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Bridging Policy and Empowerment: The Multilevel Governance Gap in Fisherfolk Empowerment

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Small-scale fisher empowerment policies do not necessarily translate into community capacity and autonomy. This article examines how multilevel governance gaps narrow fisher empowerment from national to village level. Using a descriptive-analytical qualitative case study of Kuala Patah Parang Village, Riau, it analyzes 12 regulatory instruments, village budget data (2023–2025), and program history (2016–2026) through Dunn's policy evaluation criteria and Fetterman's empowerment evaluation principles. Only one instrument is dedicated to fisher empowerment, while 79.6% of residents depend on fisheries but economic assistance averages 15.33% of allocations. The findings reveal a policy-to-agency gap between administrative delivery and community agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment has become an important orientation in the transformation of public administration from state-centered government toward governance that positions communities as actors in public value creation. New Public Service and New Public Governance shifted attention toward citizens, collaboration, participation, and co-creation of public value (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Osborne, 2006; Osborne, 2010). Empowerment is therefore no longer understood merely as the provision of assistance, training, or facilities; it encompasses capacity, agency, ownership, decision-making ability, and the ability of communities to influence the policies that shape their lives (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

These challenges are more complex in small-scale fisheries. Fishing communities face dependence on fluctuating natural resources, limited capital and technology, restricted market access, ecological risks, and climate change (Allison & Ellis, 2001; Béné et al., 2016; Coulthard, 2012), and the literature characterizes fisheries governance as a wicked problem shaped by uncertainty, power asymmetries, and multiple actors (Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2018; Jentoft & Chuenpagdee, 2009). Interventions are more likely to succeed when they are holistic, participatory, locally facilitated, and collaborative (Stacey et al., 2021). The scale is considerable: Indonesia had about 3.03 million fishers in 2022, of whom about 2.40 million fished at sea and 632,401 worked in inland waters (Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries data cited in CNBC Indonesia, 2024). Small-scale fisheries account for about 80% of national fisheries production, and more than 90% of fishers use vessels below 10 GT (Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan [KKP], n.d.). Table 1 places these indicators beside the case village examined here.

Table 1. Statistical Context of Small-scale Fisheries in Indonesia and in Kuala Patah Parang Village

Level	Indicator	Value
National	Number of fishers, 2022	≈3.03 million (marine 2.40 million; inland 632,401)
National	Share of national production from small-scale fisheries	≈80%
National	Fishers using vessels below 10 GT	>90%
Village	Residents / residents working in fisheries	1,784 / 1,420 (79.60%)
Village	Fishing households	≈338
Village	Mean allocation share 2023–2025: institutional strengthening / training / economic assistance	30.33% / 19.33% / 15.33%
Village	Consistent allocation for fishers' technical capacity	None identified (0%)

Source: Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries data (2022) as cited in CNBC Indonesia (2024); KKP (n.d.); Kuala Patah Parang Village Office data (2026); village shares calculated by the authors.

Normatively, Indonesia's fisher empowerment policy system already has a relatively comprehensive foundation. Law No. 7/2016 on the Protection and Empowerment of Fishers, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers positions fishers as

subjects entitled to protection and empowerment. This framework is reinforced by fisheries management regulations and the allocation of governmental authority. Research documents identify national instruments such as Fisher Cards, Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance, and Kampung Nelayan Maju. However, when traced to Riau Province and Indragiri Hilir Regency, policy orientation increasingly shifts toward regulatory, technical, business-legalization, and fiscal aspects.

The gap becomes visible at the village level. Kuala Patah Parang has 1,784 residents, of whom 1,420 (79.6%) work in fisheries, in about 338 fishing households. Yet during 2023–2025 about 30% of empowerment allocations went on average to general village institutions and 19% to general community training, and no consistently dedicated allocation was identified for fishers' technical capacity, value-added processing, fishing technology, or market access. Figure 1 shows the pattern: institutional strengthening is the largest category in 2023 (35%) and 2025 (36%), whereas economic assistance remains between 13% and 18%. On average, institutional strengthening (30.33%) is almost twice economic assistance (15.33%), a ratio of 1.98 to 1, even though four in five residents depend on fisheries, and swings such as program operations (25% in 2024 but absent in 2023 and 2025) point to weak continuity. Empowerment resources thus follow the administrative structure of the village rather than its livelihood base, which suggests that the governance and evaluation system emphasizes inputs and outputs while changes in community agency are not treated as a primary measure.

