

Local Government Social Intervention Strategy: A Sociological Study of the Effectiveness of Empowerment Programs

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Abstract

Social inequality and economic disparity are still deep-rooted structural problems in the lives of Indonesian society. Although various empowerment programs have been launched by local governments, many of them are symbolic and technocratic, and fail to touch the roots of social injustice. This study aims to analyze social intervention strategies in community empowerment programs through a critical sociological approach. Using a literature study method with a qualitative approach, this study examines key theories such as power relations (Foucault), symbolic power (Bourdieu), capability approach (Sen and Nussbaum), and participatory parity (Fraser). The results of the analysis show that the dominance of power in the planning and implementation of empowerment programs often ignores the local socio-cultural context and narrows the space for citizen participation. Empowerment, which should be transformative, has instead become a tool for legitimizing elite, top-down policies. Therefore, the integration of substantive capability and participatory approaches in local policies is needed to dismantle structural inequality and build democratic, just, and inclusive governance. This study emphasizes the importance of reorienting the empowerment paradigm from merely administrative to social transformation that favors marginalized groups and expands the real freedom of society.

Keywords: Critical Sociology; Empowerment; Social Inequality, Social Intervention, Participation, Capability

1. Introduction

Social inequality and economic disparities are structural realities that continue to haunt people's lives in various regions of Indonesia. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2023, Indonesia's Gini index is still at 0.388, reflecting a fairly high inequality in income distribution. This inequality not only impacts unequal access to economic resources, but also affects people's quality of life in terms of education, health, and social participation. From a structural-functional sociology perspective, inequality that is not handled seriously can hinder social integration and create the potential for disintegration at the local level. Therefore, local governments as important actors in the decentralization system have an urgency to develop social intervention strategies that are responsive to unequal socio-economic realities.



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However, in practice, many empowerment strategies designed by local governments are still elitist and top-down, without considering the socio-cultural characteristics of the target community. This is exacerbated by the low level of active participation of marginalized groups in the planning and implementation process of the program, so that the interventions carried out tend to be symbolic and do not touch the root of the problem. As stated by Menconi et al (2017) in their approach to participatory rural appraisal, true empowerment requires community involvement as subjects, not objects of policy. Therefore, efforts are needed to reorient social intervention strategies that do not only see poverty as an economic problem, but also as a result of social relations inequality and structural injustice that must be dismantled through a critical and transformative sociological approach.

The lack of effectiveness of empowerment programs run by local governments is often rooted in the absence of a social data-based approach and in-depth needs analysis. Many policies are uniform (one-size-fits-all), even though social conditions in each region are very heterogeneous. In Rhéaume's (2022) view, through the capability approach, development should focus on expanding the substantive freedom of individuals to determine their lives. However, without accurate social mapping and community participation in the planning process, social intervention strategies will only strengthen bureaucratic power relations and ignore the aspirations of local communities. This shows that the empowerment claimed by the government is often false, because it is not accompanied by efforts to listen to and understand the real needs of citizens.

In addition, local government social interventions tend to be trapped in the logic of short-term projects that pursue administrative output alone, such as the number of trainings or funds distributed, without measuring deeper sociological impacts. A study by Rasyid et al (2025) shows that the success of empowerment programs cannot be assessed only from quantitative indicators, but also from the extent to which the program is able to create changes in the structure of social relations, increase collective self-confidence, and strengthen the institutional capacity of the community. In this context, it is important for local governments to integrate a critical sociological approach into every stage of policy, from planning to evaluation. Without it, social interventions will continue to be in a repetitive cycle that fails to touch the essence of empowerment: building critical awareness and social independence of the community.

Evaluation of empowerment programs that ignore the sociological dimension not only risks failing to achieve long-term goals, but also has the potential to reproduce inequality and structural domination in society. In the framework of Michel Foucault's theory of power (1980), power is not only present in repressive forms, but also in the way knowledge and policies are formed. When evaluations are only focused on achieving quantitative indicators such as training attendance figures or the amount of funds

disbursed, then relational dimensions such as social cohesion, participation patterns, or role transformation in the community are invisible and uncouned. This shows that public policies are often manipulated to show administrative success, even though they do not substantially dismantle the unequal relationship structure that causes dependency and social powerlessness.

Therefore, sociological studies are key to dismantling the myth of the effectiveness of empowerment programs that are framed technocratically. Through this approach, evaluations can explore deeper social changes, for example, whether the program changes the power relations between local elites and the community, or the extent to which women and minority groups gain space in the decision-making process. As emphasized by Perdana & Hamid (2025), symbolic power works through social legitimacy and the reproduction of dominant values; so without a critical approach, social interventions risk strengthening the dominance of certain groups in the name of development. Thus, a sociological approach is not only important as a complement, but as the main framework for reading the dynamics of power and social change in community empowerment policies.

