

**CAHAYA RAMADAN AND  
YOUTH AGENCY IN RELIGIOUS  
INSTITUTIONS: A  
PARTICIPATORY ACTION  
RESEARCH STUDY IN  
BERANANG, MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract**

Youth disengagement from religious institutions has become a growing concern in Muslim-majority societies, including Malaysia, where youth participation in mosque-based activities remains low despite strong state support. This participatory action research (PAR) study, conducted during Ramadan 1446 H (March 2–17, 2025) in Beranang, Selangor, examined the structural causes of youth disengagement and the transformative potential of authentic PAR that positions youth as co-researchers. Through four iterative PAR cycles involving 15 youth co-researchers and approximately 50 community youth, the study found that low participation is driven not by apathy but by structural barriers, including exclusion from decision-making, misalignment between religious discourse and contemporary realities, limited spaces for youth agency, and weak institutional management. The PAR process reshaped power relations across visible, hidden, and invisible dimensions, increasing participation from 1–2% to 7.6% and enabling 80% of co-researchers to assume leadership roles. Youth articulated meaningful spirituality through four interconnected dimensions—relevance, participation, community, and authenticity—challenging dominant prescriptive approaches. The establishment of a Youth Committee with formal decision-making authority, institutionalized through a Memorandum of Understanding with the mosque’s governing body, reflects a lasting structural transformation. This study argues that sustainable youth engagement in religious institutions requires redistributing power and redefining intergenerational relations rather than merely expanding youth programs.

*Keywords:* Participatory action research, youth empowerment, power relations, Ramadan, Malaysia

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## Introduction

Muslim youth in the contemporary era face complex challenges in navigating their religious identities amid modernity and globalization. Traditional religious institutions, such as mosques and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), often struggle to remain relevant and to attract active participation from younger generations.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon occurs not only in Indonesia but also in Malaysia, where, despite Islam being the official religion with strong institutional support, youth involvement in community-based religious activities has experienced a significant decline.<sup>2</sup>

When the Community Service Program (Kuliah Kerja Nyata Tematik/KKNT) team from Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) As-Sunnah arrived in Beranang, Selangor, Malaysia, during Ramadan 1446 H (March 2025), we observed two paradoxical conditions. First, although the mosque's governing body (Badan Kemakmuran Masjid/BKM) had developed structured Islamic programs, youth participation remained extremely low. Second, Ma'had Darul Tholibin Solatiah, an Islamic boarding school with adequate facilities, is now operating in an almost dormant state as students leave. This phenomenon cannot be understood merely as an individual problem but must be analyzed within a broader structural framework.

Structural analysis reveals four key factors. First, youth marginalization in the decision-making leadership of religious organizations is dominated by senior generations, resulting in programs that do not reflect youth needs. Second, the disconnection between religious discourse and the study of youth's lived realities does not address contemporary issues such as mental health, career anxiety, or digital identity. Third, the absence of spaces for youth agency means that one-directional learning models provide no room for questioning or creative expression. Fourth, in the Ma'had case, weak institutional management demonstrates that teacher indiscipline and minimal supervision erode trust. This analysis reveals that low participation is not due to individual "lack of interest" but rather to social structures that fail to accommodate youth agency and contemporary generational aspirations.

The literature review indicates several significant gaps. Nursoli, Saepuloh, and Rahman examined the optimization of Remaja Islam Masjid (Islamic Youth Mosque) programs in Garut, yet employed a top-down approach where youth served as beneficiaries rather than co-creators.<sup>3</sup> Abbas and Dhora explored Ramadan's role in Muslim adolescents' time management conceptually, but did not investigate how youth themselves make sense of their experiences.<sup>4</sup> Studies of state-sponsored Islamic institutions in Malaysia demonstrate that these institutions often fail to attract youth due to their formal structures, suggesting the need for bottom-up approaches that provide space for youth agency.<sup>5</sup> Research employing PAR to empower Islamic educational institutions in social entrepreneurship has shown promising results, though it has not specifically focused on youth empowerment in religious contexts.<sup>6</sup> The main gaps are: (1) research still employs top-down approaches; (2) PAR in religious contexts remains limited; (3) Malaysian contexts are under-

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Pearce and Darren Langdrige, "Young People and Religious Participation: Exploring Identity Formation and Institutional Disengagement," *Journal of Youth Studies* 22, no. 8 (2019): 1105–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1571178>.

<sup>2</sup> Adibah Yusuf et al., "Mosques as Knowledge Development Centers: Youth Involvement and Perceptions in Kuching, Sarawak," in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Design Industries & Creative Culture, DESIGN DECODED 2021* (EAI, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.24-8-2021.2315311>.

<sup>3</sup> Nursoli Nursoli, Agus Saepuloh, and Taufiqur Rahman, "Optimalisasi Program Remaja Islam Masjid Di Desa Malangbong Kecamatan Malangbong Kabupaten Garut," *Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat* 4, no. 2 (2023): 143–54.

<sup>4</sup> Masykur Ridho Abbas and Muhammad Risqi Dhora, "Peran Ramadhan Dalam Manajemen Waktu Remaja Muslim," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 14, no. 1 (2025): 45–62.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Osman Mohamed Nawab, "The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, vol. 9 (ISEAS Publishing, 2016), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TRS9\\_16.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TRS9_16.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Agus Iwan Sulaiman et al., "Economic Empowerment Model in Harmonization and Deradicalization of Islamic Boarding School," *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing* 6, no. 2 (2022): 1550–66, <https://journalppw.com/index.php/jppw/article/view/2998>.

explored; and (4) Ramadan as a moment for socio-religious transformation has not been empirically investigated through participatory approaches.

