

From Policy To Empowerment: Evaluating The Implementation Gap In Fisher Community Empowerment Programs

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Abstract

Fisher community empowerment is a strategic agenda in the development of Indonesia's marine and fisheries sector. However, its implementation continues to face a gap between policy and practice. This article aims to analyze the challenges of sustainable fisher empowerment by examining the linkage between policies from the national to the village level and the reality of programs in Kuala Patah Parang Village, Indragiri Hilir Regency, Riau Province. This study employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach based on policy document analysis, village administrative data, literature, and the implementation of fisher empowerment programs, which are examined through the perspective of empowerment evaluation. The findings indicate that although Law Number 7 of 2016 has positioned fishers as development subjects who must be protected and empowered, regulations at the provincial and regency levels remain largely administrative-fiscal in orientation and have not translated the vision of empowerment substantively. At the village level, the implemented programs remain fragmented, output-oriented, top-down, and characterized by limited post-training assistance; consequently, they have not been able to foster the economic independence of fishers, even though approximately 80 percent of the population depends on the fisheries sector. This article argues that this gap is caused by the lack of integration between conventional administrative evaluation and participatory evaluation that positions fishers as active subjects. Therefore, an integrative evaluation model is needed, one that combines public policy effectiveness with the principles of empowerment evaluation in order to realize sustainable and independent fisher empowerment.

Keywords

Community Empowerment; Fishers; Policy Evaluation; Empowerment Evaluation; Sustainability



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of community empowerment in public administration did not emerge inherently from the classical state-centered paradigm; rather, it developed as

a consequence of an epistemological shift toward more democratic, participatory, and collaborative approaches. In the classical public administration paradigm influenced by Weberian thought, society was positioned as a passive object of policy, while bureaucracy acted as the dominant actor controlling policy planning and implementation in a hierarchical manner (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Osborne, 2006). Criticism of these limitations gave rise to the New Public Management paradigm, which sought to improve efficiency through market mechanisms, yet still positioned citizens as service users or customers rather than as actors with bargaining power in the policy process (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The significant development of the empowerment concept gained momentum within the paradigms of New Public Service and New Public Governance, which position society as citizens who possess rights, capacities, and legitimacy to participate actively throughout the entire public policy cycle (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Voorberg et al., 2015).

In coastal areas, the urgency of fisher empowerment is both structural and strategic. Small-scale fishers continue to face multidimensional vulnerability in the form of structural poverty, dependence on fluctuating natural resources, limited access to capital, technology, and markets, as well as pressures from climate change and marine environmental degradation (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné et al., 2016) (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné, Arthur, et al., 2016). The Food and Agriculture Organization report confirms that most small-scale fishers worldwide still face high levels of poverty and vulnerability (FAO, 2022), while the World Bank notes that coastal communities in Indonesia are among vulnerable groups, with poverty rates in coastal villages higher than those in non-coastal villages, and approximately 2.5 million households involved in small-scale fisheries with high levels of vulnerability (World Bank, 2022). This condition affirms that fisher empowerment cannot be reduced merely to the distribution of assistance; instead, it must be understood as a process of transforming power relations between the state and society, in line with governance principles that place power distribution, network interaction, and public deliberation as key elements of public policy administration (Rhodes, 2012; Sorensen & Torfing, 2007).

Community empowerment programs are inseparable from the need for an evaluation model that corresponds to the character of empowerment itself. Conventional public policy evaluation tends to focus on measuring program performance through indicators of effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness, using an external, objective, and top-down

approach (Dunn, 2018). This approach provides a strong assessment tool for evaluating policy success in terms of outcome achievement, but it has not fully explained the transformation of community capacity, which constitutes the core essence of empowerment. As an alternative, empowerment evaluation, developed by David M. Fetterman, positions evaluation as a participatory process aimed at enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to conduct self-assessment independently, thereby enabling communities to serve as co-evaluators involved in determining indicators, collecting data, and reflecting on results (Fetterman, 2001, 2017). The ten main principles of empowerment evaluation—improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability—make this approach relevant for evaluating programs oriented toward social transformation rather than merely administrative achievement (Fetterman et al., 2021).

