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Rethinking Poverty Metrics: Constructing the GEAR Model Indicators through a Reflective-Critical Lens

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Abstract:
The apparent success of many poverty reduction policies stands in sharp contrast to persistent experiences of dependency, clientelism, and structural vulnerability. This article argues that the gap arises from an epistemological crisis in poverty measurement. The domination of technocratic metrics prioritizes income, output, and cost-efficiency while ignoring power relations, voice, and legitimacy. As a response, this study operationalizes the GEAR (Growth, Empowerment, Adaptability, and Rationality) Model as a reflective-critical framework for evaluating social assistance. It uses a theoretical-derivation approach grounded in critical constructivism to deconstruct existing indicators such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index and Proxy Means Testing, then reconstructs four normative dimensions inspired by Sen, Habermas, Beck, and Freire. These dimensions are translated into 12 indicators and an exploratory dual-method measurement toolkit that combines Likert-type items with qualitative interview probes. The toolkit includes a structured item bank, field administration guidelines, and a diagnostic schema for interpreting patterns, including golden cage situations where material gains coexist with political silence. Critically, self-reported perceptual measures require robust validation protocols to address social desirability bias in patron-client contexts. While grounded in the Indonesian context, this article proposes a conceptually coherent framework of the GEAR Model, offering public administration scholars an evaluation framework that integrates legitimacy, voice, and implementation distortions by extending beyond technocratic metrics and proposing a validation program for empirical testing in social assistance governance.

Keywords: GEAR Model; Poverty Metrics; Critical Constructivism; Performance Measurement; Reflective-Critical Paradigm.

JEL: I32, D63, H53, O15, C83

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INTRODUCTION

The reduction of poverty has long served as the central legitimacy claim of modern welfare states, yet the metrics used to assess this progress remain mired in an epistemological crisis. In Indonesia, the official narrative of poverty alleviation often presents a paradox (Prawira et al., 2025). While statistical data indicates a consistent decline in headcount poverty ratios, the lived reality of deprivation remains systemic, multidimensional, and deeply entrenched (Ballon & Ophi, 2012; Haliim & Muhammad, 2025; Haliim, 2026). This discrepancy is not merely a technical error in data collection but a symptom of a profound methodological failure. Current poverty metrics, predominantly rooted in technocratic traditions and logics, prioritize administrative compliance and aggregate economic growth over substantive transformation of power relations (Kurniawan, 2022; Macekura, 2019). As a result, social policies frequently produce successful bureaucratic reports while failing to address the structural and relational dimensions of poverty (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025). This paper contributes to public administration scholarship by providing a governance-facing evaluation framework (GEAR) that captures not only material outcomes but also legitimacy, voice, and distortions from clientelism in performance measurement regimes (Umar et al, 2025; Ferrera, 1996; Haliim, 2026).

The dominance of technocratic approaches in social policy measurement has created a *technocratic blindness* (Gubser, 2012). By treating social indicators as value-neutral facts akin to natural laws, technocratic metrics strip human deprivation of its moral and political context (Beck et al., 2020; Samal, 2021). Instruments such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), while an improvement over unidimensional income metrics, still suffer from aggregation bias and an inability to capture the relational dynamics of agency and voice (Chakrabartty, 2024; Ravallion, 2011). These metrics operate on an instrumental logic, focusing on the efficiency of service delivery rather than the justice of distribution or the quality of democratic participation (Samal, 2021). Consequently, the *success* of programs like *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) is often measured by disbursement rates and attendance compliance, ignoring the persistent clientelistic dependencies that erode beneficiary autonomy (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025; Wasim et al., 2019).

This article argues that a genuine transformation in social policy requires an epistemological rupture in how we measure progress (Gergen & Dixon-Román, 2014; McLeod, 2024). We must move beyond the monolithic gaze of technocracy, which views people with low incomes as passive objects of intervention, and toward a reflective-critical paradigm that recognizes them as active agents of change (Samal, 2021; Uher, 2018). To this end, this study introduces the GEAR Model (Growth, Empowerment, Adaptability, and Rationality), a reflective-critical framework previously conceptualized to bridge the normative-pragmatic divide in social policy (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025). GEAR's distinct contribution is operationalizing rationality (justification/voice) and adaptability (reflexivity) as measurable indicators, bridging normative aspirations with field-ready tools for social assistance evaluation in public administration (Haliim, 2026).

