

Empowered Villages and the Paradox of Poverty Intervention Between Administrative Design and Social Transformation in West Nusa Tenggara

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the paradox of village-based poverty alleviation programs in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), highlighting the tension between neat administrative designs and the need for profound social transformation. Building on reflections on the “Empowered Village” Program in NTB, this paper examines three main issues: (1) the limitations of expenditure-based poverty approaches, (2) the problem of direct assistance and thematic programs that are not accompanied by a change in mindset, and (3) the risk of administrative bias when poverty reduction targets are too pressing. The method used is a literature review with content analysis of studies on Empowered Villages, village economic empowerment, and poverty alleviation strategies in eastern Indonesia. The results of the study indicate that many programs are administratively successful (indicators achieved, reports are neat), but changes in economic culture, local institutions, and cultural poverty have not been truly touched (Orbawati et al., 2024; Lestary et al., 2022; Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Toda, 2016). Studies on the Rumah Zakat Empowered Village (Desa Berdaya Rumah Zakat), the development of Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), the creative economy, and local agribusiness show that a combination of mentoring, institutional strengthening, economic literacy, and citizen participation results in more sustainable transformation (Barung et al., 2025; Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022; Savira et al., 2025). This article recommends strengthening the social change design within the NTB Empowered Village Program through a behavior change curriculum, more contextually relevant poverty mapping, and repositioning mentors as social learning facilitators rather than merely program administrators.

1. INTRODUCTION

Village empowerment programs in Indonesia have accelerated since the enactment of the Village Law and the Village Fund transfer policy. In many regions, including West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), local governments have introduced various empowerment initiatives to support rural development and accelerate poverty reduction, particularly extreme poverty. One of these initiatives is the Empowered Village Program, which is designed through a comprehensive administrative framework supported by poverty databases, budget allocations, implementation guidelines, performance indicators, and measurable poverty-reduction targets (Inderasari et al., 2022; Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Imelda et al., 2022). Within this framework, program success is generally assessed through procedural compliance, target achievement, and the effectiveness of resource distribution.

However, empowerment scholars argue that successful poverty interventions should not be evaluated solely through administrative achievements. Transformative Empowerment Theory emphasizes that empowerment extends beyond the provision of resources and institutional arrangements, requiring changes in individual capacities, critical awareness, self-reliance, and collective social action. From this perspective, empowerment becomes meaningful when interventions contribute to sustainable social

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transformation rather than merely achieving short-term administrative targets. The distinction between administrative success and transformative outcomes is particularly relevant in rural poverty-reduction programs, where well-designed policies do not necessarily guarantee lasting changes in beneficiaries' lives.

Existing studies on village empowerment programs reveal an important gap between administrative performance and substantive social transformation. The Rumah Zakat Empowered Village program in Bligo, for example, demonstrated positive outcomes in strengthening local institutions, revitalizing community groups, and enhancing socio-economic conditions through the 5P empowerment strategy (enabling, strengthening, protecting, supporting, and maintaining) (Orbawati et al., 2024). These findings suggest that empowerment initiatives can generate meaningful social change when they strengthen community capacities and participation. Nevertheless, evaluations of local government-led Empowered Village programs in Mojokerto and Lamongan indicate that administrative success does not always translate into transformative outcomes. Although program implementation was considered successful according to official indicators, limited community capacity and inadequate understanding of the program's objectives remained significant challenges (Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Lestary et al., 2022).

The case of West Nusa Tenggara further illustrates this tension. The provincial government has implemented the Empowered Village Program, placing strong emphasis on reducing extreme poverty through household expenditure data, beneficiary targeting mechanisms, and direct assistance schemes for poor households. While these measures demonstrate a strong administrative commitment to poverty alleviation, studies on rural economic empowerment in NTB suggest that poverty is not merely an economic issue. It is also shaped by cultural factors, including work ethics, income management practices, entrepreneurial confidence, and community perceptions of economic opportunities (Rosyidi et al., 2022; Savira et al., 2025). Consequently, poverty reduction strategies that focus primarily on administrative interventions may encounter limitations when deeper social and cultural dimensions of poverty remain unaddressed.

