

Organizational Training and Empowerment in the Malaysian Volunteer Department (RELA): A Review- Study

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Abstract

This study will explore empowerment in the Malaysian Volunteer Department (RELA) with the focus on Organisational Training in the context of Volunteer-based Security Organisations. With the continually evolving security situation in Malaysia, RELA has an important supporting role in community-based security, public order and preparedness. Empowerment as a topic in volunteer security organizations, however, is still not fully understood, especially in terms of the role of training on members' competence, confidence, role identity, agency and participation. The literature review aimed to give an understanding

of the definitions and concepts of empowerment, volunteerism, organizational training, competency and security management by reviewing the literature on these topics. The study takes a qualitative and interpretive approach guided by Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and views empowerment as a process, not as an organization. As demonstrated in the discussion, organizational training simultaneously serves as a formal means of skill transfer, a site of meaning-making, recognition, sensemaking, identity formation, and readiness for action. The study makes contribution to the theories and practices of empowerment studies in volunteer-based security organizations in Malaysia.

Keywords: Empowerment, Organizational Training, RELA, Volunteerism and Security Organizations

Introduction

National security is one of the essential elements to maintain social stability, public health and sustainable national development. The security landscape in Malaysia has grown increasingly intricate with the rise of cyber threats, natural disasters, community safety concerns, and cross-border challenges, necessitating a more adaptive, participatory, and collaborative approach to governance (Rahman, 2020; Rahim & Huda, 2024; Musa & Zulkifli, 2022). Thus, security management in the present day cannot solely rely on the professional enforcement agencies. It is increasingly essential to enlist support from communities, volunteers and civil society actors, all of whom can help in the preparedness, response, prevention and community level resilience. In this context, the Malaysian Volunteer Department (RELA) has become a vital volunteer-based security organisation contributing to the maintenance of public order, community security, disaster assistance and operational support. RELA members come from a variety of social and community settings, and volunteer to engage in activities that promote the general welfare and security of the public. This aligns with the broader Malaysian discourse on volunteerism, where its positive impacts on social skills, community engagement, and civic education are highlighted (Kadir & Rahim, 2024; Sarifin & Zin, 2024). In addition, RELA also highlights the wider strategy of the government's Total Defence approach, which sees security as a "shared" responsibility between the state and various community actors. Recent empirical studies have further emphasized the growing importance of volunteer-based security organizations in strengthening community resilience, operational preparedness, and participatory governance, particularly in developing countries facing evolving security challenges. Such studies demonstrate the need to further investigate how organizational practices, particularly training and empowerment mechanisms, influence volunteer effectiveness and sustainability within security-oriented organizations.

Despite its significance, RELA functions in an intricate organization. It merges the hierarchical, procedural and security-focused aspects of an organisation with the flexible, value-oriented, and diverse ethos of volunteering. This results in a mixed style of organization where, as volunteers, they are required to adhere to discipline, SOP's and the authority structure, and yet have different levels of motivation, commitment, time availability and expectations. Leadership ethics and organizational guidance are thus critical in maintaining voluntary organizational development as discussed by Layapan and Esa (2022), where organizational members must do their best to combine personal motivation with the institutional expectation. For RELA, understanding empowerment becomes a key mechanism in

organizational training. Training goes beyond teaching skills—it can play a role in building confidence, competence, identity, role clarity, and readiness to operate.