It is crucial to distinguish the specific contribution of this article from the author's prior conceptual work. While the previous study (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025) established the theoretical architecture and normative justification of the GEAR Model, it stopped short of providing operational tools for empirical application. This article bridges that critical gap by moving from conceptualization to operationalization. Its distinct novelty lies in the translation of abstract philosophical tenets, specifically Communicative Action and Reflexive Modernization into a concrete measurement toolkit comprising 12 indicators, Likert-type constructs, and qualitative probes. Unlike standard Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) which often treat participation as an isolated event, the synthesis presented here embeds critical theory directly into the structural logic of poverty metrics, offering a field-ready instrument that previous theoretical iterations lacked.

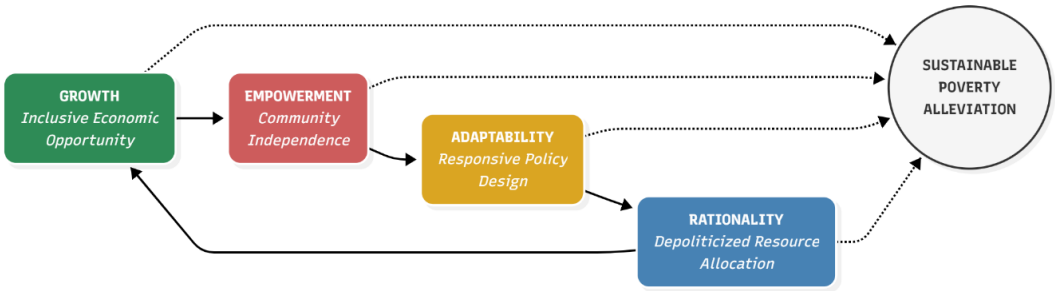

Figure 1. The GEAR Model Framework for Sustainable Poverty Alleviation
Source: Haliim & Muhammad (2025)

The primary objective of this article is to operationalize the GEAR Model by deconstructing conventional poverty indicators and reconstructing them through a reflective-critical lens. It seeks to answer the following research problem: *How can the abstract concepts of Growth, Empowerment, Adaptability, and Rationality be translated into empirical indicators that capture the substantive, rather than merely administrative, dimensions of poverty reduction?* Social innovation can significantly mediate the relationship between social entrepreneurship and sustainable social development for reducing poverty (Monir & Geberemeskel, 2024), highlighting how transformative approaches

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outperform technocratic metrics that privilege administrative compliance over substantive change. By challenging the hegemonic metrics of the technocratic era, this study aims to provide a methodological blueprint for a more humane and structurally transformative social policy evaluation through the GEAR model.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Trap of Technocratic Metrics: A Critical Review

Measuring poverty is not a neutral technical exercise. It is an inherently political act that defines who counts and what matters in social policy (Mosse, 2004; White, 2002). For decades, the dominant epistemology in poverty measurement has been shaped by the convergence of technocratic paradigm (Macekura, 2019). This section critically examines the limitations of these hegemonic frameworks, arguing that their technocratic consciousness (Habermas, 1970) has produced a metrics system that is efficient in data generation but deficient in capturing human agency and structural injustice.

Technocratic approaches to social science assume that social reality can be observed, measured, and verified with the same objectivity as natural phenomena (Samal, 2021). In the context of poverty, this manifests in the obsession with standardized, quantifiable metrics that strip deprivation of its relational context (Chakrabartty, 2024). While the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) represented a significant leap from unidimensional income metrics by incorporating health, education, and living standards (Alkire et al., 2022; Suppa & Kanagaratnam, 2025), it remains methodologically bounded by what is measurable in large-scale surveys.

Critics argue that such aggregation creates a false clarity. By reducing complex lived experiences into a single composite number, indices like the MPI often mask the specific power dynamics that perpetuate poverty, such as gender-based exclusion or political clientelism (Ravallion, 2011). While recent methodological advancements in the Alkire (2022) framework have attempted to incorporate participatory approaches by allowing communities to define weights or dimensions relevant to their context. These adaptations often remain constrained by the technocratic requirement for cross-spatial comparability. Consequently, even participatory variants of MPI struggle to fully capture the relational and political dimensions of agency, voice, and clientelistic dependency that remain invisible in standardized household surveys.