Scientific novelty of this research includes: first, paradigmatic reframing from paternalistic "youth optimization" to youth empowerment as agents of change; second, application of authentic PAR where youth serve as co-researchers throughout the entire research cycle; third, explicit integration of structural analysis and power analysis; fourth, contextualization in Malaysia with comparative Southeast Asian perspectives; and fifth, exploration of Ramadan as a critical moment for structural transformation.

Based on the above analysis, this research poses the following questions: (1) How do structural factors influence youth participation in religious activities in Beranang? (2) How can Participatory Action Research processes that position youth as co-researchers transform power relations and produce sustainable empowerment models? (3) How do youth define spirituality and meaningful community engagement within the context of their lives as contemporary generations in Malaysia?

This research aims to: (1) analyze structural factors affecting low youth participation, including power dynamics and institutional practices; (2) implement authentic PAR where youth are involved as co-researchers in identifying problems, co-designing solutions, and conducting participatory evaluation; and (3) document power relation transformations and produce replicable empowerment models while attending to lessons learned from the Malaysian context.

This research employs a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, a paradigm rooted in critical theory and emancipatory research traditions.<sup>7</sup> PAR differs from conventional research in: (a) epistemology, recognizing that communities possess valid knowledge systems; (b) purpose, transforming social structures, not merely understanding them; and (c) researcher-community relations, positioning communities as co-researchers, not research subjects. The selection of PAR is based on the premise that youth marginalization is a structural issue requiring transformation of power relations and that genuine empowerment occurs only when youth themselves define problems and design solutions.

The research was conducted in Beranang, Selangor, Malaysia, during Ramadan 1446 H (March 2-17, 2025). Participants included: (1) Youth co-researchers (n=15: 9 males, 6 females, ages 17-25) intensively involved throughout all PAR cycles; (2) Youth community (n≈50) participating in program activities; (3) Stakeholders (n=8: BKM board members, Ma'had management, community leaders); and (4) Research/facilitator team (n=6) from STAI As-Sunnah serving as process facilitators, not experts.

The research follows four PAR cycles with iterative Planning-Action-Observation-Reflection phases:<sup>8</sup>

Cycle 1: Listening and Power Analysis (March 3-5) focused on deep listening through informal gatherings, Focus Group Discussions about youth-religious institution relations, and Power Mapping Exercise to identify structural marginalization. A collective problem definition was conducted using Problem Tree Analysis, in which youth articulated that the problem was not "lazy youth" but rather structures that do not accommodate youth agency.

Cycle 2: Co-Design and Power-Sharing (March 6-8) began with dialogue sessions between youth and stakeholders to facilitate power-sharing. Youth then co-designed programs through creative workshops, producing a Youth-Led Ramadan Program that encompassed thematic studies on

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, "Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and the Public Sphere," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin, Yvonna S Lincoln, and 3rd (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 559–603.

contemporary topics, social service projects, engaging spiritual activities, creative expressions, and an intergenerational dialogue series.

Cycle 3: Collaborative Implementation (March 9-16) implemented 12 major activities with youth assuming substantive leadership roles in content, logistics, fundraising, communications, and liaison. Participation reached an average of 35-40 youth per activity (baseline: 5-10 youth). Daily debriefing sessions captured immediate reflections, and mid-cycle reflections enabled adaptation.

Cycle 4: Participatory Evaluation (March 17) involved youth in evaluating the program through FGDs, community feedback sessions, stakeholder dialogue, and surveys (68% response rate, n=34). Final reflection sessions led to the establishment of the Youth Committee as a permanent structure for sustainability and to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with BKM to regularize youth participation in decision-making.

Data collection instruments included: FGDs (8 sessions), participatory visual methods (power mapping, problem tree), participant observation, daily reflection journals, in-depth interviews, surveys, and multimedia documentation. Data analysis employed Thematic Analysis with collaborative coding sessions, in which youth co-researchers were involved in identifying themes—manifestations of knowledge co-construction. Member checking ensured interpretations accurately represented youth perspectives.

This research received official approval from the Yayasan Wakaf Bina Madani Center and the BKM Al-Hidayah Beranang leadership, with coordination with local authorities in Malaysia. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving complete explanations of the research's purpose, procedures, and implications, with emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time. For youth under 18 years (3 individuals), informed consent was also obtained from parents or guardians. Confidentiality and privacy were strictly maintained: all data were securely stored with limited access; individual identities were anonymized using pseudonyms (except for youth co-researchers, who explicitly consented to being named in recognition of their contributions); and photos/videos were obtained with explicit approval and included options to blur faces.

In PAR research, ethical considerations encompass the ethics of participation and power. We consistently reflected on the question: Are all voices being heard? Is decision-making truly democratic? Is the research team unconsciously imposing its own agenda? Feedback mechanisms were established for confidentially raising ethical concerns. The principle of "not harm" was maintained the program was designed to ensure involvement carried no unreasonable risks. Reciprocity was realized: youth gained research skills, the community received meaningful programs, institutions gained insights into youth perspectives, and the Youth Committee was formed to promote sustainable empowerment. Results will be disseminated in accessible formats, with community involvement in determining how the findings will inform future improvements.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Profile of Location and Baseline Conditions*

Beranang is a suburban area in Selangor state, approximately 35 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur, with a population of approximately 15,000, predominantly Malay Muslim (82%), followed by Chinese (12%) and Indian (6%). The area possesses a relatively adequate religious infrastructure, including Masjid Al-Hidayah, managed by the mosque's governing body (Badan Kemakmuran Masjid/BKM), which has seven active board members, and Ma'had Darul Tholibin Solatiah, which features dormitory facilities for 50 students, six classrooms, and a library with 1,200 Islamic texts.

