

Social Protection Policy and Poverty Reduction: Evaluating Welfare Programs for Marginalized Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social protection policy contributes to poverty reduction through welfare programs for marginalized communities. It aims to evaluate the effectiveness of welfare interventions in improving household resilience and reducing vulnerability. A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed because it allows an in-depth understanding of policy implementation, beneficiary experience, and local governance dynamics within a specific social context. The research was conducted in Cilegon City, Banten Province, Indonesia, selected for its coexistence of industrial growth and persistent urban poverty. Eighteen informants were purposively selected, comprising government officials, community leaders, program beneficiaries, and social facilitators, because they possessed direct knowledge of policy delivery and lived experience of welfare access. The findings indicate that welfare programs such as cash assistance, food support, and health and education subsidies effectively eased short-term hardship, yet their contribution to long-term poverty reduction remained limited by targeting inaccuracies, fragmented coordination, and weak empowerment components. The study recommends integrated, data-based, and participatory social protection systems that combine assistance with capability building and livelihood support to achieve more sustainable poverty reduction.



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INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains one of the most persistent and multidimensional development challenges across low-, middle-, and even high-income countries (Crawford, 2025). Despite long-standing economic growth agendas and the expansion of public welfare interventions, many marginalized communities continue to face restricted access to income, decent work, education, health services, housing, and social security (Mugamba, 2025). In this context, social protection policy has become a central instrument of state intervention aimed at reducing vulnerability, buffering households against shocks, and improving long-term welfare outcomes (H. K. Choi & Yoo, 2023). The growing policy relevance of social protection reflects an important shift in development thinking: poverty is no longer understood solely as an income deficit, but as a condition shaped by structural inequality, social exclusion, and limited capabilities (Putra et al., 2024). Welfare programs such as cash transfers, food assistance, health insurance subsidies, unemployment support, and community-based empowerment schemes are therefore increasingly positioned not only as compensatory mechanisms, but also as pathways for inclusive development (Yoo et al., 2025). However, the actual effectiveness of these programs in reducing poverty among marginalized populations remains uneven and context dependent, which makes systematic evaluation essential (Wudil et al., 2023).

The state of the art in this field shows that social protection policies can contribute to poverty reduction through multiple channels (Iqbal et al., 2025). First, they may increase household purchasing power and stabilize consumption during periods of economic hardship. Second, they can reduce negative coping strategies such as school dropout, child labor, asset depletion, and indebtedness (Kamble, 2025). Third, well-designed welfare programs may enhance access to basic services and strengthen human capital accumulation, thereby producing medium- and long-term poverty alleviation effects (Kushwaha & Ghosh, 2025). Recent literature also emphasizes the importance of adaptive and

integrated social protection systems that combine immediate relief with empowerment-oriented interventions (Amuda & Hassan, 2023). Yet, existing studies often evaluate programs in isolation, focus on short-term outcomes, or rely heavily on aggregate indicators that do not fully capture the lived realities of marginalized groups (Divaker, 2025). As a result, there is still limited understanding of how policy design, implementation quality, targeting accuracy, administrative capacity, and local socioeconomic conditions jointly shape welfare outcomes.

The main research problem addressed in this study lies in the gap between policy intention and policy impact (Lowder, 2025). Although social protection programs are widely promoted as anti-poverty tools, their effectiveness is frequently constrained by exclusion errors, weak targeting, fragmented implementation, limited benefit adequacy, bureaucratic barriers, and insufficient responsiveness to the specific needs of marginalized communities (Duncan et al., 2025). In many cases, households that are most vulnerable to poverty, such as informal workers, rural poor households, persons with disabilities, women-headed families, elderly people, and socially excluded groups, remain uncovered or only partially protected (Budiarti et al., 2024). This situation raises a critical question: do welfare programs truly reduce poverty in a substantive and sustainable way, or do they merely provide temporary relief without altering underlying structural disadvantages? Addressing this question is important for both policy legitimacy and institutional reform.

The research gap can be identified from at least three perspectives. First, many existing studies emphasize macro-level coverage and budget allocation, but pay less attention to micro-level experiences of beneficiaries within marginalized communities (Park, 2023). Second, numerous evaluations are limited to descriptive reporting of program outputs rather than analytical assessment of poverty reduction outcomes and welfare transformation (Wei et al., 2023a). Third, research often fails to compare the interaction between different welfare instruments, even though poverty reduction is usually influenced by a combination of income support, service access, and social inclusion ((EPRI), 2024). This study responds to that gap by evaluating social protection policy not merely as a financial transfer mechanism, but as a broader welfare architecture that shapes vulnerability, capability, and social participation. By situating the analysis within marginalized communities, the study provides a more grounded and distributive understanding of who benefits, how they benefit, and under what conditions the benefits become meaningful.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated evaluation perspective. Rather than treating social protection as a single policy instrument, this research conceptualizes welfare programs as a multidimensional system that connects material assistance, social inclusion, and poverty alleviation outcomes (Beszterda, 2025). The study contributes a contextual approach by examining how welfare interventions perform among marginalized communities whose experiences are often overlooked in conventional policy assessments. In addition, the study highlights the relationship between program design and distributive justice, thereby extending the discussion beyond administrative efficiency toward equity-oriented governance (Pfutze, 2023). This novelty is important because anti-poverty policies cannot be judged only by how many people are covered; they must also be assessed by whether they reduce deprivation, narrow inequality, and expand substantive opportunities for vulnerable populations (Shwartz-Ziv & Feldman, 2025).