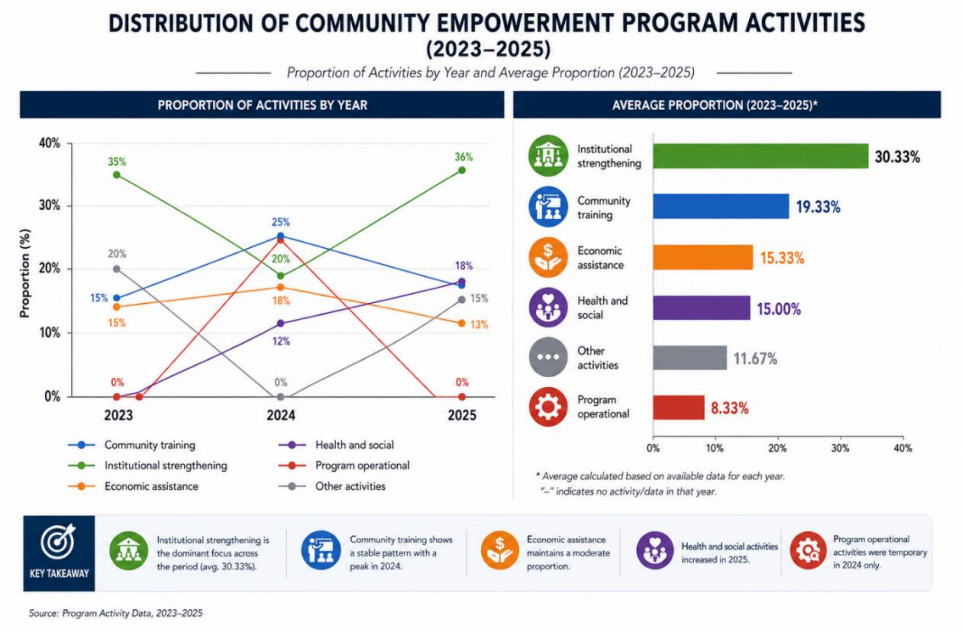


Figure 1. Community Empowerment Program Activities

Source: Kuala Patah Parang Village Office data, 2026. Note: in the right panel, the average for health and social activities (15.00%) covers the two active years, whereas the average for program operations (8.33%) covers three years; the analysis uses three-year means (Table 3).

Against this background, the article develops the argument of a policy-to-agency gap, defined as the gap between policy designs that normatively seek to

empower communities and the capacity of program governance to generate agency, ownership, capacity, and community autonomy. It aims to map changes in the orientation of fisher empowerment policy from the national to the village level, to analyze how these orientations are translated into programs and resource allocations in Kuala Patah Parang Village, and to explain why administrative success and program outputs do not automatically produce community empowerment. It contributes by shifting the analysis from program delivery to the governance of empowerment, by connecting multilevel governance with empowerment evaluation, and by providing a conceptual basis for evaluation that combines policy accountability with the strengthening of community agency.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Policy evaluation and empowerment evaluation

Dunn provides evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness) that enable governments to assess the merit and worth of policy (Dunn, 2018). In contrast, Fetterman's empowerment evaluation treats evaluation as a process that simultaneously builds communities' capacity to assess and improve their own programs (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005, 2007). The two are complementary: policy evaluation ensures public accountability, whereas empowerment evaluation ensures that communities gain capacity, ownership, and decision-making space. Consultation alone is not empowerment; what matters is the extent to which communities control evaluation questions, evidence production, interpretation, and use (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998).

Analytical model

Figure 2 presents the analytical model. Fisher empowerment is treated as a chain of six stages: policy commitment, multilevel translation, program delivery, outputs, outcomes, and community agency. Dunn's criteria are applied to stages 1 to 5 and Fetterman's principles to stage 6. Each stage has an indicator: the share of instruments dedicated to fisher empowerment (commitment); the orientation of instruments at each level of government (translation); the allocation alignment ratio, AAR, which is the mean budget share of an activity divided by the share of residents dependent on fisheries (delivery); the interventions delivered (outputs); continuity and benefit conversion (outcomes); and ownership, capacity, bargaining position, and autonomy (agency).

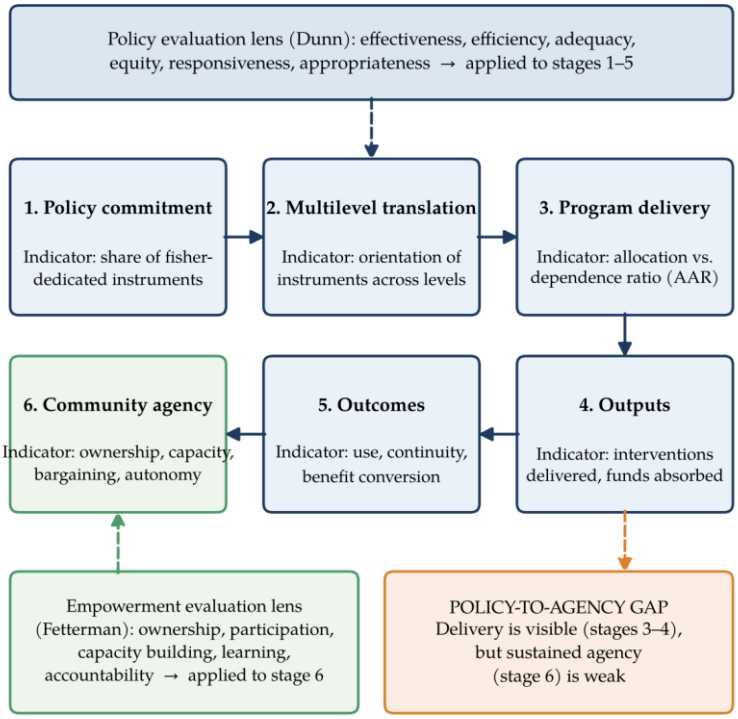


Figure 2. Analytical Model of the Policy-to-Agency Gap in Multilevel Fisher Empowerment

Source: Authors' model, developed from Dunn (2018) and Fetterman and Wandersman (2005, 2007).

