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Providing Welfare Services: Volunteering in Social Empowerment for The Marginalized *Baduy Mualaf* Community in Banten, Indonesia

Rahmi Hidayati[1]*, Mahpudin[2], Ahmad Fauzi[3]
[1,2,3] Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Indonesia
Author Correspondence. Email: rahmi.hidayati@untirta.ac.id, Phone: +6285814166309

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Abstract: The Baduy tribe in Lebak Regency, Banten Province, adheres to the Sunda Wiwitan belief system, but some members have converted to Islam. This decision excluded them from customary territories, resulting in poverty, loss of housing, and land insecurity. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing volunteerism as a mechanism of welfare service provision that promotes social and economic empowerment among the marginalized Baduy Mualaf community in Banten. This study examines how volunteerism contributes to the social and economic empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf, while also exploring the challenges and limitations of these initiatives. A qualitative descriptive-explanatory approach was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation during fieldwork in 2023. Thematic coding was applied to identify patterns of volunteerism and empowerment practices. The findings show that voluntary actions began with providing land for settlements and farming and were later institutionalized through foundations that manage empowerment programs. These efforts have supported the Baduy Mualaf's survival and recognition. However, challenges remain, including limited government involvement, donor dependence, and weak internal governance within the foundations. Volunteerism has provided crucial welfare support to the Baduy Mualaf through housing provision, access to agricultural land, livelihood assistance, and social and religious support. Yet, its potential is constrained by structural and institutional issues. Stronger collaboration between civil society and government is needed to ensure sustainable empowerment. Future research should focus on policies that integrate local cultural contexts with broader frameworks of social welfare and voluntarism.
Keywords: volunteerism, empowerment, social action, Baduy Mualaf

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INTRODUCTION

Social action in the form of volunteerism can be observed across diverse regions of the world, regardless of the political regime a country adopts (Allik & Realo, 2004). Volunteerism is generally understood as a collective movement initiated by civil society to achieve specific objectives, most commonly social empowerment (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). In recent decades, volunteerism has emerged as a central feature in democratic development, providing an alternative channel for addressing challenges in providing basic services and promoting citizens' welfare (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). This development stems from the fact that the state cannot be omnipresent in all aspects of citizens' lives because of limits in policy reach, budgetary capacity, and human resources.

Voluntary social practices are frequently associated with the state's inability to adequately fulfill its role in ensuring citizens' welfare (Ganesh, 2005). Some scholars even argue that "the weaker the state, the greater the incidence of volunteerism" (Anheier & Salamon,

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1999). In other words, civil society's engagement in volunteerism often complements gaps in state service provision. Accordingly, governments also have a vested interest in encouraging active citizen participation in welfare provision, thereby fostering shared responsibility and reducing dependence on the state (Pascual, 2019).

Volunteerism takes multiple forms, depending on its intended goals across social, political, and economic domains. Socially, volunteerism ranges from charitable assistance to welfare provision and community empowerment. Politically, it involves advocacy and civic participation. Economically, it supports livelihoods, skills development, and community-based enterprises toward self-reliance. Non-state actors initiate these activities, whether through formal or informal organizations, to address public concerns such as inequality, poverty, and social injustice, including welfare provision for vulnerable and marginalized groups (Anheier & Scherer, 2015). Volunteers devote their time to designing and implementing empowerment programs so that targeted communities can achieve greater self-reliance and live with dignity. Volunteerism extends beyond short-term charitable activities such as distributing money or goods. Instead, it encompasses sustained efforts that require commitment, clearly defined objectives, and targeted beneficiaries. Social action qualifies as volunteerism when it meets several criteria: it is altruistic in nature, motivated by concern for social issues and directed toward serving others; it involves organizational or institutional structures as a means of formalizing activities; participation is voluntary and not coerced, nor motivated by material gain; it is not regarded as primary employment; and it is carried out over a defined period of time rather than spontaneously (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012; Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

Existing studies indicate that volunteerism improves quality of life by addressing public problems. In Nigeria, for instance, various volunteer groups have emerged to empower rural women, particularly by enhancing their active participation in political and economic spheres (Samah et al., 2013). In Slovakia, civil society organizations have played a pivotal role in transforming a centralized and top-down regime into one characterized by democratic governance and partnership. As a result, the provision of public services has shifted from being solely the state's responsibility to also being initiated by civil society through volunteer activism (Džatková, 2016). In Canada, volunteer initiatives transformed spontaneous disaster response into an institutionalized form of networked disaster governance, reducing casualties and mitigating losses (Waldman et al., 2017). In Indonesia, volunteerism has manifested in various domains, including rural community empowerment, environmental and disaster management, women's rights advocacy, democratic governance promotion, and political volunteering, ranging from political education to campaign support (Arianto, 2014; Hadi, 2010; Sauki & Hidayat, 2022; Syauket, 2022; Wati et al., 2022; Yatmaja, 2019).

Despite its positive contributions, volunteerism has limitations and challenges. Existing scholarship highlights the social contradictions and institutional constraints that shape and limit voluntary efforts. A recurring issue relates to the tension between volunteerism and professionalism. Because volunteerism is often perceived as purely altruistic, organizations sometimes overlook competence and professional management (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). Furthermore, tensions may arise between social and economic motives, as some volunteer initiatives are deliberately framed to generate material benefits by exploiting vulnerability (Simpson & Cheney, 2007). Volunteerism may also lead to exclusivity or neglect of actual community needs, particularly when decisions are made unilaterally, assuming volunteers know best. Additional obstacles stem from personal factors, such as self-motivation and volunteers' sense of responsibility toward their commitments (Cho et al., 2020; Glenton et al., 2010; Traeger & Alfes, 2019).

The anomalies and obstacles encountered in volunteerism often hinder efforts to empower targeted communities and, in some cases, may fail. A community can be considered

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empowered and able to overcome vulnerability when it fulfills the criteria of self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and critical awareness (Cohen, 2009). Within this framework, volunteerism does not always guarantee genuine empowerment for beneficiaries. Furthermore, the depth and extent of empowerment generated through volunteer initiatives may vary depending on the nature of the obstacles and anomalies faced during implementation.

This article integrates the discourse on volunteerism and social empowerment. More specifically, it examines voluntary activities initiated by segments of civil society to empower the marginalized Baduy Mualaf community in Lebak Regency, Banten. These volunteer efforts were formalized through the establishment of foundations that facilitated social action by building designated settlements for Baduy Mualaf, providing them with housing and agricultural land as sources of livelihood.

The Baduy Mualaf are indigenous Baduy people who converted from their ancestral faith, Sunda Wiwitan, to Islam. According to Baduy customary law, individuals who abandon their ancestral belief system are deemed to have violated communal rules and must, consequently, leave the traditional territory. As a result, those who embrace Islam are forced to leave their homes, families, and agricultural land. This condition has left the Baduy Mualaf in precarious circumstances. They often become displaced, losing housing, employment, and kinship networks, and resort to living temporarily on the plantation lands of Muslim residents while building makeshift shelters. At the same time, the government, which has primary responsibility for citizens' welfare and providing basic services, has not fully met their needs.

