

Discourse on Poverty and Empowerment Practices of Poor Family Groups of the Family Hope Program in Makassar City

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the discourse on poverty and the practice of empowering poor families in the Family Hope Program (PKH) in Makassar City. PKH is known as a conditional cash transfer scheme that links cash assistance with compliance with education and health requirements, but at the praxis level, empowerment is often realized through Family Capacity Building Meetings, social assistance, and data verification mechanisms that form power relations between the state, companions, and beneficiary families. With a conceptual qualitative approach that combines critical discourse analysis of the Fairclough model and a synthesis of the latest scientific literature, this article shows that the discourse of feasibility and compliance tends to shift the meaning of poverty from structural issues, such as informal inequality, public services, and urban slums, to individual behavioral issues. The novelty of this article lies in the formulation of three poverty discourse paths that work simultaneously in PKH in Makassar, namely administrative categorization, behavior normalization, and political legitimacy, as well as in the reading of empowerment as a double-faced arena that has the potential to strengthen poor family agency while reproducing administrative discipline if not supported by local economic access. The policy implications offered include strengthening rights-based empowerment, improving poverty data governance, and expanding the space for deliberation for beneficiary families as policy subjects, not just administrative objects of social assistance.

Keywords: poverty discourse; empowerment; Family Hope Program; poor families; Makassar; social assistance

1. Background

In Indonesia's social protection architecture, the Family Hope Program (PKH) is positioned as a poverty reduction instrument oriented towards human capital development through the fulfillment of education and health requirements. Quantitative evidence based on panel surveys suggests that PKH can drive certain

improvements in household consumption, although results are not always uniform on children's educational attainment and prenatal visitation, meaning the effectiveness of programs often depends on service capacity, implementation design, and regional context (Hudang, Hariyanto, & Handoyo, 2024). Long-term experimental findings reinforce this picture:

PKH has been shown to push some recipient families out of the agricultural sector towards non-agricultural employment, but the impact is moderate and highly dependent on distance to the labor market (Yuliani & Nasrudin, 2024). Meanwhile, an evaluation of unconditional cash assistance showed that short-term transfers did not necessarily change the behavior and preferences of beneficiaries, a finding that challenges the assumption that financial incentives automatically shape economic independence (Al Izzati, Suryadarma, & Suryahadi, 2023).

At the governance level, policy studies affirm that progress in poverty reduction in Indonesia requires improving program design, sharpening targets, integrating services, and strengthening implementing institutions so that interventions do not stop at short-term assistance, but encourage social mobility (Nugroho, Amir, Maududy, & Marlina, 2021). Recent implementation studies of PKH in various regions show a consistent pattern: programs contribute positively to educational participation and access to health, but their effectiveness is limited by administrative problems, inaccurate recipient data, and weak monitoring at the local level (Erlianti, Handoko, Sukristyanto, & Saputra, 2025). Similar issues are also seen in the analysis of the diffusion of conditional cash assistance policies from international development institutions to the Indonesian domestic context, which shows that the adoption of the global CCT model is not neutral, but rather is characterized by negotiations of bureaucratic interests and limited implementation capacity in the field (Larasati & Jannah, 2022).

However, contemporary policy studies remind us that poverty alleviation policies are not just a set of technical instruments, but also an arena for the production of meaning: who is called poor, why is considered poor, and how "poverty" is treated in policy language and field practice. Ethnographic research on the politics of knowledge in cash assistance schemes in Indonesia shows that the practice of measuring and collecting poverty data is paradoxical: on the one hand, it allows for large-scale aid distribution, but on the other hand it simplifies the reality of poverty so that it triggers mistargeting that is constantly repaired by state officials, local figures, and communities (McCarthy, Nooteboom, Hadi, Kutaneegara, & Muliati, 2023). In political years, social assistance also often experiences increased budgets and a shift in narratives into a

commodity of legitimacy, which can obscure long-term social goals and reinforce electoral interests (Suhirman, Mashilal, & Sahala, 2025).

In Makassar City, as a large city with urbanization dynamics, informal work, and inequality of access to services, PKH operates in complex social realities. Recent studies of social inequality in urban Makassar have identified three interrelated factors: unequal access to education, limited formal employment opportunities, and deviations in the implementation of social policies that make some slum dwellers never involved in development planning (Tahir G., Tinri, & Anas, 2025). In such a context, poor families are not merely "recipient objects," but actors who negotiate aid, shame, rules of compliance, and survival strategies. Therefore, the sociological question is not only "whether PKH is effective," but "what discourse works behind PKH" and "how empowerment is practiced as a social relationship that shapes subjects, compliance, and agency."