The model yields three expectations that are tested in the Results: the share of dedicated instruments falls as policy moves downward; the AAR of fisher-relevant activities remains well below 1; and the interventions delivered show weak continuity and benefit conversion. When all three hold while outputs are still delivered, a policy-to-agency gap exists, represented by the dashed pathway in Figure 2.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach with a contextual case study design in Kuala Patah Parang Village, Sungai Batang District, Indragiri Hilir Regency, Riau Province, purposively selected because of its very high dependence on fisheries. The design suits a question that concerns not only whether a program was implemented, but also how policy orientations change across government levels and how this affects the substance of empowerment.

The data trace the policy chain from the national to the village level. National documents are Law No. 7/2016 on the Protection and Empowerment of Fishers, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers; Law No. 31/2004 on Fisheries, as amended by Law No. 45/2009; Law No. 23/2014 on Regional Government; and Law No. 6/2014 on Villages. At the Riau Province level, Regional Regulation No. 5/2017 on Capture Fishery Business Permits and Governor Regulation No. 35/2018 on its implementing guidelines were analyzed. At the Indragiri Hilir Regency level, the documents are Regional Regulation No. 10/2009 on Fishery

Business Permits, Regional Regulation No. 25/2010 on Fishery Business Permit Levies as amended by Regional Regulation No. 6/2019, Regent Regulation No. 85/2019 (an implementing regulation; official title to be confirmed), and Regional Regulation No. 5/2015 on the Desa Maju Indragiri Hilir Jaya (DMIJ) Program. These were complemented by village administrative and budget data for 2023–2025, the history of fisher empowerment programs for 2016–2026, and scientific literature on policy evaluation, empowerment evaluation, collaborative governance, and small-scale fisheries livelihoods.

Qualitative content analysis proceeded in three stages: policy mapping of objectives, instruments, actors, and orientation at each level; content analysis of regulations and administrative and budget data on four dimensions (policy orientation, alignment with the local economic base, continuity of support, and evidence of empowerment); and comparative interpretation through Dunn's criteria and Fetterman's principles. Descriptive statistics summarized the quantitative information: counts and proportions of instruments by level and orientation; annual and mean shares of activities with their sample standard deviation (SD) and coefficient of variation (CV = SD/mean × 100) over n = 3 budget years; and the AAR. One-sample t-tests (df = 2) benchmarked each mean share against the fisheries dependence share and are exploratory only. Nominal amounts reported as ranges were converted to midpoints to obtain indicative totals.

Source triangulation compared regulations, village administrative data, budget data, program histories, and empirical literature to distinguish normative conditions (das sollen) from implementation conditions (das sein). Because only secondary and administrative data are used, claims about fishers' subjective perceptions, individual experiences, and the quality of informal participation are not treated as direct findings.

RESULTS

Vertical policy fragmentation: from empowerment to administrative delivery

At the national level, fisher empowerment is framed comprehensively through protection, business certainty, infrastructure, capacity building, and welfare, positioning fishers as subjects of empowerment through instruments such as the Fisher Card, Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance (BPAN), and Kampung Nelayan Maju (Kalaju). In Riau Province, empowerment becomes more regulatory and technical, emphasizing business permits, infrastructure, production inputs, and technical capacity, with less attention to market access and value-chain bargaining positions. In Indragiri Hilir Regency, the narrowing is more pronounced, through regulations on business legality, licensing, fees, and administrative procedures, so that policy resembles the regulation of economic activity more than the development of fishers' capacity and autonomy. The contrast is evident between Law No. 7/2016 on the Protection and Empowerment of Fishers, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers, which provides a relatively comprehensive framework, and Regional Regulation No. 5/2017 on Capture Fishery Business Permits, which narrows implementation toward permits and administration. Fragmentation therefore arises not from policy absence but from

shifts in orientation as responsibilities are distributed: decentralization of authority has not produced decentralization of capacity.

The composition of the framework is also visible statistically. Table 2 lists the 12 instruments analyzed, with the subject of each. Only 1 of the 12 (8.3%) is dedicated to the protection and empowerment of fishers, and it sits at the national level. Five instruments (41.7%) concern business permits and levies, all at provincial and regency levels, so 5 of the 7 subnational instruments (71.4%) are permit-and-levy regulations, while none of the 7 (0%) is dedicated to fisher empowerment. No fisher-specific regulation was identified at the village level.

Table 2. Regulatory Instruments Analyzed, by Level, Subject, and Orientation (n = 12)

Level	Instrument	Subject (what it regulates)	Dominant orientation
National	Law No. 7/2016	Protection and empowerment of fishers, fish farmers, and salt farmers	Fisher empowerment
National	Law No. 31/2004	Fisheries	Fisheries management
National	Law No. 45/2009	Amendment of Law No. 31/2004 on Fisheries	Fisheries management
National	Law No. 23/2014	Regional government	Governance and authority
National	Law No. 6/2014	Villages	Governance and authority
Riau	Regional Reg. No. 5/2017	Capture fishery business permits	Permits and levies
Riau	Governor Reg. No. 35/2018	Implementing guidelines for Regional Reg. No. 5/2017	Permits and levies
Inhil	Regional Reg. No. 10/2009	Fishery business permits	Permits and levies
Inhil	Regional Reg. No. 25/2010	Fishery business permit levies	Permits and levies
Inhil	Regional Reg. No. 6/2019	Fishery business permit levies (amends No. 25/2010)	Permits and levies
Inhil	Regent Reg. No. 85/2019	Implementing regulation (official title to be confirmed)	Programs / implementing
Inhil	Regional Reg. No. 5/2015	Desa Maju Indragiri Hilir Jaya (DMIJ) program	Programs / implementing
Village	None identified	No fisher-specific village regulation	–

Source: Authors' classification of the national, provincial, and regency regulations; Kuala Patah Parang Village Office data, 2026. Inhil = Indragiri Hilir Regency; Reg. = Regulation.

