

Youth Civic Engagement as a Catalyst for Strengthening Civil Society in Riverbank Communities: A Case Study of Banjarmasin, Indonesia

Mariatul Kiptiah¹, Nurul Huda², Alex Alex³, Anisha Shahara⁴, Muhammad Ridho Afreza⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Study Program of Pancasila and Citizenship Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, Indonesia
mariatulkiptiah@ulm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT:

Youth civic engagement has increasingly been recognized as a critical driver in strengthening civil society, particularly within marginalized urban communities. In Indonesia, riverbank settlements such as those in Banjarmasin face persistent environmental and social challenges, making them important contexts for examining grassroots civic participation. This study aims to analyze how youth-led civic engagement contributes to the development of civil society in riverbank communities. This research employs a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm, utilizing a case study design to explore youth community practices in Banjarmasin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with youth members aged 18–25 who are actively involved in community initiatives. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and meanings related to civic engagement. The findings reveal that youth play a transformative role through (1) environmental civic action, including river clean-up activities and community education; (2) strengthening social cohesion and community empowerment; (3) navigating structural challenges such as limited resources and participation barriers; (4) acting as informal civic educators; and (5) engaging in emerging yet limited institutional collaborations. These activities demonstrate that youth civic engagement operates as both a social and environmental practice that contributes to collective awareness and participatory culture. In conclusion, youth-led initiatives significantly contribute to strengthening civil society in marginalized riverbank areas, although their sustainability depends on stronger institutional support and resource availability. This study highlights the need for policy interventions that recognize and empower youth as key actors in community development. Future research is recommended to adopt comparative and mixed-method approaches to deepen understanding of youth civic engagement

across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Youth Civic Engagement; Civil Society; Riverbank Communities; Environmental Action; Community Empowerment; Banjarmasin.

1. Introduction

Urban citizenship in the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by the capacity of young people to respond to social inequality, ecological vulnerability, and weakening public trust at the community level. Across rapidly urbanising societies, civic engagement is no longer limited to electoral participation, but extends to voluntary action, collective problem-solving, environmental care, neighbourhood advocacy, and community-based solidarity (Saud, Ida, & Mashud, 2020). This shift is particularly significant in cities where marginalised residents experience limited access to formal decision-making yet continue to build informal civic networks to sustain everyday life. Globally, urban areas are now central sites of democratic participation and social resilience, especially as climate-related risks and socio-economic inequalities increasingly affect low-income settlements (UN-Habitat, 2022). In Indonesia, this issue is urgent because 59.2% of the population lived in urban areas in 2024, while young people numbered 64.22 million, or around 22.99% of the national population, with most residing in urban contexts.

Within this context, youth civic engagement has become a strategic pathway for strengthening civil society. Civil society refers to the social sphere between the state, market, and household in which citizens organise, deliberate, and act collectively for public purposes (Edwards, 2014). Youth communities are particularly important because they often operate through flexible, informal, and locally embedded networks that can mobilise participation beyond bureaucratic institutions. Recent studies show that youth engagement contributes to civic identity, social responsibility, democratic learning, and community empowerment (Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020; Saud et al., 2020). However, the civic potential of youth is unevenly distributed. Young people in marginalised

communities frequently face structural constraints, including poverty, spatial exclusion, limited access to civic education, and weak institutional recognition (UNICEF Indonesia, 2021). These conditions create a paradox: youth are expected to become agents of democratic renewal, yet their participation is often constrained by the very inequalities they are asked to address.

The riverbank communities of Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, offer a distinctive and underexplored setting for examining this paradox. Banjarmasin is historically known as a river city, where rivers function not only as ecological corridors but also as cultural, economic, and social spaces. Recent urban studies note that Banjarmasin's river-based settlements are deeply connected to local ways of life, although urban development has also generated problems of settlement density, environmental degradation, and river-border management (Setiadi, 2021). The city government's 2021–2026 development orientation also places river-based development as a defining feature of Banjarmasin's urban identity. At the same time, BPS data indicate that Banjarmasin still faces persistent social vulnerability; in 2025, the number of poor residents was recorded at 33,160 people. These conditions make riverbank communities important social laboratories for understanding how civic engagement emerges in places marked by both cultural resilience and urban marginality.