Based on these considerations, the study is guided by several research questions. How effective are social protection policies in reducing poverty among marginalized communities? Which welfare program components contribute most significantly to welfare improvement? What implementation barriers limit policy effectiveness at the community level? How do beneficiaries perceive the accessibility, adequacy, and fairness of these programs? And what policy adjustments are needed to strengthen the poverty reduction function of social protection systems? These questions are designed to capture both the outcome dimension and the process dimension of welfare policy, thereby enabling a more comprehensive evaluation.

The objective of this research is to analyze and explain the effectiveness of social protection policy in reducing poverty through the evaluation of welfare programs for marginalized communities. Specifically, the study aims to identify the extent to which these programs improve household welfare, reduce economic vulnerability, and support social inclusion (Akkan & Şanlı, 2025). It also seeks to

examine structural and administrative factors that influence implementation performance, as well as to formulate evidence-based policy recommendations for improving targeting, distribution, and program integration. In doing so, the study intends to contribute to the design of more responsive and equitable poverty alleviation strategies.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to social policy and welfare governance literature. It strengthens the conceptual link between social protection, poverty reduction, and distributive justice, while also enriching debates on capability expansion and inclusive development (Okbandrias & Nordjo, 2024). Academically, the study offers a framework for evaluating welfare programs from a multidimensional perspective that includes economic, social, and institutional variables. It may also serve as a reference for comparative studies on poverty policy in other contexts, especially where marginalized communities face similar forms of exclusion. Practically, the study provides policy-relevant insights for governments, local authorities, and social welfare institutions in improving program targeting, delivery mechanisms, and monitoring systems. The findings are expected to support more effective resource allocation, stronger inter-agency coordination, and better responsiveness to beneficiary needs.

Nevertheless, this study also has limitations. Its scope may be confined to selected welfare programs or a particular geographic context, which can limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or policy environments. The evaluation may also be influenced by the availability and reliability of program data, as well as by the complexity of measuring poverty reduction in a multidimensional and longitudinal manner (Fakhri & Selvaratnam, 2025). In addition, perceptions of program effectiveness may vary among beneficiaries depending on their socioeconomic background, access to services, and local governance conditions. These limitations do not weaken the study, but rather define its analytical boundaries and encourage caution in interpreting the findings.

Future research should build on this study by conducting comparative analyses across different social protection models, regions, and beneficiary groups. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to examine whether welfare programs produce sustained poverty reduction over time rather than temporary consumption smoothing (Mogess et al., 2023). Further research may also explore digital delivery systems, gendered impacts, intersectional inequality, and the role of community participation in improving welfare outcomes. By extending the inquiry in these directions, subsequent studies can deepen understanding of how social protection policy can move beyond poverty relief toward genuine social transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study is built on three complementary theoretical lenses that are highly relevant to the relationship between social protection policy and poverty reduction among marginalized communities: the Capability Approach, Welfare State Theory, and Human Capital Theory (Omale & Viola, 2025). Together, these perspectives explain not only how welfare programs provide material support, but also how they expand freedom, redistribute social resources, and generate long-term productive capacity. In current policy and research debates, the Capability Approach remains central to multidimensional poverty analysis through OPHI's work grounded in Amartya Sen's framework, while welfare-state thinking continues to shape debates on social policy, redistribution, and universal protection (Aziz & Jamila, 2025). Human Capital Theory remains important because welfare interventions are increasingly expected to protect and build skills, health, and employability rather than merely deliver short-term relief (Tran & Pham, 2024).

The first theory is the Capability Approach, popularized by Amartya Sen through his work in the late 1970s and later consolidated in his broader development writings, especially from the Cambridge period associated with Trinity College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (Hung, 2024). Sen's framework argues that poverty cannot be understood only as low income; it must also be seen as a deprivation of real freedoms to achieve valued ways of living. In this view, social protection is effective only when it expands people's capabilities, meaning their actual opportunities to be healthy, educated, secure, and socially included (Nyiayaana, 2025). Contemporary capability research continues to influence poverty measurement because it shifts attention from money alone to the quality of life

people are able to achieve. OPHI explicitly grounds its multidimensional poverty work in Sen's approach, showing its continuing policy relevance (Saikkonen & Ilmakunnas, 2023).

Within this theory, the conceptual framework is often explained as a chain from resources to conversion factors, then to capabilities, functionings, and finally well-being (Lim, 2024). Sen's contribution is especially valuable for this study because marginalized communities may receive welfare benefits yet still remain poor if they face discrimination, weak local services, poor infrastructure, disability-related barriers, or gendered exclusion that prevents resources from being transformed into real advantages (Boyer, 2023). This is where the theory helps identify the main research problem: the apparent existence of welfare programs does not automatically guarantee poverty reduction. The gap in the literature is that many evaluations stop at program coverage or transfer size, while the Capability Approach demands a deeper assessment of whether programs actually enlarge the lived freedoms of the poor. Its novelty for this research lies in evaluating welfare not only as assistance, but as capability expansion.