Mismatch between the local economic structure and empowerment allocation

Approximately 80% of Kuala Patah Parang residents (1,420 of 1,784; 79.60%) depend on fisheries, yet the 2023–2025 budget directs the largest share to general institutional strengthening (LPMD, PKK, Karang Taruna, and RT/RW). Table 3 reports the annual shares and their descriptive statistics, from which Figure 1 is drawn. Institutional strengthening has the highest mean share (30.33%; SD = 8.96), followed by community training (19.33%; SD = 5.13) and economic assistance (15.33%; SD = 2.52). Economic assistance is the most stable category (CV = 16.4%), but it also changed little, from 15% in 2023 to 13% in 2025, whereas the supporting activities are highly unstable: program operations (CV = 173.2%), health and social activities (CV = 91.7%, rising from 0% to 18%), and other

activities (CV = 89.2%). These coefficients confirm that supporting activities lack continuity across years and that fisher-specific capacity building was never established as a stable budget line.

Table 3. Annual Share and Descriptive Statistics of Empowerment Activities, 2023–2025 (%)

Activity type	2023	2024	2025	Mean	SD	CV (%)
Institutional strengthening	35	20	36	30.33	8.96	29.5
Community training	15	25	18	19.33	5.13	26.5
Economic assistance	15	18	13	15.33	2.52	16.4
Other activities	20	0	15	11.67	10.41	89.2
Health and social	0	12	18	10.00	9.17	91.7
Program operations	0	25	0	8.33	14.43	173.2

Source: Kuala Patah Parang Village Office data, 2026 (APBDes 2023–2025); mean, SD (sample), and CV calculated by the authors (n = 3 years; absent activities counted as 0%; 2023 shares as reported sum to 85%).

To express the mismatch in a single measure, the allocation alignment ratio of each activity j is defined as its mean share (M) relative to the share of residents who depend on fisheries (D), as follows.

$$AAR_j = M_j / D , \quad D = 1{,}420 / 1{,}784 \times 100 = 79.60\% \tag{1}$$

Table 4 shows that no category approaches proportional allocation. The AAR is 0.38 for institutional strengthening, 0.24 for community training, and only 0.19 for economic assistance, which receives about one fifth of the share that the fisheries dependence of the population would imply, a gap of 64.26 percentage points. In the exploratory one-sample tests every mean share is significantly below D (all $p < .05$; for economic assistance $t(2) = -44.23$, $p < .001$), although with n = 3 these tests indicate the size of the gap rather than formal inference. Fisher-specific technical capacity, processing, technology, and market access have an AAR of 0 because no consistent allocation was identified.

Table 4. Allocation Alignment Ratio (AAR) Relative to Fisheries Dependence (D = 79.60%)

Activity type	Mean share (%)	Gap to D (pp)	AAR	t (df = 2)	p
Institutional strengthening	30.33	-49.26	0.38	-9.52	.011
Community training	19.33	-60.26	0.24	-20.34	.002
Economic assistance	15.33	-64.26	0.19	-44.23	<.001
Other activities	11.67	-67.93	0.15	-11.30	.008
Health and social	10.00	-69.60	0.13	-13.15	.006
Program operations	8.33	-71.26	0.10	-8.55	.013

Source: Authors' calculation from Tables 1 and 3; one-sample t-tests of each mean share against D (exploratory; pp = percentage points).

The nominal amounts reported in the village budget add a statistic on continuity. Converting the reported ranges to midpoints, the indicative annual allocation was about Rp110 million in 2023, Rp800 million in 2024, and Rp111 million in 2025 (Figure 3). The 2024 total is 7.3 times the 2023 total, and the 2025 total is 86.1% lower than that of 2024; 2024 alone accounts for 78.4% of the

cumulative Rp1,021 million (CV of annual totals = 117.0%). Cumulatively, economic assistance accounts for 18.1% (Rp185 million), about Rp547 per fishing household over three years even if all of it reached the 338 fishing households, compared with about Rp572 per resident for the whole allocation. These figures are indicative because the source amounts are approximate, but they show that funding was concentrated in a single year rather than sustained.