Despite growing scholarship on civic engagement, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature on youth civic engagement focuses on formal political participation, digital activism, or school-based civic education, while less attention is given to youth communities that work through everyday, place-based practices in marginal urban settlements (Bowman, 2011; Cho et al., 2020). Second, studies on civil society in Indonesia often emphasise national democratic institutions, legal restrictions, or large civil society organisations, whereas

grassroots youth communities in peripheral urban spaces remain less visible. This gap is important because Indonesia's civic space continues to face regulatory and political challenges; civil society actors formally enjoy constitutional rights, yet organisational and expressive freedoms remain subject to bureaucratic control and restriction. Third, research on Banjarmasin's riverbank settlements has tended to prioritise spatial planning, environmental sustainability, tourism, or settlement resilience, rather than analysing how youth civic engagement contributes to strengthening civil society from below.

Addressing this gap is academically and socially significant. Riverbank youth communities may function as civic intermediaries that connect residents, local government, cultural traditions, and environmental concerns. Through activities such as community clean-ups, informal education, cultural preservation, public discussion, mutual aid, and neighbourhood advocacy, youth groups can produce social capital and collective efficacy. These practices are central to civil society because they cultivate trust, reciprocity, participation, and public-mindedness (Putnam, 2000; Wray-Lake, DeHaan, Shubert, & Ryan, 2019). In marginalised riverbank areas, such engagement may also challenge deficit-based narratives that portray peripheral communities merely as sites of poverty, disorder, or environmental risk. Instead, youth civic engagement can reveal how local actors generate agency, solidarity, and democratic capacity in contexts where formal institutions may be limited or unevenly present.

Therefore, this study investigates civic engagement among youth communities as an effort to strengthen civil society in riverbank communities of Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. Specifically, it seeks to analyse the forms, motivations, strategies, and social contributions of youth civic engagement in marginal riverbank settings. By situating youth participation within the lived realities of river-based urban communities, this research contributes to the literature on civic engagement, civil society, and urban marginality in three ways. First, it expands the concept of civic engagement beyond formal political participation by highlighting everyday

community-based action. Second, it provides empirical insight into how young people in peripheral urban spaces negotiate structural constraints while sustaining collective initiatives. Third, it offers a locally grounded perspective on civil society strengthening in Indonesia, particularly in a river city where ecological, cultural, and social dimensions are inseparable. In doing so, the study argues that youth civic engagement in Banjarmasin's riverbank communities should be understood not merely as voluntary activity, but as a democratic practice through which marginalised citizens participate in shaping a more inclusive, resilient, and socially rooted civil society.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how youth civic engagement contributes to strengthening civil society in riverbank communities. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research seeks to understand socially constructed meanings, lived experiences, and contextual dynamics of youth participation, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Civic engagement in marginal communities is embedded in cultural practices, informal interactions, and local narratives; therefore, an in-depth, interpretive approach is necessary to capture these complexities.

The study is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through interaction and shared meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm aligns with the objective of examining how youth interpret their roles, actions, and contributions within their communities. It allows the researcher to co-construct understanding with participants, acknowledging multiple perspectives rather than seeking a single objective truth.

Specifically, this research employs a case study design, focusing on youth communities in the riverbank areas of Banjarmasin. The case study approach enables a detailed, context-rich investigation of a bounded system, capturing the interplay between social, cultural, and environmental factors (Yin, 2018). As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative case studies

are particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena within real-life settings, making them highly relevant for this research context.

3. Results

1: Youth-Led Environmental Civic Action

This theme captures the active involvement of youth communities in initiating and sustaining environmental civic practices in riverbank areas of Banjarmasin. The findings indicate that youth engagement is not merely participatory but also transformative, as young people position themselves as key actors in addressing local ecological challenges. Their actions reflect an emerging sense of environmental responsibility combined with collective civic awareness. Two interrelated sub-themes were identified: environmental awareness and collective action.