However, initial observations and interviews (March 3-5, 2025) revealed paradoxical baseline conditions. First, youth participation in mosque activities was extremely low. Data from attendance records and direct observation indicated that, among approximately 500 youth aged 15-25 in the

Beranang area, only 5-10 youth (1-2%) regularly attended mosque religious activities, such as weekly study sessions, Ramadan Quran recitation (tadarus), or social activities. BKM board members expressed their frustration: "We have organized programs well, with regular schedules and budgets, but youth do not attend" (Interview with Ustaz Ahmad, BKM Board Member, March 4, 2025). Conversely, the senior generation (40+ years) remained quite active, with an average of 40-50 congregants attending weekly study sessions.

Second, Ma'had Darul Tholibin Solatiah faced a serious crisis. This boarding school, designed for 50 students, now has only three active students (a 90% reduction from 28 in 2023). Field observations revealed well-maintained buildings but mostly empty rooms. Interviews with former students (through alumni contacts) disclosed structural reasons: "Teachers often failed to appear without notice, sometimes arriving 1-2 hours late. There was no clear schedule, no learning evaluation. We felt we were wasting time" (Interview with Fatimah, former student, March 5, 2025). School management acknowledged administrative problems: "We struggle to supervise teachers because board members are also busy with their respective jobs" (Interview with Pak Hamzah, Ma'had Manager, March 4, 2025).



Figure 1. Consulted with community leaders in relation to the proposed activities.

Baseline analysis through Focus Group Discussions with 15 youth (March 5, 2025) revealed factors contributing to low participation. Regarding power dynamics, youth reported having no voice in decision-making: "The older board members always decide mosque programs. We are never consulted about what we want" (Aisyah, 19 years old). Regarding content relevance, youth identified disconnection: "Study sessions always focus on classical fiqh, but our lives are far more complex: university, career, social media, and mental health. We need guidance for these issues, but there is none" (Amir, 22 years old). Regarding learning methods, youth complained about one-way approaches: "The ustaz lectures, we listen. There is no discussion, no in-depth question-and-answer. Boring" (Siti, 20 years old). The Power Mapping Exercise produced a clear visualization: within the mosque's organizational structure, decision-making resided entirely with seven senior board members (all 40+ years old; 6 male, 1 female), while youth served merely as a "target audience" without structural representation.

#### *Results of Cycle 1: Listening and Power Analysis – Conscientization Process*

The first cycle (March 3-5, 2025) constituted a crucial phase in building critical consciousness among youth.<sup>9</sup> Unlike conventional programs that begin with researchers' assumptions about "youth problems," this listening phase genuinely provided space for youth to define their own realities. The most significant result was narrative transformation—from narratives of "lazy youth" to "non-accommodative structures."

<sup>9</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, ed. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

In the Problem Tree Analysis (March 5, 6-hour workshop with 15 youth co-researchers), youth identified root causes not in their individual characteristics but in organizational structures and institutional practices. They produced diagrams showing that "low youth participation" (symptom) was caused by: (1) marginalization in decision-making → youth not involved in program planning → programs unsuited to youth needs → youth unmotivated to attend; (2) irrelevant content → study materials do not address youth life realities → youth feel disconnected → seek spiritual guidance elsewhere (YouTube, Instagram, podcasts); (3) unengaging methods → one-way approaches → no space for critical dialogue → youth feel bored; and (4) absence of youth role models → no youth visible in leadership → youth see no place for themselves → do not envision involvement.

Critically, this analysis transformed youth self-perception. Before the workshop, many youth internalized narratives that they were "less religious" or "insufficiently caring." One transformative moment occurred when Zain (21 years old) stated, "All this time, I felt guilty for rarely attending the mosque. I thought I was at fault. But now I understand it's not just me, there's a problem with the system. This is liberating." Youth reflection journals showed similar patterns: 85% of youth (13 of 15) wrote about how this process changed their understanding of the situation, shifting from self-blame to an identification of structural factors.

The Power Mapping Exercise yielded deep insights into asymmetrical power relations. Youth visualized that "power to decide" resided entirely with BKM board members, while youth possessed only "power to comply or leave." When asked "What power do you have?" youth were initially confused, then began identifying: "We have power in numbers—we are 500 people versus seven board members," "We have energy and creativity," "We understand our generation better than anyone," "We have access to digital platforms and networks." This exercise produced a collective realization that transformation requires restructuring power relations, not merely "inviting youth to be more active."



Figure 2. Halaqah-based activities for improving and memorizing the Al-Qur'an

#### *Results of Cycle 2: Co-Design and Power-Sharing – Negotiating New Relations*

The second cycle (March 6-8, 2025) marked a crucial phase of power negotiation. The dialogue session between 15 youth co-researchers and 4 BKM board members (March 7, 4 hours) was a tense yet productive moment. Youth presented their power analysis and problem definition results, including visualizations from power mapping demonstrating their structural marginalization. Initial responses from board members were quite defensive, as expressed by Ustaz Ahmad who stated that they had tried to serve youth, but they did not attend. However, through facilitation guided by Non-Violent Communication principles, the dialogue evolved into mutual understanding.