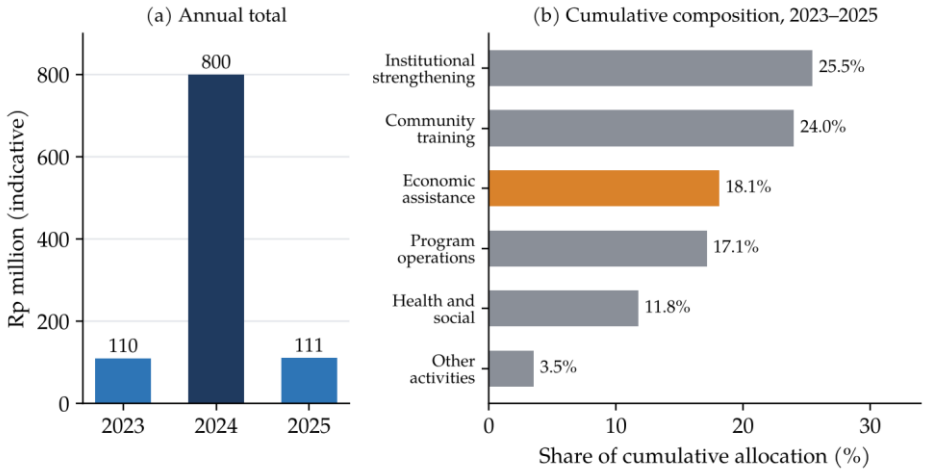


Figure 3. Indicative Annual Total and Cumulative Composition of Empowerment Allocation, 2023–2025

Source: Authors' calculation from Kuala Patah Parang Village Office data, 2026 (ranges converted to midpoints; amounts approximate).

Program outputs achieved, but community empowerment has not yet emerged

Longitudinal tracing of fisher empowerment programs from 2016 to 2026 reveals a central paradox: government produced program outputs, but these did not consistently translate into outcomes and empowerment. Fishers received facilities, extension, strengthening of fisher groups (KUB), processing training, and 0.7 GT boats (distributed in 2020, 2022, and 2023), yet the interventions remained largely episodic and insufficiently integrated with the fisher livelihood chain. The 2017 ice plant remained unused because it produced crystal ice instead of the block ice that fishers required, and the 2017 fish and shrimp processing training lacked sustainability because it was not followed by mentoring. In all four documented intervention types (ice plant, processing training, boats, and facilities, extension, and KUB strengthening) the output was achieved (4 of 4, 100%); in two of them (50%) the records show explicitly that the benefit was not used or not sustained, and the other two are described as episodic and unintegrated. The study therefore distinguishes three levels of achievement: output (what is provided), outcome (the use and benefits generated), and empowerment (changes in the community's capacity to define needs, decide, sustain benefits, and act autonomously), as expressed in equation (2).

$$Output \neq Outcome \neq Empowerment \quad (2)$$

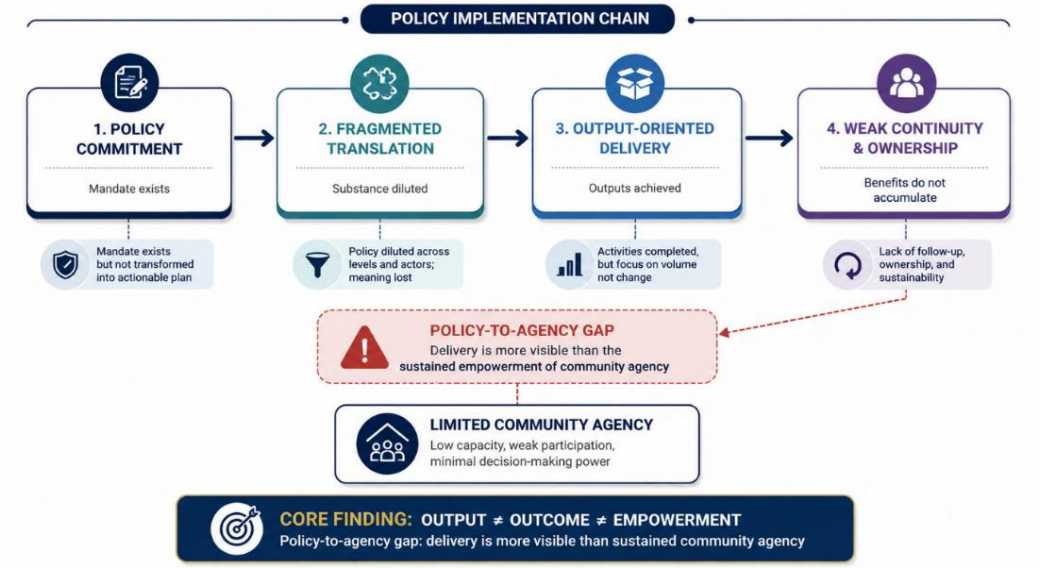


Figure 4. Policy Implementation Chain and the Emergence of the Policy-to-Agency Gap

Source: Authors' analysis.

Fragmented policy translation and output-oriented programs without continuity weaken community ownership and capacity, creating a policy-to-agency gap between delivered interventions and communities' ability to sustain and develop their benefits. Program success is more easily demonstrated through delivery indicators than through changes in community agency, which indicates a governance-evaluation failure: the system can show that interventions were delivered but cannot show sustained capacity, ownership, and autonomy.

Table 5 applies the analytical model in Figure 2 to the evidence. All three expectations formulated in the Theoretical Review hold: the dedicated share falls from 8.3% nationally to 0% among subnational instruments; the AAR of economic assistance is only 0.19; and outputs were delivered in every intervention type while funding was highly discontinuous and two of four interventions failed to convert outputs into sustained benefit. Because all three hold while outputs continue to be delivered, the evidence is consistent with a policy-to-agency gap.