Furthermore, reliance on household-level data often overlooks intra-household inequalities and the broader political economy of exclusion (Laderchi, 2001). As White (2002) observes, the technocratic drive to quantify every aspect of development often leads to the fetishization of metrics, where the indicator itself becomes the goal, displacing the substantive objective of human liberation.

In developing countries like Indonesia, the operationalization of poverty policy is heavily influenced by the technocratic paradigm that prioritize efficiency, performance measurement, and output-oriented governance (Akbar et al., 2015; Kurniawan, 2022). This paradigm has given rise to a regime of compliance metrics in social assistance programs. For instance, the success of Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) like *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) is typically evaluated based on administrative outputs: disbursement speed, attendance in health checks, and error rates in Proxy Means Testing (PMT).

The literature suggests that PMT methodologies often entail high inherent exclusion errors due to their static assessment of dynamic livelihoods (Kidd et al., 2017; Kidd & Wylde, 2011; Ohlenburg et al., 2022). More critically, technocratic tradition and logic-driven focus on targeting efficiency neglects the quality of the state-citizen encounter. Beneficiaries are viewed as passive consumers of services rather than rights-holders, reinforcing a clientelistic relationship where empowerment is reduced to obedient participation in state-mandated protocols (Berenschot, 2018; Haliim & Muhammad, 2025).

This managerial approach creates a successful failure: administratively impeccable programs yet fail to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of powerlessness.The fundamental gap in current literature and practice is the lack of indicators that bridge the normative-pragmatic divide. While participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) have attempted to bring local voices into measurement (White & Pettit, 2007), they often remain qualitative anecdotes that are rarely institutionalized into national metrics. Conversely, technocratic critiques offer powerful diagnostics but rarely propose alternative operational metrics that bureaucrats can use.

1.2 The GEAR Model as a Reflective-Critical Paradigm

GEAR extends the social policy and public administration literature on performance regimes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Haliim, 2026) by incorporating critical metrics for assessing implementation effects. It specifically engages with the New Public Governance paradigm, which emphasizes pluralism and inter-organizational relationships, by treating beneficiaries not as passive recipients but as active partners in co-production (Osborne, 2010). Furthermore, the model addresses the classic dilemma of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010) by providing tools to evaluate the gap between policy intent and the discretionary practices of frontline agents, particularly regarding clientelism and voice. The positioning of the GEAR Model within the Reflective-Critical tradition is a deliberate epistemological stance, designed to move beyond the limitations of the dominant technocratic paradigms in social policy.

The Critical Dimension: Deconstructing Power and Injustice: The critical aspect of the GEAR Model is rooted in its fundamental objective to deconstruct and challenge the asymmetrical power relations that perpetuate poverty. Unlike technocratic models that view poverty as a technical problem to be managed, GEAR views it as a political condition of disempowerment. This critical lens is operationalized in several ways:

- Critique of Instrumental Rationality: The Rationality dimension explicitly rejects the New Public Management's (NPM's) obsession with cost-efficiency. Instead, it elevates Communicative Justice (Habermas, 1984), arguing that a policy is only truly rational if its justifications are transparent and ethically legitimate in the public sphere. *It asks not, " Is it cheap? However, is it just?*
- Focus on Agency over Compliance: The Empowerment dimension directly attacks the clientelistic nature of conventional aid. By prioritizing Political Efficacy and Freedom from Clientelism, it shifts the focus from measuring beneficiary compliance (a form of social control) to measuring their capacity to contest and shape the policies that affect their lives. This aligns with Sen's (1999) argument that true development is the expansion of substantive freedoms.
- Exposure of Structural Fragility: The Growth dimension critiques the illusion of progress created by income-based poverty lines. By focusing on control over productive assets, it exposes the fragility of livelihoods dependent on precarious labour or temporary cash transfers (Beck, 1992), highlighting the failure of policies that do not alter the underlying structure of economic ownership.

