

# Empowering Coastal Communities: Policy and Practice in the Bajo Fishing Community of Soropia, Southeast Sulawesi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v7i2.1290>

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the empowerment of the Bajo traditional fishing community in Soropia Subdistrict, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The research aims to analyze the socio-economic conditions of the Bajo community, identify key challenges in the empowerment process, and formulate a context-based empowerment model. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed to capture in-depth insights into the lived experiences of the community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and focus group discussions involving fishermen, community leaders, women, and local stakeholders. The data were analyzed using an interactive model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the Bajo community remains highly dependent on traditional fishing activities, with unstable income influenced by seasonal and environmental factors. Structural challenges such as limited access to capital, technology, education, and markets contribute to their socio-economic vulnerability. Existing empowerment programs tend to be top-down and lack sustainability and community participation. However, the study also identifies significant local potentials, including rich marine resources, strong social capital, local ecological knowledge, and the active role of women in household economies.*

*This study argues that effective empowerment requires a holistic and participatory approach that integrates economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The proposed model emphasizes strengthening local institutions, enhancing human capacity, promoting sustainable resource management, and supporting gender-inclusive development. The study contributes to the literature on coastal community empowerment by offering a contextual and integrative framework applicable to traditional maritime communities.*

## KEYWORDS

*Bajo community; community empowerment; traditional fishermen; sustainable livelihood; coastal development.*

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional fishing community of Bajo is one of the oldest maritime communities in the Southeast Asian region known as "sea nomads" (Bellina et al., 2021; Hayati, 2023). Their social, cultural, and economic identity is very closely tied to the sea as the main living space (Hong, 2016). In the Indonesian context, the Bajo community is spread across various

coastal areas, including in Soropia District, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province (Maulidyna et al., 2021; Asnaedi et al., 2025). The presence of the Bajo people in this region is not only part of the local social structure, but also contributes to the dynamics of the coastal economy through traditional fishing activities.

Historically, the Bajo people have had a nomadic lifestyle that relied on the availability of marine resources (Jers et al., 2025). They move around following the fishing season and settle temporarily in areas with abundant resource potential (Aburto et al., 2009). However, in modern developments, now most of the Bajo people have begun to settle in coastal areas and build permanent settlements, such as in Bajo Indah Village, Mekar Village, and Leppe Village in Soropia District (Sinapoy et al., 2020). This change in lifestyle shows a significant social transformation from marine communities to semi-permanent coastal communities (Ariando et al., 2025).

In Soropia District, the Bajo people generally make a living as traditional fishermen using simple fishing gear such as fishing rods, nets, and traditional diving gear (Stacey, 2007). Their economic activities are greatly influenced by natural conditions, seasons, and the availability of marine resources (Chen et al., 2024). This high dependence on nature makes them a vulnerable group to environmental changes, including climate change and the degradation of coastal ecosystems. Research shows that Bajo fishermen in this region have experienced the impacts of climate change and are trying to adapt through certain economic and social strategies (Ahmad Wani et al., 2018).

In addition, the Bajo people in Soropia also face various structural problems related to education, health, economy, and infrastructure aspects (Jalil et al., 2026). The low level of public education is one of the inhibiting factors in improving the quality of human resources. The lack of awareness of the importance of education causes the young generation of Bajo to tend to continue their work as fishermen without having alternative skills. This has an impact on limited social mobility and wider economic opportunities (Hajrah et al., 2024).

In the economic aspect, the limitation of facilities and infrastructure is the main challenge in supporting fishermen's activities (Tan et al., 2023). The lack of adequate marketing facilities and lack of access to modern fisheries technology cause the economic value of the catch to be relatively low (Hungevu et al., 2025). In addition, limited access to business capital and financial institutions is also an obstacle in the development of the fishery business of the Bajo community. Environmental problems are also a crucial issue in the lives of the people of Bajo. Degradation of coastal ecosystems such as mangrove damage, sedimentation, and unfriendly fishing practices also threaten the sustainability of marine resources (Nichols et al., 2018). In fact, in some cases, destructive fishing practices such as the use of explosives are still found, which have a serious impact on marine ecosystems and the sustainability of fishermen's livelihoods (Ahmed et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the Bajo people also have great potential that can be developed within the framework of empowerment (Cahyaningrum, 2017). The abundant potential of marine resources in the Soropia area allows the development of fishery-based businesses and processed marine products. For example, innovations in processed products such as cod fish meatballs and other seafood-based foods have been carried out as an effort to increase the added value of the community's economy. In addition, the development of local products such as processed sea urchins (tayo and tetehe) shows the existence of creativity and economic potential based on local wisdom that can be further developed (Hak, 2023).

However, various empowerment programs that have been carried out still face challenges in their implementation. A less participatory approach, limited coordination between institutions, and lack of optimal program integration are factors that hinder the effectiveness of empowerment. Therefore, a more holistic, participatory, and based on the local needs and potential of the Bajo community is needed.