Table 5. Application of the Analytical Model to the Evidence

Stage	Indicator	Statistical evidence	Assessment
1. Policy commitment	Share of instruments dedicated to fisher empowerment	1 of 12 (8.3%), national level	Mandate exists but is narrow
2. Multilevel translation	Dedicated and permit-and-levy instruments at subnational levels	0 of 7 (0%) dedicated; 5 of 7 (71.4%) permits and levies	Orientation narrows downward
3. Program delivery	Allocation alignment ratio (AAR)	Economic assistance 0.19; training 0.24; institutional 0.38; fisher-specific 0	Generic, misaligned allocation
4. Outputs	Interventions delivered; funds allocated	Output achieved in 4 of 4 types (100%); Rp1,021 million (indicative)	Outputs delivered
5. Outcomes	Continuity and benefit conversion	CV of annual totals 117.0%; 2024 = 78.4% of total; 2 of 4 types not sustained (50%)	Weak continuity and conversion
6. Community agency	Ownership, capacity, bargaining, autonomy	No consistent fisher-specific allocation (0%); no village policy for fishers	Policy-to-agency gap

Source: Authors' synthesis of Tables 1 to 4 and Figures 1 to 3.

DISCUSSION

From policy implementation to the governance of empowerment

The main finding is that weak fisher empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village is not primarily caused by the absence of policies or programs, but by discontinuity among policy commitment, cross-level policy translation, program implementation, and the formation of community agency. First, national policy positions fishers as subjects of protection and empowerment, but this orientation narrows at the provincial and regency levels into more regulatory, technical, administrative, and fiscal functions. Second, at the village level, empowerment tends to be generic, fragmented, and output-oriented, even though fisheries are the main livelihood base. Third, administrative outputs have not consistently generated greater capacity, ownership, autonomy, and livelihood sustainability. Thus, the central problem is not policy absence but a policy-to-agency gap: the gap between administrative success in implementing programs and the ability of those programs to generate community agency. These findings reinforce literature showing that the effectiveness of small-scale fisheries governance is determined not only by the existence of institutions and regulations but also by the quality of their translation and implementation. Cross-country research shows that transparency, adaptability, communication, community leadership involvement, and fisher empowerment are important attributes associated with small-scale fisheries performance (Ouréns et al., 2022). Similarly, Aguión et al. (2022) show that co-management, governance across scales, and participation are important for sustainability, but their presence does not automatically generate good performance without adequate capacity and implementation. The findings therefore reinforce the proposition that institutional presence is not synonymous with institutional effectiveness.

The issue is further evident in the mismatch between the local economic structure and empowerment resource allocation. Although fisheries are the main livelihood base of Kuala Patah Parang, the average allocation during 2023–2025

was concentrated on general institutional strengthening (30.33%), community training (19.33%), and economic assistance (15.33%), while no consistent and explicit allocation was identified for fishers' technical capacity, fisheries processing, production technology, or market access. This pattern suggests that village-level empowerment remains closer to generic empowerment than sector-responsive empowerment. The issue is therefore not only how much budget is available, but whether public resources are aligned with the livelihood structure that policy seeks to transform. This argument is consistent with Stacey et al. (2021), who found that many livelihood interventions have been implemented in Indonesian small-scale fisheries, while post-program impact evaluation remains limited and interventions involving communities in partnership with government and non-governmental organizations tend to generate stronger impacts. Global findings also show that fishing communities in Asia and Africa face multidimensional vulnerabilities, making community-centered approaches and gender inclusion important for transitions toward viability (Dias et al., 2023). Thus, the allocation mismatch in Kuala Patah Parang can be understood as a resource–livelihood alignment problem: the extent to which government resources are directed toward factors that actually determine communities' ability to sustain their livelihoods.

The third finding shows that output is not identical to outcome, and outcome is not identical to empowerment. The unused ice plant and unsustained fisheries-processing training demonstrate that administrative success can occur without substantive change. Infrastructure was built, but the technology did not match fishers' needs. Training was delivered and groups were formed, but they did not develop because sustained mentoring was absent. This pattern indicates that program completion does not necessarily produce changes in community capacity. The finding is closely aligned with Stacey et al. (2021), who emphasize the need for long-term evaluation of the socio-ecological effectiveness of livelihood interventions in Indonesian small-scale fisheries. Sowman and Sunde (2021) show that small-scale fisheries policy in South Africa experienced a gap between participatory policy aspirations and implementation practices because of weak sustained engagement, one-size-fits-all approaches, limited capacity, changing political agendas, implementation delays, and unclear institutional responsibilities. Nakamura et al. (2021) likewise emphasize that implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines requires cross-disciplinary and cross-actor engagement so that protection, empowerment, and recognition of fishing communities can be translated into legal and policy frameworks. Kuala Patah Parang is therefore not merely a case of local administrative failure but reflects a broader problem of policy translation failure in multilevel governance.