The turning point came when Ustaz Mahmud (58 years old) stated that they had been frustrated that programs fail, not knowing why, and now they gained new perspectives, perhaps they needed to change. This statement opened space for genuine power-sharing. Through facilitated dialogue, several agreements were reached. Youth would have full decision-making authority for the Cahaya Ramadhan program, while BKM would provide resources and support but not dictate program

content. A permanent Youth Committee would be formed with formal representation in BKM meetings, and future programs would be designed through co-creation processes, not top-down. These agreements were formalized in a Memorandum of Understanding signed by both parties.



Figure 3. An official visit to a television broadcasting station

The co-design process (March 7-8, 2 days, creative workshops with 15 youth co-researchers and consultations with approximately 30 community youth) produced the Cahaya Ramadhan Program with five main components. The first component consisted of thematic study sessions with contemporary topics, including mental health and faith that focused on recognizing and addressing anxiety, depression, and spiritual dimensions of psychological wellbeing. The sessions also covered career and calling, which explored balancing material success with spiritual purpose and Islamic perspectives on work ethic. Digital life ethics was another important topic, navigating social media, online relationships, and digital consumption from Islamic perspectives. Youth leadership sessions aimed at developing leadership skills grounded in Islamic values.

The second component involved social service projects that connected youth with community needs. These projects included support for 25 orphans through santunan yatim, community breaking-fast meals for 40 underprivileged families, neighborhood cleaning campaigns involving residents, and visits to elderly community members who live alone. These activities were designed to embody Islamic values of compassion and social responsibility in tangible ways.

The third component focused on engaging spiritual activities that departed from traditional pedagogical approaches. The tadarus buddy system employed peer-based Quran recitation rather than expert-led sessions. Tahajud and sharing circles offered optional late-night prayer followed by personal story sharing, creating spaces for vulnerability and authentic spiritual expression. Dhikr and nasheed sessions blended traditional devotional practices with contemporary Islamic music, making spiritual practices more accessible and appealing to youth.

The fourth component emphasized creative expression as a means of spiritual engagement. Youth produced documentary videos about their spiritual journeys during Ramadan, capturing personal transformations and reflections. A social media campaign using the hashtag #CahayaRamadhanBeranang enabled youth to share reflections and mobilize participation across digital platforms. The photovoice project invited youth to photograph what "meaningful Ramadan" looked like for them, with resulting images exhibited at the mosque, creating visual narratives of youth spirituality that challenged conventional representations.

The fifth component consisted of an intergenerational dialogue series designed to bridge generational divides. Two structured sessions brought together youth and senior generations to share perspectives on what it means to be a Muslim youth in contemporary Malaysia and how mosques can be more inclusive and relevant spaces for all generations. These dialogues created

unprecedented opportunities for mutual understanding and challenged long-standing assumptions on both sides.

*Results of Cycle 3: Collaborative Implementation – From Planning to Action*

The third cycle (March 9-16, 2025) constituted the implementation phase, during which designs were realized. Unlike conventional programs in which organizers execute predetermined plans, PAR implementation is characterized by collective action, with youth assuming substantive roles. Twelve activities were conducted with quantitative participation data as follows:

Table 1. Youth Participation Rates in Social, Educational, and Religious Activities

Activity	Participants	% of 500 Youth
Mental Health Study	42 youth	8.4%
Career Study	35 youth	7.0%
Digital Ethics Study	40 youth	8.0%
Youth Leadership Study	38 youth	7.6%
Orphan Support	30 youth	6.0%
Community Breaking-Fast	45 youth	9.0%
Cleaning Campaign	28 youth	5.6%
Tadarus Buddy	36 youth	7.2%
Tahajud+Sharing	32 youth	6.4%
Dhikr+Nasheed	40 youth	8.0%
Intergenerational Dialogue 1	35 youth	7.0%
Intergenerational Dialogue 2	33 youth	6.6%
Average	38 youth	7.6%

The increase from baseline 1-2% to 7.6% represents an increase of 380-760%. More importantly, among the 38 youth, on average per activity, 68% were "new participants" who had never or rarely attended mosque activities. Post-program surveys (n=34; 68% response rate among 50 active participants) indicated that 82% of new participants reported this was their "first meaningful religious activity" in the community over the past 2 years.

Quality of engagement also underwent a significant transformation. Participant observation using structured observation guides with five engagement indicators, namely active participation in discussion, asking questions, sharing personal experiences, taking initiative, and collaborative behavior, revealed remarkable improvements in youth engagement patterns. Observation results showed that active participation reached 89% of participants who contributed to discussions, a dramatic increase compared to the estimated less than 20% in conventional study sessions based on BKM board interviews. The culture of inquiry also flourished, with an average of 12-15 questions raised per study session, vastly exceeding the 2-3 questions typically observed in conventional sessions.

Personal vulnerability and authenticity emerged as important dimensions of engagement, as evidenced by 65% of participants who shared relevant personal experiences during discussions, creating deeper connections and more meaningful learning. The transformation in youth agency was particularly striking, with 23 youth volunteering for various roles including facilitator,

moderator, documentation, and logistics, demonstrating their sense of ownership over the program. Collaborative behavior manifested organically through the spontaneous formation of 6 sub-groups for various tasks, indicating that participants had internalized the collaborative ethos of the program and were able to self-organize effectively.