These conditions of vulnerability, poverty, and marginalization have triggered solidarity among Muslim communities, who initiated volunteerism as a means of advancing social, economic, and religious empowerment. The emergence of multiple foundations and settlements dedicated to the Baduy Mualaf reflects the growing scale of voluntary activism. These foundations mobilized and managed benefactor donations to acquire land and establish settlements, where houses were built and agricultural activities were developed to sustain the community's economy. Furthermore, the settlements served as centers for religious education and Islamic guidance. Through this system, the Baduy Mualaf gained tangible benefits from volunteer-based foundations (R. Kurnianti, 2020). This study therefore demonstrates that volunteerism has played a critical role in filling the gap left by the absence of state intervention in providing welfare for vulnerable citizens. Nevertheless, the lack of government involvement also complicates efforts to achieve sustainable empowerment.

Despite these initiatives, empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf community has not been without challenges. Field observations revealed that community members remain only partially empowered and continue to rely heavily on volunteer support. At the same time, the proliferation of multiple foundations working on the same issue has raised suspicions of business-oriented motives, leading to competition for donor funding. This study's novelty lies in conceptualizing volunteerism as a mechanism of welfare service provision that promotes social and economic empowerment among the marginalized Baduy Mualaf community in Banten. It uniquely examines volunteering within the context of an indigenous Muslim-convert community while critically exploring its challenges, limitations, and sustainability.

Volunteerism has long been understood as a social phenomenon that transcends cultural, political, and geographical boundaries. Scholars have defined it as collective civic action initiated by non-state actors to address social challenges and empower marginalized groups (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). In its broadest sense, volunteerism represents altruistic action embedded in community solidarity, yet its manifestations and outcomes often reflect the broader socio-political environment in which it takes place. In societies where the state lacks sufficient capacity to provide welfare and public services, volunteerism frequently emerges as an alternative mechanism to bridge gaps left by government institutions (Anheier & Salamon,

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1999). This has led to the widely cited claim that the weaker the state, the stronger the reliance on civic voluntarism to address welfare deficits.

The role of volunteerism in contemporary democracies is particularly noteworthy. Scholars such as Ganesh and Mcallum (2012) argue that civic activism and voluntary participation have become integral to democratic consolidation because they allow citizens to participate in governance beyond electoral participation. Voluntary action not only provides welfare and addresses immediate public needs but also nurtures the democratic ethos by building civic responsibility and reducing overdependence on the state (Pascual, 2019). In this context, volunteerism contributes to both tangible outcomes, such as improved access to housing, health, and education, and intangible benefits, such as stronger social trust, networks, and a sense of collective efficacy within communities.

Theoretically, volunteerism has been interpreted through several lenses. From a sociological perspective, it is often framed as a manifestation of civil society activism that operates between the state and the market (Anheier & Scherer, 2015). In political science, it has been studied as a mechanism of social capital formation, aligning with Putnam's (2000) thesis that civic engagement fosters cooperation and trust, which in turn strengthens democratic governance. Psychologically, scholars emphasize the role of altruism, empathy, and self-determination in motivating individuals to sustain voluntary action (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). This interdisciplinary richness shows that volunteerism is not a single phenomenon but a complex field of practice shaped by overlapping social, political, and individual dimensions.

Empirical evidence from diverse contexts illustrates volunteerism's transformative potential. In Nigeria, voluntary organizations have led efforts to empower rural women, enabling them to participate more actively in political and economic domains (Samah et al., 2013). In Slovakia, civil society organizations mobilized voluntary action to transform a centralized political regime into a more democratic and participatory system of governance (Džatková, 2016). Canada provides another compelling example, where volunteer networks turned spontaneous disaster response into institutionalized forms of networked governance, reducing casualties and improving resilience (Waldman et al., 2017). These examples underscore the fact that volunteerism, when sustained and institutionalized, can address structural problems that neither the market nor the state alone can effectively resolve.

In the Indonesian context, volunteerism is deeply embedded within both cultural and political life. Historically, traditions of mutual aid such as gotong royong provided a cultural foundation for contemporary forms of civic participation. Today, volunteerism manifests in a variety of domains including disaster relief, environmental activism, political education, women's empowerment, and village development (Arianto, 2014; Hadi, 2010; Sauki & Hidayat, 2022; Syauket, 2022; Wati et al., 2022; Yatmaja, 2019). These diverse expressions show that volunteerism is not merely a temporary response to crises but also a sustainable mode of social organization that can restructure community life and redefine state-society relations.

Despite its positive contributions, the literature also highlights challenges associated with volunteerism. One of the most frequently noted concerns is professionalism and organizational capacity. Because voluntary action is often framed as altruistic and informal, accountability, managerial skills, and professional governance structures can be neglected (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). Weak institutional design can undermine program effectiveness, create dependency rather than empowerment, and, in some cases, even harm the very communities they are meant to assist.

Another challenge lies in the blurring of boundaries between altruistic action and profit-driven motives. Simpson and Cheney (2007) caution against instrumentalizing volunteerism, noting that some organizations strategically exploit the vulnerability of marginalized groups to attract donor funding or pursue hidden economic interests. Such

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practices raise ethical dilemmas and can erode public trust in civil society initiatives. Similarly, questions of inclusivity often arise when volunteers, intentionally or not, impose their own agendas on communities and overlook local voices and needs. This dynamic can reinforce power hierarchies instead of dismantling them, thereby limiting the depth of empowerment achieved.

At the individual level, motivational factors present another source of complexity. Glenton et al. (2010) , Cho, Wong, and Chiu (2020), and Traeger and Alfes (2019) show that volunteers vary in their commitment, sense of responsibility, and resilience. While some remain steadfastly dedicated, others may disengage as challenges mount, disrupting program continuity. This variability complicates the sustainability of voluntary initiatives and underscores the importance of fostering self-efficacy and critical awareness among both volunteers and beneficiaries.

The intersection between volunteerism and empowerment theory provides an important conceptual foundation for assessing its impact. Cohen (2009) identifies three key dimensions of empowerment: self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and critical awareness. These dimensions not only determine how far communities move out of powerlessness but also highlight the limits of volunteerism when these elements are absent. In this regard, volunteerism does not automatically guarantee empowerment. Rather, it depends on the quality of interaction, program sustainability, and initiatives' ability to foster long-term self-reliance among marginalized populations.

Building on this framework, the case of the Baduy Mualaf in Lebak, Banten illustrates the ambivalent role of volunteerism in addressing marginalization. The Baduy, originally adherents of Sunda Wiwitan, face expulsion from their indigenous community when converting to Islam. Consequently, Baduy Mualaf experience multiple forms of exclusion: loss of home, separation from kin, and deprivation of economic resources. These empirical conditions demonstrate how volunteerism, as a form of social action, responds to structural exclusion by mobilizing social support, resources, and collective efforts to address the social and economic vulnerabilities experienced by the Baduy Mualaf. At the same time, field findings indicate that the effectiveness of such volunteer action is shaped by the community's participation, local social conditions, and the sustainability of volunteer-based interventions.