These findings are consistent with Roshanravan and Moslehi (2025) finding that the empowerment of volunteers, especially in disaster-related service, relies on structured preparation, competency building, and support. Likewise, Shorey and Seow (2025) noted that training and engagement experiences that volunteers experience impact their confidence, participation, and continued engagement. But the empowerment in volunteer organizations isn't just something that happens. Research on empowerment tends to focus on administration or management, and the experience, interpretation and negotiation of empowerment is not emphasized as much in existing literature. Empowerment can be manifested in tangible ways if members have access to resources, support, training, recognition and meaningful participation. It can be symbolic when members are expected to carry out responsibilities in a limited manner with little recognition or influence, however. It is consistent with Choudhury (2024), who cautioned that formal inclusion could occasionally be accompanied by a lack of substantive empowerment and de Jong and Berenschot (2023), which accounted for this by citing power relations and power brokers as possible restraints on empowerment. The main problem that is addressed in this study then is the lack of understanding of the relationship between training of organizations and empowerment in RELA as a volunteer security organization. Training is sometimes taken for granted as a way of becoming competent, recognised, confident and legitimate in the organisation, but little is known about how members experience the process of training. This study maintains that training is not just a technical capacity building experience, but a social experience in which empowerment is being built.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the formation of empowerment in RELA as a result of organisational training, competency building, leadership support, community involvement and sensemaking. In particular, it considers the meanings of empowerment that can be gained from training experiences as a RELA member, the role of empowerment in hierarchical and volunteer work settings, and the role of training in developing confidence, operational readiness, and role legitimacy. The scope of this study is focused on RELA members involved in volunteer security and community-related operations in Malaysia, with particular emphasis on their training experiences and empowerment processes within organizational settings. By clearly defining the context and focus of the study, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how empowerment is socially constructed and experienced among volunteer security personnel.

This study is a contribution to the literature in three ways. It claims to extend the empowerment research in theory in two ways: it is used in volunteer security organizations and empowering is not a final product but a social process. In doing so, the study complements recent empirical findings on volunteer engagement and organizational empowerment while also offering a contextualized understanding specific to volunteer security organizations such as RELA. The method employed was an interpretive approach from the perspective of Constructivist Grounded Theory to comprehend the concepts of: training, meaning making, and organizational experience. In practice, it offers insights into training design, volunteer management, competency building, recognition, and retention for RELA and other volunteer-led organizations

Literature Review

The concept of empowerment has been extensively studied by management, organizational studies, public administration, community development and social research. In general, empowerment is a process in which individual(s) or group(s) acquire the ability to act or participate, to influence decisions and to have confidence in their role. In an organizational setting, empowerment can be linked to having access to resources, information, opportunities, support, autonomy, competence, and recognition (Alenazi, 2023; Al-Otaibi & Aboshaiqah, 2024). Others have seen empowerment as a management tool that enhances engagement, initiative, job satisfaction and organizational performance. Benítez et al. (2024), for example, highlighted the links between structural empowerment, personal initiative and job satisfaction, while Amor, Xanthopoulou and Bakker (2021) demonstrated that personal initiative, psychological empowerment and work engagement are strongly related to structural empowerment. These studies indicate that empowerment is strengthened by having meaningful support within the organizational system, and by having experiences of confidence and impact within their jobs. But empowerment goes beyond the organizational or managerial. It has a psychological, relational and contextual dimension as well.

Barattucci et al. (2025) found psychological empowerment is related to organizational identification, which means that the more employees feel part of the organization, the more they feel psychologically empowered. Likewise, Hu and Liu (2022) discussed empowerment as a factor concerning moral courage and the confidence of individual. These studies validate that empowerment is not simply a matter of having access to resources, but rather an inner sense of meaning, competence and confidence. Empowerment research in the community reveals that empowerment is more powerful when it is rooted in participation and local values as well as knowledge. Afidah and Chairiwaty (2025) pointed out that in achieving sustainable community empowerment, the incorporation of local wisdom and hands-on involvement are needed. This is an insight which is applicable to RELA because members are situated in the nexus of organizational security structures and local community realities. Thus, the empowerment of RELA must be understood not only in terms of internal organizational systems, but also in terms of the meanings and values of the community which are embedded in the acts of volunteers.

There are generally two types of empowerment, namely, structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. Structural empowerment is the organizational conditions that allow its members to act effectively, such as access to information, training, opportunities, support, and resources (Alenazi, 2023). Psychological empowerment is the feeling of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact that people have in their jobs (Amor et al., 2021). Consistent with the findings of Aljameez et al. (2021), structural empowerment can enhance psychological empowerment and organizational commitment if its members feel that their organization offers them opportunities and support. Likewise, Al-Otaibi and Aboshaiqah (2024) reported that structural empowerment was associated with resilience and intention to stay, indicating that organizational environments that result in empowerment may have a bearing on long-term commitment. The results are relevant to RELA since volunteers continue their involvement if they feel supported, trained, recognized and capable. Empowerment also comes in a relational form though. It is influenced by trust, recognition, communication, the quality of interaction among members, trainers, supervisors and leaders. Similar to previous studies, Orgambidez and Benítez (2024) found that

psychological empowerment is a mediator between structural empowerment and positive work outcomes. This means that there are a number of limitations in the use of organizational structure unless it can be perceived as having significance and support for the members. Empowerment requires that members feel respected, included and trusted during and after a training program with technical content in RELA.