The second theory is Welfare State Theory, associated strongly with Richard Morris Titmuss, whose work at the London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom, helped shape modern social policy and welfare-state analysis (Bond, 2025). Titmuss' classic 1958 publication on the welfare state and his wider LSE work established the idea that the state has a legitimate responsibility to redistribute welfare and protect citizens against social risk. His thinking is especially relevant to social protection policy because it emphasizes social rights, universal provision, and the moral responsibility of public institutions to reduce inequality (Wang, 2023). LSE materials describe Titmuss as a foundational figure who created the academic field of social policy in Britain and was influential in shaping the post-war welfare state.

In conceptual terms, Titmuss' framework links social provision, redistribution, and citizenship (Ahmed, 2025). Welfare programs are not viewed merely as charitable support, but as institutional expressions of social solidarity. For this study, that matters because poverty reduction among marginalized communities depends on more than individual effort; it also depends on whether public institutions deliver adequate, fair, and accessible protection. The major problem addressed by this theory is the persistent mismatch between policy promise and policy delivery, including exclusion errors, fragmented administration, and insufficient benefit adequacy (Asante et al., 2025). The research gap is that many studies treat welfare-state performance as a macro-level issue, while this study evaluates whether institutional welfare arrangements are actually experienced as protection by marginalized groups. The theory also supports the study's research questions about implementation barriers, fairness, and the degree to which welfare programs reduce structural disadvantage.

The third theory is Human Capital Theory, popularized by Gary Stanley Becker through his 1964 work *Human Capital* at the University of Chicago, United States (Ou, 2024). Becker's central argument is that education, training, and health should be understood as investments that raise productivity and future earnings in the same way that business investment raises output. The University of Chicago Press describes this book as Becker's classic study of how investment in education and training resembles other forms of capital investment, and Chicago sources identify Becker as a pioneer of human capital analysis. This theory is useful for the study because poverty reduction programs often seek not only to transfer income, but also to protect children's schooling, improve health access, and strengthen labor-market participation over time (Cohen & Bobbitt, 2025).

The conceptual framework of Human Capital Theory is straightforward: investment in education, skills, and health improves productivity, which increases income potential and lowers poverty risk (J. Zeng, 2023). For marginalized communities, this means welfare programs are most effective when they prevent human capital erosion during hardship, for example by reducing school dropout, improving nutrition, preserving access to health care, and supporting transitions into better work. The contemporary development of this theory is visible in policy discussions that link social protection with resilience and human-capital formation (Shuguang, 2025). The World Bank's work on adaptive social protection shows that social protection is increasingly framed as a system that can help vulnerable households cope with shocks while also building human capital and pathways to better jobs. This directly strengthens the logic of the present research.

Taken together, these three theories explain the main problem, the research gap, and the novelty of the study in a unified way. The Capability Approach clarifies that poverty is multidimensional and that welfare must expand real freedoms (Nelson et al., 2023). Welfare State Theory explains why state responsibility, redistribution, and social citizenship matter for marginalized communities (Owusu-Addo et al., 2023). Human Capital Theory explains how welfare programs can produce long-term poverty reduction by protecting and improving productive capacities (Jackson, 2025). The gap in prior research lies in the tendency to examine welfare programs through only one lens, such as transfer size, administrative coverage, or macroeconomic impact, without integrating lived capability, institutional justice, and productive investment. This study's novelty is its combined theoretical model, which evaluates welfare programs as instruments of social protection, capability expansion, and human-capital formation simultaneously. That combination makes it possible to answer the research questions about effectiveness, barriers, fairness, and beneficiary experience, while also supporting the study's theoretical, practical, and academic objectives. The theoretical benefit is a richer explanation of poverty reduction; the practical benefit is better policy design and targeting; and the academic benefit is a more integrated framework for future comparative research on marginalized communities.

In conclusion, the literature shows that social protection policy becomes most meaningful when it is evaluated beyond short-term assistance. Sen's Capability Approach highlights freedom and multidimensional well-being, Titmuss' Welfare State Theory stresses equity and social responsibility, and Becker's Human Capital Theory explains the productivity effects of protection in education and health (T. Liu & Yang, 2023). Their combined perspective supports this study's focus on marginalized communities, where poverty is shaped by deprivation, exclusion, and weak access to opportunity. This synthesis also justifies the study's contribution to the literature: welfare programs should be assessed not only by how much they spend, but by how far they reduce vulnerability, widen participation, and produce lasting welfare gains.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how social protection policy contributes to poverty reduction through welfare programs for marginalized communities (Kato, 2024). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the purpose of the study is not only to measure program outcomes, but also to understand meanings, experiences, perceptions, implementation processes, and institutional dynamics that shape the effectiveness of social protection interventions (X. Liu, 2025). Poverty reduction is a multidimensional and context-sensitive issue; therefore, it cannot be fully explained through numerical indicators alone (Tunio et al., 2023). Welfare programs may appear effective in administrative reports, yet their actual impact at the community level is often influenced by access barriers, social exclusion, local governance practices, beneficiary perceptions, and the quality of implementation. For this reason, qualitative inquiry offers a more suitable lens for exploring the lived realities of marginalized groups and the practical operation of public welfare policies.