The Reflective Dimension: Institutionalizing Learning and Adaptation: The reflective aspect of the GEAR Model addresses the institutional learning disability inherent in rigid, top-down bureaucracies. It embeds mechanisms for continuous self-assessment and adaptation into the policy process itself.

- Systemic Self-Correction: The Adaptability dimension is the core of the model's reflective nature. It operationalizes the principles of a Reflexive Modernization (Beck, 1992) by demanding that policy systems be capable of responding to emergent risks (e.g., climate change, pandemics). Indicators like feedback loop responsiveness institutionalize a process of constant learning from failure and success.

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- Contextual Sensitivity: The model rejects the one-size-fits-all logic of technocratic programs. By emphasizing local contextualization, it forces a reflection on the unique socio-cultural and geographical realities of the communities being served, valuing local and indigenous knowledge as a valid input for policy design.
- Bridging the Normative-Pragmatic Divide: At its core, the GEAR model is reflective because it forces a constant dialogue between what is (pragmatic reality) and what should be (normative goals of social justice). The entire four-part cycle is a feedback loop in which the pursuit of Growth and Empowerment is continually checked and recalibrated by the principles of Rationality and Adaptability.

The GEAR Model is categorized as Reflective-Critical because it rejects treating policy evaluation as a neutral act of measurement. Instead, it frames evaluation as a political and ethical act of questioning: *Who holds power? Whose knowledge counts? Does this policy liberate people with low incomes or merely manage them?* By embedding these questions into its very structure, GEAR provides a framework not just for assessing policy, but for transforming it.

This creates a methodological vacuum. We lack a set of indicators that are technically rigorous enough for policy monitoring but epistemologically grounded in a critical understanding of power, agency, and adaptability. This is the specific gap the GEAR Model aims to fill. By shifting the focus from mobilization to political efficacy and from compliance to reflexive learning, GEAR proposes a new grammar of measurement that aligns with the transformative aspirations of critical social policy. To rigorously implement this paradigm, the study adopts a methodological stance of Critical Constructivism. This approach serves as the epistemological bridge between the theoretical framework discussed above and the operational indicators developed later. Critical Constructivism posits that valid social indicators cannot be merely found in statistical aggregates but must be actively constructed through a dialectical engagement with power structures. This methodological foundation justifies the specific indicator development process detailed in the following section.

2. METHODOLOGY

The reflective-critical paradigm requires a methodological framework that transcends standard empirical-inductive approaches. Conventional indicator development often relies on factor analysis of existing datasets, a process that inadvertently reproduces the ideological biases embedded in the original data collection (Uher, 2018). To avoid this epistemological trap, this study employs a Theoretical-Derivation Approach grounded in Critical Constructivism (Kincheloe, 2005). This methodology asserts that valid social indicators cannot be merely found in statistical aggregates. The construction of the GEAR indicators follows a systematic, three-stage epistemological translation process, ensuring that each proposed metric maintains theoretical fidelity to the reflective-critical paradigm while achieving operational feasibility.

2.1 Phase 1: Deconstructive Diagnosis (The Negative Benchmark)

The first phase involves a diagnostic deconstruction of hegemonic poverty metrics (e.g., *Badan Pusat Statistik*/BPS- Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, Proxy Means Testing, and the MPI) to identify their specific epistemological blind spots. Drawing on critical social policy analysis (Fischer, 2003), current indicators are interrogated not for their statistical reliability but for their political ontology: *What dimensions of human existence do they render invisible? Do they reduce agency to administrative compliance? Do they mask power asymmetries behind aggregate numbers?* This phase establishes the negative benchmark by clearly defining what the new GEAR indicators must avoid (e.g., avoiding conflating presence in meetings with political voices).

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2.2 Phase 2: Normative Reconstruction (The Theoretical Core)

In the second phase, the substantive dimensions of the GEAR Model are reconstructed by synthesizing foundational critical theories. This ensures that each component of the model has a distinct and robust intellectual genealogy:

- Growth is reconceptualized through the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Scoones, 1998), shifting the definition from aggregate income to livelihood security and control.
- Empowerment is redefined through the synthesis of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), moving beyond beneficiary participation to political efficacy and critical agency.
- Adaptability is conceptualized using Risk Society theory (Beck, 1992), reframing resilience not as survival, but as systemic reflexivity and institutional learning.
- Rationality is grounded in theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984), transforming the metric of governance from cost-efficiency to communicative transparency and ethical legitimacy.