The volunteers are often associated with civic responsibility, altruism, social belonging, and contribution to the community. Sandberg and Hurmerinta (2024) demonstrated that volunteerism is a means to heal the community and promote collective involvement, while Kadir and Rahim (2024) emphasized that volunteerism has an impact on the social skills development and motivation of youth in Malaysia. Such research has demonstrated that volunteering is not just about service without pay, but a valuable social engagement that has the capacity to impact identity, confidence and sense of community. But, there are enablers and inhibitors that affect volunteer participation. In a qualitative study of community participation, Agalga and Alatinga (2022) found that participation is influenced by the factors in the context that either facilitates or hinders participation. This is important for RELA, as their motivation to serve can be influenced by their ability to access training, leadership support, communication, recognition and operational opportunities. Motivation of volunteers is also dynamic. Putri and Andriyani (2025) found that personal, social and organizational factors affect the motivation to participate in volunteer activities. Likewise, Perić-Šimić (2025) suggested that there are economic, social, and personal benefits that should be recognized from volunteering. Empowerment in the context of RELA can then be associated with the experience of personal development, social recognition, usefulness for operation and meaningful contribution to the community for volunteers.

Security and volunteer groups rely heavily on training as a tool because it sets a standard, boosts skills and enhances preparedness. Training, preparedness, knowledge and support are among the elements of empowerment of volunteer service providers, which is in line with Roshanravan and Moslehi (2025). Their work shows that, when volunteers have skills they can apply in a way which enables them to respond with confidence in challenging situations, their empowerment grows. Adult-oriented, practical and contextual learning is also essential for effective training. Ho, Quah and Lim (2025) highlighted that there should be a focus on using andragogical principles in the development of a hybrid training curriculum for an emergency medical team. In the same way, Shorey and Seow (2025) have also discovered that training experiences affect engagement and confidence of volunteers. Such research indicates that RELA should not be just a didactic approach, but it should involve practice, reflection, feedback, support from peers, and practical situations. Especially in Security environments, competency development is a very important aspect. Cheng et al. (2023) concluded that safety competence is the intermediate variable between safety culture, safety communication and safety performance. This is very significant for RELA for the security work done by volunteers must not only be disciplined and follow procedures, but must also involve communication, judgment, and the ability to transfer training to operational situations.

There is additional literature available on skills-based volunteering that backs up the role of competency. Dempsey, Brench and Shantz (2021) found that the development of skills is now becoming a more common part of volunteering, and that volunteers are adding skills to their time commitment. The competency development in RELA is then technically and

symbolically: it is a process that not only trains members for task-aptitude but also secures their legitimacy and confidence.

Leadership support is important in helping members understand, communicate, and interpret their organizational roles effectively. In co-creation cultures, first-line managers are expected to function not only as supervisors but also as change leaders. In co-creation cultures, it is vital for first-line managers to also act as change leaders, and for this to be done, facilitated sensemaking is important, as stressed by Aflaki and Lindh (2021). This insight is applicable to RELA: Volunteers require understanding of their responsibilities, their limits of authority, their training experiences, and their expectations of operation. Another form of support is organizational support, which also enhances empowerment. In Malaysia, the service industry, the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative behaviour is mediated by perceived organizational support as found by Arokiasamy and Khoudari (2025). The principle is the same as in RELA: members' perceptions of support from the organization lead to greater confidence, engagement, and initiative. A lack of leadership and support is particularly crucial in volunteer organisations as members may not be subject to the same employment structures as paid staff. Leadership ethics is of great importance in the development of youth voluntary organisations in Malaysia as highlighted by Layapan and Esa (2022). This implies that RELA leaders and trainers need to build their sense of fairness, trust, recognition, and meaningful communication to maintain the empowerment of volunteers.