On this basis, fisher empowerment should be understood as a governance issue rather than merely a program implementation issue. Empowerment, however, requires more because ultimate success concerns communities' ability to influence decisions, manage resources, engage in collective action, and sustain change. Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasize institutional design, dialogue, trust, and facilitative leadership in collaborative governance, while Emerson et al. (2012) conceptualize collaborative governance as a process that generates

capacity for collective action. In this study, such capacity cannot be built only during implementation; it must be extended into evaluation and collective learning. Communities need the capacity to assess program fit with their needs, evaluate the sustainability of benefits, and participate in changing policy design. Schlüter et al. (2021) show that transformation in small-scale fisheries governance is shaped by interactions between top-down interventions and bottom-up self-organization. External interventions also need to be sustained for an adequate period to build durable institutional change. Caceres et al. (2023) show that collaborative governance network structures influence the adaptive capacity of small-scale fisheries systems. Government intervention fragmentation is therefore not only an administrative coordination problem but can become a structural constraint on collective capacity building.

From an evaluation perspective, Dunn's criteria—effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness—remain important for assessing policy success and policy worth (Dunn, 2018). However, using these criteria exclusively may position communities as objects of evaluation because assessment tends to focus on easily quantifiable elements such as numbers of beneficiaries, training sessions, facilities constructed, and budgets absorbed. The substantive empowerment question is whether fishers can define needs, influence decisions, use resources independently, strengthen bargaining power, and sustain change. Dunn and Fetterman should therefore not be treated as competing approaches: Dunn asks, "Did the policy succeed?", whereas Fetterman asks, "Does the policy and evaluation process strengthen communities' ability to determine and improve their own lives?" Francés-García et al. (2024) show that empowerment evaluation enables communities to participate in processes of individual and collective transformation, particularly in contexts of social inequality. Buetti et al. (2023) show that evaluation capacity building in community-based organizations requires not only evaluation competencies but also organizational change capacity and understanding of community context. Nielsen et al. (2023) likewise demonstrate the growth of the evaluation capacity-building literature and the importance of evaluation capacity as a distinct field of inquiry. Thus, the problem in Kuala Patah Parang is not simply suboptimal monitoring; evaluation has not yet developed into a capacity owned and used by the community.

Research gap and novelty: the policy-to-agency gap in multilevel governance

Policy implementation scholarship has long explained gaps between policy formulation and implementation, while collaborative governance literature explains coordination, interdependence, participation, and collective action. Empowerment scholarship, in turn, emphasizes ownership, participation, capacity, and self-determination. However, these three perspectives have not been fully integrated to explain situations in which programs are successfully implemented but communities have not acquired the capacity to sustain and develop change. The implementation gap primarily describes the gap between policy and implementation, whereas the policy-to-agency gap traces the problem further—from program implementation to the formation of community agency.

A program can therefore succeed at the implementation level but fail at the agency level. Administrative program success does not automatically mean that communities have become empowered. Ouréns et al. (2022) found that adaptability, communication, transparency, and the involvement of fishers and community leaders are important attributes associated with small-scale fisheries performance. Spijkers et al. (2023) also show that fisheries governance varies considerably across countries and is shaped by government capacity and socio-economic context. These findings strengthen the argument that there is no single governance design that can be uniformly applied; policy effectiveness depends on how policy is translated into specific institutional and social contexts.

Another gap lies in the tendency to equate participation with empowerment. Participation can occur without changes in the distribution of power. Galappaththi et al. (2022) show that women's experiences in influencing and shaping fisheries governance vary considerably and that power structures can constrain meaningful participation. Freeman and Svels (2022) likewise show that Fisheries Local Action Groups can increase women's visibility and support diversification activities, but their empowerment effects are complex and vary across regions. Research on gender and Blue Justice also shows that gender-based power inequalities can generate procedural injustice in fisheries governance (Lawless et al., 2021). Participation as presence is therefore not the same as participation as influence, and participation as influence is not necessarily equivalent to self-determination. Empowerment must be understood as both a process and an outcome. At the policy-design stage, evaluation should assess whether community problems are genuinely represented. At the multilevel-translation stage, it should assess whether the substance of empowerment is maintained across government levels. At the program-delivery stage, evaluation should consider effectiveness together with ownership. At the capacity-building stage, outputs should be accompanied by evidence of increased capacity. At the outcome stage, well-being should be analyzed together with agency and self-determination. Finally, sustainability should demonstrate the community's ability to sustain change without continuous dependence.

Steenbergen et al. (2019) have shown that governance in small-scale fisheries market chains involves multiple institutions at different levels with different objectives. In this study, that complexity is extended by showing that differences in objectives and actors can affect the continuity of empowerment processes. Research on implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines likewise demonstrates the importance of understanding how legal and policy frameworks are translated across contexts (Nakamura et al., 2021). Fabinyi (2024) shows that relationships between small-scale fisheries and governance need to be understood through interactions between fisheries scale and broader policy processes. Smith et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines in advancing food-system transformation that places fishing communities at the center of governance change. The contribution of this study is therefore not simply to advocate participation, but to identify a conceptual mechanism linking policy design, multilevel translation, program delivery, and agency formation.