Despite the growing literature on village empowerment and poverty alleviation, limited attention has been paid to understanding the paradox that emerges when administratively successful programs fail to produce sustainable social transformation. Most studies focus either on implementation performance or poverty reduction outcomes, while the relationship between administrative design and transformative empowerment remains insufficiently explored. This gap is particularly important in the context of NTB, where policy success is often measured through program implementation indicators. Yet, field realities continue to reveal social tensions arising from beneficiary targeting, recurring failures of micro-enterprises, and the re-emergence of pre-intervention dependency patterns after program completion (Barung et al., 2025; Orbawati et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2025; Toda, 2016).

Drawing on Transformative Empowerment Theory, this article examines how the paradox between administrative design and social transformation operates within the Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara. By placing empirical field experiences in dialogue with recent studies on village empowerment, poverty interventions, and rural development, this study seeks to explain why administratively successful programs may produce limited transformative effects. It explores the implications of these findings for developing a more transformative model of village empowerment. Therefore, the central question addressed in this article is: how does the paradox between administrative design and social transformation operate in the Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara, and what are its implications for formulating a more transformative village empowerment design?

2. METHOD

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a literature-based review design. The study is grounded in the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, which distinguishes between administrative achievements and substantive social transformation in community empowerment programs. Rather than generating primary field data, this research critically examines empirical findings from previous studies on Empowered Villages, rural economic empowerment, and poverty alleviation programs. A literature review approach was selected because it enables a comprehensive examination of various empowerment models and poverty intervention experiences across different regional contexts, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and Eastern Indonesia (Rosyidi et al., 2022; Amazihono et al., 2024).

Data Sources and Units of Analysis

The primary data sources were scientific publications and policy documents relevant to village empowerment and poverty reduction. The units of analysis were not individual informants but documented empirical findings reported in academic and institutional publications.

The documents analyzed included:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles discussing Empowered Village programs, village economic empowerment, community-based poverty alleviation, Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), local entrepreneurship development, and rural transformation (Orbawati et al., 2024; Lestary et al., 2022; Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Barung et al., 2025; Lubis et al., 2025; Savira et al., 2025).
2. Community service reports documenting empowerment interventions and community capacity-building initiatives in rural areas (Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022).
3. Conceptual and policy-oriented publications addressing village competitiveness, regional government roles, local economic development, and poverty alleviation strategies in Eastern Indonesia (Toda, 2016; Amazihono et al., 2024; Rantissi, 2024).

A total of more than twenty scientific references were included in the analysis to ensure adequate analytical depth and to enable comparison across different empowerment contexts and intervention models (Inderasari et al., 2022; Imelda et al., 2022).

Because this study is based on documentary analysis, no human informants were involved in the research process.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through a systematic document search and screening process.

First, relevant literature was identified through searches of Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed publications, SINTA-indexed journals, and institutional publication repositories. Searches employed combinations of keywords including "Empowered Village," "village empowerment," "rural poverty," "community empowerment," "local economic development," "poverty intervention," and "West Nusa Tenggara."

Second, documents were screened according to predefined inclusion criteria: (1) focusing on village or rural communities; (2) discussing empowerment interventions, poverty alleviation programs, or village development initiatives; (3) providing empirical evidence regarding implementation processes, outcomes, or community impacts; and (4) being published in academic journals, institutional reports, or reputable scholarly publications.

Third, selected documents were read intensively. Particular attention was paid to the introduction, methodology, findings, and discussion sections to identify information on program design, implementation mechanisms, empowerment strategies, social dynamics, and poverty-reduction outcomes.

Finally, relevant findings were extracted, categorized, and organized into thematic matrices to facilitate comparative analysis across different cases and regional settings.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic content analysis. Analysis began by classifying findings into four major themes: administrative program design, empowerment strategies, social and institutional dynamics, and outcomes related to poverty reduction and village self-reliance (Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022; Lubis et al., 2025).

The coding process focused on three analytical dimensions derived from Transformative Empowerment Theory. The first dimension examined administrative interventions, including beneficiary targeting mechanisms, poverty databases, and aid distribution systems (Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Toda, 2016; Imelda et al., 2022). The second dimension explored economic empowerment initiatives, including direct assistance schemes, microenterprise development, and local economic strengthening efforts (Barung et al., 2025; Lubis et al., 2025; Dinan & Muhtadi, 2023). The third dimension analyzed indicators of social transformation, including changes in community behavior, self-reliance, entrepreneurial attitudes, participation, and social capacity (Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022; Al et al., 2025; Savira et al., 2025).