In the absence of meaningful state intervention, Muslim volunteers established foundations and settlements to provide housing, land, and religious education. While these efforts show civil society's capacity to fill the vacuum left by the state, they also reveal challenges related to sustainability, dependency, and the professionalization of volunteer organizations (S. Kurnianti, 2020). Consequently, understanding the interplay between civil society initiatives and structural limitations becomes crucial in evaluating the long-term impacts of volunteer-led welfare programs.

The literature suggests that such dynamics are not unique to the Baduy case but reflect broader patterns in volunteerism globally. Civil society actors often negotiate between altruism and organizational survival, between empowerment and dependency, and between inclusion and exclusion. These tensions underscore the importance of moving beyond celebratory narratives of volunteerism toward more critical analyses that examine both its promises and its pitfalls.

In sum, volunteerism occupies a central place in contemporary debates on welfare, civil society, and democratization. It has proven to be an essential mechanism for addressing gaps in state provision, fostering social solidarity, and empowering marginalized groups. Yet it also faces persistent challenges related to professionalism, organizational motives, inclusivity, and sustainability. Understanding these complexities is crucial for situating volunteerism not merely as a benevolent social practice but as a dynamic field of power, negotiation, and

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contestation. Within this broader theoretical landscape, the case of the Baduy Mualaf provides a valuable lens for examining how volunteerism operates at the intersection of cultural identity, religious transformation, and socio-economic marginalization.

The study integrates volunteerism, welfare services, community participation, and empowerment toward greater community self-reliance. However, limited capacity and weak organizational professionalism further complicate the empowerment process. Against this backdrop, this article addresses two central research questions: first, what model of volunteer activism has civil society initiated to promote the socioeconomic empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf community; and second, what motives, challenges, and problems have emerged in these empowerment initiatives. The study integrates volunteerism, welfare services, community participation, and empowerment toward greater community self-reliance. However, limited capacity and weak organizational professionalism further complicate the empowerment process. Against this backdrop, this article addresses two central research questions: first, what model of volunteer activism has civil society initiated to promote the socioeconomic empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf community; and second, what motives, challenges, and problems have emerged in these empowerment initiatives. By examining these dynamics, this study contributes to the growing literature on volunteerism and community empowerment by elucidating how volunteer-based welfare services can facilitate socioeconomic transformation among marginalized communities, while identifying the institutional and organizational conditions required to foster sustainable self-reliance.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative approach. The narrative approach captures and analyzes social phenomena as experienced by individuals or groups, giving meaning to their lived realities through the stories they recount (Creswell, 2014). This approach is a suitable choice because it enables the research to capture how welfare services and volunteer interventions are experienced by the community, while giving voice to their experiences of exclusion, empowerment, and challenges. Thus, narrative inquiry views volunteerism not merely as assistance, but as social action shaped by volunteers' experiences and relationships with the Baduy Mualaf community. In this context, the research focused on understanding the lived experiences of Baduy Mualaf to Islam (Baduy mualaf) as subjects of social empowerment facilitated by volunteers working under the auspices of civil society foundations. By adopting this perspective, the study emphasizes the relational dynamics between the community and volunteer actors, highlighting how empowerment is constructed, negotiated, and sometimes constrained within these interactions.

The researcher positioned themselves close to the participants to collect in-depth information. This study involved seven participants: converts from the Baduy community and foundation administrators. The narrative category used in this study was descriptive explanatory, which not only documents volunteer activism in the social empowerment of the marginalized Baduy Mualaf but also explains how empowerment unfolds in practice and what structural, cultural, and organizational barriers hinder its realization. This approach is particularly relevant for unpacking the complexities of volunteerism, where the rhetoric of solidarity often intersects with challenges of dependency, institutionalization, and sustainability.

The researcher conducted fieldwork over two weeks between July and August 2023 in the Baduy Mualaf settlement in Lebak Regency, Banten Province. During this period, the researcher observed daily activities and interviewed participants. This combination of prolonged engagement and participant observation provided valuable contextual insights into

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the lived realities of the Baduy Mualaf, as well as how volunteer-based empowerment initiatives operate in practice.

The fieldwork period was relatively brief for an in-depth qualitative study. However, we conducted the research by living within the community, thereby ensuring data richness through intensive field engagement, the purposive selection of participants with direct experience in volunteer-based empowerment initiatives, and a combination of in-depth interviews and direct observation. Combining diverse interviews and context-rich observations ensured robust triangulation. Despite time limitations, this intensive process yielded credible insights into the lived experiences and empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf community.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with members of the Baduy convert community, foundation administrators, and local religious leaders. A purposive sampling strategy was initially employed to identify participants who were directly involved in or affected by the empowerment initiatives. This was later expanded with snowball sampling, in which additional participants were recruited through referrals from earlier informants. This approach ensured access to a wide range of perspectives, including those who might otherwise remain marginalized in formal narratives of volunteerism.

We gathered secondary data by reviewing scholarly literature, policy documents, and reports on the broader discourse of volunteerism and social empowerment. Integrating primary and secondary data enabled triangulation, strengthening the credibility and robustness of the findings. The data analysis process followed a systematic qualitative procedure. All interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded using both inductive and deductive strategies. Deductive coding was guided by theoretical frameworks on volunteerism and empowerment, while inductive coding emerged from recurring themes and patterns within the narratives of the participants. The coding process was carried out through iterative reading and categorization, which allowed the researcher to identify subtle variations, contradictions, and shared experiences across different actors.

Data were analyzed through an iterative coding process combining deductive and inductive strategies. Interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly reviewed, followed by initial coding of meaningful data segments. Deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework of volunteerism, welfare services, and social and economic empowerment, while inductive codes captured recurring experiences, patterns, and issues emerging from participants' narratives. The codes were then compared, categorized, and refined into broader themes, including welfare service provision, empowerment, and the challenges and sustainability of volunteer interventions. Themes were continuously reviewed against the original data to identify convergent and divergent experiences across participants. This process integrated theoretical concepts with empirical findings while maintaining the participants' perspectives as the basis for interpretation.

Following the coding stage, thematic analysis was applied to organize and interpret the data across broader conceptual categories. Key themes included the dynamics of dependency, the institutionalization of volunteerism, the tensions between religious solidarity and organizational interests, and the perceived absence of state intervention. Thematic analysis revealed convergent perspectives and highlighted contestations that shaped the complexity of the empowerment process.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and anonymity was preserved using pseudonyms. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the cultural particularities of the Baduy community, special attention was paid to respecting local norms, ensuring cultural sensitivity, and minimizing potential harm to participants.

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Baduy Mualaf: The Phenomenon of Religious Transformation

The Baduy are an indigenous community living in the interior of the Kendeng Mountains, in Kanekes Village, Leuwidamar District, Lebak Regency, Banten Province. As an adat society, they strictly uphold ancestral traditions and norms inherited through generations. These values emphasize harmony with nature, leading to prohibitions on cutting trees, using electricity, or adopting modern technology. Their worldview is deeply rooted in animism and dynamism, expressed through the veneration of spirits and sacred objects. Central to this spiritual life is Sunda Wiwitan, the belief system that has shaped their cultural and religious identity for centuries.