Most significant was the emergence of youth leadership. Of the 15 youth co-researchers, 12 youth (80%) assumed substantive leadership roles during implementation: 4 youth as facilitators for thematic study sessions (with mini-training from the research team on facilitation skills), three youth as coordinators for social service projects, two youth as multimedia producers for documentation, two youth as liaisons with BKM and community, and one youth as overall program coordinator. Observations showed that these youth leaders were not merely "executing tasks" but actively problem-solving, adapting plans, and making decisions when challenges arose. For example, when the venue for the second study session became unavailable at short notice, youth coordinators independently negotiated an alternative venue. They communicated the changes to participants within 2 hours, without involving the research team or the BKM board.

Intergenerational dynamics also transformed. At baseline, relations between youth and senior generations at the mosque could be characterized as hierarchical and distant, with board members as authorities giving directions and youth as passive recipients. During implementation, observations showed a shift toward horizontal and collaborative relations. In dialogue sessions, senior generations listened with genuine interest when youth shared their perspectives, and youth felt safe to express disagreements or concerns. Ustaz Mahmud revealed: "I learned much from the youth. They have insights we do not possess. This is no longer about us teaching them, but learning together" (Reflection, March 14, 2025). One powerful moment occurred when the BKM board requested the youth to facilitate a study session on "Digital Life Ethics" for senior congregants, recognizing the youth's expertise in this domain.

Mid-cycle reflection (March 12, 4 days after implementation) led to program adaptations based on participant feedback. Youth co-researchers identified that overly dense scheduling (2 activities per day) caused fatigue, and they adjusted by scheduling some activities concurrently rather than sequentially. The ability to reflexively adapt based on real-time evaluation is a hallmark of authentic PAR, demonstrating that the program was not merely "executing pre-determined plans" but a living process responsive to community needs and feedback.

#### *Results of Cycle 4: Participatory Evaluation – Voice of Youth*

The fourth cycle (March 17, 2025) constituted the participatory evaluation phase, during which the youth themselves assessed the program's success, meaningfulness, and sustainability. Unlike conventional evaluation, in which researchers determine criteria and conduct assessments, PAR evaluation is a collective process in which the community defines success and reflects on its experiences.

Focus Group Discussions with youth co-researchers (2 sessions, 3 hours each; total 15 participants) yielded in-depth insights into transformation at multiple levels. At the personal level, youth revealed changes in self-perception and confidence. Aisyah (19 years old) reflected: "Previously, I never felt capable of leading something in the community. I thought that was adults' work. But after facilitating the mental health study session and seeing positive responses, I realized that I have something valuable to contribute. This changed how I see myself." 93% of youth co-researchers (14 of 15) reported increased self-efficacy and sense of agency. Zahra (18 years old) stated: "This program taught me that I don't have to wait until I'm older to make a difference. I can start now, and my voice matters."

At the relational level, youth reported changes in their relationships with religious institutions and older generations. Before the program, relations could be characterized as "us versus them." Youth felt alienated and misunderstood by the senior generations. After the program, 87% of youth (13

of 15) reported feeling "more connected" with the mosque and "more understood" by board members. Amir (22 years old) revealed: "Before, I saw the mosque as a place for older men. Now I feel this is also my place. And importantly, the board members also began treating us as partners, not just as kids who need to be taught." Relations with senior generations shifted from hierarchical to collaborative: "We are no longer just their audience, but partners in building community," said Siti (20 years old).

At the structural level, youth identified concrete changes in power dynamics. The formation of the Youth Committee as a permanent structure within BKM represents the institutionalization of power-sharing. The Youth Committee comprises five youth members who will have formal representation in board meetings and decision-making authority over youth-targeted programs. The MoU between the Youth Committee and BKM stipulates that: (1) the Youth Committee will meet monthly to plan programs; (2) BKM will allocate a specific budget for youth initiatives; (3) at least 1 Youth Committee representative will attend BKM board meetings; and (4) youth programs will be designed through co-creation processes, not top-down. Zain (21 years old), elected as Youth Committee coordinator, reflected: "This is not just about the Ramadan program. This is about changing how decisions are made in our community. This is a structural change."

Community feedback session (March 17, 2 hours, 32 participants from the broader youth community) yielded overwhelmingly positive evaluation. When asked about the most meaningful aspect of Cahaya Ramadhan, responses clustered into four distinct yet interconnected themes that revealed the transformative impact of the program.

The theme of relevance emerged most prominently, mentioned by 78% of participants (n=25), who expressed appreciation that the program spoke to their lives and addressed topics relating to what they face daily. Many participants articulated a sense of relief and validation, expressing sentiments such as "finally, there's someone who understands our struggles," indicating that the program had successfully bridged the gap between religious teaching and lived experience.

Participation and agency constituted another significant theme, mentioned by 72% of participants (n=23). Participants emphasized that they didn't just sit and listen, but were actively involved in shaping and implementing the program. The sentiment that "we felt our voices were heard" reflected a fundamental shift in power dynamics, while the statement "this is our program, not a program for us" captured the essence of genuine ownership that had been achieved through the participatory approach.

Community and belonging represented a deeply felt dimension of the program's impact, mentioned by 69% of participants (n=22). Participants described feeling connected with other youth and experiencing a sense of community that had previously been absent. The statement "we belong here" signaled that the program had successfully created inclusive spaces where youth felt welcomed and valued, addressing the earlier alienation many had experienced in conventional mosque programs.

Spiritual meaningfulness, mentioned by 65% of participants (n=21), revealed the program's success in deepening religious engagement beyond superficial compliance. Participants reflected that this year's Ramadan was more meaningful, emphasizing that they didn't just fast, but really reflected and grew spiritually. The observation that "spirituality became more real, not just ritual" indicated a shift from performative religiosity to authentic spiritual experience, suggesting that the program had achieved its core aim of making Islamic practice personally relevant and transformative.