2.3 Phase 3: Operational Translation (Proxy Development)

The final phase involves translating these normative concepts into observable proxy Indicators suitable for empirical research, prioritizing relational and perceptual proxies over purely administrative ones. For instance, measuring perceived safety in voicing dissent rather than the number of formal grievances filed. However, this shift from administrative to perceptual measurement introduces a critical trade-off. While it addresses the technocratic blindness toward agency and power dynamics, self-reported measures are vulnerable to social desirability bias, especially when beneficiaries fear that honest answers could jeopardize material welfare. In Indonesia's patron-client contexts, respondents have a strong incentive to falsely agree with items such as "*I am not afraid to openly disagree with the village head*," thereby obscuring rather than exposing clientelistic dependencies. These indicators are presented as a structured proposal ready for piloting, with validation protocols (e.g., triangulation) to ensure reliability in patron-client contexts.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Constructing the GEAR Indicators: From Technocracy to Transformation

This section operationalizes the four dimensions of the GEAR Model by systematically applying the three-phase methodological framework established in Section 2. The presentation of results follows the logic of the Theoretical-Derivation Approach: first, identifying the limitations of current indicators (Phase 1: Deconstructive Diagnosis); second, reconstructing them through critical theory (Phase 2: Normative Reconstruction); and third, formulating new proxy metrics (Phase 3: Operational Translation). For each dimension (Growth, Empowerment, Adaptability, and Rationality) the analysis is presented through a dialectical process (Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis), thereby demonstrating methodological fidelity to the critical constructivist design.

Growth: From Aggregate Income to Livelihood Security

The Hegemonic Metric (Thesis): In standard poverty assessments, *Growth* is predominantly measured through aggregate monetary indicators such as *per capita expenditure* (BPS approach) or *household income levels* (World Bank metrics). Policy success is claimed when a household

crosses a nominal poverty line (e.g., IDR 550,000/capita/month). This technocratic approach assumes that monetary liquidity equates to economic well-being.

The Critical Gap (Antithesis): This income-centric view suffers from a transience bias. It captures a snapshot of cash flow but ignores the structural fragility of that income (Omar Mahmoud, 2010). A household may cross the poverty line due to a temporary cash transfer (BLT) yet remain destitute in terms of asset ownership and productive capacity (Scoones, 1998). As Haliim & Muhammad (2025) note, without control over productive resources, such growth is merely a dependency trap disguised as development. The metric fails to distinguish between *survivalist accumulation* (coping) and *productive accumulation* (thriving).

The GEAR Proposition (Synthesis): The GEAR Model reconstructs *Growth* as Sustainable Livelihood Security. We propose shifting the measurement focus from *flow* (income) to *stock* (assets) and *stability*.

- Indicator G1: Control over Productive Assets. Instead of asking *How much did you earn?* the proxy asks: *Do you own or control the primary tools/resources (land, technology, capital) required for your livelihood?* This measures economic sovereignty.
- Indicator G2: Livelihood Diversification Index. A single income source indicates vulnerability. This proxy measures the number of distinct, non-correlated income sources a household possesses, reflecting resilience against sector-specific shocks.
- Indicator G3: Perceived Economic Security. A subjective metric assessing the household's confidence in sustaining their lifestyle for the next 6 months without external aid. This captures the psychological dimension of growth often ignored by static data.

Empowerment: From Mobilization to Political Efficacy

The Hegemonic Metric (Thesis): In the technocratic paradigm lexicon, *Empowerment* is frequently reduced to *administrative participation*. Success is measured by the attendance rate of beneficiaries at socialization events, the formation of community groups (*kelompok usaha bersama*), or the frequency of development plan meetings (*Musrenbang*). This metric assumes that physical presence equates to active engagement.