Subsequently, a comparative synthesis was undertaken to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns across various empowerment models. These findings were then interpreted through the lens of Transformative Empowerment Theory to explain the paradox between administrative success and limited social transformation within the Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara.

The trustworthiness of the analysis was strengthened through source triangulation across multiple studies, regional contexts, and publication types, as well as through logical consistency between empirical evidence and the theoretical framework employed (Rosyidi et al., 2022; Amazihono et al., 2024).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Empowered Village as an Administrative Design: Strong on Paper, Fragile in Social Transformation

Many regions in Indonesia have adopted the Empowered Village Program to accelerate rural development and poverty reduction. The program is generally characterized by a strong administrative design consisting of poverty databases, implementation guidelines, funding allocations, monitoring mechanisms, and measurable performance indicators. In Lamongan, for example, the Empowered Village Program was implemented through an economic branding approach, supported by clear regulations and institutional arrangements. Evaluation results indicated that the program performed well in procedural implementation and in achieving formal indicators (Lestary et al., 2022). Similar findings were reported in Mojokerto, where the program was assessed using Armstrong's performance management framework. They were considered successful in promoting local entrepreneurship and village economic development, although limitations remained in community capacity and understanding of the program's objectives (Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025).

These findings suggest that the administrative architecture of the Empowered Village Program is well established. Beneficiary databases, standard operating procedures to support program implementation, targeted budget allocations, and quantifiable indicators such as poverty reduction rates and improvements in the village development index (Lestary et al., 2022; Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025; Imelda et al., 2022). From a bureaucratic perspective, these components represent important prerequisites for effective policy implementation.

However, evidence from NTB and other empowerment initiatives indicates that administrative effectiveness does not necessarily lead to substantive social transformation. Reports of social jealousy arising from beneficiary targeting, discrepancies between official poverty data and local perceptions, recurring failures of household enterprises, and the re-emergence of dependency patterns after assistance programs end reveal a persistent gap between administrative achievement and community empowerment (Barung et al., 2025; Orbawati et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2025). Similar tendencies can be observed across several village empowerment initiatives, where program outputs are successfully delivered but long-term changes in social behavior, economic resilience, and collective agency remain limited.

From the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, this gap reflects a fundamental distinction between administrative intervention and social transformation. Empowerment is not merely the successful delivery of resources or the completion of planned activities. Rather, empowerment involves the development of critical awareness, self-reliance, social participation, and collective capacity to manage local development processes. Consequently, a program may achieve administrative success while simultaneously failing to transform the underlying social conditions that reproduce poverty.

This interpretation helps explain the paradox identified in the NTB context. Villages are often approached as administrative units that can be improved through funding mechanisms, program packages, and technical interventions. Yet villages are also complex social systems shaped by local norms, power relations, economic networks, and cultural practices (Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022; Ristanti et al., 2025). When empowerment strategies focus predominantly on administrative compliance rather than social learning and capacity building, program achievements tend to remain procedural rather than transformative.

Therefore, the central issue is not the absence of administrative capacity but the limited integration of transformative dimensions into program design. The evidence suggests that the Empowered Village Program has been relatively successful in creating bureaucratic structures for poverty intervention, yet less successful in fostering the social capabilities required for sustainable poverty reduction. This finding reinforces the argument that effective empowerment policies must move beyond administrative performance and place greater emphasis on the long-term transformation of community capacities, local institutions, and collective agency.

2. The Limitations of Expenditure-Based Poverty Measurement in Empowerment Programs

The Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) relies heavily on official poverty indicators, particularly expenditure-based measurements used to identify households categorized as extremely poor. This approach is consistent with national poverty measurement systems and provides a standardized basis for targeting beneficiaries. From an administrative perspective, expenditure data offer

practical advantages because they are measurable, comparable across regions, and compatible with government poverty reduction databases.

