



Exploring Lived Experiences and Meanings of Community Participation in Waste Bank Programs in Urban Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Community-based environmental initiatives are crucial in addressing waste management and sustainability. Waste bank programs, in particular, integrate environmental, social, and economic goals through active community participation. However, little is known about the subjective experiences and meanings attached to participation, creating a gap in understanding how community members interpret their involvement. This study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) using semi-structured interviews with twelve participants engaged for at least six months. Findings reveal four key dimensions of meaning: awareness transformation, negotiation of personal and collective responsibilities, emotional empowerment, and redefinition of social identity. Beyond functional waste management, participation reshapes values, identities, and sense of belonging. These insights underscore the need for program design and policies that integrate personal meaning and social identity to strengthen sustainable community engagement.



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INTRODUCTION

Waste generation and environmental degradation have emerged as pressing global issues that directly affect human life, community sustainability, and ecological well-being. In response, community-based waste management initiatives, such as waste bank programs, have gained prominence as innovative approaches to reducing environmental impact while promoting collective responsibility (Arya et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). Within many developing regions, including Indonesia, these programs are designed not only to manage waste efficiently but also to empower communities through participatory decision-making and shared environmental stewardship. The social and cultural contexts in which these initiatives operate are deeply intertwined with local values, collective norms, and individual behaviors, shaping how community members perceive and respond to environmental challenges.

The significance of waste bank programs extends beyond their functional objectives. Participation in these initiatives often reflects broader sociocultural transformations within communities, influencing how individuals negotiate their personal and collective identities. Prior studies have highlighted the environmental and economic impacts of waste banks, focusing primarily on quantitative outcomes such as reductions in landfill contributions or increases in household income (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). However, these programs also carry profound experiential dimensions that shape individuals' perceptions, emotions, and social roles. For many participants, involvement in waste bank initiatives is not merely about managing waste; it represents a process of redefining personal values, responsibilities, and belonging within the community.

Despite growing academic interest, there remains a limited understanding of the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their participation in such programs (Salem et al., 2024;

Tshivhase & Bisschoff, 2023). Much of the existing literature has focused on structural and programmatic analyses, offering valuable insights into policy frameworks and operational effectiveness but often overlooking the lived experiences of community members. Yet, understanding these personal narratives is essential, as individual perceptions and interpretations fundamentally shape collective participation, long-term engagement, and social sustainability. Exploring these perspectives allows researchers to uncover how individuals make sense of their involvement, the emotional transformations they undergo, and the broader cultural significance of their actions.

Given this context, a phenomenological approach provides a suitable and rigorous framework for capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences (Eliasi et al., 2025; Targetti et al., 2021). By focusing on participants' lived realities and subjective interpretations, phenomenology enables the exploration of meaning beyond observable behaviors or programmatic outcomes. This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate the personal and collective dimensions of community engagement within a waste bank program, offering insights into how participation reshapes environmental awareness, social relationships, and individual identity within the broader sociocultural context.

Building upon the broader context of community-based environmental initiatives, research focusing on individuals' lived experiences within such programs has become increasingly significant. Scholars in environmental sociology and community engagement have emphasized the necessity of understanding how people interpret, internalize, and attach meaning to their participation in sustainability-oriented initiatives (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Within this emerging body of work, phenomenological approaches have been highlighted as a promising paradigm for revealing the subjective dimensions of community involvement, particularly when social, cultural, and environmental values intersect.

However, methodological challenges remain in exploring the deeper meanings of personal experience within these contexts. A substantial proportion of existing studies has relied on quantitative indicators, such as program attendance rates, levels of household recycling, or income generated through waste bank participation. While these findings are valuable for assessing operational effectiveness, they often fail to capture the complexity of personal perceptions, emotional transformations, and social identity negotiations that occur when individuals engage in collective environmental action. As a result, critical experiential insights risk being overlooked, leaving gaps in understanding the intrinsic motivations and symbolic significance behind participation.

Furthermore, previous qualitative studies exploring community engagement have often been limited by their methodological scope. Many have employed descriptive approaches that focus primarily on observable behaviors or programmatic structures, providing little insight into how individuals construct meaning from their lived realities. Without exploring these subjective interpretations, it becomes difficult to fully understand the essence of the phenomenon and its implications for sustaining long-term participation and social change. The absence of such depth in prior research underscores the need for an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) that allows researchers to examine how individuals' personal experiences are shaped by, and in turn shape, their broader social and cultural environments.

Given these gaps, this study positions itself within the intersection of community-based environmental action and phenomenological inquiry. By focusing on participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of their involvement in a community-based waste bank, the research seeks to uncover nuanced insights into environmental awareness, social belonging, and identity transformation. This focus not only addresses the limitations of prior methodologies but also contributes to a deeper, more holistic understanding of how meaning emerges through participation in collective environmental practices.

