

# Strengthening Smallholder Empowerment in the Early Years of SDG 2: Challenges and Strategies

**Mahin Ainun Naim**

Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan PGRI Sampang, Indonesia  
ainunnaim943@gmail.com

## Abstract

This study explores the empowerment of smallholder farmers within the framework of the Zero Hunger Agenda (SDG 2), focusing on the challenges and strategic dynamics during the initial years of implementation. Using a qualitative, document-based methodology grounded in the Sustainable Livelihoods and capabilities approaches, the research examines global and national policies, institutional practices, and contextual barriers shaping empowerment outcomes. Findings reveal a disconnect between international goals and local realities, with land tenure insecurity, fragmented governance, and social exclusion as major impediments. While some participatory and cooperative initiatives showed promise, their impact was often constrained by weak institutional support. The study advocates for inclusive policy frameworks emphasizing decentralized governance, farmer agency, and knowledge co-production. It offers theoretical insights and practical recommendations to realign empowerment strategies with the lived experiences of smallholders, thereby advancing progress toward SDG 2.

## Keywords

smallholder farmers; empowerment; sustainable livelihoods; SDG 2; rural development

## INTRODUCTION

Smallholder farmers represent a cornerstone of global food production, responsible for approximately 80% of the food consumed in large parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (FAO, 2015). Despite their significant contributions, these farmers often remain marginalized, grappling with structural barriers such as insecure land tenure, lack of access to credit, and limited technological inputs (Hazell et al., 2010, p. 17).

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, particularly Goal 2—Zero Hunger—positioned smallholder empowerment as pivotal for ensuring food security and eradicating hunger. Yet, translating this international commitment into effective local action remains fraught with complexities due to institutional inefficiencies and contextual challenges (World Bank, 2016).

From a theoretical perspective, smallholder empowerment embodies multidimensional constructs encompassing agency, access, voice, and resilience (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p. 22). Empowerment is not merely about increasing productivity but also about transforming the structural and institutional contexts that perpetuate vulnerability (Narayan, 2002, p. 34).

Empirical studies have consistently shown that policy frameworks which fail to integrate farmers' perspectives or which centralize decision-making often result in suboptimal outcomes (Chambers, 1997, p. 11). As such, the empowerment of smallholders must be approached through participatory and context-sensitive strategies.

Indonesia, as a case study, reflects these dynamics. With over 90% of its farmers categorized as smallholders, the country embodies the contradictions between policy aspirations and lived realities (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2016). National development programs, such as "Kawasan Rumah Pangan Lestari," have aimed at strengthening food security through local empowerment.

However, disparities in implementation, regional capacity, and bureaucratic coordination have limited their impact (Saptana & Ashari, 2015). These limitations mirror global patterns of uneven rural development, where smallholders are frequently left behind by market-driven and technocratic reforms.

The literature on rural development and smallholder farming has extensively documented the role of power asymmetries in shaping development outcomes. For instance, studies have emphasized how global agricultural value chains often exploit rather than empower small-scale producers (Vorley et al., 2012).

Additionally, scholars note that donor-driven models frequently impose standardized approaches that fail to account for local socio-cultural conditions (Ellis & Biggs, 2001, p. 47). Thus, a gap persists between the global governance of food security and the grounded realities of smallholder livelihoods.

In light of these tensions, this study poses three guiding research questions: How have empowerment strategies for smallholder farmers evolved during the early implementation of the SDGs? What are the main structural and contextual

challenges hindering smallholder participation in food security agendas? And, how can policy frameworks be restructured to enhance smallholder agency and resilience?

These questions are crucial for interrogating the effectiveness of existing mechanisms and for proposing alternative pathways to inclusive rural transformation. This article aims to contribute to the theoretical and practical discourses on sustainable development by illuminating the strategic role of empowered smallholders in achieving SDG 2.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on smallholder agriculture and sustainable development reveals a robust body of work exploring the intersection between empowerment, food security, and institutional dynamics. Scholars such as Chambers (1997, p. 20) have long argued that participatory development, centered on the agency of the poor, is essential to achieving equitable rural transformation.