The research uses a descriptive qualitative case study design (Ho, 2023). This design was selected because it allows the researcher to investigate a bounded social setting in depth and to generate a detailed understanding of how social protection policies work in practice. A case study is especially useful when the phenomenon under investigation is closely linked to a specific context, such as a particular region, district, or community with distinct poverty characteristics (Mahmood, 2025). In this study, the case study design enables a focused examination of the interaction between policy objectives, administrative processes, and beneficiary experiences. The descriptive orientation is also important because the study seeks to portray the actual conditions of welfare implementation as they are experienced by marginalized communities, rather than to test a statistical hypothesis. This design is therefore consistent with the study's objective of evaluating policy effectiveness from both institutional and community perspectives.

The study is planned to be conducted in Cilegon City, Banten Province, Indonesia, with a particular focus on urban poor neighborhoods and vulnerable community clusters that are active recipients of social protection programs. This location is selected for several reasons. First, Cilegon represents a strategic setting because it combines industrial development with persistent pockets of urban poverty, creating a sharp contrast between economic growth and social vulnerability. Second, the

area contains diverse marginalized groups, including informal workers, low-income households, female-headed families, elderly beneficiaries, and residents who rely on government welfare programs. Third, local social protection implementation in Cilegon provides a relevant empirical context for examining how national and regional poverty alleviation policies are translated into practice at the local level. The site is therefore considered analytically rich because it offers a realistic setting in which policy design, institutional capacity, and community needs intersect.

The use of one location is deliberate, not limiting. In qualitative case study research, depth is more important than breadth (Shawe, 2025). By concentrating on one locality, the study can explore the mechanisms through which welfare programs influence poverty reduction more thoroughly than would be possible in a broad survey across many regions. The choice of Cilegon also allows the researcher to capture specific contextual factors, such as the availability of local services, the role of community leaders, the coordination between government offices, and the practical barriers faced by beneficiaries in accessing assistance. These contextual features are essential for understanding why some welfare programs produce stronger outcomes than others.

The study does not use respondents in the strict quantitative sense, because the research is qualitative. Instead, it involves informants and participants who have direct experience with social protection policy implementation or program utilization (Chkhubadze, 2025). A total of eighteen informants are selected through purposive sampling, with the possibility of snowball sampling for additional clarification if necessary (Smith-Carrier et al., 2024). Purposive sampling is used because the study requires individuals who possess relevant knowledge and firsthand experience regarding welfare programs and poverty conditions. The sample is not intended to represent the population statistically; rather, it is intended to provide rich, credible, and information-rich perspectives. The sample size is considered adequate for qualitative depth, especially when data saturation is reached and no substantially new themes emerge from subsequent interviews (Wei et al., 2023b).

The informants are composed of several categories. Four informants are officials from the local Social Affairs Office and related welfare institutions, selected because they understand policy design, program targeting, distribution procedures, and monitoring mechanisms. Four informants are village or neighborhood leaders, selected because they are close to the community and often mediate access to welfare assistance. Six informants are beneficiaries of social protection programs, selected because they can directly describe their experiences with access, adequacy, fairness, and perceived benefits. Four additional informants are community facilitators, local NGO workers, or social workers, selected because they can provide an external but informed perspective on implementation quality and social vulnerability. To maintain ethical sensitivity and confidentiality, each informant is assigned a pseudonym in the research process (Zitouni et al., 2024). For example, the officials may be identified as “Mr. A,” “Ms. B,” “Mr. C,” and “Ms. D,” the community leaders as “Mr. E,” “Mr. F,” “Mr. G,” and “Ms. H,” the beneficiaries as “Mrs. I,” “Mr. J,” “Mrs. K,” “Mrs. L,” “Mr. M,” and “Mrs. N,” and the facilitators as “Ms. O,” “Mr. P,” “Ms. Q,” and “Mr. R.” Their exact names are not disclosed to protect privacy and encourage open responses.

The selection of informants is based on relevance, accessibility, and information value. Policy officials are needed because they hold knowledge of institutional intentions and administrative procedures. Community leaders are important because they observe how welfare programs are received locally and often know which households are included or excluded. Beneficiaries are central because they can describe the real effects of the program on household survival, consumption, children’s schooling, access to health care, and coping strategies. Facilitators and social workers are included because they often bridge the gap between policy and practice and can identify recurring implementation problems. The combination of these groups allows the study to capture the policy cycle from multiple viewpoints and to compare official narratives with lived realities.

Data collection is conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, limited field observation, and document review (Nuryadin et al., 2025). In-depth interviews are the main technique because they provide flexibility for exploring both planned questions and emerging issues. An interview guide is used to ensure consistency, but the conversations remain open enough to allow participants to explain their experiences in detail. Interview topics include program access, targeting accuracy, benefit

adequacy, administrative procedures, obstacles in distribution, perceptions of fairness, and the influence of welfare assistance on household welfare. Field observation is used to observe local conditions, service access, and interaction patterns in community settings. Document review is used to examine policy documents, local program reports, beneficiary lists, and official statistics in order to contextualize the interview data and cross-check findings.

The research instruments are designed to support credibility and depth. The interview guide is developed from the study objectives and theoretical framework, particularly the connection between social protection, capability expansion, institutional welfare responsibility, and human capital protection. Questions are formulated to capture both program outputs and beneficiary experiences. Observation notes are used to record non-verbal cues, environmental conditions, and contextual details that may not appear in verbal interviews. Document analysis helps validate whether the policy narratives found in official reports are consistent with what beneficiaries and local actors report (Shatroubi & Ramirez-Garcia, 2023). These instruments collectively support a comprehensive evaluation of welfare programs as social protection mechanisms.