The Critical Gap (Antithesis): This quantitative approach creates an *illusion of inclusion* (Arnstein, 1969). It fails to distinguish between *mobilization* (forced or ritualistic attendance) and *genuine participation* (influence). As Sen (1999) argues, agency is not about being present, but about the freedom to achieve valuable functioning. In Indonesia's patron-client context, high attendance often masks a *culture of silence* where beneficiaries are afraid to voice dissent for fear of losing aid (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025). Measuring attendance without measuring voice merely validates the state's mobilization power, not the citizens' power.

The GEAR Proposition (Synthesis): The GEAR Model redefines *Empowerment* as *Political Efficacy* and *Agency*. We propose indicators that capture the *quality* of power relations.

- Indicator E1: Perceived Political Efficacy. A psychometric proxy measuring a beneficiary's belief that their voice can influence decision-making. *If you disagree with the village head about aid distribution, do you feel safe and able to speak up*?
- Indicator E2: Collective Bargaining Power. Measuring the existence and strength of autonomous (non-state) networks that can negotiate terms with local authorities, moving beyond state-formed groups.
- Indicator E3: Freedom from Clientelism. Assessing the extent to which aid receipt is contingent on political loyalty or personal connections, rather than rights-based entitlement.

Adaptability: From Procedural Compliance to Reflexive Learning

The Hegemonic Metric (Thesis): Bureaucratic adaptability is traditionally measured through *procedural compliance* and *speed*. Indicators include the timeliness of budget disbursement, the adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs), and the completion rate of scheduled program revisions. The *good* program follows the plan perfectly, even if the reality on the ground has changed.

The Critical Gap (Antithesis): This rigidity creates a learning disability within social policy. In a *Risk Society* characterized by sudden shocks strict adherence to pre-set SOPs can be disastrous (Beck, 1992). Procedural metrics ignore the systemic need for *reflexivity*, the ability of institutions to question their own foundations and pivot based on new information. A program can be procedurally perfect (*Wajar Tanpa Pengecualian*/WTP audit status) yet functionally obsolete in addressing new forms of poverty (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025).

The GEAR Proposition (Synthesis): The GEAR Model reconstructs *Adaptability* as *Reflexive Governance*. We prioritize indicators of institutional learning and responsiveness.

- Indicator A1: Feedback Loop Responsiveness. A temporal metric measuring the lag time between a valid community complaint/input and a tangible modification in program implementation.
- Indicator A2: Local Contextualization Index. The degree to which local implementers have the discretionary power to modify guidelines to fit specific local socio-cultural or geographic conditions.
- Indicator A3: Shock-Responsive Elasticity. The mechanism's ability to automatically expand coverage or benefit levels in response to defined triggers (e.g., crop failure, disaster) without waiting for new central decrees.

Rationality: From Cost-Efficiency to Communicative Justice

The Hegemonic Metric (Thesis): Rationality in modern governance is almost exclusively interpreted as *instrumental rationality*. Indicators focus on cost-benefit ratios, overhead minimization, and financial audit opinions (e.g., Unqualified Opinion/WTP). The ultimate goal is the efficient minimization of inputs for maximum outputs.

The Critical Gap (Antithesis): This instrumental view blinds policymakers to the *moral and communicative* dimensions of justice. A policy can be cost-efficient but perceived as deeply unfair or corrupt by the public (Habermas, 1984). Audit culture often creates a façade of transparency where documents are clean, but the substantive decision-making process remains opaque and elite-captured (Fischer, 2003). Instrumental metrics fail to capture the *legitimacy* of the distribution process.

The GEAR Proposition (Synthesis): The GEAR Model elevates Communicative Rationality. Indicators must measure the transparency of *reasons*, not just accounts.

- Indicator R1: Substantive Transparency. Do beneficiaries understand *why* they (or their neighbours) were selected or excluded? This measures the clarity of the justification, not just the availability of data.
- Indicator R2: Perceived Impartiality. The public trust level that allocation decisions are made based on objective rules rather than nepotism or political affiliation.
- Indicator R3: Ethical Accountability. The existence of accessible, safe, and effective channels for ethical recourse when rights are violated.