Nevertheless, the literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that poverty in rural communities cannot be fully understood through expenditure indicators alone. Studies on village economic development reveal that some households categorized as poor based on expenditure levels possess productive assets such as agricultural land, livestock, social networks, and informal economic opportunities that enhance their resilience during periods of economic uncertainty. Conversely, households with relatively higher expenditures may remain highly vulnerable because they lack productive assets, savings, or stable income sources (Barung et al., 2025; Lubis et al., 2025; Savira et al., 2025). These findings indicate that economic vulnerability is often more complex than what can be captured through monetary indicators.

The discrepancy between official poverty classifications and local perceptions of well-being has important implications for empowerment programs. Several studies suggest that communities frequently question the fairness of beneficiary selection when official poverty data do not correspond to local understandings of deprivation and vulnerability (Lubis et al., 2025; Toda, 2016). As a result, social tensions may emerge, reducing community trust and weakening support for program implementation. In such circumstances, poverty data may serve as an effective administrative tool while simultaneously generating unintended social consequences at the community level.

This issue is particularly significant when viewed through the lens of Transformative Empowerment Theory. The theory emphasizes that poverty should not be understood merely as a lack of income or consumption capacity but as a condition characterized by limited capabilities, restricted participation, weak social agency, and reduced control over livelihood opportunities. Consequently, empowerment interventions that rely exclusively on expenditure-based indicators risk addressing only the symptoms of poverty while overlooking its structural, cultural, and social dimensions.

The findings reviewed in this study suggest that poverty in NTB is closely associated with cultural and behavioral factors, including attitudes toward work, financial management practices, entrepreneurial confidence, and risk-taking behavior (Rosyidi et al., 2022; Savira et al., 2025; Rantissi, 2024). These dimensions are largely absent from conventional poverty databases despite their significant influence on long-term economic outcomes. Therefore, households that receive assistance may continue to experience vulnerability if underlying behavioral and institutional constraints remain unchanged.

Evidence from studies on village profiling and local economic mapping further supports the need for more participatory approaches to poverty identification. Combining quantitative poverty indicators with local knowledge, community assessments, and participatory vulnerability mapping can provide a more comprehensive understanding of household conditions and village dynamics (Imelda et al., 2022). Similar lessons emerge from the evaluation of poverty reduction policies in East Nusa Tenggara, where the distribution of revolving funds often produced limited impacts when local social conditions were insufficiently considered during program design (Toda, 2016).

From a critical perspective, the reliance on expenditure thresholds such as IDR 500,000 per capita per month reflects a broader tendency within poverty policy to prioritize administrative simplicity over contextual understanding. While such indicators facilitate bureaucratic targeting, they may obscure important forms of social capital, productive assets, and local resilience. Consequently, the paradox of empowerment

Reemerges: Programs may achieve high levels of administrative accuracy according to official criteria, yet fail to generate legitimacy and meaningful empowerment within the communities they seek to assist.

These findings suggest that transformative empowerment requires a broader conceptualization of poverty. Rather than focusing exclusively on consumption levels, poverty assessment should incorporate dimensions of capability, social participation, productive assets, and community resilience. Such an approach would allow empowerment programs to move beyond administrative categorization and toward a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that sustain rural poverty.

3. Direct Assistance and Small Enterprises: Between Economic Stimulation and Transformative Empowerment

One of the main intervention mechanisms within many Empowered Village programs, including those implemented in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), is the provision of direct business capital assistance to poor households. The rationale behind this approach is straightforward: limited access to capital is often considered a major constraint preventing poor households from engaging in productive economic activities. Consequently, financial assistance is expected to stimulate entrepreneurship, increase household income, and ultimately contribute to poverty reduction.

From an administrative perspective, this intervention model offers several advantages. The amount of assistance distributed can be clearly measured, beneficiary households can be easily identified, and program achievements can be reported through quantifiable indicators such as the number of recipients and the total value of funds disbursed. Such indicators are attractive for policy implementation because they provide visible and immediate evidence of government intervention.

However, the literature reviewed in this study indicates that the relationship between capital provision and sustainable economic empowerment is far more complex than administrative indicators suggest. Evidence from village economic development programs consistently demonstrates that access to capital alone is insufficient to generate long-term economic transformation. Instead, successful empowerment outcomes depend on the interaction between financial resources, human capabilities, institutional support, and social learning processes.