Indragiri Hilir Regency is one of the coastal areas in Riau Province with substantial fisheries resource potential. The number of fishers in this regency has reached approximately 9,081 to 17,738 people in recent years, with around 3,916 fisheries households and production exceeding 43 thousand tons per year. These figures make the sector the backbone of coastal community economies while also indicating a group that remains economically and socially vulnerable. More specifically, this condition is reflected in Kuala Patah Parang Village, Sungai Batang District, which is one of the centers of capture fisheries with a very high level of community dependence on the fisheries sector. Of the village's total population of 1,784 people and 422 households, around 1,420 people work in the fisheries sector, with 338 fisheries households, meaning that approximately 80 percent of the village population depends economically on this sector.

Normatively, the national policy framework has provided a strong foundation for fisher empowerment through Law Number 7 of 2016 concerning the Protection and Empowerment of Fishers, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers. This framework is reinforced by Law Number 31 of 2004 in conjunction with Law Number 45 of 2009 concerning Fisheries Management and supported by national programs such as the Fisher Card, Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance, and the Advanced Fisher Village Program. However, within the decentralization framework as regulated by Law Number 23 of 2014, the implementation of these policies depends heavily on policy capacity and orientation at the regional level. At the Riau Province level, fisheries policy is manifested through Regional Regulation Number 5 of 2017 concerning

Fisheries Management. Nevertheless, its orientation still emphasizes productivity improvement and technical aspects of production inputs, and has not fully addressed the structural dimensions of empowerment, such as market access, power relations in value chains, and the transformation of fishers' economic institutions. At the level of Indragiri Hilir Regency, existing regulations—such as Regional Regulation Number 10 of 2009 concerning Fisheries Business Licenses and Regional Regulation Number 6 of 2019 concerning Fisheries Business License Retribution—place greater emphasis on business legality and fiscal management than on a substantive policy design for empowerment.

The gap between policy design and the implementation of fisher empowerment programs is not unique to a single research locus. Various empirical studies show that coastal empowerment programs in different contexts are often designed in a top-down and less participatory manner, so they do not fully reflect the real needs of fisher communities (Bolkiah et al., 2021; Chambers, 1995; Fetterman et al., 2014). (Ginting et al., 2018) found that, although many government empowerment programs had been implemented, these programs had not significantly improved the living standards of traditional fishers. Meanwhile, a study of the Coastal Community Economic Empowerment Program in North Jakarta showed that institutional and financial output achievements did not automatically generate welfare, as some loans were actually used by relatively non-poor households (Aisyah et al., 2010) (Aisyah et al., 2010). These findings confirm a mismatch between the normative goals of empowerment and the outcomes produced, particularly in the context of fishers' low adaptive capacity to socio-ecological pressures (Bennett & al., 2021; Coulthard, 2012).

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article aims to analyze the linkage between the fisher empowerment policy framework from the national, provincial, and village levels and the reality of empowerment program implementation in Kuala Patah Parang Village, as well as to identify structural challenges that hinder the achievement of sustainable fisher empowerment. This article is positioned at the intersection of the technocratic tradition of public policy evaluation and the participatory approach of empowerment evaluation, with the argument that both approaches if used separately are not yet able to fully explain why fisher empowerment programs that are normatively designed comprehensively have, in practice, failed to generate substantive independence and sustainable livelihoods among fishers.

METHODS

This article employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach grounded in the study of policy documents, village administrative data, and the implementation of fisher empowerment programs. The data used are secondary data, including national, provincial, and regency regulations related to the fisheries sector and fisher empowerment, administrative and financial data of Kuala Patah Parang Village for 2023–2025, the history of fisher empowerment programs, and relevant academic literature. The analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis to examine the consistency and policy orientation across levels of government and to identify patterns of program implementation at the village level. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, source triangulation was carried out by comparing formal regulatory documents, village administrative data, and previous research findings relevant to the context of fisher empowerment in coastal Sumatra and Indonesia more broadly (Miles et al., 2014). This triangulation is important because formal policy documents often describe normative conditions (*das sollen*) that differ from implementation realities (*das sein*) at the local level.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Fragmentation of Fisher Empowerment Policy Across Levels of Government