Theoretically, this article uses two complementary lenses. First, a policy discourse approach that views policy texts, media narratives, and implementation practices as the production of meanings that affect who is "deserving," what is "rational," and how poverty is interpreted in the public sphere. The application of critical discourse analysis to development issues and agrarian conflicts in Indonesia shows how Fairclough's framework is able to unravel the relationship between texts, discursive practices, and social practices in seemingly technocratic policies (Berenschot & Saraswati, 2024). The framework of governmentality also enriches this reading: at the frontline level, the welfare bureaucracy often works through the production of expectations and "ruthless optimism" that keeps beneficiaries complying with procedures even when substantive outcomes are uncertain (England, 2024). A reading of incentive-based welfare administration in Indonesia also shows that the power relationship between social workers, the state, and the beneficiary families is formed by a remuneration structure that can actually perpetuate the inequality that the program itself wants to overcome (McLaren, Qonitah, & Widianingsih, 2022). The gender dimension is also relevant, considering that PKH by design targets women as the main recipients, so that social relations in households and communities are also reshaped by the position of women as subjects of compliance as well as agents of change (Anggraini, Khairiyah, & Hasanah, 2024).

Second, the framework of empowerment practices is understood as a multifaceted social relationship: it can be a space for capacity building and agency, but it can also be a mechanism for normalization through compliance, monitoring, and feasibility evaluation. A study of the Family Capacity Building Meeting shows that this forum can run well as a learning space, but its success in encouraging independent graduation is highly dependent on companion capacity, module support, and connectivity to economic opportunities (Triano & Machdum, 2023; Gunawan, Hartiadi, Ibrahim, & Afda, 2024). The literature on multi-sectoral partnerships in social protection confirms that the leverage of poverty alleviation increases when cross-agency synergy is directed at the sustainability of services, not just the distribution of aid (Kuntjorowati et al., 2024), while studies on the transformative capacity of communities in the face of crises show that PKH can contribute to adaptive social resilience if empowerment is managed collectively, rather than solely individually (Komarawati, Nurdin, Gunawan, & Nurwati, 2025). Evidence of conceptual mechanisms in the realm of mental health adds an important nuance: cash transfers have the potential to improve the psychological well-being and life opportunities of young people through indirect channels, such as reducing family economic pressures, so that empowerment cannot be reduced to a mere indicator of administrative compliance (Evans-Lacko et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the findings of implementation in various cities show mixed and often suboptimal results: the fulfillment of basic biomedical needs of children under five who receive PKH is still influenced by many factors beyond cash assistance (Fauziyah, Baroya, & Sandra, 2024), the implementation of PKH policies in Medan City is considered not optimal due to weak target mapping and inter-agency coordination (Nasution, Sobri, Azhar, & Najib, 2023), and studies from a sharia economic perspective show that the impact of PKH on welfare is partial and needs to be complemented by productive business assistance (Romadhoni & Hidayatullah, 2025). This series of findings strengthens the argument that the effectiveness of PKH cannot be understood only from the number of distributions, but must be read through how the feasibility discourse and empowerment practices intertwine in the field.

The novelty of this article lies in two things. First, this article formulates three paths of

poverty discourse that work simultaneously in PKH in the context of South Sulawesi's big cities, namely administrative categorization, behavioral normalization, and political legitimacy, a reading that has not been explicitly proposed in the Makassar-based PKH study. Second, this article combines the analysis of the critical discourse of the Fairclough model with a synthesis of cutting-edge open research (2021–2026) to read the ambivalence of the P2K2 empowerment space, namely its potential as an arena for strengthening agency as well as its risks as an instrument of administrative discipline, when both have not been analyzed simultaneously in one framework. Based on this framework, this article aims to develop an analytical framework to read PKH as a discursive practice and an empowerment practice at the same time, with a conceptual focus on Makassar, while positioning the program as a field of power that can open up opportunities for emancipation, but can also produce social discipline if empowerment is reduced to mere administrative compliance.

The significance of this study is also supported by the fact that Makassar is one of the largest urbanization nodes in eastern Indonesia, where rural-urban migration, the informal sector, and densely populated settlements are intertwined with household-based social protection schemes. In such situations, nationally designed policies must be translated into local contexts that have their own social, economic, and cultural logic, so that the discourses of "feasibility" and "compliance" produced at the central policy level can experience a refraction of meaning when meeting the realities of urban poor families. Thus, this article is not intended to assess the success of PKH quantitatively, but rather to open up a space for critical reading of how policy language, mentoring practices, and the experiences of beneficiary families shape each other. The next section will outline the research methods used, followed by results and discussions that analyze the three discourse paths in more detail, before ending with conclusions and policy implications.