In the context of ever-changing social dynamics, the effectiveness of social policies can no longer be measured through a rigid and universal bureaucratic approach. Local governments need to realize that society is not merely a passive object, but a social actor who has unique aspirations, agency, and local values. Insensitivity to the local cultural context and social structure has caused many empowerment programs to fail to be implemented sustainably. According to Elmakki (2024) in *Seeing Like a State*, policies that are too centralized and ignore local knowledge actually create “institutional blindness” that weakens the effectiveness of state intervention. Therefore, social intervention strategies must be based on a careful reading of social structures, community values, and patterns of relationships that exist in society.

Furthermore, a participatory social policy approach must be able to go beyond pseudo-proceduralism that only presents the community in formal forums without a true deliberative space. True participation demands a sharing of power in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of empowerment programs, where the community has control over decisions that affect their lives. This is in line with the idea of Ihkamuddin et al (2020) on participatory parity, namely a condition in which all citizens can participate equally in social life because they are free from structural domination. Thus, the effectiveness of social policy must be redefined: not only about administrative success, but also about the extent to which the policy is able to dismantle inequality, encourage the transformation of social relations, and strengthen community autonomy in facing the challenges of modern life.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method (library research), which aims to analyze the local government's social intervention strategy in community empowerment programs through sociological studies. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study seeks to understand the meaning, social construction, and dynamics of power and social relations contained in empowerment policies, not just measuring variables statistically. Through this perspective, researchers can explore the discourse, practices, and social structures hidden behind the social interventions carried out by local governments.

The data in this study were obtained through analysis of various relevant literature sources, such as accredited scientific journals, books on sociology of development theory and social policy, local government policy documents, empowerment program evaluation reports, and previous research results that discussed similar themes in the last five years. The data collection process was carried out by identifying and critically reviewing literature containing sociological perspectives, especially theories such as power relations (Foucault), symbolic power (Bourdieu), capability approach (Amartya Sen), and participatory parity (Fraser). Furthermore, the data were analyzed using thematic content analysis methods to reveal thematic patterns that emerged related to intervention strategies, community participation, and program effectiveness. The results of this analysis were interpreted reflectively to understand the implications of social policy from a critical sociological perspective.

3. Result and Discussion

Structural Domination in Empowerment Practices: Between Rhetoric and Social Reality

1. Empowerment as a Legitimation Discourse: An Analysis of Power in Foucault's Perspective

To understand how empowerment is used as a tool to legitimize power, it is important to first look at the theoretical framework offered by Michel Foucault regarding power relations and discourse. Michel Foucault's analysis of power and discourse has been widely adopted in public policy studies, including in critiques of the concept of "empowerment." Foucault (1978) emphasized that modern power no longer works repressively, but through mechanisms that regulate life, produce subjects, and form "regimes of truth" through institutions such as education, health, and social policy. In this context, empowerment becomes part of the technique of "governmentality," namely the way the state regulates the population through the formation of obedient and productive citizen identities (Al Syahrin et al.,

2020). Empowerment is not only about helping the poor, but more deeply, about forming citizen subjects that are in accordance with the logic of the state and the market.

Another study by Ferguson (1990) in his book *The Anti-Politics Machine*, describes how development programs in Africa use technocratic discourse to eliminate politics from state intervention, even though the intervention is very political. In this case, empowerment is not just an administrative act, but a tool to perpetuate state control over certain social spaces. A similar concept can be applied in the context of empowering poor communities in Indonesia, where the government uses language that seems neutral, but actually contains elements of structural control.

In Indonesia itself, analysis of empowerment programs such as PNPM Mandiri or Village Funds shows that citizen participation is often only procedural. Research by Sumarto & Suryahadi (2010) found that local power structures, village elites, and bureaucratic logics make citizen initiatives often not fully autonomous, but are directed to suit administrative needs. Meanwhile, Sekaringtias et al (2023) stated that despite the rhetoric of participation, the power gap in the implementation of these programs remains high, especially between state officials and villagers.

Moreover, efforts to “fix” communities are often accompanied by the assumption that the state and experts know what is best, while local knowledge is considered irrational or invalid. This reinforces the idea that empowerment can actually be an instrument of depoliticization and subordination of communities.

Thus, the discourse of empowerment cannot be separated from the power relations that underlie it. A critical approach to public policy must be able to reveal how the policy is not politically neutral, but rather produces power effects through language that appears to be “well-intentioned.” In practice, the discourse of empowerment operates as a hegemonic mechanism, not only through formal structures, but also through people’s ways of thinking and perceptions of themselves.