The review of policy documents reveals a pattern of policy orientation fragmentation that becomes increasingly evident as the level of government moves downward. At the national level, Law Number 7 of 2016 explicitly positions fishers as subjects who have the right to be protected and empowered by the state. The law comprehensively regulates empowerment strategies, including the provision of facilities and infrastructure, business certainty, risk protection, and the improvement of fishers' capacity and welfare (Hasibuan et al., 2025; Siregar, 2026). This framework is reinforced by various national programs such as the Fisher Card for access to services and subsidies, Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance for occupational risk protection, and the Advanced Fisher Village Program for integrated local economy-based fisher area development. Conceptually, this national policy design has moved toward a multidimensional empowerment approach and is consistent with the principles of comprehensive empowerment.

Nevertheless, when this framework is translated to the Riau Province level through Regional Regulation Number 5 of 2017 concerning Fisheries Management, the policy orientation begins to shift toward a more regulatory-technical direction. Supporting programs at the provincial level, such as fisheries facilities and infrastructure assistance and fisher capacity-building programs, substantively aim to strengthen capacity. However, their focus remains dominated by production inputs such as boats and fishing gear, and has not fully addressed structural dimensions such as power relations in fisheries value chains and

the transformation of fishers' economic institutions. This shift becomes even more pronounced at the level of Indragiri Hilir Regency, where existing regulations Regional Regulation Number 10 of 2009 concerning Fisheries Business Licenses, Regional Regulation Number 6 of 2019 concerning Fisheries Business License Retribution, and Regent Regulation Number 85 of 2019 are predominantly administrative and fiscal in nature, regulating business legality and retribution, but not yet containing substantive policies that specifically govern fisher empowerment as a strategic group in regional development.

This fragmentation pattern can be understood as an indication of a disjunction between the normative policy design (*das sollen*) at the national level and the capacity and orientation of regional policies in translating it (*das sein*), as cautioned within the decentralization framework under Law Number 23 of 2014 (Arafat, 2023). When management authority is delegated to local governments without strengthening institutional capacity and policy orientation in line with the national empowerment vision, regional policies tend to reduce empowerment to administrative-fiscal functions. This finding is consistent with critiques of the New Public Management paradigm, which tends to position society as users of administrative services rather than as actors with bargaining power in the policy process (Hood, 1991; Osborne, 2010).

Inconsistency and Output Orientation in Village-Level Empowerment Programs

At the local level, the analysis of Kuala Patah Parang Village Fund Allocation data for 2023–2025 and the history of community empowerment programs over the last decade reveals a more concrete gap between fishers' needs and the direction of village empowerment policy. Budget data show that the largest portion of community empowerment activities was absorbed by the development and strengthening of generic village institutions such as the Village Community Empowerment Institution (LPMD), Family Welfare Empowerment (PKK), and Youth Organization (Karang Taruna), with an average proportion of around 30 percent of the total budget, while general community training activities absorbed around 19 percent. There was no specific budget allocation explicitly directed toward improving fishers' technical capacity, such as value-added fisheries processing, the adoption of fishing technology, or strengthening market access, even though approximately 80 percent of the village community depends on the fisheries sector. This condition confirms that empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village remains generic and administrative, and has not yet become a strategic instrument for strengthening the village's main economic base.

An examination of the history of fisher empowerment programs from 2016 to 2026 reveals recurring patterns of inconsistency. Several programs have been implemented with outputs formally recorded, such as fisheries product processing training that produced groups making shrimp amplang, shrimp crackers, shrimp paste, and salted fish, as well as assistance programs for 0.7 GT fishing boats that were distributed gradually in 2020, 2022, and 2023. However, the administrative status of "implemented" does not necessarily reflect substantive empowerment success. For example, an ice factory was constructed in 2017, but

it was not utilized by the community because the type of factory built—a crystal ice factory—did not match local fishers' need for block ice to preserve their catch. Similarly, training in value-added fish and shrimp processing conducted in 2017 did not produce sustainable results because most participants did not apply the skills acquired, primarily due to the absence of follow-up assistance.