While numerous initiatives have been introduced to promote community-based waste management, most existing approaches have focused on practical solutions such as improving operational efficiency, optimizing recycling systems, and increasing participation rates. These efforts have undeniably contributed to measurable environmental and economic outcomes; however, they remain largely oriented toward observable behaviors and quantitative indicators. As a result, they

provide limited insight into the subjective experiences and personal meanings that shape individual and collective engagement within these initiatives.

The limitation of current research lies in its inability to capture the deeper experiential dimensions of participation (Levstek & Banerjee, 2021; Tahmasebi Zadeh & Boyer, 2021). Quantitative metrics, while valuable for policy and program evaluation, fail to address how community members perceive, internalize, and interpret their roles in collective environmental actions. Even within qualitative studies, many investigations have employed descriptive frameworks that primarily document observable activities rather than explore the essence of participants' lived realities. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of the emotional transformations, identity negotiations, and social belonging experienced by individuals as they participate in community-based waste management programs.

To address this limitation, adopting a phenomenological approach, particularly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), offers a compelling alternative (Gutierrez et al., 2020; Yusof & Soelar, 2021). By focusing on participants' subjective interpretations and lived experiences, this study seeks to uncover the hidden layers of meaning embedded within their engagement. Phenomenology allows researchers to move beyond surface-level observations and explore how participation reshapes individuals' environmental awareness, personal values, and sense of belonging within the community. This deeper understanding is crucial for designing more inclusive and sustainable community-based environmental initiatives that resonate with people's identities and motivations.

By filling this gap, the study aims to generate rich, experiential insights that have been largely overlooked in previous research, contributing both to theoretical advancement in phenomenological inquiry and to practical improvements in community-based environmental practices.

Recent studies on community-based environmental initiatives have highlighted the role of collective participation in improving waste management practices and strengthening local social networks (Ekawati et al., 2023; Santhosh & Babu, 2020). While prior research has addressed the structural and operational aspects of waste bank programs, only a limited number of studies have focused on participants' subjective experiences. Existing literature often emphasizes outcomes such as increased recycling rates, economic benefits, or community participation levels. However, these findings provide little understanding of the personal meanings and identity transformations experienced by individuals involved in such programs. This study positions itself within this context by focusing on the lived experiences of community members participating in waste bank management.

To address this limitation, the study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore the deeper meanings behind participants' involvement (Abeysekera et al., 2022; Azadnia et al., 2021). IPA is particularly suitable because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their personal experiences within broader social and cultural contexts. This method directly responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier by enabling the discovery of hidden insights into emotional transformation, environmental awareness, and social belonging. By employing IPA, the study uncovers how participation in the waste bank program influences individuals' values, perceptions, and community identities. Thus, the chosen methodological framework supports a holistic exploration of meaning that cannot be achieved through quantitative or purely descriptive approaches.

The remainder of this article is organized into several sections to provide a structured and comprehensive understanding of the study (Nag & Chowdhary, 2019; Yang et al., 2024). The introduction outlines the research context, literature review, and identified gaps. The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical framework. The results section presents findings organized into emergent themes, supported by participants' direct quotations to ensure authenticity and credibility. Finally, the discussion integrates these findings with existing literature, followed by a conclusion that highlights theoretical contributions, practical implications, and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences and subjective meanings of local community members participating in a community-based waste bank program (Borcsa & Rober, 2015; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological framework was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding of how individuals interpret, construct, and make sense of their personal experiences within a specific social and cultural context. IPA emphasizes a double hermeneutic process, in which participants make sense of their involvement while the researcher interprets these meanings to uncover deeper insights. This design was considered appropriate for addressing the research question, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive, internalize, and attach meaning to their engagement in the program.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that those included had direct and substantial experience with the phenomenon under study (Bednarek-Gilland, 2015; Gibton, 2015). A total of twelve individuals participated, consisting of seven females and five males, with an average age of thirty-eight years. All participants had been actively involved in the waste bank program for at least six months and represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, enhancing the richness and variability of the dataset. Individuals with less than three months of involvement or without direct participation in daily program activities were excluded from the study. This selection ensured that participants possessed sufficient experiential depth to contribute meaningful insights into the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit comprehensive accounts of participants' personal experiences and interpretations. An interview guide was used to maintain consistency across sessions while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes organically. Each interview lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes and was conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting to encourage openness and trust.

