

## **Abstract**

The salience of the concept of “empowerment” has been more often deductively claimed than carefully defined or inductively assessed, by development scholars and practitioners alike. Using evidence from an in-depth, mixed methods examination of the *Kecamatan* Development Project (KDP) in rural Indonesia, we define it here as deliberative development interventions that build marginalised groups’ capacity to engage local level governing elites using routines of deliberative contestation. Our data show that while KDP induced local level development conflicts, it also provided tools for peacefully resolving them, including associational spaces, incentives for marginalised group participation, and resources for argumentation such as facilitators. Ultimately, marginalised groups used these spaces, incentives, and resources to modestly but consistently shift local level power relations, regardless of the pre-existing institutional context. By contrast, marginalised groups in non-KDP development conflicts from otherwise similar contexts used “mobilisational contestation” to generate comparatively erratic and inconsistent shifts in power relations that depended greatly on the pre-existing context.

**Keywords:** empowerment, local decision-making, power relations, conflict, marginalised groups

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