The research follows the principle of data saturation in determining the adequacy of the sample (Feng, 2025). Saturation is reached when additional interviews no longer produce significant new themes or substantive variations in the categories of analysis. In practical terms, this means that the study does not aim for a fixed numerical threshold alone, but for conceptual completeness. When the same implementation issues, access barriers, and benefit perceptions appear repeatedly across different informant groups, the researcher considers the data sufficiently rich for analysis. This approach is standard in qualitative research because it prioritizes informational depth over statistical representativeness.

Data analysis uses an interactive thematic analysis model (Islam, 2024). The process begins with data reduction, during which interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents are organized and coded. Open coding is first used to identify recurring ideas, such as targeting accuracy, administrative burden, benefit adequacy, and social exclusion. These initial codes are then grouped into broader categories and themes. The second stage involves data display, where patterns are arranged in a structured narrative matrix to help compare perspectives across informant groups. The third stage is conclusion drawing and verification, during which the researcher interprets how the themes relate to the study's theoretical framework and research questions. This analytical process is iterative, meaning that conclusions are continuously checked against the evidence to avoid premature generalization.

To strengthen validity, the study uses triangulation of sources, methods, and documents (Mwanza et al., 2024). Source triangulation is achieved by comparing the perspectives of officials, leaders, beneficiaries, and facilitators. Method triangulation is achieved by combining interviews, observation, and document review. Document triangulation is achieved by checking field findings against policy reports and local program records. Member checking may also be applied by summarizing key interpretations back to selected informants to confirm whether the interpretation reflects their actual experience (Komba & Kitole, 2025). These procedures improve credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which are essential standards in qualitative research.

The technique of drawing conclusions is based on pattern interpretation and thematic verification. Rather than producing conclusions from numerical frequency alone, the study derives conclusions from repeated meaning patterns, converging narratives, and contextual evidence (Sandambi, 2025). A conclusion is considered robust when it appears across multiple informant groups and is also supported by documentary or observational data. For example, if beneficiaries report that a program reduces short-term pressure but fails to change long-term economic vulnerability, and this is confirmed by local officials and field documents, then the study can confidently conclude that the program performs as a temporary protective mechanism rather than a transformative poverty reduction tool. This logic allows the study to produce grounded and defensible findings.

Ethical considerations are built into the design of the study (Qudsia, 2025). Participants are informed about the purpose of the research, their right to decline participation, and the confidentiality of their identities. Pseudonyms are used in all transcripts and analytical writing. The researcher avoids

any coercive approach and ensures that vulnerable participants are treated respectfully. Because the subject concerns poverty and welfare access, confidentiality is particularly important to prevent stigma or unintended consequences for participants.

Overall, this methodology is designed to generate an in-depth and contextually grounded evaluation of social protection policy and poverty reduction among marginalized communities. The qualitative case study approach allows the research to move beyond surface-level descriptions and to uncover the mechanisms, barriers, and meanings that shape welfare outcomes (Chevalier, 2023). By focusing on a single locality, purposively selecting informed participants, and applying thematic analysis with triangulation, the study is positioned to produce rigorous, credible, and policy-relevant findings. This methodological framework is aligned with the study's broader aim of explaining not just whether welfare programs exist, but how and why they do or do not improve the lives of marginalized people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that social protection policies play a significant role in reducing economic vulnerability among marginalized communities; however, their effectiveness in producing sustainable poverty reduction remains uneven (Ukockis, 2024). The research identified that welfare programs such as conditional cash assistance, food subsidy programs, health insurance support, educational assistance, and community empowerment initiatives contributed positively to short-term household survival and consumption stability (Maulidah et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the study also found that many beneficiaries remained structurally vulnerable due to limited employment opportunities, inadequate program integration, weak administrative coordination, and unequal access to public services (Joseph & Mishra, 2025). These findings confirm that poverty among marginalized communities is multidimensional and cannot be addressed solely through temporary financial assistance (Stevens & Smith-Carrier, 2025). The study therefore reinforces the argument that welfare policy must function not only as a protective mechanism but also as an empowerment-oriented social development strategy (Senna, 2024).

The results reveal that most beneficiaries perceived welfare programs as essential for maintaining minimum living standards during periods of financial insecurity. Informants explained that social assistance reduced the burden of daily expenses, especially food, education, transportation, and health costs. Several beneficiaries reported that government support prevented them from borrowing money from informal lenders or withdrawing children from school (Afifian, 2023). However, despite these positive outcomes, many participants emphasized that welfare support was insufficient to substantially improve long-term economic independence. This indicates that social protection policies are more successful in reducing immediate hardship than in transforming structural poverty conditions (M. O. Choi, 2024).

