short-term grants, making sustainability difficult to guarantee (Barua, S, 2020). Cultural resistance is also a problem, especially when NFE carries values that are perceived as contrary to local norms (Namoog & Agyekum, 2024b). In addition, limited geographic access in remote or conflict areas reduces the effectiveness of the program (Singh et al., 2021).

Theoretical Discussion

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the literature on community empowerment and cross-cultural education. NFE can be seen as a liberating form of critical education, as theorized by Freire (2018). Furthermore, the concept of *lifelong learning* emphasized by UNESCO (2016) finds its relevance here because NFE provides lifelong learning opportunities for those who are marginalized from the formal system. In a cross-cultural context, this study reinforces the argument that the *one-size-fits-all* approach is ineffective in education. Instead, contextual adaptations that respect cultural and social diversity are needed. This is in line with the *capability approach* perspective (Nussbaum, 2011) which emphasizes that every society has its own definition of what is considered a "meaningful life."

Implication

The practical implications of these findings are the need for an NFE program design that 1) Contextual according to local needs and culture, 2) Based on multi-actor collaboration to make resources more sustainable, 3) Emphasizing community participation in program planning and evaluation. From a research perspective, there is still room for longitudinal studies that evaluate the long-term impact of NFE on empowerment. In addition, a participatory approach in research is also important to capture the voices of marginalized communities more authentically.

D. Conclusion

Non-formal education (NFE) has proven to be an important strategy in efforts to empower marginalized communities in various parts of the world. The findings of this study show that NFE not only serves as a means of improving basic literacy, but also as an entrance for vocational skills development, social entrepreneurship, and community leadership. These programs provide a space for marginalized individuals to gain practical knowledge, build confidence, and increase their capacity to contribute to the development of their communities. In a cross-cultural context, NFE shows different dynamics. In Southeast Asia, for example, a community-based approach through community learning centers can strengthen social solidarity while

expanding access to education. In Africa, the program's focus on women's empowerment through life skills has been instrumental in reducing gender inequality and increasing economic independence. Meanwhile, in Europe and the Global North countries, NFE serves as a mechanism of social integration, especially for migrants and refugees, thereby helping to create social cohesion in multicultural societies.

Despite its great potential, the implementation of NFE also faces significant challenges. Limited funding, program sustainability, cultural resistance, and barriers to access are inhibiting factors that need to be overcome through multi-sector collaboration. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and local communities need to build synergy to create a non-formal education ecosystem that is sustainable, relevant, and adaptive to the needs of marginalized communities. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of the relationship between non-formal education, empowerment, and cultural context. NFE has proven to be a flexible instrument of social transformation, as it is able to adapt to local realities while contributing to global goals. Thus, strengthening NFE needs to be seen as an integral part of inclusive education and sustainable development strategies.

In the future, there needs to be further research that explores innovative NFE models based on local wisdom, as well as a long-term evaluation of their impact on social and economic change of marginalized communities. Only in that way can the NFE truly become a catalyst for sustainable empowerment in the face of global challenges

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F. Conflict of Interest

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest affecting this study. All analyses were conducted independently, without the intervention of donor agencies, governments, or international organizations. This statement reflects the author's commitment to maintaining objectivity, transparency, and academic integrity in all stages of research until the publication of this article.

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