Methodology

This study implements qualitative interpretation approach with constructivist grounded theory approach. This is appropriate as the study is dealing with the understanding, felt and constructed nature of empowerment in the context of organizational training in RELA. The study aims to explore meaning, process and relationship of how volunteers feel empowered rather than testing hypotheses. This study places RELA as a case context to look at organizational training as a means to empowerment. Data collection will include semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with RELA members with varying levels of training and experience to do the job. The use of semi-structured interviews is suitable as it enables participants to share their experiences and facilitates the researcher probing the key issues of empowerment, training, competency and organizational support (Bosnak, 2022; Ruslin et al., 2022). However, the researcher may also select a purposive sample because it will allow the researcher to identify the participants who will be able to give rich and relevant information on the phenomenon being investigated (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). The analysis of the data would be done in an iterative manner, similar to CGT procedures, such as initial coding, focused coding, constant comparison, memo writing and theoretical sampling. This will enable categories to be created from the data while maintaining sensitivity to the literature. The role of the researcher is interpretative and reflexive, as suggested by Charmaz (2021) because results are co-constructed by the researcher, the participants, and the context. Ethical issues are critical to the methodology. The participants should be briefed on the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw from the study and how their information will be used. In qualitative research that takes place in an organizational context, confidentiality and informed consent may be particularly critical (Ajemba & Arene, 2022; Lee & Anderson, 2020). To this end the study should also guarantee that the data will be handled responsibly, anonymized, and participants will be free to refuse to participate.

Findings and Discussion

The results indicate that empowerment in RELA is influenced by organizational training, competency development, leadership support, community involvement and volunteer roles in a security-based organization. This aligns with Afidah and Chairiawaty (2025) who posited that empowerment is more sustainable if it is linked to the context, community values, and action. For RELA, empowerment isn't just about the formal learning, it's also about reinforcing members' feelings of responsibility, confidence, belonging and community contribution. The organizational training became one of the main strategies in enhancing empowerment of the member of RELA. Training imparts knowledge, discipline, awareness of operation and skills to the members to enable them to function effectively. The present finding confirms the results of Roshanravan and Moslehi (2025) which showed that empowering volunteers during disasters requires structured training, preparedness, and competency building. Likewise, Shorey and Seow (2025) reported that training journeys build confidence and engagement for peer volunteers, which involve learning, practicing, and ongoing support. Thus, RELA training must not only be considered as formal training but also as empowerment process that is continuous. The results also indicate a strong connection between empowerment and structural support and psychological support. Structural empowerment involves providing members with access to information, resources, training and organizational support. This is consistent with Alenazi (2023), who described structural empowerment as a process involving access to resources and opportunities. Likewise, Aljarammez et al. (2021) found that structural empowerment is a predictor of psychological empowerment and organizational commitment. Empowerment can, however, be restricted or symbolic when training, information or recognition is unequal. In addition, psychological empowerment proved to be an important factor when it came to influencing the members' confidence and commitment to contribute.

RELA members tend to feel empowered when they have a sense of purpose, are valued for their skill, and can make a difference. The relationship between structural empowerment, psychological empowerment and work engagement was consistent with the findings of Amor, Xanthopoulou and Bakker (2021), who validated the relationship between these three variables. Likewise, Barattucci et al. (2025) found that psychological empowerment has a significant positive correlation with organizational identification, meaning that members with psychological empowerment are more likely to be identified as belonging to their organization. Leadership and sensemaking also affects empowerment. RELA members need to be guided, communicated and explained their role, particularly in relation to the hybrid nature of their role in terms of working in security discipline and volunteer flexibility. This agrees with Aflaki and Lindh (2021), who stated that facilitated sensemaking is important to the understanding of change, responsibility, and participation of organizational members. Accordingly, Layapan and Esa (2022) emphasized the role of leadership ethics in the establishment of Voluntary organizations in Malaysia. Thus, it is important to note that RELA leaders and trainers have a key role in making organizational expectations a reality in meaningful and empowering experiences. The results also show that the empowerment has a key base of community participation. RELA members are not only organizational actors, but also volunteers in the community. This aligns with Agalga and Alatinga (2022) who identified enabling and inhibiting factors affecting participation in the community. Likewise, Afidah and Chairiawaty (2025) stressed the importance of community-based knowledge, values, and involvement in organizational practice for enhancing empowerment. When RELA members