Thus, the study of the empowerment of the Bajo traditional fishing community in Soropia District is very important to understand the socio-economic dynamics of coastal communities and formulate effective and sustainable empowerment strategies. This article aims to analyze the existing conditions of the Bajo community, identify the problems faced, and formulate an empowerment model based on the local potential and cultural wisdom of the community.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### ***Research Approach and Design***

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design (Yin, 2014). This approach was chosen because it is able to understand in depth complex social phenomena, especially related to the empowerment of the Bajo traditional fishing community in Sorapia District, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province. Case studies allow researchers to explore social realities holistically, contextually, and based on people's lived experiences.

Epistemologically, this research is based on a constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as the result of the construction of social and cultural interaction. Thus, the focus of the research is not only on the outcome of empowerment, but also on the process, meaning, and social dynamics that accompany it.

### ***Research Location***

The research was carried out in Soopia District, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province, with a focus on the Bajo community living in coastal areas, such as Bajo Indah Village, Mekar Village, and Leppe Village. This location was chosen purposively because:

1. It is one of the main pockets of the Bajo community.
2. It has the characteristics of traditional fishermen with high dependence on marine resources.
3. Being targeted by various government empowerment programs and non-governmental institutions.

### ***Research Informant***

The determination of informants was carried out by purposive sampling by considering the involvement, knowledge, and experience of informants related to the issue of empowerment of the Bajo community. To enrich the data, snowball sampling techniques are also used.

The categories of informants include:

- Key informants: Traditional Bajo fishermen (heads of families, fisher women, and youth).
- Key informants: Bajo indigenous leaders, fishermen's group leaders, and community leaders.
- Supporting informants: Village/sub-district government officials, empowerment program facilitators, and NGO representatives.

The number of informants is flexible and follows the principle of data saturation, which is when the information obtained has been repeated and no longer produces new findings (Neuman, 2014).

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

This research uses several qualitative data collection techniques, namely:

- a. In-depth Interview

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the experiences, perceptions, and views of informants related to community

empowerment. Interview guidelines are structured flexibly to allow for more in-depth exploration of issues.

b. Participatory Observation

The researcher conducted direct observations of community activities, such as fishing activities, processing of catches, and social interactions in the community. This observation aims to understand the socio-cultural context more comprehensively.

c. Documentation

Documentation is carried out through the collection of official documents, such as empowerment program reports, village statistical data, and policy archives related to the Bajo community. In addition, visual documentation (photos) is also used to support data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data analysis in this study uses an interactive model from Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which consists of three main stages:

1. Data Reduction

The process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from the field. The data is categorized based on themes such as socio-economic conditions, forms of empowerment, and challenges faced by the community.

2. Data Display

The data that has been reduced is then presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, matrix, or thematic table to facilitate interpretation.

3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification

The final stage is in the form of extracting meaning from the data that has been analyzed, as well as verification through triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2014).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Socio-Economic Conditions of the Bajo Fishing Community***

The results of the study show that the majority of the Bajo people in Soropia District still depend on the traditional capture fisheries sector as the main source of livelihood. Fishing activities are carried out daily (one day fishing) using simple equipment such as fishing rods, nets, and traditional diving equipment.

Fishermen's income tends to be unstable and is greatly influenced by weather conditions and the fish season. In certain seasons, the catch is abundant, but in the famine season, many fishermen do not get enough produce to meet their daily needs. One of the informants stated: "If the weather is good, we can get a lot of fish. But if the wind is strong or the season is not good, sometimes we go home without success." (Bajo fisherman, 45 years old)

In addition, the level of public education is relatively low, especially in the older generation. Many children do not continue their education to a higher level due to economic limitations and work culture from an early age. This has an impact on the low quality of human resources and limited job opportunities outside the fisheries sector.

### ***Adaptation Patterns and Livelihood Strategies***

In the face of economic uncertainty, the Bajo people have developed various adaptation strategies in order to survive. The findings show that there is a diversification of livelihoods, although still on a limited scale. Some of the forms of strategy found include:

First, Diversification of work: Some fishermen work as laborers, builders, or small businesses.

Second, the role of women: Bajo women play an active role in supporting the family economy through the processing of marine products, such as salted fish, shredded fish, and other processed products.

Third, Social network system: When experiencing difficulties, people take advantage of kinship relationships to help each other, especially in economic crisis conditions. This method is quite effective in helping the Bajo community in solving the problems that are being experienced.

A female informant stated:

"If the husband can't get fish, we process the existing fish or we sell food so that there is still income. Even though the income we earn is relatively small, it really helps the sustainability of our family's life" (Perempuan Bajo, 38 years old)

These findings suggest that despite being in limitations, the Bajo people have quite strong adaptive abilities in maintaining their survival.

### ***Form and Implementation of Empowerment Programs***

The research found that various empowerment programs have been carried out by governments and non-governmental institutions. The identified forms of the program include:

- Skills training, such as training in processing seafood and opening small businesses. For example, such as stalls in front of the house.
- Assistance with fishing gear, such as tasi, fishing rods, and others.
- The formation of fishermen's groups, which aims to assist Bajo fishermen in solving the socio-economic problems they face.
- Productive social and economic assistance programs. The majority of the Bajo community still depends on government assistance such as: Harapan family program, Non-Cash Food Assistance, and other productive economic assistance.