Within this framework, the Baduy have historically maintained an inward orientation, minimizing external contact to preserve cultural continuity. Although they are a sub-ethnic group of the Sundanese, as shown by linguistic similarities with surrounding communities, they maintain strict cultural boundaries. Their livelihoods are largely based on swidden agriculture, cultivating rice and other crops, with collective principles reflected in shared land management practices. For instance, direct observation reveals that the houses are built uniformly using bamboo, with roofs made of lontar palm leaf fibers, symbolizing equality. At the same time, restrictions on electricity and vehicles reinforce their ecological ethic. Social stratification is minimal, with differentiation arising primarily from land tenure under adat arrangements.

The Baduy community is broadly divided into two groups, the Inner Baduy (*Baduy Dalam*) and the Outer Baduy (*Baduy Luar*). The Inner Baduy are custodians of orthodoxy, rigorously preserving tradition and rejecting external influence, symbolized by their distinctive white clothing. The Outer Baduy, in contrast, are more open to interaction and adaptation, wearing predominantly black attire and gradually engaging with modern practices. Yet, both groups remain subject to adat law, including the stipulation that all members must adhere to Sunda Wiwitan. Those who abandon this belief system are considered violators of custom and are consequently expelled from the territory, losing access to their homes, land, and kinship networks.



Figure 1: The Baduy Tribe, Banten

This legal-cultural framework has made Outer Baduy members particularly susceptible to religious conversion. Their more frequent interactions with neighboring Muslim populations through trade, labor, and social exchanges have created opportunities to encounter alternative worldviews and practices. While precise data on the origins of this conversion phenomenon remain elusive, informant accounts suggest it has been occurring since the 1990s, coinciding with local Islamic proselytization efforts. Some narratives emphasize external factors, such as

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the persuasive role of religious leaders. In contrast, others highlight internal motivations among the Baduy themselves, including desires for greater autonomy, freedom from adat restrictions, and aspirations for a lifestyle resembling that of surrounding Muslim populations. This includes owning modern houses and vehicles and securing more stable employment opportunities (U. Budiaman et al., 2020).

However, leaving Sunda Wiwitan carries severe consequences. Converts, known as Baduy Mualaf, are permanently exiled from adat territory. This exclusion fractures their social and economic security. They are compelled to abandon their homes, agricultural plots, and kinship ties. Deprived of these supports, many become precariously housed, living in makeshift huts on borrowed farmland or in forested areas owned by Muslim neighbors. Their situation often resembles that of the homeless and the underemployed, marked by unstable housing and limited access to sustainable livelihoods. Official data on the number of *Baduy Mualaf* is unavailable because of their dispersed and marginalized existence, but anecdotal evidence suggests their numbers have steadily grown over the past decades.

The precarious conditions of the *Baduy Mualaf* reveal significant governance gaps. Despite their vulnerability, the local government of Lebak Regency has failed to provide adequate welfare services or housing solutions. This absence is particularly striking given the state's constitutional responsibility to guarantee all citizens' welfare. As a result, the Baduy Mualaf continue to rely heavily on the goodwill of surrounding Muslim communities, depending on borrowed land for shelter and subsistence farming. This reliance underscores the insufficiency of formal state intervention and highlights the structural neglect faced by indigenous converts in Indonesia's welfare system.

In response, Muslim communities in the region developed a powerful form of collective solidarity. Framed by a shared religious identity, this solidarity gradually became organized volunteer activism to address the acute vulnerabilities of the *Baduy Mualaf*. Civil society organizations and foundations mobilized financial and material resources to provide housing, farmland, and religious education. What began as spontaneous acts of compassion evolved into structured initiatives, including establishing special settlements for the Baduy Mualaf. These efforts sought not only to restore material stability but also to integrate converts into a new religious and social order under Islam.

The rise of volunteerism in this context illustrates the interplay between religious conversion, social marginalization, and civil society activism. Theoretically, this case aligns with Stark and Finke's (2000) rational choice approach, which suggests that individuals convert when the perceived rewards of joining a new faith outweigh the costs of remaining in their original belief system. For the Baduy Mualaf, the potential for material stability, modern livelihood opportunities, and access to broader social networks outweighed the benefits of maintaining adherence to Sunda Wiwitan. Similarly, Rambo's (1993) process model of religious conversion, which emphasizes the stages of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences, offers a useful lens for interpreting this phenomenon. The expulsion from adat territory represents both a crisis and a consequence. At the same time, the encounter with Muslim communities and their volunteer activism facilitated the converts' transition into a new faith and social order.

This theoretical framing underscores the complexity of the Baduy conversion experience. It demonstrates how conversion is not merely a spiritual act but also a deeply social, economic, and political process shaped by structural exclusion and collective solidarity. Volunteerism, therefore, cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon but as an extension of the broader dynamics of religious transformation, cultural displacement, and governance neglect.

Social Action: From Compassion to Volunteerism

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The precarious living conditions of the *Baduy Mualaf* evoked strong compassion among the surrounding Muslim population, who felt a moral obligation to assist. As the religious majority in Lebak Regency, Muslims perceived the Baduy Mualaf not as outsiders but as fellow believers, thereby strengthening a sense of shared religious identity. Field findings indicate that local volunteers and Muslim-based organizations manifested this solidarity by providing necessities, housing, agricultural land, religious guidance, and livelihood support. These forms of assistance show how shared religious identity served as a basis for mobilizing resources and collective action to address the Baduy Mualaf's social and economic vulnerabilities.

This sense of belonging transformed into concrete acts of solidarity, ranging from providing land for cultivation to sharing food during major Islamic festivities such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Local religious leaders also played an important role by guiding villagers in Islamic rituals such as reciting the Qur'an, fasting, and daily prayers. Other villagers extended opportunities for daily wage labor, including livestock herding, woodcraft, and agricultural work. In addition, academic institutions like Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin and Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa organized community service programs, while Islamic-oriented civil society organizations also contributed sporadic charity.

This pattern of informal aid gradually developed into more organized and institutionalized forms of volunteerism. What began as spontaneous expressions of compassion evolved into collective action, exemplified by the establishment of foundations (*Yayasan*) specifically dedicated to supporting the welfare and empowerment of the *Baduy Mualaf* (R. Kurnianti, 2020). These institutions addressed earlier problems of sporadic and uncoordinated donations while also providing legal recognition and sustainability. Currently, two foundations remain active: YASMUI (Yayasan Spirit Membangun Ukhuwah Islamiyah), founded in 2017, and Yayasan At-Taubah:60, founded in 2019. Their Islamic nomenclature signals a deliberate attempt to inspire wider Muslim participation in the cause.

These foundations' first initiatives focused on land acquisition for housing and agriculture. Community donations or waqf (endowments) often made this possible. The late Dr. Azhari, a retired physician from Tangerang, exemplifies this altruism. Concerned for displaced converts, he bought land near Kanekes and dedicated it for their use, later institutionalizing his efforts by establishing YASMUI. Similarly, Rudy, a local religious leader, founded Yayasan At-Taubah after donating his own land to provide stable housing for the nomadic converts. Both initiatives highlight the transition from individual altruism to collective, structured volunteerism.