2. Research Methods

This paper is compiled as a conceptual-qualitative article based on document analysis and open-access research synthesis. The main sources include open-access scientific articles on PKH, P2K2, social protection, and the study of social assistance discourse in the context of political contestation, published in the range of 2021 to 2026 and have an active DOI that can be

searched through Google Scholar. This source is complemented by PKH policy documents and aggregate data on Makassar's urban social disparities to provide empirical context for discursive readings.

The analysis is carried out through two complementary stages. The first stage is thematic reading to identify discourse patterns, such as the keywords "feasibility," "compliance," "graduation," and "independence," as well as patterns of empowerment practices, such as the form of group meetings, the role of companions, and barriers to participation. The second stage is the application of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model to three interrelated dimensions, namely (1) the analysis of policy texts and media narratives regarding PKH, (2) discursive practice analysis that includes how the text is produced, distributed, and consumed by policy actors and beneficiary families, and (3) social practice analysis that places PKH discourse in the context of the socio-economic structure of Makassar City. This three-dimensional model has been applied similarly to the study of social assistance discourse and agrarian conflict in Indonesia (Suhirman et al., 2025; Berenschot & Saraswati, 2024), so that its use in the Makassar PKH case is adaptive to proven methodological traditions.

The analytical framework of this research is described in Figure 1, which shows the flow from resource collection, thematic reading and three-dimensional CDA, to the formulation of three paths of poverty discourse and ambivalence reading of empowerment space.

Gambar 1. Kerangka Analitis Penelitian

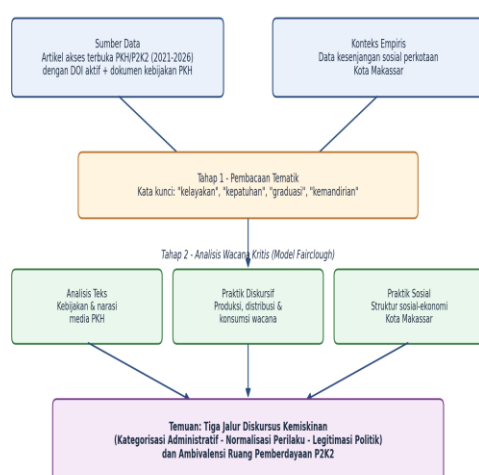


Figure 1. Research Analytical Framework: Thematic Reading Flow and Critical Discourse Analysis Fairclough Model

PKH policy discourse tends to place poverty in the language of "feasibility" that must be proven through data and verification, as well as "compliance" that must be demonstrated through service access behavior. In this logic, poor families are produced as administrative categories that are constantly assessed, examined, and evaluated. Research on the politics of knowledge in cash assistance schemes in Indonesia confirms that the practice of data collection and poverty measurement is a metric that simplifies social reality, thereby triggering target errors that are constantly repaired by state officials, local figures, and communities, while depoliticizing fundamental questions about distribution (McCarthy et al., 2023). As a result, poverty easily shifts from the problem of inequality of employment, housing, and public services to a problem of administrative order and compliance with conditions. A similar pattern is also seen in the study of critical discourse on national strategic projects and agrarian conflicts, which shows how development policy language tends to use positive diction and technocratic terms to legitimize decisions that impact vulnerable communities, while marginalizing alternative narratives from affected groups (Berenschot & Saraswati, 2024).

At the same time, the empowerment dimension through Family Capacity Building Meetings (P2K2) has the potential to become a social learning space that restores the dignity of poor families as subjects who learn, discuss, and strengthen parenting strategies. Qualitative findings suggest that P2K2 can run "well" as a process, but it has not automatically encouraged independent graduation due to structural and institutional barriers, such as the capacity of companions, the availability of operational support, the quality of modules, and connectivity to economic opportunities (Triano & Machdum, 2023). Studies on the role of social companions in encouraging independent graduation reinforce this picture: psychological support and facilitation of access to public services by companions do increase the motivation of beneficiary families, but successful graduation remains constrained by cross-institutional coordination and understanding of diverse socio-economic conditions in the field (Gunawan, Hartiadi, Ibrahim, & Afda, 2024). In other words, empowerment that focuses only on changing household behavior risks becoming superficial if it is not supported by access to work, informal job protection, and local economic ecosystems.