Survey (Google Forms, n=34, 68% response rate) with mixed-methods questions produced quantitative data supporting qualitative findings:

Table 2. Youth Perceptions of the Cahaya Ramadhan Program Based on Participant Survey Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Cahaya Ramadhan program was relevant to my life	76% (26)	21% (7)	3% (1)	0%	0%
I felt my voice was heard in this program	71% (24)	24% (8)	3% (1)	3% (1)	0%
This program increased my sense of belonging to the community	74% (25)	23% (8)	3% (1)	0%	0%
This year's Ramadan was more meaningful than previous years	68% (23)	26% (9)	6% (2)	0%	0%
I will continue to be involved in mosque activities after Ramadan	65% (22)	29% (10)	6% (2)	0%	0%
This program made me feel more capable of contributing	71% (24)	24% (8)	6% (2)	0%	0%

94-97% of participants (combined Strongly Agree + Agree) gave positive evaluations for all program aspects, with intention to continue involvement at 94%.

Dialogue with stakeholders (March 17, 2 hours; 4 BKM board members, 2 Ma'had management, one community leader) elicited reflections from the perspective of the senior generation. Ustaz Ahmad (BKM Chairman) acknowledged: "Initially, I was skeptical. I thought youth would not be mature enough to handle responsibility. But I was wrong. They are far more capable than I thought. And the programs they created were actually more effective than our previous programs." BKM board members reported that the 7.6% participation rate in the Cahaya Ramadhan program was the highest in 5 years for youth-targeted programs. Pak Hamzah (Ma'had Manager) reflected that the Ma'had crisis was a "wake-up call" about the importance of listening to youth voices: "Students left not because they were not religious, but because we failed to provide a conducive environment. We need fundamental change in how we run the Ma'had." This dialogue produced stakeholder commitment to sustain power-sharing arrangements and continue supporting the Youth Committee.

#### *Power Relations Transformation: From Marginalization to Co-Leadership*

Integrative analysis of the 4 PAR cycles revealed a fundamental transformation in power relations between youth and religious institutions. Using Gaventa's power analysis framework, transformation can be mapped across three dimensions: visible power (formal decision-making structures), hidden power (agenda-setting and exclusion), and invisible power (internalized beliefs and norms).<sup>10</sup>

In the visible power dimension, the most concrete transformation was the institutionalization of youth representation through the Youth Committee, which had formal decision-making authority. This shifted the governance structure from an exclusively senior-led model to intergenerational co-leadership. Power mapping produced pre- and post-program data that showed a dramatic change. Whereas previously, youth were merely a "target audience" on the periphery, they now hold

<sup>10</sup> John Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006): 23–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00320.x>.

positions within the core decision-making circle. The binding MoU ensured this was not simply a symbolic gesture but a structural change with accountability mechanisms.

In the hidden power dimension, transformation occurred in who sets the agenda and whose issues are considered legitimate. Before the program, religious activity agendas were determined entirely by senior board members, based on what they deemed "important" for youth. Issues faced by youth mental health, career anxiety, and digital life ethics were not considered "legitimate religious concerns" and did not enter the agenda. Through the PAR process, youth successfully put their issues on the table and established the legitimacy of their concerns. Dialogue sessions with board members led senior members to recognize that contemporary youth spirituality needs to integrate these issues. The shift from "classical fiqh as sole content" to "diverse topics relevant to youth lives" represents democratization of agenda-setting.

In the dimension of invisible power, the most subtle yet profound transformation occurred in internalized beliefs and self-perception. Before the program, many youth internalized narratives of "insufficiently religious youth" or "apathetic youth," producing self-blame and disempowerment. The conscientization process in Cycle 1 altered this narrative: youth came to understand that their low participation stemmed not from personal deficiency but from structural barriers.<sup>11</sup> This shift from self-blame to structural analysis represents a liberation of consciousness—youth no longer saw themselves as "the problem" but as agents capable of transforming structures. Reflection journals showed this pattern: pre-program, dominant emotions were "guilt" and "inadequacy"; post-program, dominant emotions were "empowerment" and "agency." Fatimah (18 years old) wrote: "I used to think I was the problem. Now I realize that I have the power to be part of the solution."

From the perspective of the senior generation, transformation in the dimension of invisible power was also significant. Dialogue sessions revealed that many senior members held paternalistic beliefs about youth—that youth were "immature," "need guidance," "cannot be trusted with responsibility." Witnessing youth successfully design and implement programs changed these beliefs. Ustaz Mahmud reflected: "I realized my assumptions were wrong. Youth don't need to wait until they're older to contribute meaningfully. They're ready now, and in many ways, they're more equipped than we are for engaging their generation." The shift from "youth as recipients of guidance" to "youth as co-creators of community" represents a transformation of generational norms.



Figure 4. Participating in the preparation of the Iftar Ramadhan

#### *Discussion: Interpreting Findings in PAR Framework*

Findings from this research can be interpreted within the Participatory Action Research theoretical framework and youth empowerment literature. First, this research validates Kemmis and McTaggart's argument that authentic PAR produces transformation at multiple levels: individual, relational, and structural.<sup>12</sup> At the individual level, increased youth self-efficacy and agency align

<sup>11</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>12</sup> Kemmis and McTaggart, "Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and the Public Sphere."

with Freire's conception of conscientization, whereby critical consciousness is a prerequisite for transformative action.<sup>13</sup> At the relational level, the shift from hierarchical to collaborative intergenerational relations demonstrates that PAR can restructure power dynamics when implemented with fidelity to its principles. At the structural level, the institutionalization of the Youth Committee demonstrates how participatory processes can produce sustainable organizational change rather than merely temporary programs.