The first sub-theme, environmental awareness, highlights how youth participants develop a critical understanding of river pollution and its social consequences. This awareness is not acquired through formal education alone but emerges from direct interaction with their surroundings and community experiences. Youth participants demonstrate a shift from passive observation to proactive concern, indicating an internalization of environmental values that drives civic behavior.

"We realized that this river is not just a place to throw away rubbish, but a source of life, so we started to encourage residents not to throw rubbish carelessly..." (Informant 1, P1, member of the riverbank youth community, 21 years old)

This statement illustrates how environmental awareness is framed as both ecological and social responsibility. The informant's narrative suggests that civic engagement begins with a reinterpretation of the river's meaning—from a neglected space to a shared resource requiring collective care.

The second sub-theme, collective action, reflects how awareness is translated into organized civic practices such as river clean-up initiatives and community education campaigns. These actions are characterized by collaboration, peer mobilization, and grassroots coordination, indicating that youth

engagement operates through informal yet structured community networks.

"... we usually do community service to clean the river every week, and also provide education to children and local residents to care more about the environment..." (Informant 2, P2, member of the riverbank youth community, 19 years old)

This excerpt demonstrates the consistency of collective engagement across participants, emphasizing routine action and community-oriented strategies. The findings suggest that youth-led initiatives function as practical mechanisms for fostering civic participation, where environmental action becomes a medium for strengthening social cohesion.

2. Social Cohesion and Community Empowerment through Youth Engagement

This theme highlights how youth-led civic engagement extends beyond environmental action to foster social cohesion and empower local communities in riverbank areas. The findings reveal that youth initiatives function as social bridges, connecting diverse community members and strengthening collective identity. Through sustained interaction and participatory activities, youth groups contribute to building trust, mutual support, and a shared sense of responsibility among residents. Two sub-themes emerged: strengthening social bonds and community empowerment.

The first sub-theme, strengthening social bonds, reflects how youth activities create spaces for interaction among residents who previously had limited social engagement. Environmental programs such as river clean-ups and educational outreach serve as entry points for broader social collaboration, enabling intergenerational communication and collective participation.

"since there have been activities from the youth, residents have been gathering and working together more often, unlike before when they tended to do things individually" (Informant 3, P3, member of the riverbank youth community, 23 years old)

This statement indicates that youth engagement acts as a catalyst for social interaction, transforming previously fragmented community relations into

more cohesive networks. The activities initiated by youth are not only environmentally oriented but also socially integrative, reinforcing communal ties.

The second sub-theme, community empowerment, illustrates how youth initiatives enhance the capacity of residents to participate in local problem-solving. By involving community members in planning and implementing activities, youth groups encourage a sense of ownership and agency among residents. This participatory approach reduces dependency on external actors and promotes grassroots-driven development.

"we don't just clean, but also invite residents to participate in planning activities so that they feel responsible." (Informant 4, P4, member of the riverbank youth community, 22 years old)

This excerpt demonstrates that empowerment is achieved through inclusive participation and shared decision-making. Youth engagement, therefore, functions as a mechanism for redistributing civic agency within the community. Overall, the findings suggest that youth-led initiatives play a crucial role in strengthening civil society by fostering both social cohesion and community empowerment in marginalized riverbank settings.

3: Constraints and Challenges in Sustaining Youth Civic Engagement

This theme explores the structural and contextual challenges faced by youth communities in sustaining their civic engagement initiatives in riverbank areas. While youth demonstrate strong commitment to environmental and social activities, their efforts are often constrained by limited resources, inconsistent community participation, and lack of institutional support. These challenges reveal the fragile nature of grassroots civic action in marginalized settings. Two sub-themes were identified: resource limitations and community participation barriers.