The experience of the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) laying-hen business in Nusa Village illustrates this point. The success of the initiative was not solely the result of capital investment but also of continuous technical assistance, business management training, production monitoring, and institutional support that enabled the enterprise to maintain productivity and generate stable village income (Barung et al., 2025). Similar findings emerged from agribusiness seedling programs in Batu Kumbang Village, where increases in household income were achieved through sustained mentoring, skills development, and the strengthening of social capital rather than through financial assistance alone (Savira et al., 2025).

These cases suggest that capital functions most effectively when embedded within a broader empowerment ecosystem. Financial assistance becomes transformative when accompanied by opportunities for learning, institutional strengthening, and the development of entrepreneurial capabilities. In contrast, assistance programs that focus primarily on funding distribution often struggle to achieve sustainable outcomes because beneficiaries may lack the knowledge, confidence, and market access needed to convert financial resources into productive assets.

The evidence also indicates that many beneficiaries remain vulnerable to returning to pre-intervention economic conditions once financial assistance is exhausted. Studies of community-based creative economy programs reveal that business sustainability is strongly influenced by managerial capacity, innovation, market connectivity, and access to support networks (Suwarta & Aryaningtyas, 2025; Rosyidi et al., 2022; Rantissi, 2024; Ristanti et al., 2025). When these factors are absent, direct assistance often serves as a temporary economic stimulus rather than a mechanism for reducing structural poverty.

This pattern can be interpreted through the lens of Transformative Empowerment Theory. The theory argues that empowerment should not be understood solely as the transfer of resources, but as a process through which individuals and communities gain the capabilities necessary to control and improve their own livelihoods. From this perspective, capital provision represents only the initial stage of empowerment. Genuine transformation occurs when beneficiaries develop the capacity to manage risks, adapt to changing economic conditions, access broader markets, and sustain economic activities independently.

The findings, therefore, reveal a critical distinction between economic stimulation and transformative empowerment. Economic stimulation focuses on increasing short-term access to financial resources, whereas transformative empowerment seeks to strengthen the capabilities and institutions that enable communities to maintain economic progress over time. The success stories identified in the literature consistently involve long-term mentoring, organizational development, and collective learning processes. At the same time, less successful interventions tend to emphasize capital distribution without comparable investments in capacity building.

This distinction helps explain the paradox observed in many Empowered Village programs. Administratively, programs can report impressive achievements in beneficiary coverage and fund disbursements. Yet socially, these achievements may not translate into significant changes in entrepreneurial culture, economic resilience, or community self-reliance. As a result, program success becomes visible in administrative reports while remaining relatively limited in the everyday economic realities of rural households.

The evidence reviewed in this study, therefore, suggests that the effectiveness of poverty interventions should not be measured solely by the amount of assistance distributed. Greater attention should be directed toward assessing whether empowerment programs strengthen local capabilities, expand economic opportunities, and reduce long-term dependency. Without these transformative dimensions, direct assistance risks becoming a cyclical poverty intervention rather than a sustainable pathway toward rural development and community empowerment.

4. Cultural Poverty and the Necessity of Mindset Transformation in Empowerment Processes

Beyond economic deprivation, the literature on rural development in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) highlights the significance of cultural and behavioral dimensions of poverty. Several studies emphasize that income levels do not solely determine poverty in rural settings but are also shaped by work orientation, financial management practices, attitudes toward entrepreneurship, and willingness to take economic risks (Rosyidi et al., 2022; Savira et al., 2025; Rantissi, 2024). These dimensions are often described as forms of "cultural poverty," which influence how households respond to development interventions and determine the sustainability of economic improvement.

Empirical findings from village empowerment initiatives support this argument. The Rumah Zakat Empowered Village program in Bligo demonstrates that meaningful social transformation occurs when empowerment strategies extend beyond economic assistance and incorporate processes of collective learning and institutional strengthening. In this case, the formation of farmer groups, waste banks, and community-based institutions contributed to the development of collective agency and cooperation among villagers (Orbawati et al., 2024). Facilitators played a critical role not merely as program administrators but as agents of behavioral change who encouraged reflection, participation, and problem-solving within the community (Orbawati et al., 2024; Rosyidi et al., 2022).