Table 1. Summary Matrix: The GEAR Indicator System

Dimension	Traditional/Indicator (Thesis)	Critical Gap (Antithesis)	GEAR Model Indicator (Synthesis)
GROWTH	Per capita income; Expenditure level	Transience bias; Ignores asset vulnerability	G1: Control over Productive Assets G2: Livelihood Diversification G3: Perceived Economic Security
EMPOWERMENT	Attendance rates; Number of groups formed	Illusion of inclusion; Mobilization vs. Agency	E1: Perceived Political Efficacy E2: Collective Bargaining Power E3: Freedom from Clientelism
ADAPTABILITY	SOP compliance; Disbursement speed	Institutional rigidity; Failure to learn	A1: Feedback Loop Responsiveness A2: Local Contextualization A3: Shock-Responsive Elasticity
RATIONALITY	Cost-efficiency; Financial Audit (WTP)	Instrumental blindness; Ignoring legitimacy	R1: Substantive Transparency R2: Perceived Impartiality R3: Ethical Accountability

Source: Author's elaboration based on the critical constructivist synthesis, 2025.

3.2 From Theory to Practice: The GEAR Measurement Toolkit

The transition from a technocratic to a reflective-critical paradigm requires more than just conceptual realignment; it demands new instruments of inquiry. A common critique of critical social policy is its tendency to remain abstract, potent in diagnosis but paralyzed in operationalization (Fischer, 2003). Building upon the indicators formulated in Section 3.1 (which represent Phase 3 of the methodology), this section translates those constructs into a concrete measurement toolkit. This toolkit is designed as a dual-method instrument, providing Quantitative Constructs (Likert-type items for large-scale surveys) and Qualitative Probes (In-depth interview questions to explore the mechanisms and narrative behind the data). This operationalization serves not only as a validation tool for the GEAR Model but also as a replicable resource for future researchers aiming to assess the substantive quality of social policies in Indonesia.

The items presented in Table 2 should be read as core indicators rather than an exhaustive questionnaire. Each conceptual indicator (G1–G3, E1–E3, A1–A3, R1–R3) is intended to be operationalized by a small bank of likert-type items rather than a single question. The current table therefore displays one theoretically central item and one qualitative probe per indicator as an illustrative anchor. In subsequent empirical work, this core set will be expanded into a broader item bank that can be refined through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to identify the most psychometrically robust items for each construct. In other words, Table 2 serves as the normative and conceptual nucleus of the GEAR measurement system, while the full item bank is deliberately left open for iterative development and validation.

Table 2. The GEAR Model Measurement Toolkit

Dimension	Indicator Code	Quantitative Item (Likert-type 1-5) *(1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)*	Qualitative Probe (Interview Guide)
GROWTH	G1	*"I have full authority to sell, rent, or use the productive assets (land/tools) I received from the program."*	*"Can you tell me a story about a time you wanted to use the aid/tool for a new business idea? Were you allowed to do so?"*
	G2	*"My household relies on more than three different sources of income to survive."*	*"If your main job stops tomorrow, what other specific sources of income can you rely on immediately?"*

	G3	*"I feel confident that my family will not fall back into poverty in the next 6 months even if aid stops."*	*"What makes you feel secure (or insecure) about your economic future without government aid?"*
EMPOWERMENT	E1	*"I am not afraid to openly disagree with the village head regarding aid distribution."*	*"Have you ever disagreed with a decision made by the program officer? What happened when you spoke up?"*
	E2	*"Our community group can negotiate with officials to change program rules that don't fit our needs."*	*"Does your group ever meet without the facilitator present? What do you discuss?"*
	E3	*"I believe I would still receive this aid even if I did not support the current local leader."*	*"In your village, who really decides who gets on the list? Is it based on rules or relationships?"*
ADAPTABILITY	A1	*"When we complain about problems, the program fixes them within a month."*	*"Tell me about a complaint you filed. How long did it take for them to respond, and was the solution real or just talk?"*
	A2	*"In my area, program staff are allowed to modify or relax standard rules when these rules do not match local realities"*	*"Can you describe a concrete example when program rules were changed or relaxed because of the specific conditions in your village/neighbourhood? What exactly was adjusted, and who decided it?"*
	A3	*"During crises, this program can quickly increase or adapt its support without having to wait for new instructions from higher authorities."*	*"Please tell me about your community's experience during the most recent crisis. What, if anything, changed in this assistance program, and how quickly did those changes happen?"*
RATIONALITY	R1	*"I clearly understand the specific reasons why my neighbor was chosen or rejected for this program."*	*"How did the officers explain the selection criteria to you? Did it make sense?"*
	R2	*"The selection of beneficiaries in this village is free from family or political connections."*	*"If you were the village head, how would you distribute this aid differently to make it fairer?"*
	R3	*"If something unfair happens in this program, I know there is a complaint channel that will take my report seriously and produce a real response."*	*"When there is unfairness or wrongdoing in the distribution of assistance, where do people usually file complaints? What happens after they complain? do you see any concrete follow-up or change?"*