Implications for governance and evaluation

The findings have important implications for multilevel governance, showing that divided authority does not automatically generate coordination. When actors operate primarily within sectoral mandates, interventions can become fragmented rather than forming an integrated empowerment ecosystem. Coordination mechanisms are therefore needed to connect goals, resources, information, responsibilities, and institutional learning across levels. Bausero-Jorcin et al. (2024) similarly show that participatory governance requires continuous evaluation, while collaborative networks may still experience core–periphery patterns and actor disconnections. At the village level, the findings suggest a shift from generic empowerment toward sector-responsive empowerment, particularly where fisheries constitute the main economic base. Village policies should connect local resources with fishers' livelihood needs through needs assessment, group strengthening, processing, market access, financial literacy, technology, mentoring, monitoring, and participatory evaluation. This does not imply directing the entire village budget to fishers, but rather integrating fisheries into broader village empowerment strategies.

Bennett et al. (2024) demonstrate that social, cultural, political, and financial assets positively predict small-scale fisher well-being, whereas formal access rights alone do not. Thus, facilities, permits, assistance, and infrastructure should be treated as enabling resources rather than automatic evidence of empowerment. Practically, empowerment should be designed as a continuum rather than a collection of isolated projects, linking needs assessment, co-design, resource provision, capacity development, mentoring, markets, monitoring, evaluation, and learning. House et al. (2024) show that participatory fisheries monitoring can strengthen community engagement and empowerment capacity, although monitoring must account for different group experiences to avoid reproducing participation inequalities. Market governance is equally important because small-scale fisheries value chains involve multiple institutions and governance mechanisms across levels (Steenbergen et al., 2019). Accordingly, empowerment limited to production may create dependency if processing, financing, price information, organization, and market access remain weak. In Kuala Patah Parang, success should therefore be assessed by fishers' ability to transform productive resources into greater economic value and bargaining power.

The theoretical implications can be summarized in two related propositions. First, the policy-to-agency gap extends the implementation gap concept by positioning community agency as the analytical endpoint of policy evaluation. Second, empowerment should be understood simultaneously as a process and an outcome, beginning with communities' ability to define problems and developing toward capacity, influence, and sustained change. Francés-García et al. (2024) similarly position empowerment evaluation as a mechanism for individual and collective transformation. This perspective shifts evaluation from measuring program delivery toward examining whether communities can sustain and control the changes produced by interventions. Consultative participation may increase involvement without substantially altering power

relations or decision-making authority. Research on fisheries governance shows that women may remain constrained in influencing decisions despite formal inclusion (Galappaththi et al., 2022; Lawless et al., 2021). Therefore, empowerment indicators should move beyond measuring how many community members participate and assess how much influence they exercise over decisions affecting their livelihoods.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that weak fisher empowerment in Kuala Patah Parang Village is not caused by an absence of policies or programs, but by discontinuity among policy commitment, multilevel translation, program delivery, and the formation of community agency. National law positions fishers as subjects of protection and empowerment, yet only one of the twelve regulatory instruments analyzed is dedicated to that purpose, and none of the seven provincial and regency instruments addresses it directly. Provincial and regency regulation emphasizes business permits, levies, and administration, so the empowerment agenda narrows as it moves down the levels of government.

At the village level, empowerment is generic and misaligned with the local economy. Although about four in five residents depend on fisheries, institutional strengthening received on average about 30% of allocations, community training about 19%, and economic assistance about 15%, with no consistent allocation for fishers' technical capacity, processing, fishing technology, or market access. Funding was also unstable across the years, and interventions such as the unused ice plant and the processing training without mentoring produced outputs without sustained outcomes. Administrative success in delivering programs therefore does not automatically become community capacity, ownership, and autonomy, and evaluation must ask whether communities can define their needs, sustain the benefits of interventions, and influence the decisions that shape their livelihoods.

Recommendations

The national government should preserve the substance of Law No. 7/2016 on the Protection and Empowerment of Fishers, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers as policy is translated downward, by requiring that provincial and regency regulations and programs keep explicit empowerment objectives and by adding indicators of community agency, such as ownership, capacity, bargaining position, and autonomy, to the monitoring of instruments like the Fisher Card, Fisher Insurance Premium Assistance, and Kampung Nelayan Maju. Provincial and regency governments should connect their permit and levy regulation with capacity building, mentoring, financing, and market access, so that licensing does not stand in for empowerment, and should build coordination mechanisms that link goals, resources, information, responsibilities, and learning across levels.

Village government should move from generic empowerment toward sector-responsive empowerment where fisheries are the main economic base, linking local resources with fishers' livelihood needs through needs assessment, strengthening of fisher groups, processing, market access, financial literacy, technology, mentoring, and monitoring. This does not mean directing the entire

village budget to fishers, but integrating fisheries into the broader village strategy, designing facilities to match the needs of their users, following every training with mentoring, and making multi-year budget commitments that avoid concentrating funds in a single year. Evaluators and policymakers should adopt an integrated approach in which Dunn's criteria safeguard accountability while Fetterman's principles ensure that fishers take part in defining evaluation questions, producing evidence, and using findings, with indicators that distinguish participation from influence, ownership, and self-determination.

FURTHER STUDY

This study uses secondary and administrative data; therefore, claims concerning fishers' subjective perceptions and the quality of informal participation are not treated as direct findings, and the statistical analysis is limited by three annual observations and approximate nominal amounts. Field research based on interviews and surveys constitutes a separate stage of the broader research agenda and can test the policy-to-agency gap with primary data on community ownership, decision-making capacity, bargaining position, and autonomy.

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