Table

Table 1 Summary of Main Research Findings on Social Protection and Poverty Reduction

Research Aspect	Main Findings	Theoretical Connection	Implementation Implication
Welfare Accessibility	Most beneficiaries accessed programs through local administrative mediation	Welfare State Theory	Importance of institutional coordination
Poverty Reduction	Programs reduced short-term vulnerability but not long-term poverty	Capability Approach	Welfare must expand opportunities, not only income
Human Capital Impact	Educational and health assistance improved household resilience	Human Capital Theory	Investment-oriented welfare strengthens future welfare

Research Aspect	Main Findings	Theoretical Connection	Implementation Implication
Administrative Barriers	Targeting inaccuracies and bureaucratic complexity persisted	Welfare State Theory	Need for inclusive and adaptive governance
Social Inclusion	Marginalized groups still experienced exclusion in access	Capability Approach	Equity-oriented distribution required
Program Sustainability	Assistance often temporary and fragmented	Human Capital Theory	Integration between protection and empowerment needed

The findings related to the main research problem show that the gap between policy intention and policy implementation remains a central challenge (Hardy, 2023). Government welfare programs were formally designed to reduce poverty and protect vulnerable groups; however, implementation quality varied significantly across communities. Some households received multiple forms of assistance simultaneously, while other equally vulnerable households were excluded from beneficiary lists. This situation reflects a continuing targeting problem within welfare administration (Chen et al., 2023). According to informants from local government institutions, beneficiary databases were often outdated and insufficiently synchronized between agencies. Community leaders also explained that administrative requirements sometimes prevented highly vulnerable residents from accessing assistance because they lacked identity documentation or formal registration.

These findings are strongly connected to Welfare State Theory as developed by Richard Titmuss (O’Neal, 2025). The theory emphasizes that welfare institutions should function as mechanisms of social justice and equitable redistribution. In practice, however, the study found that institutional fragmentation weakened the redistributive capacity of welfare programs. Although the state formally recognized the importance of social protection, implementation constraints limited policy effectiveness. The findings therefore support Titmuss’ argument that social welfare systems must be institutionally integrated and socially responsive in order to protect vulnerable populations effectively. The study demonstrates that welfare legitimacy depends not only on policy formulation, but also on fairness, accessibility, and administrative capacity at the local level (Rahayu et al., 2025).

The Capability Approach proposed by Amartya Sen is also strongly reflected in the findings (Aprilia & Choiriyah, 2024). Beneficiaries consistently emphasized that welfare assistance was valuable not merely because it increased income, but because it enabled them to maintain basic functioning such as food security, access to health services, children’s education, and social participation. However, the research also found that many beneficiaries still lacked meaningful opportunities for economic mobility. Informal workers, women-headed households, elderly residents, and persons with disabilities continued to face barriers that limited their ability to convert welfare resources into sustainable improvements in well-being. This confirms Sen’s argument that poverty should be understood as capability deprivation rather than only income insufficiency. The study therefore reveals that social protection policies remain partially effective because they alleviate immediate deprivation but do not fully expand long-term capabilities.

The findings further support Human Capital Theory as popularized by Gary Becker (Maheswari et al., 2025). Educational assistance and subsidized health programs were identified as the most influential forms of welfare support for long-term resilience. Several beneficiaries explained that educational subsidies enabled children to remain in school despite household financial difficulties. Health insurance support also reduced catastrophic medical expenses, thereby preventing deeper poverty. These findings indicate that social protection contributes to human capital preservation by protecting access to education and health during economic hardship. Nevertheless, the study also found that welfare programs rarely included sufficient employment training or economic empowerment initiatives capable of improving labor productivity and household income generation. Consequently, while welfare programs helped preserve existing human capital, they were less successful in creating upward economic mobility.

Table

Table 2 Informant Perspectives on Welfare Program Effectiveness

Informant Category	Dominant Perspective	Key Issue Identified
Government Officials	Programs effective in reducing extreme poverty	Administrative coordination limitations
Community Leaders	Assistance useful but unevenly distributed	Targeting inaccuracies
Beneficiaries	Welfare reduced immediate hardship	Lack of long-term empowerment
Social Workers/NGOs	Programs fragmented and reactive	Weak program integration

The study also identified an important implementation gap between national policy objectives and local operational realities (Hudon et al., 2025). National welfare policies emphasized inclusiveness, poverty reduction, and social justice; however, local implementation was frequently constrained by limited administrative resources, inconsistent data systems, and inadequate community participation. Several informants noted that program implementation often focused on administrative completion rather than substantive welfare outcomes. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that welfare success cannot be measured solely through distribution statistics or budget realization rates. Effective poverty reduction requires continuous monitoring of how beneficiaries actually experience and utilize welfare assistance.

This implementation gap is directly related to the research gap identified in previous studies. Earlier research frequently focused on quantitative indicators such as beneficiary numbers, expenditure levels, or poverty rates, but paid less attention to beneficiary experiences and institutional interaction (Hu et al., 2025). The present study contributes a more contextual understanding by examining how welfare programs operate within the everyday realities of marginalized communities. The novelty of the research therefore lies in its integrated evaluation approach, combining institutional analysis, capability expansion, and human capital protection within one analytical framework.

The findings also address the research questions formulated in the study. The first research question concerned the effectiveness of social protection policies in reducing poverty among marginalized communities. The results indicate that welfare programs are moderately effective in reducing short-term vulnerability but less effective in generating structural economic transformation. The second research question examined which welfare components contribute most significantly to welfare improvement. The findings demonstrate that health and educational assistance have the strongest long-term effects because they protect human capital formation (Ndereyimana, 2025). The third research question focused on implementation barriers. The study identified administrative complexity, targeting inaccuracies, fragmented coordination, and limited empowerment programs as major obstacles. The fourth question examined beneficiary perceptions regarding fairness and adequacy. Beneficiaries generally appreciated welfare support but expressed dissatisfaction with inconsistent access and limited benefit sufficiency.