3. Results and Discussion

This dynamic becomes more complex when read in the context of Makassar City specifically. A study of urban social disparities in Makassar shows that 64 percent of slum dwellers are trapped in the low-income informal sector, while most poverty alleviation programs reportedly do not involve slum dwellers in the development planning process (Tahir G., Tinri, & Anas, 2025). This reality shows that the P2K2 empowerment space in Makassar does not operate in a vacuum, but rather deals with an uneven urban structure from the beginning, so that empowerment sessions that are only oriented towards individual behavior change risk ignoring the root of the structural problem of gaps in access to education, employment, and health services in densely populated areas. In the framework of governmentality, this situation can be read as a form of "ruthless optimism," i.e. when the welfare bureaucracy on the front lines continues to promise improvements to lives through adherence to procedures, while the economic structure of the city that underpins the success of the program is not necessarily available to the beneficiary families (England, 2024).

The gender dimension also shows the dual face of empowerment in PKH. Because women are the main targets of recipients and implementers of program obligations, gender relations within the household are also reshaped: on the one hand, women gain new participation space through P2K2 and interaction with companions, but on the other hand, they also bear a greater burden of administrative compliance than other family members (Anggraini, Khairiyah, & Hasanah, 2024). A reading based on the power relations framework for welfare administration in Indonesia also found that the incentive structure for social workers and companions can affect the quality of assistance received by beneficiary families, so that the success of empowerment does not depend solely on the motivation of individual KPM, but also on the institutional governance that oversees the companions themselves (McLaren, Qonitah, & Widianingsih, 2022).

In the broader realm, contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of multisectoral partnerships to strengthen social protection so that it is not fragmented. Studies on the effectiveness of strengthening social protection programs through partnerships show that cross-sector collaboration can increase the leverage of poverty alleviation, especially when synergy is directed at the sustainability of services and strengthening family capacity, rather than

just the distribution of aid (Kuntjorowati et al., 2024). In line with this, studies on the transformative capacity of communities in the face of crises show that PKH can contribute to adaptive social resilience if empowerment is managed collectively and across institutions, rather than as a standalone program at the household level (Komarawati, Nurdin, Gunawan, & Nurwati, 2025). Findings from the realm of mental health also provide an important nuance that cash transfers can affect the psychological well-being and life opportunities of the younger generation through indirect channels, such as reducing family economic pressure, so that the success of empowerment should be measured not only from indicators of administrative compliance, but also from improvements in the psychosocial conditions of beneficiary families (Evans-Lacko et al., 2023).

However, evidence of implementation in various cities shows mixed results and is often not optimal. The fulfillment of basic biomedical needs of children under five who receive PKH is still influenced by many factors beyond the value of cash assistance itself, such as parenting knowledge and access to health facilities (Fauziyah, Baroya, & Sandra, 2024). The implementation of the PKH policy in Medan City is considered not optimal due to weak target mapping, lack of coordination between implementing agencies, and limited distribution budgets (Nasution, Sobri, Azhar, & Najib, 2023). Studies from a sharia economic perspective on PKH recipients in Mlandangan also show that the impact of the program on welfare is partial and needs to be complemented by productive business assistance so that the benefits are sustainable (Romadhoni & Hidayatullah, 2025). This series of findings strengthens the argument that the effectiveness of PKH cannot be understood only from the number of funds disbursed, but must be read through how feasibility discourses and empowerment practices intertwine in the field, as can also be seen in the national PKH implementation study that highlights data and monitoring issues that are repeated from time to time (Erlianti, Handoko, Sukristyanto, & Saputra, 2025; Nugroho, Amir, Maududy, & Marlina, 2021).

In terms of policy politics, a reading of the discourse on social assistance shows that aid programs are easily drawn into the orbit of political legitimacy, especially in the period of electoral contestation, when social spending increases and the narrative of "state presence" is presented as performance (Suhirman, Mashilal, &

Sahala, 2025). The dissemination of the conditional cash assistance model from international development institutions to Indonesia also shows that policy adoption is not neutral, but is colored by the interests of the domestic legitimacy of the government that adopts it (Larasati & Jannah, 2022). In this context, PKH can experience tensions between "social functions" and "political functions," which ultimately affect public perception and the relationship of trust of beneficiary families towards the program, even though econometrically this program has been shown to encourage some families to move from the agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector (Yuliani & Nasrudin, 2024) and does not cause significant work disincentive effects (Al Izzati, Suryadarma, & Suryahadi, 2023).