This view aligns with Sen's (1999, p. 33) capabilities approach, which underscores the importance of enabling individuals to pursue lives they value. In the context of SDG 2, the empowerment of smallholder farmers is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional process encompassing access to resources, market integration, and political voice (World Bank, 2016). Research by Ellis (2000, p. 89) further emphasized livelihood diversification as a critical strategy for rural resilience, underscoring the need for flexible and inclusive development frameworks.

Several frameworks have been proposed to analyze smallholder empowerment. The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) provides a comprehensive model that examines how various forms of capital—natural, human, social, physical, and financial—interact to shape livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 1998). Meanwhile, institutional economists have explored how property rights, transaction costs, and governance structures influence smallholder productivity and vulnerability (Ostrom, 1990, p. 72).

Recent studies stress the relevance of inclusive innovation systems that integrate smallholders into knowledge networks and technological development (Hall et al., 2003). These frameworks collectively inform a nuanced understanding of empowerment, not as a static end-state but as a continuous, negotiated process influenced by power, culture, and policy.

Empirical studies across Asia, Africa, and Latin America have examined how policy interventions have impacted smallholders in practice. For instance, Dorward et al. (2004) examined the failures of input subsidy programs that lacked proper targeting, while Bebbington (1999) highlighted the role of social capital and community organization in enhancing smallholder agency.

A common thread across these works is the emphasis on context: successful empowerment initiatives tend to be those that are embedded in local realities and that promote institutional pluralism. Yet, the literature also points to a persistent research gap: while macro-level policy evaluations are abundant, there is limited systematic analysis of the dynamics of smallholder empowerment within the SDG framework, particularly during its early years. This study seeks to address this gap by critically engaging with both theoretical models and empirical findings to evaluate the alignment—or lack thereof—between global development narratives and grassroots implementation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

To critically assess the empowerment of smallholder farmers within the context of the Zero Hunger Agenda, this study adopts a multidimensional theoretical lens, drawing primarily from the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), the capabilities approach, and institutional development theory. The SLA, developed by Scoones (1998), provides a comprehensive framework that identifies five core assets—natural, financial, human, physical, and social capital—that collectively shape rural livelihoods.

Empowerment, from this perspective, is not merely a policy outcome but an ongoing process of strengthening these assets to enable resilience, agency, and adaptive capacity in the face of external shocks (Ellis, 2000, p. 92). In the context of smallholder farmers, access to irrigation, seeds, credit, extension services, and communal organization are crucial dimensions influencing their ability to engage productively and sustainably in agriculture.

The capabilities approach, popularized by Amartya Sen, complements the SLA by emphasizing individual agency and freedom as central to development (Sen, 1999, p. 87). Unlike utility-based models, this approach foregrounds what people are effectively able to do and to be, thus allowing a broader assessment of well-being that includes empowerment, voice, and dignity.

For smallholder farmers, this means evaluating their ability to make decisions regarding crop choice, land use, and market participation, and their capacity to

influence agricultural policies. Empowerment, therefore, extends beyond economic gains to include political representation and social inclusion, both of which are often neglected in top-down development interventions (Narayan, 2002, p. 115).

Institutional theory adds an important structural layer to this analysis by examining how formal and informal rules shape access to resources and opportunities. North (1990, p. 36) argued that institutions, both governmental and customary, define the incentive structures within which actors operate. In many developing countries, the disconnect between policy frameworks and local practices undermines smallholder empowerment.

For example, land titling programs may increase security on paper but fail in practice due to local contestations and administrative inefficiencies (Meinzen-Dick et al., 1999). Thus, empowerment must be understood as a function of institutional alignment—how well policies, programs, and customary systems interact to support farmers' capabilities.