This finding strengthens the argument that the main failure of fisher empowerment programs at the village level does not lie in the planning or initial implementation stage, but rather in the absence of post-training assistance and a sustainable monitoring and evaluation mechanism. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Ginting et al. (2018), who argued that various government empowerment programs had not succeeded in significantly improving the living standards of traditional fishers, and with Aisyah et al.'s (2010) study of the Coastal Community Economic Empowerment Program in North Jakarta, which showed that institutional and financial output achievements do not automatically produce substantive welfare for target communities. Thus, three main problem patterns can be identified in fisher empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village: first, some programs were constructed but not utilized due to weak planning based on real needs; second, the quantity of facility assistance increased from year to year without being accompanied by the strengthening of business management capacity; and third, training and conservation programs were implemented sporadically without integration with economic strengthening programs, so they did not form a comprehensive empowerment ecosystem.

Output-Outcome Disorientation as the Root Problem of Fisher Empowerment Programs

The fundamental problem emerging from the two findings above is the dominance of output-based evaluation in fisher empowerment programs, both at the level of regional policy and village program implementation. Viewed through Dunn's (2018) public policy evaluation criteria, existing programs may demonstrate achievements in terms of the quantitative adequacy of assistance for example, the number of boat units or training participants recorded but these achievements do not necessarily satisfy the criterion of effectiveness in the sense of achieving the true goal of empowerment, namely the sustainable improvement of fishers' independence and welfare. Likewise, in terms of equity, generic empowerment programs that do not specifically target the fisheries sector risk being disproportionate to the group that is in fact the most vulnerable and most dependent on fisheries in the village.

When examined through the lens of Fetterman's empowerment evaluation, the gap becomes clearer in the process dimension, not merely in the results. The principle of community ownership requires fisher communities to be involved in determining the types of facilities, training, and support that are relevant to their needs. However, the case of the ice factory that did not match local needs indicates that program planning had not fully involved fishers' democratic participation as beneficiaries. The principle of capacity building requires a continuous process to develop communities' ability to manage businesses and programs independently. Yet the absence of post-training assistance shows that existing

programs stopped at the stage of temporary knowledge transfer without building fishers' evaluative and managerial capacities in a sustainable manner (Fetterman et al., 2015). Similarly, the principle of accountability in empowerment evaluation demands accountability beyond budget realization alone, including substantive questions such as whether fishers' income has increased, whether dependence on middlemen has decreased, and whether fishers are able to adapt to climate change and fluctuations in catch volume (Fetterman, 2017).

This finding is also coherent with national capture fisheries performance data, which recorded that although the value of the key performance indicator reached 101.49 percent in 2024, the Fisher Exchange Rate indicator, which is more relevant to real welfare, reached only 94.22 percent, partly because the growth in commodity prices received by fishers had not been able to offset increases in operational costs (KKP, 2025). The gap between administrative achievement and real welfare at the national level resonates with the pattern found in Kuala Patah Parang Village, strengthening the argument that fisher empowerment evaluation at various levels of government requires instruments capable of capturing the realities of production costs, market risk, and fishers' purchasing power, rather than merely counting the number of programs implemented.

Structural Challenges of Sustainable Fisher Empowerment

The synthesis of the findings above leads to the identification of three main structural challenges in sustainable fisher empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village, which may also reflect similar problems in other coastal villages with comparable institutional characteristics. First, the absence of vertically integrated empowerment policies from the central government to the village level causes the comprehensive empowerment vision at the national level to be degraded into administrative-fiscal practices at the implementation level. Second, program fragmentation resulting from weak cross-sectoral coordination among providers of facility assistance, financing institutions, and marketing mechanisms that are still conventionally managed by fishers themselves causes existing interventions to fail to form a mutually reinforcing empowerment ecosystem (Flaherty et al., 2020). Third, weak post-program assistance and participatory evaluation mechanisms prevent the knowledge and skills transferred through training from being internalized into the independent capacity of the community, causing programs to become ceremonial rather than transformative.