However, the implementation of the program is not fully optimal. Some informants said that programs are often top-down and lack community involvement in planning. This causes the program not always to meet local needs.

"Sometimes help comes, but it is not in accordance with the needs we need. Besides that, we are not involved in planning time." (Chairman of the Fishermen's Group)

In addition, there are limitations in the sustainability of the program. Many programs stop after the initial stage without follow-up assistance, so the impact is not sustainable.

### ***The Role of Social Capital in Empowerment***

Social capital is one of the main strengths in the Bajo community. The results of the study show that there is a high level of solidarity between community members, which is reflected in the practice of mutual cooperation and mutual assistance. The practice of helping is reflected in social, economic, cultural, religious, and other aspects.

Fishermen's groups are an important forum in strengthening cooperation and coordination between members. Through these groups, the community can share information, resources, and experiences. In addition, high trust between community members is a supporting factor in the success of various local initiatives.

However, this social capital has not been fully integrated with the formal institutional system. The lack of support from external parties causes the potential of social capital to not be utilized optimally in the empowerment process.

### ***Challenges in Empowerment of the Bajo Community***

The research identified several main challenges in empowering the Bajo community in Soopia District, namely:

- a. Limited Access to Resources  
People have difficulties in accessing business capital, fisheries technology, and markets. Dependence on middlemen causes fishermen's bargaining position to be weak.
- b. Low Quality of Human Resources  
Low education levels and lack of alternative skills are obstacles to the economic development of the community.
- c. Environmental Degradation  
The destruction of marine ecosystems, such as coral reefs and mangroves, has an impact on declining fish catches. This includes environmental pollution issues sourced from household, industrial, and transportation waste
- d. Less Participatory Program Approach  
Top-down empowerment programs are less effective because they do not consider the local needs and potential of the community.

Behind the various challenges, this research also found a number of local potentials that can be developed as a basis for empowerment, including:

- Abundant marine resources
- Local wisdom in marine management
- The active role of women in the household economy
- Strong social capital

This potential shows that the Bajo community has great opportunities to be developed through community-based empowerment approaches and local wisdom.

Based on field findings, the empowerment of the Bajo community in Soropia District can be categorized into three typologies:

First, Economic Empowerment: Focus on increasing income through fishing gear assistance and productive businesses.

Second, Social Empowerment: Strengthening local institutions and increasing community capacity.

Third, Environmental Empowerment: Marine resource conservation efforts and sustainable fisheries practices.

However, these three aspects have not been optimally integrated, so a more comprehensive empowerment model is needed.

Overall, the findings of the study show that the empowerment of the Bajo fishing community in Soropia District is still in the transition stage. On the one hand, there are various empowerment initiatives that have been carried out, but on the other hand, there are still various structural and cultural obstacles that hinder its effectiveness.

The Bajo community has great potential that can be developed, but it requires a more participatory, local potential-based, and sustainability-oriented approach to empowerment. Thus, these findings are an important basis for formulating more effective empowerment strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examines in depth the dynamics of empowerment of the Bajo traditional fishing community in Soopia District, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province, using a qualitative approach based on case studies. The results show that the Bajo people still face various complex structural challenges, including economic vulnerability, limited access to resources, low quality of human resources, and pressures on the coastal environment.

The high dependence on the traditional capture fisheries sector with simple technology makes the Bajo people very vulnerable to seasonal changes, fluctuations in catches, and market dynamics. In addition, the patron-client relationship with middlemen weakens the

bargaining position of fishermen in the local economic system, thus having an impact on the low level of welfare.

On the other hand, this study also found that the Bajo people have great potential that can be the basis for empowerment. This potential includes the wealth of marine resources, local wisdom in ecosystem management, strong social capital, and the active role of women in supporting the household economy. However, this potential has not been fully optimized within the framework of existing empowerment programs.

The implementation of the empowerment program that has been carried out so far still tends to be top-down and not fully participatory. As a result, programs often do not fit the local needs and context of the community. In addition, the weak sustainability of the program and the lack of mentoring are inhibiting factors in achieving optimal results.

Theoretically, this study emphasizes that the empowerment of the Bajo fishing community must be understood as a multidimensional process that includes economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects. Capabilities based on capability, sustainable livelihood, and social capital have proven to be relevant in explaining the dynamics of coastal community empowerment.

Thus, the empowerment of the Bajo community in Soropia District requires a holistic, participatory, and sustainable approach, by placing the community as the main subject in the development process.

The local government needs to develop economic empowerment programs based on the local potential of the Bajo community, such as: *First*, the development of household industries based on marine products (processed fish, dry products, and typical Bajo foods). *Second*, the provision of access to capital through fishermen's cooperatives or microfinance institutions. *Finally*, strengthening the value chain by improving market access and reducing dependence on middlemen.

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