From the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, these findings suggest that empowerment is fundamentally a process of consciousness transformation. Economic resources alone are insufficient to alter long-standing behavioral patterns unless accompanied by continuous learning, critical awareness, and institutional support. In other words, poverty persists not only because of limited material resources but also because of constrained capabilities to interpret, manage, and transform those resources into sustainable livelihoods.

The experience of agribusiness empowerment in Batu Kumbang Village further reinforces this argument. The increase in household income among women participants was not only the result of financial assistance but also of sustained training, mentoring, and the strengthening of social capital that enabled them to participate more actively in household and community decision-making processes (Savira et al., 2025). Similarly, community-based empowerment programs integrating economic development with health and social initiatives have demonstrated that when behavioral change is supported through structured engagement, communities show higher participation rates in local institutions such as integrated health posts and cooperative economic activities (Siregar et al., 2025).

These findings indicate that sustainable empowerment requires more than economic stimulation; it requires the systematic development of a "behavioral transformation framework" within empowerment programs. Such a framework includes financial literacy, entrepreneurial discipline, cooperation, and adaptive problem-solving skills. Without these components, economic interventions risk being absorbed into existing behavioral patterns, leading to temporary improvements that do not persist.

This interpretation helps explain why many Empowered Village interventions in NTB produce limited long-term transformation despite significant resource allocation. When behavioral and cultural dimensions are not addressed systematically, households may revert to pre-intervention practices once external support ends. Consequently, empowerment programs risk becoming episodic interventions rather than continuous processes of social transformation.

Therefore, cultural poverty should not be understood as an individual failure but as a structural condition reflecting the absence of sustained, transformative engagement within empowerment programs. Addressing this dimension requires a shift from short-term assistance models toward long-term participatory learning processes that enable communities to reflect on their economic practices critically and gradually reconstruct their livelihood strategies.

In this sense, Transformative Empowerment Theory provides a critical lens for understanding that meaningful poverty reduction cannot be achieved without addressing the interplay among economic resources, behavioral change, and institutional learning. The persistence of cultural poverty in NTB thus reflects not only community-level constraints but also limitations in the design of empowerment interventions that have not fully integrated transformative learning processes into their implementation framework.

5. Thematic Programs, Local Potential, and the Problem of Policy Standardization

The implementation of Thematic Empowerment Villages in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) reflects a broader policy tendency toward standardization in rural development programs. Through village development planning mechanisms (Musrenbangdes), villages are often encouraged to align their development proposals with predefined thematic categories such as food security, tourism, and environmental sustainability. While this thematic approach is intended to streamline program

implementation and facilitate monitoring, the literature suggests that it may inadvertently produce a gap between policy design and local socio-economic realities.

Empirical studies indicate that not all villages possess the same capacity to identify and develop proposals based on their genuine local potential. As a result, many villages tend to replicate successful models from other regions or adjust their local conditions to fit predetermined thematic categories. This phenomenon reflects a form of policy imitation that prioritizes administrative compliance over contextual relevance, thereby limiting the possibility of genuinely place-based development.

The experience of tourism and creative economy empowerment in Jamalsari Village demonstrates that when development programs are grounded in participatory identification of local potential, more sustainable outcomes can be achieved. In this case, the formation of Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis), the development of homestays, and the promotion of local products through digital platforms emerged from community-driven processes rather than top-down thematic assignment (Suwarti & Aryaningtyas, 2025). This suggests that the effectiveness of empowerment programs is closely related to the degree of local ownership and contextual alignment.

Similarly, the development of an orange peel waste-based economy in Poncokusumo Village illustrates that successful empowerment requires a strong connection between program design and local resources. The transformation of agricultural waste into economically valuable products such as flour, tea, and eco-enzymes was made possible through targeted program design that aligned with local commodity strengths, supported by mentoring and institutional facilitation through the DEDAYA initiative (Al et al., 2025). In this case, the program succeeded not because of thematic conformity but because of contextual specificity.