These three challenges indicate that the problem of fisher empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village is not merely one of limited financial resources, but rather a matter of evaluation institutional design that has not integrated policy accountability with substantive empowerment dimensions. The use of conventional evaluation approaches that are administrative and output-oriented, without being balanced by participatory approaches that position fishers as co-evaluators, causes programs that are normatively designed to empower to risk reproducing the same assistance-based dependency pattern from year to year. This is consistent with the argument that the success of public policy in the context of

modern governance is largely determined by the government’s ability to build interactive relationships with society as strategic partners, not merely as beneficiaries (Osborne, 2010).

The implication is that the evaluation model required for the context of sustainable fisher empowerment needs to integrate conventional public policy evaluation criteria with empowerment evaluation principles simultaneously. This integration enables assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency, and appropriateness of policy targeting as required by government administrative accountability, while also ensuring that the evaluation process strengthens ownership, participation, and the evaluative capacity of fishers as the main subjects of empowerment—not merely as objects of assistance (Francés-García, 2024). Within such an integrative framework, evaluation no longer functions solely as an administrative control instrument, but becomes a collective learning mechanism that promotes the sustainability of socio-economic change in coastal fisher communities.

Table 1. Comparison of Fisher Empowerment Policy Orientation Across Levels of Government

Level	Main Regulation/Program	Policy Orientation
National	Law No. 7/2016; Law No. 31/2004 in conjunction with Law No. 45/2009; Fisher Card; Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance; Advanced Fisher Village Program	Comprehensive empowerment and risk protection
Provincial (Riau)	Regional Regulation No. 5/2017 concerning Fisheries Management; facilities assistance and technical training	Regulatory-technical, production input-based
Regency (Indragiri Hilir)	Regional Regulation No. 10/2009; Regional Regulation No. 6/2019; Regent Regulation No. 85/2019; Regional Regulation No. 5/2015 (DMIJ)	Administrative and fiscal (business legality, retribution)
Village (Kuala Patah Parang)	Village Fund Allocation programs 2023–2025; fishing boat assistance; fisheries product processing training	Generic, fragmented, output-oriented

Source: processed from national regulatory documents, Riau Provincial Regional Regulations, Indragiri Hilir Regency Regional/Regent Regulations, and Kuala Patah Parang Village data (2026).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the challenges of sustainable fisher community empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village, Indragiri Hilir Regency, stem from a structural gap between normative policy design at the national level and implementation realities at the regional and village levels. Although Law Number 7 of 2016 has positioned fishers as development subjects entitled to comprehensive protection and empowerment, regulations at the levels of Riau Province and Indragiri Hilir Regency remain dominated by regulatory-technical and administrative-fiscal orientations, and have not translated this empowerment vision

substantively. At the village level, empowerment programs implemented over the past decade have been fragmented, output-oriented, and not accompanied by adequate post-program assistance, thereby failing to establish fishers' economic independence even though the fisheries sector serves as the livelihood base for most village residents.

From an evaluation perspective, this gap reflects the limitations of conventional policy evaluation approaches that emphasize the assessment of administrative achievement or judgment, without being complemented by empowerment evaluation approaches that emphasize learning, ownership, and sustainable community capacity strengthening. This article argues that the two evaluation approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: public policy evaluation criteria are needed to maintain program accountability and effectiveness, while empowerment evaluation principles are needed to ensure that the evaluation process itself becomes an instrument of empowerment.

Based on these findings, further research is recommended to develop an integrative evaluation model that combines the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness from the public policy perspective with the principles of community ownership, democratic participation, and capacity building from the empowerment evaluation perspective, as is being developed within the dissertation framework that forms the basis of this study. Practically, regional and village governments are advised to: (1) formulate fisher empowerment policies that are explicitly integrated from the regency level to the village level; (2) allocate village empowerment budgets proportionally to the main economic base of the village, particularly the fisheries sector; and (3) establish post-program assistance mechanisms and participatory evaluation involving fishers as co-evaluators, in order to ensure that fisher empowerment no longer stops at the stage of assistance distribution, but genuinely produces independence and sustainable livelihoods for coastal communities.

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