The interviews focused on participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of their involvement in the program. Examples of guiding questions included: "How has participation in the waste bank program influenced your daily routines?" and "What meaning do you attach to community involvement in waste management?" All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual observations, such as non-verbal cues, that enriched the interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following the systematic framework proposed by Hammersley, (2003). The process began with immersive reading of the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of participants' narratives. Initial coding was then conducted to highlight significant statements and meaning units within the data. These codes were clustered into broader emergent themes that reflected shared experiential patterns.

Following this, a cross-case analysis was carried out to compare themes across participants, enabling the identification of both convergences and divergences in their interpretations of the phenomenon. NVivo 14 software was utilized to support the organization of data and thematic coding, ensuring systematic and transparent analysis. The iterative nature of IPA allowed findings to remain grounded in participants' authentic voices while uncovering the essential meanings of their lived experiences.

RESULTS

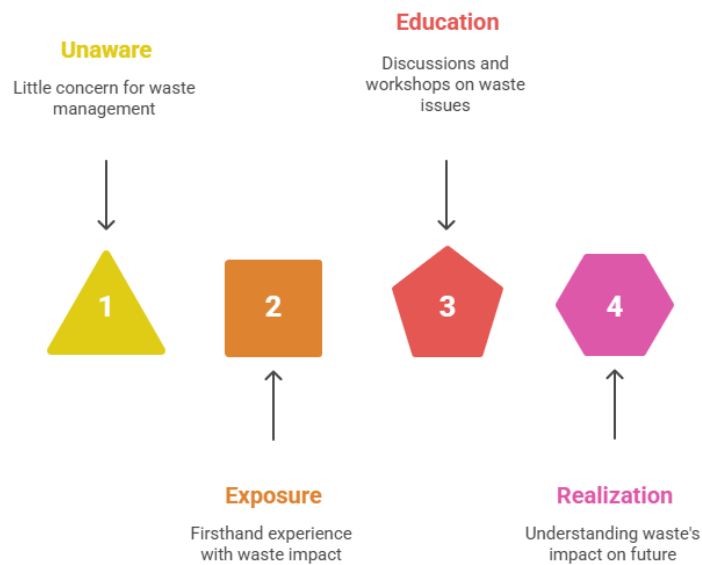
Awakening Environmental Awareness

Participants described how their involvement in the waste bank program triggered a profound shift in their environmental consciousness. Before joining the initiative, many admitted to having little concern about waste management or sustainable practices. However, participation provided them with firsthand exposure to the environmental and social consequences of improper waste disposal.

“Before joining this program, I honestly never thought much about my trash. I used to throw everything away without thinking. But after attending several discussions and workshops, I realized how much waste affects our lives and future generations.” (P3)

This awakening went beyond technical knowledge; participants expressed a sense of moral responsibility toward environmental stewardship. Their narratives revealed a transformation from passive awareness to active engagement, aligning personal behaviors with broader collective goals.

From Ignorance to Environmental Stewardship



Negotiating Personal and Collective Responsibilities

A recurrent theme was the negotiation between individual needs and community obligations. While participants recognized the collective benefits of waste bank participation, they also faced personal challenges such as time constraints, family priorities, and economic pressures.

“Sometimes, I feel conflicted. I want to contribute, but as a small business owner, I also have to focus on earning a living. It is not easy to balance personal needs with community expectations.” (P6)

Interestingly, participants highlighted the role of peer influence and social support in sustaining their engagement. The program created a shared sense of accountability, where members encouraged each other to remain committed despite personal limitations. This demonstrates that participation is sustained not merely by individual motivation but also by collective social norms.

Emotional Transformation Through Participation

Beyond practical contributions, participants described an emotional journey that unfolded during their involvement. Feelings of pride, empowerment, and belonging emerged as central aspects of their experiences.

“I used to think I couldn't make any difference. But when I saw how the community benefited from our efforts, I felt proud for the first time. It's not just about managing waste; it's about proving to ourselves that we can change something together.” (P2)

This emotional transformation was often described as liberating, allowing participants to redefine their roles in society. Many reported gaining confidence and agency, particularly women and younger participants who previously had limited community involvement. Participation became a catalyst for self-growth as well as social contribution.

Redefining Social Identity and Community Belonging

For many participants, engagement in the waste bank reshaped their sense of identity within the community. Individuals who previously saw themselves as “ordinary residents” began to perceive their roles as agents of social change.