2. Systemic Marginalization and the Role of Local Elites in Regional Power Structures

To strengthen the discussion on systemic marginalization and the role of local elites in regional power structures, a number of scientific studies and academic findings can be used as theoretical and empirical foundations. These studies not only strengthen the argument that local elites play a central role in perpetuating inequality, but also reveal how this dynamic becomes a recurring pattern in various regional contexts.

First, Trianahadi's (2018) research in *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* shows that development and empowerment programs are often not neutral. These programs often become instruments of power, where local actors who have access to social, cultural, and political capital use the programs to strengthen their positions in society. Li uses a Foucaultian

framework to explain how power works through governmentality, namely the ways in which the state (and its local agents) regulate people's lives under the pretext of empowerment. This supports the argument that empowerment is not always liberating, but can be a hidden tool of control.

Ardiansyah (2025) explains that development programs designed top-down without community participation tend to fail and only benefit certain actors who have the power to regulate information and resource distribution. In the regional context, this occurs when local elites who understand how bureaucracy works and have strong relations with the central government become intermediaries and controllers of development resources. They determine who is entitled and who is not entitled to receive benefits, thus creating a patron-client relationship structure that further strengthens the marginalization of the poor and voiceless.

Furthermore, Doran et al (2025) in their article *Depoliticising Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation* criticize the rhetoric of participation in many development programs, including empowerment. They emphasize that the term “participation” is often used to legitimize elite or state intervention, whereas the community is only given a pseudo-space to contribute. Participation that is conditioned like this ultimately perpetuates the power of a handful of people because the community does not really have autonomy in making decisions. This is in line with practices in the field where local elites determine the direction of the program, the narrative of success, and evaluation indicators without real dialogue with the target group.

In Indonesia itself, Fatmawati (2018) in her study revealed that decentralization does not necessarily result in democratization at the local level. In fact, in many cases, decentralization strengthens local oligarchies that exploit local government structures for personal or group interests. These elites often use empowerment programs, social assistance, and regional projects as tools for consolidating power, which in turn narrows the space for community participation and prolongs the cycle of inequality.

Furthermore, Sekaringtias et al (2023) highlighted that inequality perpetuated by powerful actors not only impacts economic distribution, but also social and political exclusion. In this case, local elites who dominate the development narrative and control resources also act as gatekeepers who determine who can have a place in the development structure and who remains on the margins.

Based on the various literatures, it can be concluded that the dominance of local elites in the management of empowerment programs is not a case-by-case phenomenon, but rather a systemic pattern rooted in the power structure and social practices that have taken root. Therefore, efforts to build true empowerment must be accompanied by efforts to democratize decision-making, strengthen the capacity of communities to organize, and open up space for criticism of exploitative local power

practices. This approach will encourage more participatory, fair, and sustainable empowerment, and break the chain of marginalization that has long been going on at the local level.

The Urgency of Participatory and Sociological Approaches in Local Policy Design

1. Redefining Participation: From Symbolic to Transformative

To support the discussion on the redefinition of participation from symbolic to transformative, it is necessary to strengthen scientific studies that have widely discussed the dynamics of community participation in public policy. One strong theoretical basis is Sherry Arnstein's thinking in her famous article "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969). Arnstein describes participation as a tiered ladder, from the lowest level in the form of manipulation and tokenism (symbolic), to the highest level, namely citizen power, which reflects citizen control over the Development process (Arbayah & Suparti (2022)). According to Arnstein, many participation models implemented by the government are actually only at the symbolic level, such as consultation or information, which do not provide space for the community to truly influence the final outcome of a policy. Arnstein's thinking is an important basis for criticizing participation practices that are only procedural.

In addition, the theory of participatory governance developed by researchers such as Archon Fung (2006) also reinforces the importance of transformative participation. In his writing "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance", Fung introduces democratic governance models that emphasize three main dimensions of participation: the extent to which people are involved in decision-making, how much power is given to them, and how communication mechanisms between citizens and the state are built. According to Dupuy & Defacqz (2022), meaningful participation will only be achieved if citizens are not only heard, but also have substantive control over the policy process and outcomes. This is in line with the deliberative democracy approach, which emphasizes that the quality of democracy is not only measured by electoral procedures, but also by how deliberative the policy formulation process itself is - namely the extent to which the process allows for rational argumentation, equality of speaking positions, and balanced influence between the actors involved.