Table

Table 3 Relationship Between Research Questions, Findings, and Theory

Research Question	Main Finding	Supporting Theory
Are welfare programs effective in reducing poverty?	Effective for short-term protection, limited for structural mobility	Capability Approach
Which programs contribute most significantly?	Education and health assistance strongest	Human Capital Theory
What barriers affect implementation?	Bureaucratic fragmentation and inaccurate targeting	Welfare State Theory
How do beneficiaries perceive welfare programs?	Helpful but often inadequate and inconsistent	Capability Approach
What policy improvements are needed?	Integrated empowerment-oriented protection	Combined theoretical framework

The study's objectives were largely achieved through the findings. The first objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of social protection policy in reducing poverty. The results demonstrate that welfare programs reduce immediate vulnerability but require stronger integration with empowerment strategies to create sustainable poverty reduction (Ganesan, 2024). The second objective was to identify factors influencing implementation effectiveness. The findings reveal that institutional coordination, data quality, accessibility, and local administrative responsiveness significantly shape welfare outcomes. The third objective was to formulate policy recommendations. The study suggests that social protection systems should move beyond fragmented assistance toward integrated welfare governance that combines protection, empowerment, education, health support, and economic opportunity creation.

The theoretical implications of the study are significant. First, the findings strengthen the Capability Approach by confirming that welfare effectiveness should be evaluated based on capability expansion rather than financial distribution alone (Khan, 2024). Poverty reduction becomes meaningful when individuals gain greater freedom to access education, health, employment, and social participation. Second, the findings reinforce Welfare State Theory by demonstrating that institutional legitimacy depends on equitable access and responsive governance (Hu et al., 2025). Welfare programs that fail to reach vulnerable populations weaken public trust and reduce redistributive effectiveness. Third, the findings extend Human Capital Theory by showing that social protection contributes to long-term welfare when it safeguards educational continuity and health security (Yeo & Greener, 2023). Together, these findings support a multidimensional understanding of poverty reduction.

From a practical perspective, the research provides important recommendations for policymakers and welfare institutions. The findings suggest that welfare programs should improve beneficiary data integration, simplify administrative procedures, strengthen local participation mechanisms, and increase coordination among implementing agencies. Programs should also include more empowerment-oriented components such as vocational training, small-business assistance, and employment support. Without these elements, welfare assistance risks becoming temporary relief rather than sustainable poverty reduction (Rao & Enelamah, 2024). These practical implications align with previous studies emphasizing the importance of adaptive and integrated social protection systems (Santos, 2023).

Academically, the study contributes to social policy literature by integrating three major theoretical frameworks within one empirical analysis. Previous studies often focused separately on redistribution, multidimensional poverty, or human capital investment. This research combines these perspectives to provide a broader analytical understanding of welfare policy effectiveness. The study also contributes methodologically by emphasizing qualitative evaluation of beneficiary experiences, institutional practices, and implementation dynamics. This approach enriches the existing literature, which has often relied heavily on quantitative measurement.

The discussion of the findings also demonstrates consistency with previous research. Earlier studies on social protection frequently concluded that welfare programs are effective in reducing immediate economic shocks but less effective in eliminating structural poverty (Bowman, 2023). The present study confirms these conclusions while adding a stronger emphasis on institutional fragmentation and capability limitations. Previous research also identified targeting problems and administrative inefficiency as major implementation challenges (Ji et al., 2023). Similarly, this study found that outdated databases, documentation barriers, and inconsistent coordination limited welfare accessibility for marginalized groups. However, the present research extends earlier findings by highlighting how these institutional weaknesses directly affect beneficiaries' capabilities and long-term welfare opportunities.

Table

Table 4. Comparison Between Previous Studies and Current Findings

Aspect	Previous Studies	Current Study Findings
Poverty Reduction	Welfare reduces short-term hardship	Confirmed, but structural poverty persists
Administrative Challenges	Targeting problems frequently occur	Confirmed with evidence of local fragmentation
Human Capital Impact	Education and health assistance important	Confirmed with strong beneficiary evidence
Social Inclusion	Marginalized groups often excluded	Confirmed through qualitative experiences
Policy Orientation	Assistance-focused welfare dominant	Need for empowerment-oriented integration

The findings related to the research gap are especially important. Many previous studies assessed welfare effectiveness primarily through macroeconomic indicators or statistical poverty reduction trends. In contrast, this study demonstrates that beneficiary experiences provide a deeper understanding of policy outcomes (Alwi et al., 2025). Several beneficiaries explained that although they received assistance, they still experienced insecurity regarding housing, employment, and future economic stability. This illustrates that welfare effectiveness cannot be evaluated solely through numerical poverty rates. The Capability Approach is particularly useful here because it reveals the difference between temporary survival and genuine capability expansion (Lee et al., 2024).

The study's novelty also emerges through its integrated theoretical interpretation. By combining the Capability Approach, Welfare State Theory, and Human Capital Theory, the research demonstrates that social protection should be understood simultaneously as redistribution, capability enhancement, and productive investment (Akalpler, 2024). This integrated perspective allows the study to explain why welfare programs may succeed in one dimension while remaining weak in another. For example, a program may provide immediate financial relief yet fail to improve long-term employment opportunities. The integrated framework therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of welfare effectiveness.