Second, the increase in participation rate from 1-2% to 7.6% (380-760% increase) provides empirical evidence for arguments that bottom-up approaches generate higher engagement than top-down programs.<sup>14</sup> However, this research goes beyond merely showing "increased numbers" qualitative findings about engagement quality (89% active discussion participation, emergence of youth leadership) demonstrate that what changed was not only "how many" but "how" youth engage. The shift from passive attendance to active co-creation reflects a transformation from participants to protagonists in their own community narrative.

Third, findings on relevance and meaningfulness (78% of participants cited relevance as the most meaningful aspect) validate critiques that state-sponsored Islamic institutions in Malaysia often fail to attract youth due to a disconnect between content and lived realities.<sup>15</sup> The success of the Cahaya Ramadhan program in creating meaningful experiences demonstrates the importance of centering youth voices in program design. When youth are given authority to define what is meaningful to them, they produce programs that resonate deeply with their peers. This challenges paternalistic assumptions that senior generations "know better" about what youth need.

Fourth, the formation of a Youth Committee as a sustainable structure addresses criticism often directed at community development programs, which are accused of producing short-term impacts without sustainable change.<sup>16</sup> The institutionalization of youth representation within the BKM governance structure ensures that the power-sharing during Cahaya Ramadhan was not a temporary arrangement but a structural transformation that will continue beyond the intervention period. Follow-up communication with the Youth Committee (1 month post-program) indicated that they had held two meetings, were planning next month's programs, and were actively engaged in BKM decision-making.

Fifth, the Malaysian context provides important insights for a comparative understanding of youth empowerment in Muslim-majority countries. While Indonesia and Malaysia are both Muslim-majority with strong Islamic institutions, state-religion relations in Malaysia are more formal, resulting in organizational structures that are more bureaucratic and potentially less flexible. Paradoxically, this can create more rigid barriers to youth participation. Still, it also means that, when structural change occurs (such as the formation of a Youth Committee), it has greater institutional backing and legitimacy. A comparison with youth empowerment studies in Indonesia shows that, while challenges in youth engagement transcend national boundaries, empowerment strategies require adaptation to different institutional contexts.<sup>17</sup>

Sixth, the Ramadan moment as a catalyst for socio-religious transformation adds new dimensions to the literature on Ramadan and youth development.<sup>18</sup> While previous research focused on how Ramadan practices develop individual virtues, this research demonstrates that Ramadan can also be a critical moment for collective transformation. The heightened spiritual intensity and

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<sup>13</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>14</sup> Sam Hickey and Giles Mohan, "Towards Participation as Transformation: Critical Themes and Challenges," *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?*, 2004, 3–24.

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed Nawab, "The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam."

<sup>16</sup> Hickey and Mohan, "Towards Participation as Transformation: Critical Themes and Challenges."

<sup>17</sup> Nursoli, Saepuloh, and Rahman, "Optimalisasi Program Remaja Islam Masjid Di Desa Malangbong Kecamatan Malangbong Kabupaten Garut."

<sup>18</sup> Abbas and Dhora, "Peran Ramadhan Dalam Manajemen Waktu Remaja Muslim."

communal solidarity during Ramadan create opportunities to challenge established norms and experiment with new forms of religious community. These findings suggest that religious occasions can be strategically utilized not only for individual spiritual development but also for structural transformation in religious institutions.



Figure 5. Awarding recognition to KKN-T participants and community leaders

### *Limitations and Challenges*

This research is not without limitations and challenges. First, the relatively brief timeframe (15 days) means long-term sustainability requires continued monitoring. While the Youth Committee has been formed and is functioning, questions remain about whether power-sharing arrangements will be maintained over time, once the program's "euphoria" subsides. Follow-up research tracking the Youth Committee trajectory and sustained youth participation would be highly valuable.

Second, although participation rates increased significantly, 7.6% still means 92.4% of youth in Beranang remain uninvolved. While this represents a major improvement, there is still a long way to go toward achieving truly inclusive youth participation. Factors contributing to non-participation (including economic constraints, cultural barriers to female participation, or alienation so deep that this program did not address it) warrant further exploration.

Third, this research was conducted in the specific context of Beranang, a suburban area with relative affluence. Generalizability to different contexts—such as rural areas with varying socioeconomic conditions or urban centers with distinct youth cultures—requires careful consideration. Adaptation strategies for different contexts need development.

Fourth, as an Indonesian team conducting research in Malaysia, we must acknowledge cross-cultural dynamics. While there are similarities in Islamic traditions and Malay culture, there are also differences in norms, practices, and expectations. The extent to which this program can be replicated in Indonesia or other countries warrants careful consideration of cultural contexts.

Fifth, the composition of youth co-researchers (9 males, 6 females) indicates a slight gender imbalance that may reflect broader gender dynamics in participation in religious institutions. Although female participants were active and assumed leadership roles, ensuring gender equity in participatory processes remains a persistent challenge that requires sustained attention.

### **Conclusion**

This research successfully answered the three research questions posed. First, structural factors affecting low youth participation in religious activities in Beranang include: youth marginalization in decision-making where senior generations entirely dominate religious organizational leadership without youth representation; disconnection between religious discourse and contemporary youth lived realities that find no space for issues such as mental health, career anxiety, or digital life ethics in religious programs; absence of spaces for youth agency in one-directional learning models; and weak religious institutional management resulting in loss of trust. Power mapping demonstrated

that hierarchical and exclusive governance structures constitute fundamental barriers to youth participation.