Thus, the discourse on poverty in PKH in Makassar tends to work through three interrelated paths, as summarized in Table 1: administrative categorization (who is called poor), behavioral normalization (how the poor should act), and political legitimacy (for whose benefit these policies appear to work). These three paths do not stand alone, but rather complement each other: administrative categorization provides a database to measure compliance, behavioral normalization justifies P2K2 intervention as an individual solution, and political legitimacy ensures the sustainability of program budgets from one government period to the next. In Makassar, a sociological reading of these three paths is important so that empowerment does not stop as a ritual of compliance, but rather moves to become a tool for strengthening agencies supported by public service reform and expanding economic opportunities for beneficiary families in unequal urban areas.

Table 1. Three Paths of Poverty Discourse in PKH in Makassar City

Discourse Path	Working Mechanism	Manifestations in Makassar	Supporting Resources
Administrative Categorization	Data collection and feasibility verification based on	Residents of slums are assessed through administrative data and are vulnerable	McCarthy et al. (2023); Erlianti et al. (2025)

	poverty indicators that simplify social realities	to mistargeting	
Normalization of Behavior	P2K2 drives individual behavior change in parenting, health, and education	The effectiveness of P2K2 depends on the capacity of companions and modules, not just the will of KPM	Triano & Machdum (2023); Gunawan et al. (2024)
Political Legitimacy	Social assistance is narrated as the performance of the state's presence, especially during electoral contests	Increasing the budget and socialization of social assistance correlates with regional and national political cycles	Suhirman et al. (2025); Larasati & Jannah (2022)

A further implication of these findings is the need to distinguish between compensatory empowerment, which is simply mitigating the impact of poverty through individual behavior change, and transformative empowerment, which links strengthening family capacity with improving economic structures and public services at the urban level. Studies on multi-sector partnerships (Kuntjorowati et al., 2024) and transformative capacity of communities in facing crises (Komarawati, Nurdin, Gunawan, & Nurwati, 2025) show that the path to transformative empowerment requires synergy between Social Services, municipal governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations, rather than relying solely on P2K2 sessions as the only vehicle for empowerment. Without such synergy, the risk arises that empowerment stops at the level of "ruthless optimism" as described earlier (England, 2024), i.e. the promise of continuous improvement in life through

adherence to procedures, without the accompaniment of structural changes that allow families to truly emerge from poverty in a sustainable manner.

In the end, the reading of the discourse and empowerment proposed in this article also opens up a space for evaluation of the PKH graduation policy design. When independent graduation is driven more by shame at the labeling of poor status than by the economic independence that has actually been achieved, as mentioned in various field implementation studies, the indicators of program success need to be reviewed so that they do not only measure the number of families who leave the program, but also the quality of economic life they live after leaving the program. In other words, the success of PKH in Makassar cannot be reduced to mere distribution statistics or graduation rates, but must be read as a social process that involves negotiating the meaning of poverty, power relations between actors, and the availability of urban economic structures that support the sustainability of the welfare of beneficiary families.

To conclude this section, it is important to note that the ambivalence of empowerment does not mean that PKH does not have benefits. Quantitative evidence remains to show the positive contribution of the program to household consumption and labor sector mobility (Hudang, Hariyanto, & Handoyo, 2024; Yuliani & Nasrudin, 2024), so the arguments in this article do not intend to deny these achievements. What is emphasized is that the material benefits of PKH go hand in hand with the production of discourses on feasibility and

compliance that shape the way poor families understand and understand themselves. This double reading, between material benefits and the production of meaning, forms the basis for the policy recommendations proposed in the conclusion section, namely the need for rights-based empowerment that places beneficiary families as active subjects in determining their trajectory out of poverty, rather than simply objects whose feasibility is periodically assessed by the state administrative system.

4. Conclusion

PKH is a policy that not only provides material assistance, but also shapes the discourse on poverty through feasibility and compliance mechanisms. Although proven to provide benefits to consumption and work mobility, empowerment still faces obstacles to participation, accompanying capacity, and limited access to the local economic ecosystem, making sustainable independent graduation difficult to achieve. Therefore, PKH policies need to be directed at rights-based empowerment, strengthening the capacity of companions and P2K2, expanding local economic partnerships, improving data governance and graduation indicators that measure welfare sustainability, and preventing politicization of social assistance. This study is limited to a synthesis of literature without primary data in Makassar, so further research needs to involve interviews and observations of beneficiary families, social companions, and related officials to deepen the analysis of power relations, agencies, and implementation of PKH contextually.

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