“Before, I was just a housewife staying at home. Now, people come to me for advice about sorting waste or joining the program. It feels like I have a purpose and a place in this community.” (P5)

The narratives revealed a growing sense of belonging, fostered by shared goals and collective achievements. This shift reflects not only personal transformation but also a reconfiguration of social relationships within the community.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The study aimed to answer the central research question: “How do community members make sense of their involvement in managing a community-based waste bank?” The findings demonstrate that participants’ experiences are not limited to operational aspects of waste management but represent meaning-making processes that shape personal and collective identities (Kremmydas & Kostis, 2024; Xie et al., 2024). Participation was found to foster a heightened environmental consciousness, where individuals moved from passive awareness to active responsibility. It also facilitated emotional empowerment, allowing participants to perceive themselves as agents of positive change within their communities.

Importantly, the findings contribute a unique understanding of how individual motivations intersect with collective values, resulting in stronger community cohesion and a sense of shared purpose (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). While previous studies have primarily emphasized the technical and economic benefits of waste bank programs, this study provides deeper insights into why and how people engage, focusing on the subjective meanings underlying their actions. By doing so, the research advances current knowledge about community-based environmental initiatives and highlights the transformative role of participation in shaping identities and social belonging.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings resonate strongly with existing research suggesting that community-based initiatives influence not only environmental outcomes but also social and psychological dimensions of participation (Ashapkin et al., 2023; Carrión-Bósquez et al., 2024). Consistent with these studies, participants in this research described their engagement as a journey of personal transformation, reflecting a shift in attitudes and behaviors aligned with sustainability-oriented values. However, unlike prior work that focuses primarily on programmatic efficiency, this study provides phenomenological insights into the essence of participants’ lived experiences.

The results also align with phenomenological theories that emphasize the importance of understanding subjective meanings as constructed through social interaction and cultural context. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological framework, this study captures how individuals derive meaning from their participation while simultaneously situating these interpretations within broader communal and environmental narratives. At the same time, the findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that emotional transformations such as feelings of pride, empowerment, and belonging play a pivotal role in sustaining long-term engagement. This contributes a more holistic understanding of community participation by integrating cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions within a single interpretative model.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical, social, and practical implications for understanding community-based environmental initiatives (Mukhlis, Januari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Theoretically, the research contributes to phenomenological inquiry by revealing how meaning is constructed through lived experiences, particularly in contexts where environmental and social values intersect. From a social perspective, participants' narratives demonstrate that community engagement fosters identity transformation, collective belonging, and emotional empowerment. These insights highlight the potential of community-based waste bank programs to function not only as environmental solutions but also as platforms for social cohesion and cultural change. Practically, the findings may inform policymakers and community organizers on how to design initiatives that resonate with participants' personal values and shared identities, thereby enhancing sustainability and long-term participation.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the subjective meanings associated with community participation, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which prioritizes depth over breadth, making the findings context-specific rather than universally generalizable. Second, the study focused on a relatively small sample within a single community-based waste bank program, which may limit the diversity of perspectives represented. Third, as the study relied on self-reported experiences, participants' recollections and interpretations could have been influenced by memory bias or social desirability. These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of the findings; instead, they highlight the need for future studies to adopt comparative approaches across multiple contexts and to integrate mixed-method designs for a more comprehensive understanding.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The results of this study open promising avenues for future inquiry into community-based environmental practices and the meanings individuals assign to collective participation (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Future research could extend the phenomenological framework to explore cross-community comparisons, allowing researchers to identify cultural and structural variations in meaning-making processes. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal designs would provide insights into how participants' experiences and identities evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in environmental policies or community dynamics. Beyond environmental contexts, similar methodological approaches can be applied to study identity transformation, empowerment, and social belonging within other forms of collective action. By building on the findings of this study, future research can deepen our understanding of the intersections between environmental engagement, personal meaning, and social change, ultimately contributing to both theoretical advancement and practical innovation in sustainability research.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences and subjective meanings of community members participating in a community-based waste bank program using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The findings revealed that participants' involvement fostered heightened environmental awareness, identity transformation, and a stronger sense of belonging within the community. By uncovering these deeper insights, the study addressed gaps in previous research that primarily focused on quantitative outcomes and overlooked the experiential dimensions of participation. The results highlight the potential of waste bank programs not only as environmental solutions but also as platforms for social cohesion and cultural change. These insights provide valuable implications for policymakers, community leaders, and researchers seeking to design sustainable, participant-centered initiatives. Nevertheless, this study has limitations, particularly in its small sample size and focus on a single community, which may limit generalizability. Practitioners should consider integrating reflective and identity-strengthening components into program design to maximize both environmental and social benefits. For future research, cross-community comparisons,

larger sample studies, and longitudinal designs are recommended to better capture how individual and collective meaning-making processes evolve over time and across different cultural or socio-economic contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All procedures, analyses, and interpretations were conducted independently and without any financial, personal, or organizational influences that could affect the objectivity of the research.

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