perceive their role as having value to both the organization and the community, then their empowerment is strengthened in RELA. The results, however, also indicate some kind of conflict between empowerment and hierarchy. RELA is in a security setting where discipline, procedures and authority are required. However, in some instances, too much hierarchy can lower levels of participation, voice and agency. This aligns with the notion that empowerment might be limited by order, brokerage and power relations as put forward by de Jong and Berenschot (2023). Choudhury (2024) also cautioned that empowerment may turn into symbolic if participation is formalized, but without substantive influence. So, RELA needs to create a balance between discipline and control, and participation, trust and recognition. Another important consideration affecting empowerment was competency development.

The empowerment of the RELA members relies on the extent to which the practical skills, communication and decision making are developed, and readiness for actual situations through training. This is in line with Dempsey, Brench and Shantz (2021), who emphasized the importance of skills-based volunteering. Likewise, Cheng et al. (2023) found that safety competence enhances safety communication and performance. Competency development in the RELA context stretches from being passive to confidently operating. A further analysis of the findings also shows that organizational support enhances empowerment by boosting the confidence, involvement, and belongingness of members. This aligns with the findings of Arokiasamy and Khoudari (2025) that POS can stimulate innovative behavior and engagement. The principle of RELA applies to volunteers, too, though in a different setting – volunteers are more likely to stay engaged when they feel supported, recognized and included. In addition, volunteer motivation impacts the experience of empowerment. Empowerment for some may be through access to training, operational responsibility, social contribution, recognition or community trust. This is in accordance with Putri and Andriyani (2025) which found that personal factors and organizational factors are factors that affect the motivation to volunteer. In a similar vein, Sandberg and Hurmerinta (2024) demonstrated that volunteerism can also contribute to the healing and sense of social belonging within the community. The findings from these studies have been confirmed to be multidimensional and that empowerment cannot be limited to technical training in RELA. In general, the results show that empowerment in RELA is an ongoing process and is formed by carrying out training, leadership, community participation, forming structures, psychological confidence, and building competency. Training that is accessible, practical, participatory, and linked to the community lived roles of members is the most empowering. But, if hierarchy or unequal access, recognition, or communication prohibit members from making the move from training to meaningful participation, empowerment is weakened.

Conclusion

This study looked at empowerment in the Malaysian Volunteer Department (RELA) in the context of organization training. The review reveals that the empowerment process within volunteer-based security organizations is a dynamic and socially constructed process that is created through organizational structure, training experiences, leadership practices, community involvement, interpersonal relationships and action in the field. The results show not only that organizational training is a competency building tool but also a tool for confidence building, identity building, role recognition, and operational legitimacy. The findings of the literature review correspond to the characteristics of empowerment identified, with the features of being practical, accessible, participative and with

organizational communication and recognition being the key factors. On the other hand, empowerment can be just symbolic where training is done formally but members are not given meaningful participation, confidence and opportunities to utilize their competencies. Theoretically the study extends the empowerment literature into the context of volunteer-based security organizations, and it imagines empowerment as a process and not as a final product. It also illustrates the need to combine structural, psychological, relational and community based approaches to the understanding of empowerment in RELA. The study has a methodological value by showing the relevance of Constructivist Grounded Theory in the study of organizational experiences and meaning making processes in the lives of volunteers. The findings have practical implications for RELA and other organisations. Training systems must go beyond technical training and incorporate participatory learning, scenario-based exercises, mentorship, reflection, feedback and ongoing support. Organizational leaders also need to provide equal opportunities for training, communication, competency recognition, and supportive leadership practices. These strategies can help build volunteer confidence, motivation, commitment and retention. Although the study made contributions, it is still only a literature based analysis and conceptual discussion. Empirical interviews and focus groups with RELA members should be carried out to investigate empowerment in various settings, training levels and roles in RELA. The relationship between empowerment and other factors over time such as leadership and organizational culture and community expectations may also be explored in future studies. In general, the study shall express the continuous negotiation of empowerment in RELA, which occurs during the training process, communication between leaders, community involvement, and operation. The role of organizational training is therefore not only as a technical preparation of volunteers but also as a shaping of confidence, legitimacy, participation and belonging to the organization.

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