The first sub-theme, resource limitations, refers to the scarcity of financial, material, and infrastructural support needed to maintain regular civic activities. Youth groups often rely on personal contributions and informal networks, which restrict the scale and sustainability of their programs. This limitation

highlights the gap between civic motivation and structural capacity.

"we are often constrained by funds and equipment, so sometimes activities cannot be maximized or have to be postponed." (Informant 5, P5, member of the riverbank youth community, 20 years old)

This statement indicates that despite strong intrinsic motivation, the absence of adequate resources hinders the continuity and effectiveness of civic initiatives. It underscores the dependency of grassroots engagement on external or institutional support mechanisms.

The second sub-theme, community participation barriers, reflects the difficulty in mobilizing consistent involvement from local residents. Some community members remain indifferent or resistant to change, particularly regarding environmental practices such as waste management. This creates a gap between youth-led initiatives and broader community adoption.

"... not all residents want to participate, some still throw rubbish into the river even though they have been reminded..." (Informant 6, P6, member of the riverbank youth community, 24 years old)

This excerpt demonstrates that behavioral change at the community level is gradual and uneven. The persistence of such challenges suggests that youth civic engagement operates within a complex social environment where awareness does not automatically translate into participation. Overall, these findings highlight that while youth play a critical role in strengthening civil society, their efforts are shaped and sometimes constrained by structural and cultural barriers within the community.

4: Youth as Civic Educators in Informal Community Spaces

This theme emphasizes the role of youth as informal civic educators who actively disseminate environmental knowledge and civic values within riverbank communities. The findings indicate that youth engagement goes beyond action-oriented activities and extends into educational practices aimed at shaping community awareness and behavior. Through interpersonal communication

and community-based learning, youth contribute to the diffusion of civic norms. Two sub-themes were identified: informal environmental education and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The first sub-theme, informal environmental education, highlights how youth utilize accessible and context-based approaches to educate residents, particularly children, about environmental responsibility. These efforts are often embedded in everyday interactions, making them more relatable and sustainable than formal interventions.

"... we often educate local children about the importance of protecting the river, usually through leisure activities or games..." (Informant 7, P7, member of the riverbank youth community, 22 years old)

This statement suggests that youth adopt adaptive educational strategies that align with local social contexts. The use of informal methods indicates a bottom-up approach to civic learning, where knowledge is co-created rather than imposed.

The second sub-theme, intergenerational knowledge transfer, reflects how youth bridge generational gaps by engaging both younger and older community members. In doing so, they not only transmit knowledge but also negotiate values and practices across age groups.

"we also try to remind parents, even though it's sometimes difficult, but slowly they start to understand" (Informant 8, P8, member of the riverbank youth community, 25 years old)

This excerpt demonstrates the mediating role of youth in facilitating dialogue across generations. Overall, the findings indicate that youth function as key agents of civic education, contributing to the gradual transformation of environmental attitudes and practices within the community.

5: Institutional Recognition and Collaboration Dynamics

This theme explores the extent to which youth civic engagement is supported, recognized, or constrained by external institutions such as local government and community organizations. The findings reveal that while some forms of collaboration exist, they are often sporadic and lack

continuity. This creates both opportunities and limitations for youth-led civic initiatives. Two sub-themes emerged: limited institutional support and emerging collaboration opportunities.

The first sub-theme, limited institutional support, refers to the absence of consistent engagement, funding, or policy backing from formal institutions. Youth groups often operate independently, which affects the scalability and sustainability of their programs.

"So far we have been working mostly on our own, there hasn't been much help from the government or other parties" (Informant 9, P9, member of the riverbank youth community, 23 years old)

This statement highlights the structural gap between grassroots civic initiatives and formal institutional frameworks. The lack of support indicates that youth engagement is not yet fully integrated into broader development agendas.

The second sub-theme, emerging collaboration opportunities, captures instances where youth groups begin to establish partnerships with local stakeholders, including NGOs or community leaders. These collaborations, although limited, indicate potential pathways for strengthening civic impact.