Social capital theory also plays a crucial role in this study. According to Putnam (1993, p. 168), social networks and trust facilitate collective action and information sharing, which are essential for successful agricultural practices. For smallholder farmers, being part of cooperatives or local farmer organizations can enhance their bargaining power and access to markets.

Bebbington (1999) further demonstrated how social capital intersects with livelihood strategies, allowing farmers to navigate institutional landscapes more effectively. However, disparities in social capital—due to gender, ethnicity, or geography—can create uneven empowerment outcomes, an issue that needs careful attention in policy formulation.

This theoretical constellation enables a layered analysis that captures the complexity of smallholder empowerment. By integrating asset-based, agency-oriented, institutional, and social perspectives, the framework supports a critical evaluation of how empowerment is pursued, constrained, and potentially achieved within the context of SDG 2. It also provides a foundation for interpreting the empirical findings discussed in the subsequent sections.

## **Previous Research**

Bebbington (1999) offered one of the earliest empirical investigations into the role of social capital in rural livelihoods, particularly in the Andean region. His

study emphasized how farmers leverage networks and relationships to access resources and influence development interventions. He argued that empowerment must be grounded in the ability of rural people to shape their environments rather than merely adapt to them. This work laid a critical foundation for viewing smallholder empowerment as both a social and political process, not solely an economic one.

Ellis (2000, p. 97) expanded the discussion by introducing the concept of livelihood diversification in rural development discourse. Through case studies in Africa and South Asia, he demonstrated that households pursue multiple income strategies to cope with uncertainty. His findings questioned the validity of singular policy solutions and highlighted the need for flexibility and local adaptation in rural programming. The implications for smallholder farmers were profound: empowerment had to accommodate diverse livelihood realities rather than enforce monocultural or export-oriented models.

Scoones (2001) advanced the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach by applying it to agricultural policy reform. His research in Zimbabwe showed that empowerment strategies often failed due to mismatches between formal policies and informal livelihood practices. Scoones advocated for a shift from blueprint development to learning-based, iterative approaches that prioritize local knowledge and context-specific solutions. This reframing positioned farmers not as passive beneficiaries but as agents in development.

Narayan (2002, p. 144), in a World Bank-sponsored study, introduced a multidimensional framework for empowerment that included psychological, political, social, and economic dimensions. Through extensive fieldwork in multiple countries, the study demonstrated that empowerment initiatives need to be embedded in both community-level mobilization and institutional reform. The report also emphasized the importance of enabling environments, such as access to information and grievance redress mechanisms, in ensuring empowerment outcomes for smallholder populations.

Dorward et al. (2004) critiqued input-subsidy programs in sub-Saharan Africa, revealing that many failed due to poor targeting and lack of complementary services such as extension and credit. Their findings showed that without integrated support systems, subsidies alone do not lead to sustainable empowerment. The study introduced the "developmental welfare" approach, which combines market-based instruments with pro-poor interventions tailored to rural contexts.

Burney et al. (2010) examined the relationship between irrigation and smallholder productivity in West Africa, showing that solar-powered drip

irrigation systems significantly improved yields and nutritional outcomes. Importantly, their findings linked technological interventions with food security and empowerment, illustrating how contextually appropriate innovations can shift power dynamics in favor of marginalized farmers. However, they also cautioned that such technologies require supportive institutional environments to be effective.

These studies collectively provide a rich foundation for understanding the multiple dimensions of smallholder empowerment. Yet, a critical gap remains in examining how these insights have been integrated—or ignored—within the operationalization of the SDGs, particularly during the early years of implementation. Most existing literature predates the SDGs or focuses on isolated interventions without assessing systemic alignment. This research addresses this gap by exploring how global ambitions, such as those outlined in SDG 2, interact with national policies and local realities to shape the empowerment trajectories of smallholder farmers.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative, document-based approach focusing on textual and interpretive data to explore the empowerment of smallholder farmers within the framework of the Zero Hunger Agenda. The choice of qualitative data aligns with the study's aim to understand complex social phenomena such as agency, institutional interaction, and policy implementation. Rather than quantifying empowerment through indices, the research seeks to interpret meanings, motivations, and structures embedded in development narratives and farmer experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 23). Such data allow for a deeper analysis of how policies, strategies, and power relations influence empowerment outcomes.