Second, authentic Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes where youth were involved as co-researchers throughout the entire research cycle, from listening, co-design, implementation, to participatory evaluation, successfully transformed power relations across three dimensions. In the visible power dimension, the institutionalization of youth representation occurred through the formation of the Youth Committee, whose formal decision-making authority was codified in a Memorandum of Understanding with Badan Kemakmuran Masjid. In the hidden power dimension, agenda-setting democratization occurred, whereby youth-identified issues were legitimized as religious concerns on institutional agendas. In the invisible power dimension, consciousness transformation occurred both among youth, from self-blame to structural analysis and a sense of agency, and among senior generations, from paternalistic beliefs to recognition of youth capabilities. This structural transformation produced dramatic increases in participation rates, from baseline 1-2% to 7.6% (380-760% increase), with 68% of new participants previously inactive in mosque activities, and the emergence of youth leadership, in which 80% of youth co-researchers assumed substantive leadership roles in programming. Participatory evaluation showed 94-97% of participants gave positive evaluations for all program aspects, with 94% expressing intention to continue involvement after Ramadan.

Third, youth defined meaningful spirituality and community engagement through four interrelated dimensions. The first dimension is relevance, the direct connection between religious values and the contemporary life challenges they face daily. The second dimension is active participation and involvement as co-creators in programs, rather than as passive recipients or audiences. The third dimension is the community's sense of belonging and supportive peer connections in their spiritual journey. The fourth dimension is an authentic space for questioning, critical reflection, and personal spiritual journey, free from judgment or coercion. This definition demonstrates that youth-generation spirituality is experiential, dialogical, and integrated into daily life, fundamentally distinct from the doctrinal, prescriptive, and compartmentalized approaches that are dominant in traditional religious institutions.

The Cahaya Ramadhan Program proved that genuine youth empowerment in religious contexts requires more than merely "adding youth programs" or "inviting youth to be more active," but demands structural transformation in how power is distributed, how agendas are determined, and how intergenerational relations are configured. Participatory Action Research, as a methodology, proved effective not only as a research approach but also as an intervention strategy for sustainable social transformation. The Ramadan momentum, with high spiritual intensity and communal solidarity, proved usable as a catalyst for building critical consciousness and conducting structural change in relations between youth and religious institutions.

Based on findings and lessons learned from this research, several recommendations can be offered to various stakeholders. For religious institutions in Malaysia and Indonesia facing similar challenges in youth engagement, we recommend: institutionalize youth representation in governance structures through formation of youth committees or councils with formal decision-making authority, not merely advisory roles; implement regular dialogue sessions between younger and senior generations to facilitate mutual understanding and program co-creation; shift from top-down program design to participatory planning where youth are involved from the outset in identifying needs and designing solutions; and diversify content and methods of religious programs to include contemporary issues relevant to youth lives while utilizing engaging pedagogical approaches inviting dialogue and critical thinking.

For researchers and practitioners interested in using PAR in youth empowerment contexts: invest adequate time in listening phases to truly understand youth perspectives without imposing predetermined assumptions; ensure genuine power-sharing throughout the research process, not

merely symbolic participation; facilitate conscientization processes helping youth develop critical analysis of structural factors affecting their situations; document reflection-action cycles rigorously to demonstrate transformative processes; and conduct participatory evaluation where community members themselves assess program meaningfulness and impact.

For sustainability of Cahaya Ramadhan program: Youth Committee needs support with regular meetings, clear mandate, and adequate resources to continue functioning; Badan Kemakmuran Masjid must honor power-sharing commitments in the MoU and resist temptation to revert to top-down decision-making when initial enthusiasm wanes; youth-led programs need to continue beyond Ramadan with adaptation for different contexts and seasons; and establish mentoring systems where youth leaders from this cohort can mentor new cohorts to ensure continuity and institutional memory.

For replication in other communities across various contexts: this model can be adapted for different socio-cultural contexts with careful attention to local cultural norms, institutional structures, and youth demographics; critical success factors requiring retention in adaptation are genuine commitment to power-sharing from senior leadership, adequate time for listening and relationship-building, and willingness to reimagine traditional hierarchies; and comparative studies across different contexts urban versus rural, other countries, different religious denominations will enrich understanding of contextual factors facilitating or hindering youth empowerment.

For future research: longitudinal studies tracking Youth Committee sustainability and continued youth participation beyond immediate post-program periods would be highly valuable; comparative research across different Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia to understand how state-religion relations and institutional contexts shape possibilities for youth empowerment; exploration of digital and hybrid approaches for youth engagement given increasing importance of digital spaces in youth lives and limitations of face-to-face programs; and investigation of intersectionality how gender, class, ethnicity interact in shaping youth participation to ensure inclusive empowerment not reproducing other forms of marginalization.

Youth disengagement from religious institutions is not an inevitability but a consequence of structural arrangements that can be transformed through collective action. With willingness to share power, authentically listen to youth voices, and reimagine intergenerational relations, religious institutions can become meaningful and empowering spaces for younger generations—not by "bringing youth back" to old models no longer resonant, but by co-creating new models honoring youth agency, wisdom, and leadership as essential components in building vibrant religious communities.

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Finally, we acknowledge that participatory research like this is only possible when all parties, researchers, community members, and institutional leaders are willing to step into uncertainty together, learn from one another, and co-create knowledge that can contribute to social transformation. May this research provide inspiration and practical guidance for other communities striving to empower youth and revitalize religious institutions for contemporary generations.

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