From the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, these findings highlight the importance of contextualized empowerment processes. Transformation cannot be achieved through uniform program templates because social and economic realities vary significantly across villages. Empowerment requires flexibility, participatory engagement, and the recognition of local agency in defining development pathways.

The tendency toward thematic uniformity creates a structural risk in empowerment programs. When villages are required to fit their development plans into standardized categories, innovation may be constrained and local knowledge marginalized. In such conditions, empowerment programs risk becoming administrative exercises rather than transformative processes of social change.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the NTB context, where villages with limited capacity often adopt similar thematic proposals without adequate differentiation. As a result, economic activities may become homogenized, leading to competition within narrow local markets and reducing the sustainability of village enterprises. In some cases, this has led to the collapse of similar small businesses developed simultaneously, lacking sufficient market differentiation and institutional support.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that policy standardization, while administratively efficient, may inadvertently undermine the transformative potential of empowerment programs. A more effective approach would balance administrative coordination with contextual flexibility, enabling villages to design empowerment strategies that reflect their unique social, cultural, and economic conditions.

In this sense, Transformative Empowerment Theory emphasizes that genuine empowerment must preserve local agency. Without such flexibility, empowerment programs risk reproducing dependency in a different administrative form, in which villages comply with thematic frameworks without achieving meaningful social transformation.

6. Poverty Reduction Targets and the Problem of Numerical Governance Bias

Poverty alleviation programs in Indonesia, including the Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), are often designed around ambitious quantitative targets. These targets typically aim for significant reductions in poverty rates, sometimes approaching single-digit levels or even near zero. From an administrative and political perspective, such targets provide clear benchmarks for performance evaluation and policy accountability.

However, the literature suggests that an overemphasis on numerical targets can produce unintended consequences in the implementation of poverty programs. Studies indicate that when statistical indicators primarily define success, program implementers may prioritize achieving numerical outcomes over substantive social transformation. In such contexts, the logic of reporting can gradually replace the logic of empowerment, shifting attention from long-term community capacity building to short-term target fulfillment.

The case of poverty reduction initiatives in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), particularly through the "Red Wine" program, illustrates this tension. Although substantial financial resources were distributed across numerous villages, program evaluations revealed that success was frequently measured by the number of

recipient villages and the volume of funds allocated, rather than by sustained improvements in household welfare or community resilience (Toda, 2016). This indicates that numerical expansion in program coverage does not necessarily correspond to meaningful poverty-reduction outcomes.

A similar pattern is observed in Empowered Village programs in Mojokerto, where evaluations concluded that despite formal program success, continuous improvement was still needed, particularly in strengthening implementers' capacity and enhancing community understanding of program objectives (Nisak & Kusbandrijo, 2025). These findings suggest that administrative indicators may capture procedural success but fail to fully represent the quality of social transformation occurring at the community level.

From the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, this phenomenon reflects a shift from empowerment-oriented governance to what can be conceptualized as "numerical governance." In this model, policy success is defined primarily through measurable outputs such as poverty rates, budget absorption, and the number of beneficiaries. While such indicators are important for accountability, they do not necessarily reflect changes in community autonomy, social relations, or collective capability.

In the context of NTB, this numerical orientation creates a structural tension within empowerment programs. Field implementation is heavily influenced by reporting requirements, leading to a situation in which completing administrative targets is prioritized over the depth of community engagement. As a result, program success may be formally recorded even when substantive changes in livelihood strategies, economic behavior, and social cohesion remain limited.

This condition reinforces the paradox identified throughout this study: poverty reduction programs may appear successful in statistical terms while simultaneously producing limited transformative impact at the community level. The emphasis on numerical performance indicators risks reducing empowerment to a technical exercise of data reporting, rather than a sustained process of social change.

Therefore, a critical implication of these findings is the need to re-evaluate the role of quantitative indicators in poverty alleviation programs. While numerical measures are necessary for monitoring and evaluation, they should be complemented with qualitative indicators that capture changes in community capacity, institutional strength, and social transformation. Without such a balance, poverty programs risk remaining trapped in a cycle of administrative success without transformative substance.