The data sources comprise a comprehensive collection of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, official policy documents, and international organizational reports. These include reputable publications from institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and BPS–Statistics Indonesia, alongside scholarly contributions published before 2016. Special attention was given to literature grounded in rural development, political economy, agricultural economics, and empowerment theory. This breadth ensures triangulation of perspectives and enhances the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2013, p. 78).

Data were collected through a structured literature review and document analysis. Selection criteria included relevance to smallholder empowerment, empirical grounding, and consistency with the SDG 2 context. Sources were evaluated for credibility, traceability, and methodological transparency. The process involved identifying key themes and discursive patterns related to empowerment strategies, institutional challenges, and grassroots engagement. By critically analyzing diverse documents, the study avoids reliance on anecdotal evidence and ensures an academically rigorous foundation (Bowen, 2009).

The data analysis followed a thematic interpretive approach. This method enables the researcher to synthesize diverse insights and uncover latent meanings within texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes such as institutional misalignment, participatory development, and policy contradictions were identified across data sources. These were then organized according to the study's theoretical framework, allowing for layered interpretation that linked smallholder empowerment to livelihood assets, capabilities, and institutional structures.

Conclusion drawing involved iterative comparison between theoretical models and empirical patterns. Through an abductive logic process, the study moved between data and theory to refine its interpretations and uncover new insights (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The findings thus reflect both conceptual coherence and contextual specificity. This approach is particularly suited to studying empowerment, a dynamic and situated phenomenon that requires multidimensional exploration beyond simple causal inference.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The empowerment of smallholder farmers in the early phase of SDG implementation presents a case of both potential and paradox. While the Zero Hunger Agenda articulated a bold vision of inclusive and sustainable food systems, its operationalization often fell short of addressing the structural limitations that constrain smallholders.

This section engages the theoretical constructs discussed earlier—particularly the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, institutional theory, and the capabilities approach—to analyze the dynamics of empowerment from a multi-layered perspective. The findings illustrate that while empowerment rhetoric was widely adopted, actual practices frequently reinforced existing power asymmetries and institutional fragmentation.

Early policy responses to SDG 2 exhibited a notable emphasis on productivity and market access. However, as highlighted by Ellis (2000, p. 102), empowerment must also encompass the diversification of livelihoods and enhancement of human capital. International and national strategies often privileged technological inputs and value chain integration without adequately addressing farmers' agency in decision-making.

For instance, World Bank programs focused on agribusiness competitiveness often sidelined the need for grassroots participation and accountability mechanisms (World Bank, 2016). These findings echo the critiques raised by Scoones (2001), who warned that formal interventions that overlook informal realities tend to exacerbate marginalization.

Empowerment initiatives that were successful in the early SDG years shared certain characteristics: decentralized governance, participatory planning, and support for cooperative models. This was evident in local Indonesian programs such as the Food Barn Village Initiative, which, though uneven in execution, emphasized the importance of local food sovereignty (Saptana & Ashari, 2015).

Yet, challenges persisted due to policy discontinuity, limited cross-sectoral coordination, and underinvestment in social infrastructure. These shortcomings reveal a disconnect between the SDG framework and domestic implementation, reinforcing the research gap identified in earlier sections. The discussion now turns to the thematic analysis addressing the study's three core research questions.

## **1. Empowerment Strategies in Early SDG Implementation**

The first research question focuses on the evolution of empowerment strategies for smallholder farmers during the early years of SDG implementation. Analysis reveals that while empowerment was foregrounded in strategic documents, its translation into policy often lacked coherence and sustainability. Global discourses emphasized inclusive growth and value chain participation; however, these strategies tended to reflect neoliberal development paradigms rather than context-sensitive empowerment (McMichael, 2009). As Narayan (2002, p. 148) notes, empowerment involves both individual capabilities and institutional environments—an insight often neglected in early SDG programs.