Furthermore, the concept of recognition and redistribution from Nancy Fraser (2000) in (Mudzakkir, 2021) is also relevant in framing transformative participation. Fraser rejects the separation between economic justice (redistribution) and cultural justice (recognition), and instead calls for the importance of integrating the two in creating participatory justice. In this context, justice does not only mean providing access to participatory forums, but also correcting social and symbolic inequalities that make the voices of marginalized communities unrecognized or unappreciated. Fraser emphasizes that without redistribution of power and recognition of marginalized social identities, participation will

remain within a framework of domination, where the stronger party (the state, political elite, corporations) still controls the final decision.

Empirical studies also show that transformative participation can improve the quality of policies and the success of program implementation. Research by Arifin et al (2024) shows that when citizens have the power to define problems and design solutions, policies become more contextual, relevant, and have stronger social legitimacy. Transformational participation also increases government accountability and encourages the formation of social solidarity among citizens. This is where participation is no longer understood as a technocratic procedure, but as part of a comprehensive social liberation strategy.

Thus, the various scientific literatures strengthen the argument that the transformation of participation from symbolic to substantial is not only normatively important, but also has a strong empirical and conceptual basis in the study of democracy, development, and social justice. This approach not only demands community involvement in the policy process, but also demands changes in power structures, shifts in development paradigms, and recognition of the diversity of citizen voices and experiences.

2. The Capability Approach as a Basis for Social Justice in Local Policy

To strengthen the previous description, the capability approach as a basis for social justice in local policies has been widely supported by scientific findings and arguments from various multidisciplinary studies, especially in the fields of welfare economics, public policy, and sustainable development. Indiahono et al (2021) emphasize that development should be understood as an expansion of substantive human freedom, not merely an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) or the distribution of economic goods. Sen states that poverty is the inability to achieve functionings that are considered valuable, so state intervention must be oriented towards increasing individual and collective capabilities, rather than simply distributing resources evenly.

This concept was expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011) in *Creating Capabilities*, which lists the core human capabilities that must be guaranteed by the state to achieve substantive justice, such as a decent life, health, physical integrity, social affiliation, and control over the environment. Nussbaum emphasizes that justice is not achieved if only seen from the same formal treatment (formal equality), but must consider the real conditions experienced by different individuals and groups in society. Therefore, the capability approach rejects the classical utilitarian view that measures welfare from the accumulation of total happiness, and also criticizes the resource approach that does not take into account differences in individual abilities in converting resources into real opportunities.

In the context of local policy, Ansanai & Rasyid's (2025) research shows that the capability approach is very relevant to assessing social policy multidimensionally, because it is able to capture structural, cultural, and institutional inequalities. Robeyns emphasizes the importance of context-sensitivity in policy analysis, namely paying attention to local values, cultural norms, and social diversity of the policy recipient community. In this case, the capability approach encourages tailored policy design, where policies are tailored to the specific needs and constraints of the community, rather than taken uniformly from the center.

In the Indonesian local policy literature, this approach has begun to be adopted in the analysis of community-based development. For example, a study by Purnomo et al (2024) in a study of social policy emphasizes the importance of community-based development that prioritizes strengthening the capacity of citizens as subjects of development, not objects of aid. This is in line with the capability approach that encourages structural empowerment and recognition of community agency. Furthermore, in the context of gender mainstreaming in villages, a study by Kabeer (1999) on empowerment also supports the importance of enabling policies, not just symbolically or economically empowering.

From the perspective of distributive justice, the capability approach is also in line with John Rawls' idea of justice as fairness, especially the difference principle, where inequality can only be justified if it benefits the most vulnerable group. The capability approach adds that justice is not only about the distribution of resources, but also about access to valuable life choices. This is very relevant in the context of local policies in Indonesia, which has geographical, cultural, and development level diversity between regions.

Thus, the capability approach proposed by Sen and further developed by various scholars has provided a strong scientific basis for criticizing uniform policies that are not contextual. This approach provides a new direction for the design of local policies that favor marginalized groups, encourage substantive equality of opportunity, and form a more just and inclusive social structure.

Conclusion

In the tourist villages of Bone Regency, there is tension between the preservation of local cultural values, especially the principle of *siri' na pacce*, and the demands of digitalization. The older generation is worried that culture will become just a meaningless spectacle, while the younger generation sees digital technology as an opportunity to preserve and introduce culture more widely. Village communities carry out cultural adaptation by selectively using technology so as not to damage traditional values, involving traditional figures as curators of cultural content. Social media is used as a promotional tool as well as an expression of collective identity that strengthens the sense of cultural ownership. However, obstacles to access and digital literacy still hinder the optimal use of technology.

Therefore, cross-generational collaboration and digital infrastructure support are needed so that digitalization can run sustainably and maintain cultural authenticity while empowering communities socially and economically.

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