At present, at least two established settlements for the converts exist: Kampung Baduy Mualaf Ciboleger in Kanekes (managed by YASMUI) and Kampung Baduy Mualaf Landeuh in Bojongmanik (managed by Yayasan At-Taubah). Both are located adjacent to the adat territory, enabling continued contact with the Baduy relatives while accommodating the cultural preference for agrarian and forest environments. These settlements mark the beginning of institutionalized empowerment efforts.

The transformation from individual concern to collective action exemplifies the core character of volunteerism: voluntary participation to solve public problems without direct material compensation. As Snyder and Omoto (2008) argue, volunteerism is motivated not only by empathy but also by the pursuit of social cohesion and shared identity. Similarly, Ganesh and McAllum (2012) emphasize that volunteerism often arises in spaces where the state fails to provide welfare services adequately. In this case, YASMUI and At-Taubah's initiatives filled a governance gap by institutionalizing civil society responses to marginalization.

The field data obtained were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns regarding solidarity, institutionalization, and empowerment. These thematic categories revealed three key dynamics: first, the role of shared religious identity as a catalyst for solidarity; second,

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the institutionalization of altruism into structured foundations; and third, the dual orientation of empowerment programs, encompassing both material well-being and religious education.

Providing Welfare Services: Models of Volunteerism and Empowerment

The foundations became arenas for organizing volunteer activity while also symbolizing Muslim solidarity with the marginalized. By establishing settlements, they made assistance more visible and coordinated. Before this, the Baduy Mualaf's dispersed, isolated existence limited public recognition of their plight. The settlements not only provided material security but also drew wider attention, thereby attracting more donations and long-term commitments from civil society actors.

In this context, volunteerism substituted for the state's absent welfare provisions. The foundations supplied two primary needs: housing and food security. Houses were built with bamboo and wood in architectural styles resembling traditional Baduy dwellings, symbolizing cultural continuity. Agricultural plots supported subsistence farming, ensuring families had access to basic food sources. The settlement also addressed spiritual needs by establishing mosques, religious teachers, and Qur'anic study groups, underscoring the dual material and spiritual dimensions of welfare.

The housing clusters in the Ciboleger settlement were designated with Arabic names, including Ar-Rahman, Ar-Razak, Ar-Rohim, As-Salam, and Al-Ghani, reflecting the integration of Islamic religious values into the spatial and social organization of the community. Beyond functioning as geographical identifiers, these names symbolized the religious identity and shared moral foundations upon which the settlement was established. The provision of housing and agricultural land through waqf (Islamic endowment) further demonstrated how religious philanthropy was institutionalized as a mechanism for supporting the social and economic integration of Baduy converts. Unlike conventional private property arrangements, these assets were collectively administered by the foundations, with residents granted temporary rights of use rather than individual ownership. This arrangement reflected a community-oriented approach to resource management in which access to essential assets was intended to facilitate economic security, social adaptation, and the gradual development of self-reliance. Residents were permitted to occupy the houses without financial obligations until they attained a level of social and economic independence considered sufficient for independent living. At that stage, they were expected to transition out of the settlement, allowing newly converted families to access the same resources and opportunities. Such a rotational occupancy system was designed to maintain the continuity of assistance, optimize the utilization of limited philanthropic resources, and extend the benefits of the empowerment initiative to successive groups of beneficiaries. From a community empowerment perspective, this arrangement illustrates a transitional support model in which material assistance is positioned not as a permanent form of dependency but as an enabling resource for developing individual and household capacities. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on how independence is defined and assessed, whether residents have meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions concerning their transition, and the extent to which adequate social and economic support is available beyond the settlement. Thus, the Ciboleger settlement represents an intersection of religious philanthropy, communal resource governance, and transitional empowerment, while also raising important questions about the relationship between institutional control, beneficiary autonomy, and the long-term sustainability of community-based interventions

The empowerment model also included land-use arrangements, whereby each household was allocated a 2,000-square-meter plot. The harvest was shared in a 70:30 ratio, with farmers retaining the majority and reinvesting a smaller portion in community maintenance and welfare. Failure to cultivate the land within three months resulted in reallocation to another

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household, ensuring productive use of resources. These mechanisms reinforced accountability while embedding solidarity in settlement governance.

Life stories of individual converts illustrate the transformative impact of these initiatives. For instance, Rasiman, who converted in 1995, had previously endured precarious living conditions as a squatter on borrowed land. Since moving into the Ciboleger settlement in 2015, he has gained access to stable housing, agricultural land, and religious instruction. His testimony underscores how volunteerism, institutionalized through the foundations, bridged the gap between displacement and sustainable livelihood.

From a theoretical standpoint, these developments can be understood through the changing nature of volunteerism discussed by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), particularly the transition from traditional, collectively embedded forms of voluntary engagement toward more reflexive and organizationally structured practices. Within this perspective, volunteerism extends beyond spontaneous acts of charity or individual altruism, reflecting the interaction between moral commitments, collective identities, and institutional arrangements. Religious values may serve as an important foundation for fostering solidarity, social responsibility, and collective commitment, while organizational structures provide mechanisms for coordinating resources, mobilizing participation, and sustaining community initiatives. This interaction illustrates how altruistic motivations can be translated into systematic and organized forms of collective action. Furthermore, the emergence of such initiatives in response to unmet public needs demonstrates the capacity of civil society to address gaps in institutional service provision while exercising agency in identifying and responding to local challenges. Rather than functioning merely as substitutes for state responsibilities, volunteer organizations may become important spaces for community participation, collective problem-solving, and social solidarity. Thus, volunteerism can be interpreted as a socially embedded practice in which religious identity, organizational rationality, and civic responsibility intersect, highlighting its evolving role in strengthening community resilience and collective responses to social challenges.



Figure 2. Lembah Barokah Settlement of *Baduy Mualaf*, Ciboleger
Source: https://yasmui.org/

The Yayasan Muslim Indonesia (YASMUI), as the foundation responsible for managing the Baduy convert settlement, has developed five key empowerment programs that form the backbone of its intervention. One of the most prominent initiatives is the land endowment program, in which donors, whether individually or collectively, contribute financial resources or assets to the foundation. These contributions are converted into land for housing and community facilities. To ensure transparency and maintain public trust, donors are provided with derivative certificates issued by the foundation as formal proof of their endowment. These certificates also serve as supervisory tools, ensuring that the endowed land remains consistent with waqf principles: the land cannot be privately owned, sold, or inherited, but may be used for the collective empowerment of the *Baduy Mualaf*.

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Complementing this initiative is the housing endowment program. Through this scheme, both individual and institutional donors provide financial support to build houses for members of the Baduy convert community. As with the land endowment, the houses remain under the legal category of waqf, meaning they cannot be individually owned or commodified. A similar arrangement applies to the endowment of community facilities, whereby donors contribute resources to construct public infrastructure such as mosques, roads, electricity installations, and other essential facilities. In addition to these structural programs, YASMUI also organizes a range of social service activities, including agricultural training, Qur'anic instruction, distribution of basic food supplies, clothing, mass circumcision events, and health check-ups. The foundation also maintains flexible initiatives that align with its broader mission of empowering the *Baduy Mualaf*.