In Indonesia, empowerment strategies during this period primarily revolved around capacity-building and microcredit schemes. Programs such as the Rural Agribusiness Development initiative attempted to connect farmers to markets, yet they often failed to address the deeper issues of land insecurity and price volatility (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2016). The emphasis on market access without parallel investment in collective organization and bargaining mechanisms left farmers vulnerable to exploitative intermediaries. These patterns are consistent with the critiques of Dorward et al. (2004), who argued that input-based support is ineffective without institutional scaffolding.

Another strategy involved decentralization, as reflected in regional autonomy reforms and community-driven development models. These reforms aimed to tailor interventions to local needs, echoing Chambers' (1997, p. 38) call for participatory rural appraisal. While some local governments implemented successful farmer field schools and cooperative initiatives, outcomes were inconsistent due to varying capacities and political will. Moreover, institutional rivalries and overlapping mandates often diluted the impact of empowerment programs (World Bank, 2016).

Despite these challenges, there were notable innovations. Some NGOs piloted gender-sensitive empowerment models that increased women's participation in decision-making, drawing from the capabilities approach's focus on agency (Sen, 1999, p. 93). These programs emphasized soft skills, leadership training, and rights-based education, expanding the conventional understanding of empowerment beyond inputs and outputs.

The thematic insight here is clear: empowerment strategies during the early SDG years exhibited rhetorical alignment with global goals but operational divergence. The failure to integrate multiple dimensions of empowerment—especially institutional and social capital—resulted in limited transformation of smallholder livelihoods. This subsection underscores the need for strategic coherence and alignment between empowerment discourse and practice.

## **2. Barriers to Smallholder Empowerment**

The second research question addresses the principal structural and contextual barriers that hindered smallholder empowerment during the

early implementation of the SDGs. One of the most significant barriers identified was land tenure insecurity. Many smallholder farmers in Indonesia and comparable developing countries lack formal land titles, which restricts their access to credit, limits long-term investment in land, and increases vulnerability to displacement (Meinzen-Dick et al., 1999). Land reform efforts often stalled or became entangled in bureaucratic inertia, undermining the institutional foundations necessary for empowerment (North, 1990, p. 57). Without secure access to land, empowerment strategies built on productivity or market access risked excluding the most vulnerable populations.

A second major barrier is the inadequacy of rural infrastructure. Transportation, irrigation, storage, and information systems remain underdeveloped in many smallholder regions (World Bank, 2016). This infrastructural deficit constrains access to markets, reduces profitability, and increases post-harvest losses. Even when farmers produce marketable surpluses, the lack of cold chains or feeder roads limits their capacity to compete. These material constraints reinforce marginalization and diminish the effectiveness of empowerment programs that presume a baseline level of connectivity and support.

Third, institutional fragmentation and weak governance have significantly impeded smallholder empowerment. Overlapping mandates between ministries, regional authorities, and donor agencies create confusion and dilute accountability (Scoones, 2001). In Indonesia, decentralization sometimes led to contradictory policies and disjointed program delivery, as local authorities lacked technical capacity or financial autonomy (Saptana & Ashari, 2015). This echoes Ostrom's (1990, p. 82) observation that polycentric governance requires coordination mechanisms to be effective. Without such mechanisms, decentralization becomes a liability rather than a tool for empowerment.

Social and gender norms also represent persistent contextual barriers. In many communities, women face restrictions on land ownership, participation in cooperatives, or access to extension services (Narayan, 2002, p. 153). Youth are similarly marginalized from decision-making structures, despite representing a significant proportion of the rural population. These exclusions reduce the potential for broad-based empowerment and undermine the inclusivity envisaged in SDG 2. As Sen (1999, p. 115) emphasized, capabilities are shaped by social arrangements, which must be transformed to support empowerment.