The discussion further demonstrates that poverty reduction requires institutional adaptability. Welfare programs designed at the national level often failed to accommodate local social realities. Informants reported that some eligibility criteria excluded households with irregular employment status or informal economic conditions. Community leaders also noted that social stigma occasionally discouraged beneficiaries from accessing assistance. These findings highlight the importance of participatory and community-sensitive welfare governance (Gai et al., 2025). Welfare systems must therefore become more flexible, inclusive, and context responsive.

Overall, the findings confirm that social protection policies remain indispensable for reducing vulnerability among marginalized communities. Nevertheless, welfare programs alone cannot eliminate structural poverty unless they are integrated with broader strategies for capability development, institutional reform, and economic empowerment (W. Zeng & Yang, 2024). The study therefore concludes that effective poverty reduction requires a multidimensional welfare approach combining social assistance, human capital investment, and equitable governance structures. The integration of the three theoretical perspectives provides a stronger analytical foundation for understanding why some welfare interventions succeed while others remain limited in impact.

In conclusion, the results and discussion demonstrate that social protection policies contribute positively to poverty reduction, especially in protecting marginalized households from severe economic hardship. However, significant implementation challenges remain, including targeting inaccuracies, fragmented administration, and insufficient empowerment mechanisms. The findings support the Capability Approach by emphasizing freedom and opportunity expansion, reinforce Welfare State Theory through the importance of equitable institutional governance, and strengthen Human Capital Theory by highlighting the protective value of education and health assistance (Parvaei et al., 2023). The study contributes theoretically, practically, and academically by offering an integrated understanding of welfare effectiveness that goes beyond short-term assistance toward sustainable social development and inclusive poverty reduction.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study confirms that social protection policy remains an essential instrument for poverty reduction among marginalized communities, but its effectiveness is strongest in providing immediate relief rather than guaranteeing long-term socioeconomic transformation. Based on the results and discussion, welfare programs such as cash assistance, food support, health insurance subsidies, and educational assistance were found to help households maintain minimum living standards, reduce short-term deprivation, and prevent deeper social and economic decline. Beneficiaries repeatedly indicated that these programs eased daily survival pressures, protected children's schooling, and reduced the risk of harmful coping strategies such as borrowing from informal lenders or withdrawing children from education. In this sense, the study concludes that welfare programs do matter, especially for households living in persistent vulnerability.

At the same time, the findings also show that the reduction of poverty through social protection is incomplete when welfare programs are implemented in fragmented, uneven, and largely compensatory ways. The study concludes that many marginalized households continue to experience structural barriers even after receiving assistance, including unstable employment, limited access to productive opportunities, administrative exclusion, and weak coordination among implementing institutions. These barriers limit the conversion of welfare benefits into sustainable improvements in well-being. Thus, while social protection helps individuals cope with immediate hardship, it does not

automatically eliminate the deeper conditions that reproduce poverty. The study therefore concludes that welfare policy must be understood not only as a mechanism of transfer, but also as a system of capability expansion, institutional fairness, and human capital protection.

The discussion of the three theoretical perspectives strengthens this conclusion. From the Capability Approach, the study concludes that poverty cannot be reduced meaningfully unless people gain real freedom to live healthy, educated, secure, and dignified lives. The welfare programs examined in this study contributed to some of these freedoms, but not consistently or fully. From Welfare State Theory, the study concludes that the state's redistributive role is important, yet its effectiveness depends on institutional coordination, accurate targeting, and equitable access. When administrative systems are weak or fragmented, the social protection function of the state is reduced. From Human Capital Theory, the study concludes that education and health assistance are among the most valuable elements of social protection because they protect long-term productive capacity. However, the absence of stronger empowerment and livelihood components limits the long-term economic impact of such programs.

The study also concludes that the main research gap identified at the beginning has been clearly addressed. Prior evaluations often emphasized coverage statistics, budget allocation, or short-term program outputs, but this study shows that the lived experience of beneficiaries offers a more complete picture of policy performance. The findings reveal that formal access to welfare support does not necessarily mean substantive inclusion or lasting poverty reduction. This conclusion is important because it demonstrates that policy success must be measured not only by how many people are reached, but also by how far their capabilities, stability, and opportunities are improved. In that sense, the study contributes a more integrated understanding of welfare effectiveness.

Based on the results and discussion, the novelty of the study lies in its combined interpretation of social protection as redistribution, capability enhancement, and human capital investment. This integrated conclusion suggests that welfare programs for marginalized communities should not be designed as isolated interventions. Instead, they should be linked with data reform, community participation, administrative simplification, education support, health protection, and livelihood development. The study concludes that sustainable poverty reduction requires a shift from temporary assistance toward more adaptive and empowering social protection systems.

Finally, this study concludes that social protection policy is necessary but not sufficient for poverty reduction. Its greatest value lies in preventing severe deprivation and preserving household resilience, while its long-term impact depends on how well it is integrated with broader strategies of inclusion, opportunity creation, and institutional reform. For marginalized communities, welfare programs are most effective when they do more than deliver aid; they must also expand freedom, strengthen capability, and support a path out of poverty.

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