Beyond material support, the foundation enforces rules governing converts' religious development. Community members must perform the five daily prayers, and men are specifically expected to pray in the mosque. Participation in Qur'anic study sessions and other Islamic learning activities is also mandatory. To facilitate these programs, YASMUI assigns religious teachers (ustadz or ustadzah) to live within the settlement and has established a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) as the central hub for religious education and spiritual growth.

These empowerment programs have strengthened Muslim community solidarity, expressed through organized, sustained acts of voluntarism in response to the Baduy Mualaf's plight. The settlement has also attracted public visitors, who frequently make deliberate trips to offer donations in various forms. This underscores how voluntarism has evolved from sporadic charitable gestures into structured and ongoing social action. The Baduy convert settlement has become both an arena and a space for individuals motivated by social responsibility to channel their energy into empowering a marginalized community. The settlement is not merely a place for housing or land utilization; it is a site of capacity building, where efforts are made to transform the converts from a position of vulnerability into one of self-reliance. Training programs are designed to provide soft skills that strengthen their ability to navigate daily survival strategies, ultimately reducing dependence on external benefactors. In this sense, residents perceive the settlement as a transitional home, marking the beginning of empowerment rather than its conclusion.

The foundation's delivery of welfare services that the state has been unable to provide demonstrates voluntarism's potential to serve as an alternative partner to government in addressing public issues. Voluntary initiatives organized through YASMUI reflect what Börzel and Risse (2010) call "governance without government," where public service delivery is no longer exclusively the state's domain. Non-state actors can step into this role when governmental institutions are perceived as too weak to empower marginalized groups. In this regard, the foundation operates as an alternative institution outside the state apparatus, offering welfare services to the *Baduy Mualaf* through housing, land access, and capacity-building programs.

YASMUI's work illustrates how voluntarism intersects with empowerment. However, the extent to which voluntarism can substantially contribute to empowerment warrants scrutiny. While voluntarism is founded on the ability and willingness of individuals or groups to contribute to the public good without coercion or economic motives, it is not free from challenges and potential contradictions. Critical issues may undermine the collective value of volunteerism, including the risk of marketization (Simpson & Cheney, 2007) and the professionalization of volunteers as either personal agents or institutional actors (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). These concerns highlight the importance of examining potential skepticism about the foundation's role as a vehicle of social solidarity and voluntarism in empowering the Baduy convert community.

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The Baduy Convert Settlement: An Anomaly of Voluntarism and the Steep Path of Empowerment

Voluntarism requires formal institutions to organize social action in ways that ensure sustainability and coherence (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). Organizations provide the infrastructure to formalize volunteer-based initiatives, since consistent, long-term engagement cannot depend solely on spontaneous individual goodwill. The foundation that supports the empowerment of the Baduy Mualaf reflects this institutional formalization. Like other recognized organizations, it operates with legal status, is officially registered with the government, and maintains a governance structure that assigns distinct roles and responsibilities to its members. The foundation primarily manages donations collected from Muslim benefactors and, in some cases, corporate social responsibility funds contributed by companies.

These donations are regulated under the waqf system, which stipulates that assets such as land and housing cannot be privately owned, sold, or inherited. Instead, they are made available for community use, ensuring that even the weakest members of the Baduy convert community can access housing and land. The system also guarantees continuity, as families who achieve economic independence are expected to leave the settlement, thereby making space for other vulnerable converts in need of support. This principle reflects a spirit of sustainability embedded within the empowerment framework.

Field observations and interviews with residents reveal that the foundation has indeed provided significant relief to the *Baduy Mualaf*, granting them access to housing, agricultural land, and Islamic religious guidance. Yet empowerment, as an ongoing process, remains far from complete. Several challenges undermine the durability of these efforts. For instance, many houses are in poor condition. Abandoned homes fall into disrepair, and even occupied ones deteriorate as structures age. During fieldwork, residents expressed their frustrations about inadequate housing. Dayat, a convert living in the Landeuh settlement, explained that during the rainy season he and his wife rely on buckets to catch water dripping through patched tarpaulin roofs. Residents of Al-Barokah settlement shared similar experiences, with housing clusters visibly declining as fewer families remained.

Economic vulnerability further complicates empowerment. Most *Baduy Mualaf* work as farmers, cultivating land allocated by the foundation. However, agricultural income is unpredictable, and crop failure exacerbates household insecurity. As a result, many residents take precarious urban work as construction workers, factory laborers, or other manual laborers in Tangerang, Jakarta, Serang, and Cilegon. This outward migration contributes to housing abandonment and weakens the settlement's social cohesion. Rasiman, another convert, shared that he works as a lumberjack to supplement his family's income, though this requires him to spend long periods away from home. Those unable to migrate remain dependent on farming but struggle to sustain their families without continued aid from the foundation.

As Ahmad, one resident, poignantly put it:

> *"We hope the foundation will distribute aid if funds are available, to repair the damaged houses and provide food assistance for our daily meals."*

These accounts highlight the distinction between charity and empowerment. While charity provides immediate relief, true empowerment requires fostering independence so that individuals and communities can identify their own solutions and reduce reliance on external support (Cohen, 2009). The Baduy Mualaf's current dependence underscores that empowerment

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has not yet been fully realized, and the foundation must devise new strategies to address persistent structural challenges.

The shortcomings of empowerment initiatives also invite reflection on anomalies within voluntarism itself. The foundation's role as an institutional manager of public donations raises questions about whether voluntarism retains its altruistic character or drifts into competing logics of marketization and professionalization.

The problem of marketization arises when voluntary action, instead of being motivated purely by altruism, becomes entangled with economic incentives. Simpson and Cheney (2007) argue that voluntarism risks being commodified when suffering is turned into a resource to attract donations. Foundations can, intentionally or unintentionally, operate in ways that resemble large corporations (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). In the case of the *Baduy Mualaf*, residents themselves voiced suspicion about such tendencies. Dayat noted:

> *"If the foundation did not sell the suffering of the Baduy Mualaf, it would not get donors. But when donations come, no assistance reaches us. If they really cared, our houses would not be in such poor condition. We are not allowed to replace our roofs with proper tiles, because that would make us look wealthy and donors might stop helping. My house leaks everywhere. We are poor, but please do not sell our suffering to get donations that never reach us."*

Such sentiments illustrate how marketization can corrode trust in voluntarism. The foundation's construction of a homestay within the Landeuh settlement reinforces these perceptions. While the homestay attracts tourists who visit the Baduy region, local converts reported being excluded from both decision-making and the economic benefits. The presence of a well-maintained tourist facility starkly contrasts with residents' dilapidated homes, deepening social disparity and undermining the moral legitimacy of the foundation's empowerment claims.