Another constraint is the asymmetrical power relations embedded in agricultural value chains. Smallholders often depend on middlemen who dictate prices and terms of exchange. Without collective organization or regulatory safeguards, farmers are unable to negotiate fair prices or access higher-value markets (Vorley et al., 2012). Contract farming models, while theoretically beneficial, have in practice led to exploitative relationships when not monitored or balanced by farmer representation. These power imbalances highlight the need for structural reforms that empower farmers economically and politically.

Finally, knowledge asymmetries hinder smallholder empowerment. Limited access to timely market information, climate forecasts, or new technologies reduces adaptive capacity. Extension services remain underfunded or overly technocratic, often failing to incorporate local knowledge systems or farmer feedback (Chambers, 1997, p. 45). This limits learning and innovation, which are essential for building resilience. Empowerment must thus include epistemic justice—the right to participate in knowledge creation and application.

In sum, the early years of SDG implementation exposed a complex web of interrelated barriers that constrained smallholder empowerment. These ranged from material deficits and institutional incoherence to social exclusion and market exploitation. Recognizing and addressing these barriers is crucial for any genuine empowerment strategy. This subsection reveals that unless these foundational issues are tackled systematically, smallholder empowerment will remain more aspirational than achievable.

### **3. Toward Inclusive Policy Frameworks**

The third research question investigates how policy frameworks can be restructured to enhance smallholder agency and resilience within the Zero Hunger Agenda. The findings suggest that inclusive policy design must go beyond sectoral interventions and instead integrate cross-cutting reforms that address institutional, social, and ecological dimensions. Drawing from the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, effective policies must strengthen all five livelihood capitals and align them with farmer-defined needs (Scoones, 1998). In practice, this means designing flexible, context-specific programs that emphasize not only economic productivity but also social protection, gender equity, and political representation.

One of the key policy recommendations emerging from the analysis is the institutionalization of participatory planning mechanisms. Empowerment cannot be externally imposed; it must be co-created with communities. Chambers (1997, p. 72) emphasized the importance of Participatory Rural Appraisal as a tool to engage farmers in the design and evaluation of programs. By embedding such approaches into policy frameworks, governments can ensure that interventions are responsive to local knowledge, priorities, and adaptive strategies. This shift from technocratic to dialogic governance is essential for fostering trust and sustainability.

Strengthening farmer cooperatives and producer organizations is another critical component. These institutions enhance bargaining power, facilitate collective investment, and serve as platforms for political engagement (Putnam, 1993, p. 179). In Indonesia, cooperatives that were supported with capacity-building and legal recognition showed improved market access and resilience (BPS–Statistics Indonesia, 2016). However, policy support must go beyond token inclusion; it should encompass legal reform, financial services, and leadership development to ensure that such organizations are inclusive and effective.

Social protection policies also require reform to support empowerment. Conditional cash transfers, weather-indexed insurance, and food-for-work programs can buffer shocks and reduce vulnerability, thus enabling long-term planning and investment by smallholders (Dorward et al., 2004). Yet, these mechanisms must be designed to complement rather than replace productive empowerment strategies. A dual approach—protection and promotion—ensures that farmers are both safeguarded and empowered.

Furthermore, integrating indigenous knowledge and agroecological principles into extension services can democratize agricultural innovation. Farmers are not passive recipients of technology but active experimenters and innovators (Bebbington, 1999). Policies that value local knowledge systems, support farmer-led research, and promote agroecological diversification can enhance resilience while preserving ecological integrity. This resonates with the capabilities approach, which views empowerment as the expansion of individuals' freedoms to pursue lives they value (Sen, 1999, p. 123).

Lastly, macroeconomic and trade policies must be harmonized with empowerment goals. Many structural adjustment programs and trade liberalization initiatives have undermined local food systems by

prioritizing export crops or subsidized imports (McMichael, 2009). An inclusive framework requires policy coherence across ministries—agriculture, trade, finance, and environment—to ensure that smallholders are not disadvantaged by broader economic decisions. Institutional coordination, transparency, and accountability are therefore essential pillars of empowerment.