"There has been collaboration with other communities and sub-districts, but it is still not routine" (Informant 10, P10, member of the riverbank youth community, 21 years old)

This excerpt suggests that collaboration is still in an early stage, characterized by intermittent engagement rather than sustained partnerships. Overall, the findings show that institutional dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of youth civic engagement, where stronger collaboration could significantly enhance the contribution of youth to civil society development.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that youth civic engagement in riverbank communities of Banjarmasin plays a multifaceted role in strengthening civil society, particularly through environmental action, social cohesion, informal

civic education, and grassroots empowerment. These results align with the study's objective of examining how youth-led initiatives contribute to civic life in marginalized urban settings. The emergence of youth-led environmental civic action confirms that civic engagement is not limited to formal political participation but is deeply embedded in everyday practices and local ecological concerns. This supports prior research arguing that youth engagement in community-based environmental activities fosters civic identity and collective responsibility (Wray-Lake et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the findings on social cohesion and community empowerment highlight that youth initiatives serve as catalysts for strengthening social capital within marginalized communities. This resonates with Putnam's (2000) theory that civic engagement enhances trust, reciprocity, and collective action, which are essential components of a strong civil society. In the context of Banjarmasin's riverbank areas, youth not only mobilize participation but also reshape social relationships, transforming fragmented communities into more cohesive and collaborative networks. This suggests that civic engagement operates as both a social and relational process.

The role of youth as informal civic educators extends the theoretical understanding of civic learning beyond institutional settings. Rather than relying on formal education systems, youth in this study employ context-sensitive and participatory approaches to disseminate environmental knowledge. This finding supports the argument that civic learning is socially constructed and occurs through everyday interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It also reinforces the importance of bottom-up approaches in promoting sustainable behavioral change in communities.

However, the study also identifies significant challenges, particularly in terms of resource limitations and weak institutional support. These constraints indicate that while youth possess strong agency, their impact remains structurally bounded. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that civic engagement in marginalized contexts often depends on informal networks due to limited state support (Saud et al., 2020). The lack

of sustained collaboration with formal institutions suggests a gap between grassroots initiatives and policy frameworks, which may hinder long-term sustainability.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by contextualizing civic engagement within riverbank communities, highlighting how environmental, social, and cultural dimensions intersect in shaping civic practices. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers should recognize and support youth communities as strategic partners in urban environmental management and community development. Programs that provide funding, training, and institutional linkage could significantly enhance the effectiveness of youth-led initiatives.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a specific geographical context, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other urban settings. Second, the reliance on qualitative data means that the findings are interpretive and context-dependent. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches or comparative studies across different cities to provide broader insights into youth civic engagement and civil society development.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that youth civic engagement in riverbank communities of Banjarmasin plays a significant role in strengthening civil society through multiple interconnected dimensions. The findings reveal that youth are not merely participants but active agents who initiate environmental civic actions, foster social cohesion, promote community empowerment, and act as informal civic educators. Through activities such as river clean-ups, community outreach, and environmental education, youth contribute to building collective awareness and reinforcing shared responsibility within marginalized communities. At the same time, the study highlights that these contributions are constrained by structural challenges, including limited resources, inconsistent community participation, and weak institutional support.

Theoretically, this study underscores the importance of understanding civic engagement as a contextual and socially embedded practice, particularly in peripheral urban settings where formal institutions may be limited. Practically, the findings suggest that greater recognition and support from local governments, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders are essential to enhance the sustainability and impact of youth-led initiatives. Strengthening institutional collaboration, providing financial and technical support, and integrating youth engagement into local development policies are critical steps toward reinforcing civil society at the grassroots level.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a single geographical context and its reliance on qualitative methods. Future research is recommended to explore comparative analyses across different urban and rural settings, as well as to employ mixed-method approaches to capture both the depth and breadth of youth civic engagement. Additionally, further studies could examine the long-term impact of youth-led initiatives on environmental sustainability and democratic participation. Overall, this research affirms that empowering youth communities is a strategic pathway toward building a more inclusive, resilient, and participatory civil society.

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