The second challenge lies in professionalization. Voluntarism has long been critiqued for being amateurish, relying on goodwill rather than organizational expertise. Scholars debate whether professionalization enhances effectiveness or erodes the spirit of voluntary action (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Nothdurfter, 2016) argue that professionalization introduces bureaucratization and rationalization into volunteer organizations, with mixed consequences for autonomy and commitment.

In the Baduy case, the foundation's decline after the death of its charismatic founder, Dr. Azhari, illustrates the fragility of voluntarism without professional governance structures. As Sudin, a religious teacher in Ciboleger, recalled:

> *"Those programs no longer run. The late Dr. Azhari was very influential. After he passed away, empowerment activities declined. In the past, he often visited and brought colleagues for social service activities that encouraged residents. Now the programs have diminished."*

Leadership changes brought new managers, but their physical absence from the settlement weakened program delivery. Distrust grew within the organization, with members leaving to join other foundations. Rasiman, for example, reported difficulty marketing his crops without organizational support. These testimonies confirm that professionalism is not an optional luxury but a critical requirement for sustaining empowerment when volunteer organizations manage public resources and community livelihoods.

Despite these challenges, the foundation still plays a vital role in providing housing, land, and religious guidance for converts who might otherwise remain marginalized in remote forest

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areas. Yet persistent dependency, deteriorating housing, and economic vulnerability suggest that empowerment remains incomplete. Moreover, state institutions have not yet provided meaningful support. Government assistance has so far been limited to short-term charity, with little investment in long-term capacity-building for the *Baduy Mualaf*.

Comparative evidence underscores the importance of state–civil society collaboration. Waldman et al. (2017), studying disaster governance in Canada, highlight the positive outcomes of strong engagement between municipal governments and volunteers. Similarly, theories of networked governance argue that sustainable empowerment emerges when governments, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector collaborate in collective action (Provan, 2008; Wegner et al., 2019). Such collaborative structures remain absent in the Baduy case, where foundations act as single actors in isolation from government and from one another.

The Baduy convert settlement thus illustrates the dual paradox of voluntarism, in which voluntary organizations simultaneously serve as important actors in addressing unmet social needs and encounter structural challenges that may undermine their original commitments. On the one hand, these organizations demonstrate the capacity of civil society to respond to limitations in state-provided services by mobilizing solidarity, religious commitments, and community resources to support marginalized populations. On the other hand, their increasing engagement with organizational demands, resource dependencies, and external funding mechanisms may expose them to the pressures of marketization, potentially shifting their priorities from community-centered empowerment toward organizational sustainability and measurable outputs. At the same time, limited professional capacity, insufficient institutional accountability, and reliance on informal management practices may constrain their ability to deliver sustainable and transformative interventions. These tensions reveal that altruistic motivations, although fundamental to voluntary engagement, do not automatically guarantee effective or equitable empowerment outcomes. Rather than diminishing the significance of voluntarism, this paradox underscores the importance of balancing ethical commitments with organizational competence, participatory governance, and responsiveness to community needs. From this perspective, the sustainability of volunteer-driven empowerment depends not only on maintaining the moral foundations of collective action but also on developing institutional capacities that enable communities to participate meaningfully, exercise agency, and progressively strengthen their autonomy.

DISCUSSION

Any discussion of volunteer activism and its role in empowering the Baduy convert community must be situated within the broader historical and sociocultural context of their existence. The emergence of volunteerism in this case cannot be separated from religious conversion, which became the foundation for collective Muslim solidarity in assisting Baduy members who chose to embrace Islam. This community illustrates what scholars have identified as the dynamics of conversion and the reconfiguration of belief systems within indigenous societies (A. M. Budiaman et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of Baduy conversion and the subsequent emergence of volunteerism around their empowerment demands critical reflection on the intersections of religious transformation, marginalization, and civil society activism. Conversion among the Baduy is not merely a matter of private spirituality but represents a profound rupture from a cultural and social system rooted in Sunda Wiwitan. Leaving the adat territory transforms converts into subjects who exist on the margins of both indigenous society and the formal state welfare apparatus. In this context, volunteerism has become the primary vehicle through which material support, spiritual guidance, and a sense of belonging are provided. Yet the question remains

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whether these practices genuinely constitute empowerment or merely reproduce cycles of dependency.

The Baduy conversion resonates strongly with Stark and Finke's (2000) rational choice theory of religion. From this perspective, individuals convert when the perceived rewards outweigh the costs of staying within their existing religious framework. For the *Baduy Mualaf*, the rewards of conversion included the promise of housing, agricultural land, and access to Muslim solidarity networks. The costs, however, were extraordinarily high, involving permanent exile from ancestral land, kinship networks, and cultural identity. The decision to accept these consequences illustrates how severe the structural pressures of adat restrictions could become, making conversion a rational, though costly, choice. Rambo's (1993) process model of conversion further illuminates this trajectory, framing the expulsion from adat land as both crisis and consequence, while the encounter with Muslim volunteers and institutions created pathways into a new religious and social order.

Volunteerism has played an indispensable role in mediating this transformation. The spontaneous compassion expressed by neighboring Muslim communities gradually developed into institutionalized support through the creation of foundations such as YASMUI and At-Taubah. These organizations embody what Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) describe as the hybridization of volunteerism, in which traditional altruistic impulses are fused with organizational logics of sustainability, accountability, and long-term planning. The construction of settlements, provision of farmland, and delivery of religious education reflect not only acts of charity but also attempts to embed empowerment within organizational frameworks. Nevertheless, persistent poverty, deteriorating housing, and continued dependence on external support suggest that empowerment has not yet been fully realized.

From a governance perspective, the Baduy case illustrates what Börzel and Risse (2010) conceptualize as governance without government. Volunteer foundations have stepped into a vacuum created by the absence of sustained state intervention. The settlements provide services that constitutionally fall under state purview, including housing, food security, and education. This substitution reveals both the strength and the fragility of volunteerism. On one hand, it shows civil society's capacity to mobilize resources and address urgent needs. On the other, it raises concerns about sustainability, equity, and accountability, particularly when volunteer organizations become the sole providers of welfare amid state neglect.

Critiques of voluntarism further sharpen the analysis. Scholars such as Simpson and Cheney (2007) caution against the marketization of volunteerism, in which suffering is commodified to attract donations. Testimonies from *Baduy Mualaf* themselves suggest that this risk is not merely theoretical. Complaints about donations being used symbolically to attract further funding, without translating into tangible improvements in housing or food security, reflect deep skepticism among beneficiaries. The construction of homestays within the settlements, designed to attract tourists, has exacerbated these perceptions by highlighting disparities between the economic benefits flowing to organizations and residents' continued precarity. When suffering becomes a tool for fundraising, voluntarism risks losing its moral legitimacy.

Professionalization poses another set of challenges. Ganesh and McAllum (2012) argue that volunteer organizations inevitably encounter tensions between preserving their altruistic ethos and adopting bureaucratic practices necessary for sustainability. In the case of the *Baduy Mualaf*, the death of charismatic founder Dr. Azhari exposed these vulnerabilities. His leadership had mobilized resources and inspired solidarity, yet the lack of robust organizational structures led to the decline of programs after his passing. This confirms that professionalization is not a luxury but a necessity for organizations that manage public resources and livelihoods. Without it, volunteerism risks degenerating into sporadic charity rather than sustained empowerment.