In conclusion, reimagining policy frameworks through the lens of empowerment demands a shift in development paradigms—from top-down, market-led models to inclusive, rights-based approaches. The findings highlight the importance of institutional reform, participatory governance, and knowledge pluralism in achieving SDG 2. If implemented effectively, such frameworks can transform smallholders from marginalized producers into empowered agents of sustainable development.

This study has examined the empowerment of smallholder farmers within the Zero Hunger Agenda, with a particular focus on the early years of SDG implementation. The findings reveal a notable divergence between global policy intentions and localized realities. In response to the first research question, the study finds that empowerment strategies evolved inconsistently across national and local contexts. While international development frameworks emphasized inclusive growth and sustainable food systems, actual implementation often reduced empowerment to productivity enhancement and market integration, neglecting deeper institutional and participatory dimensions.

The second research question—concerning the structural and contextual challenges confronting smallholders—highlights land tenure insecurity, infrastructural deficits, institutional fragmentation, and socio-cultural exclusions as the most pressing obstacles. These challenges not only undermined program outcomes but also reinforced pre-existing inequalities. Notably, the exclusion of women, youth, and marginalized ethnic groups from decision-making processes weakened the transformational potential of empowerment initiatives. The study reinforces the argument that empowerment must be conceptualized as a multidimensional and dynamic process, grounded in local realities and inclusive governance.

In addressing the third research question, the research emphasizes the need for inclusive and integrated policy frameworks. Effective empowerment requires a shift from technocratic, top-down approaches to participatory, rights-based

models that prioritize farmer agency, social capital, and institutional coherence. The study proposes that decentralized governance, cooperative development, and agroecological innovation—when combined with social protection and macro-policy coherence—can significantly enhance smallholder resilience and empowerment.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the refinement of the Sustainable Livelihoods and capabilities approaches by demonstrating their applicability in analyzing SDG implementation dynamics. It also advances institutional theory by illustrating how fragmented governance undermines empowerment goals. Practically, the study offers pathways for aligning policy frameworks with empowerment imperatives. These include institutionalizing participatory planning, strengthening grassroots organizations, and integrating local knowledge into extension systems. The findings call for a realignment of development strategies toward inclusive frameworks that view smallholders not as beneficiaries but as partners in transformation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated that the empowerment of smallholder farmers is both a prerequisite and a pathway toward achieving the Zero Hunger Agenda outlined in SDG 2. By engaging with multidimensional theories and analyzing empirical patterns from the early implementation period of the SDGs, the research has illuminated the complex realities confronting smallholder farmers. Key findings reveal that while global and national policies increasingly invoked empowerment as a goal, actual strategies often failed to address the structural, institutional, and social barriers that impede smallholder agency. The gap between policy rhetoric and ground-level execution remains a critical challenge for sustainable development.

The study confirms that genuine empowerment must be rooted in secure access to assets, meaningful participation in decision-making, and institutional environments that support rather than hinder local initiatives. Theoretical alignment with the Sustainable Livelihoods and capabilities approaches has allowed the research to capture the nuances of empowerment as both a condition and an outcome. The contributions of institutional and social capital theories have further clarified how fragmented governance and power asymmetries undermine inclusive agricultural development.

In light of these findings, this article recommends that future empowerment strategies prioritize participatory governance, legal and institutional reforms,

and the integration of agroecological knowledge systems. Policymakers must ensure coherence across sectors and levels of governance, while development practitioners should embed empowerment principles into the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions. For researchers, future work should deepen the analysis of empowerment dynamics over the full SDG timeline, with particular attention to gender, climate resilience, and digital inclusion. By reframing smallholders as active agents in the development process, the global community can move closer to realizing the promise of SDG 2.

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