7. Toward a Transformative Empowered Village Model in West Nusa Tenggara

The synthesis of findings across previous sections demonstrates that the main challenge of the Empowered Village Program in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) does not lie in the absence of policy instruments or administrative capacity. Instead, the core issue is the limited integration of transformative principles into program design and implementation. While administrative structures such as poverty databases, funding mechanisms, thematic planning, and performance indicators are relatively well developed, they do not automatically translate into sustained social transformation at the community level.

From the perspective of Transformative Empowerment Theory, effective poverty alleviation requires a shift from a resource-distribution paradigm to a capability-building and consciousness-transformation paradigm. This implies that empowerment should be understood as a long-term process of enhancing community agency, strengthening social institutions, and fostering collective capacity to manage economic and social change independently. The findings of this study suggest that such transformative dimensions remain insufficiently embedded within the current Empowered Village framework.

Based on a synthesis of empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation, this study proposes a reorientation toward a Transformative Empowered Village Model comprising several key principles.

First, poverty identification systems need to move beyond expenditure-based classifications toward multidimensional vulnerability mapping. This includes integrating asset ownership, social capital, local knowledge, and participatory community assessments into poverty databases. Such an approach would reduce the gap between administrative categorization and lived experiences of poverty, thereby minimizing social tensions related to targeting mechanisms (Lubis et al., 2025; Imelda et al., 2022; Toda, 2016).

Second, empowerment programs must incorporate structured behavioral transformation processes. This includes financial literacy, entrepreneurial capacity-building, development of work discipline, and collective learning systems implemented consistently throughout the program lifecycle. Evidence from agribusiness and community empowerment initiatives shows that sustainable outcomes are more likely when capacity-building processes are institutionalized rather than treated as supplementary activities (Siregar et al., 2025; Savira et al., 2025; Rantissi, 2024).

Third, strengthening local institutions should become the central axis of empowerment interventions. Institutions such as Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), community groups, and local economic organizations should not function merely as program recipients but as long-term governance actors capable of sustaining economic activities beyond the intervention period. Successful cases

demonstrate that institutional strengthening significantly enhances the durability of empowerment outcomes (Barung et al., 2025; Orbawati et al., 2024; Al et al., 2025).

Fourth, empowerment should be designed as an ecosystem-based approach rather than a household-based intervention. This involves integrating economic programs with education, health, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion initiatives. The evidence suggests that multidimensional interventions produce more sustainable outcomes because they address the interconnected nature of rural vulnerability (Orbawati et al., 2024; Siregar et al., 2025).

Finally, the evaluation framework of empowerment programs must be reoriented toward qualitative transformation indicators. In addition to poverty-reduction statistics and budget execution, evaluation systems should include measures of community autonomy, institutional resilience, behavioral change, and social cohesion. Without such indicators, empowerment programs risk remaining confined to administrative success without substantive transformation.

Overall, this study argues that the paradox between administrative design and social transformation in the Empowered Village Program is not merely an operational issue but a structural and epistemological problem in how poverty and empowerment are conceptualized. Addressing this paradox requires a fundamental shift in policy thinking—from managing poverty through administrative instruments to transforming it through sustained social capability development.

In this sense, the proposed Transformative Empowered Village Model provides an alternative framework that bridges administrative efficiency with social transformation, ensuring that poverty alleviation programs in NTB move beyond procedural success toward meaningful and sustainable empowerment outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study shows that the Empowered Village Program in NTB is in the same paradox as many other village poverty alleviation programs in Indonesia: very strong as an administrative design, but still weak as a design for social change. The use of poverty data, expenditure-based approaches, direct assistance schemes, uniform program themes, and ambitious numerical targets yields success on paper. However, it fails to adequately address cultural poverty, change mindsets, and strengthen local institutions.

Various studies on Rumah Zakat Empowered Villages, Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) development, local tourism, seed agribusiness, and the village creative economy show that integrating mentoring, economic literacy, institutional strengthening, and meaningful participation can produce more lasting social change. Therefore, NTB Empowered Villages need to move beyond administrative logic to a social learning movement in the village: villages that learn to rethink work and money, restructure local institutions, and develop an economy based on their own potential. If this dimension is strengthened, poverty reduction will no longer stop at monthly expenditure figures but will become a profound and sustainable transformation of the village's economic culture.

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