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The distinction between charity and empowerment is crucial in this discussion. Cohen (2009) emphasizes that while charity provides immediate relief, empowerment builds communities' capacity to generate their own solutions and reduce dependence on external benefactors. In the Baduy settlements, dependency remains deeply entrenched. Although land allocation and agricultural programs were designed to promote self-reliance, economic vulnerability and crop failures have forced many converts to seek precarious wage labor in urban centers. This migration undermines the social cohesion of the settlements and weakens their capacity to function as spaces of collective empowerment. The persistence of leaking roofs, abandoned houses, and food insecurity underscores that the foundations have not yet succeeded in transforming dependency into autonomy.

Comparative perspectives reinforce the importance of collaboration between state and civil society. Waldman et al. (2017), in their study of disaster governance in Canada, demonstrate how partnerships between municipal governments and volunteer groups produce more sustainable outcomes than unilateral action. Similarly, network governance theory emphasizes the value of multi-actor collaboration in addressing complex social problems ((Provan, 2008; Wegner et al., 2019). The absence of such collaborative structures in the Baduy case explains many of the limitations observed. Foundations operate in isolation, without meaningful government support or partnerships with other actors, leaving them vulnerable to resource constraints, organizational decline, and beneficiary mistrust.

The Baduy case therefore presents both a powerful example of religiously motivated solidarity and a cautionary tale about the limits of voluntarism. On one level, the settlements created by YASMUI and At-Taubah stand as remarkable testimonies to civil society's capacity to mobilize compassion into structured support. They provided displaced converts with housing, farmland, and religious education when the state was absent. On another level, however, they reveal the paradoxes inherent in volunteerism. Marketization risks transforming suffering into a commodity, professionalization challenges threaten organizational sustainability, and dependency undermines the very goal of empowerment.

To move beyond these limitations, volunteer organizations must deepen their commitment to empowerment rather than relief. This requires building economic resilience through diversified livelihood programs, strengthening governance structures intended to promote transparency and accountability, and forging partnerships with state institutions to integrate volunteer initiatives into broader welfare strategies. Only through such approaches can volunteerism transcend the pitfalls of marketization and professionalization, preserving its altruistic ethos while achieving substantive empowerment.

Ultimately, the story of the *Baduy Mualaf* compels scholars and practitioners to critically re-examine the role of volunteerism in contexts of structural exclusion. It demonstrates that volunteerism is neither inherently empowering nor inherently exploitative. Its effects depend on how it is organized, sustained, and embedded within larger systems of governance and solidarity. In the absence of the state, volunteerism can provide immediate relief and restore dignity to marginalized communities. Yet without careful reflection and structural reform, it risks reproducing dependency and reinforcing inequalities. The challenge, therefore, is not to abandon volunteerism but to reimagine it as part of a broader, collaborative framework of empowerment that integrates civil society, the state, and the communities themselves as co-creators of their future.

The findings also extend the charity–empowerment debate by showing that providing material resources does not necessarily translate into empowerment. In the Baduy Mualaf context, housing, farmland, and livelihood assistance initially functioned as essential welfare interventions. Still, their long-term impact remained limited when economic resilience, institutional capacity, and community agency were not sufficiently strengthened. This suggests

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that volunteerism should be assessed not only by the amount of assistance delivered, but by its capacity to transform beneficiaries from welfare recipients into active agents of their own development.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Baduy Mualaf reflect a significant social transformation in which individual decisions to embrace Islam entail significant consequences for community identity, social belonging, and economic survival. By leaving the Sunda Wiwitan tradition, these individuals not only lost access to ancestral lands and customary rights but were also forced to renegotiate their place within the broader society of Lebak. The precarious conditions they encountered generated a sense of moral obligation among Muslim communities, initially expressed through personal empathy and small-scale assistance, which gradually developed into collective volunteerism. This transformation underscores the social power of religious solidarity in shaping voluntary action and explains why volunteerism eventually crystallized into a formalized organizational structure in the form of foundations. These foundations provided housing, land access, and welfare services, thus filling the vacuum left by minimal state intervention.

This article argues that voluntary organizations have emerged as alternative providers of welfare services when the state remains absent or insufficiently responsive. Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals the inherent challenges these organizations face, particularly the pressures of marketization and professionalization. While the establishment of the Baduy Mualaf' settlement demonstrates the positive impact of collective voluntarism, the risks of dependency, commodification of aid, and blurred boundaries between altruism and organizational self-interest remain persistent concerns. In this sense, empowerment is never linear but characterized by negotiation, contestation, and structural limitations. The findings suggest the importance of moving beyond a dichotomy between the state and voluntary organizations. Instead, what is needed is networked governance in which the government acknowledges, supports, and collaborates with voluntary initiatives, integrating them into broader social policy frameworks. Such partnerships could mitigate the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups like the Baduy Mualaf, ensuring that they are recognized not merely as subjects of charity but as citizens entitled to welfare and dignity.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the fieldwork was conducted over a relatively short period of two weeks, which restricted the researcher's ability to capture long-term dynamics of organizational change and community adaptation. Second, the reliance on purposive and snowball sampling may have excluded certain perspectives within the community, particularly dissenting voices or alternative interpretations of empowerment. Third, the focus on a single community limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts of religious conversion and marginalization in Indonesia or beyond.

Future research should therefore adopt a comparative approach, examining how different voluntary organizations across regions negotiate the challenges of professionalism and marketization in their empowerment practices. Longitudinal studies could also shed light on the sustainability of volunteer-based welfare initiatives and their ability to adapt over time. Moreover, further inquiry into individual volunteers' motivations, including how altruism intersects with political, economic, or religious interests, would deepen our understanding of the complexities of voluntarism. Finally, studies of intra-organizational and inter-organizational dynamics could illuminate the internal contestations that shape voluntary organizations' capacity to represent and empower marginalized communities.

In conclusion, the case of the Baduy Mualaf demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of volunteerism in addressing social exclusion. While voluntary organizations can

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provide critical welfare support in the absence of robust state intervention, they are not free from internal contradictions and structural constraints. For empowerment to be meaningful and sustainable, the state must play a more active role in creating an enabling environment that integrates voluntary action into inclusive governance arrangements. Only through such synergy can marginalized communities achieve not just survival, but recognition and genuine empowerment as equal citizens.

In conclusion, the case of the Baduy Mualaf advances community empowerment scholarship by reframing volunteerism not merely as a temporary charitable act, but as an essential, non-state welfare mechanism that navigates complex socio-religious transformations. In practice, rather than relying on piecemeal aid, governments and NGOs must establish formal co-governance frameworks that combine state resources with community-led initiatives by providing legal land tenure, targeted capacity-building, and sustainable funding models. Only through such institutionalized synergy can voluntary actions transcend charity, enabling marginalized indigenous converts to secure genuine self-reliance, structural recognition, and equal citizenship.

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