Source: Author's elaboration, 2025.

The GEAR measurement toolkit is structured around four higher-order dimensions which are further specified into twelve reflective indicators. For each indicator, the toolkit provides a paired set of instruments: a quantitative likert-type item designed for large-N household surveys, and a corresponding qualitative probe intended for in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. This dual-method design is consistent with the reflective-critical paradigm of the model, which seeks to capture both the measurable patterns and the underlying mechanisms of power, voice, and livelihood security.

Table 2 presents one core item and one probe per indicator as the conceptual anchor of an emergent item bank. These core items are those most directly derived from the theoretical synthesis underpinning each dimension. At the same time, the toolkit has been deliberately designed to accommodate an expanded set of items for each indicator in future empirical applications. Researchers are encouraged to develop and test additional items around these cores, allowing the item bank to be iteratively refined through pilot studies, reliability analysis, and factor-analytic techniques.

The quantitative module is primarily designed to be implemented at the household or adult-beneficiary level, making it compatible with standard social assistance surveys and poverty assessments. The qualitative probes can be administered either to individual beneficiaries or to naturally occurring groups, depending on the research design and ethical considerations. The overall length of the toolkit has been calibrated so that it can function as an add-on module within existing survey infrastructures, while the qualitative component can be flexibly adapted to the time and resource constraints of different field settings. Together, this structure ensures that the GEAR toolkit is both theoretically grounded and practically deployable across diverse policy and research contexts.

By employing this toolkit, researchers try to uncover the *hidden poverty* often missed by standard metrics. For instance, a community might score high on income (Growth) but low on Efficacy (Empowerment), revealing a *Golden Cage* scenario where economic needs are met at the cost of political silence. Conversely, high Adaptability scores in low-income areas might explain community resilience during crises. This granular diagnostic capability distinguishes GEAR from monolithic indices like the MPI.

3.3 Using the GEAR Toolkit: Practical Guidelines

The GEAR toolkit is not only a conceptual innovation but also a practical instrument that must be implemented in politically sensitive and relationally complex environments. This subsection offers a concise "user manual" for researchers and practitioners who intend to deploy the toolkit in empirical settings. It outlines recommended choices regarding the unit of analysis and respondent selection, key principles for data collection in patron–client contexts, basic scoring procedures, and approximate time requirements.

Unit of Analysis and Target Respondents

The quantitative module of the GEAR toolkit is primarily designed to be administered at the household or adult-beneficiary level. In most social assistance programmes, the relevant respondent will be the person who is formally registered as the programme beneficiary or who effectively manages the household's interaction with the scheme (for instance, the mother in Conditional Cash Transfer programmes such as PKH). This design allows the GEAR items to be integrated into existing poverty surveys and programme monitoring instruments without requiring a separate sampling frame.

The qualitative probes, by contrast, are more flexible in terms of unit of analysis. They can be administered to individual beneficiaries in in-depth interviews, or to naturally occurring community groups (e.g., savings groups, beneficiary forums, neighbourhood associations) in focus group discussions. Group settings can be particularly valuable for uncovering shared norms, informal rules, and collective narratives around clientelism, voice, and perceived legitimacy that are difficult to capture through survey questions alone.

Data Collection Protocol and Ethical Safeguards

Because several GEAR indicators explicitly address sensitive issues such as fear of disagreeing with local elites, perceived clientelism, and distrust in allocation processes, the way in which data are collected is as important as the wording of the items themselves. At minimum, three ethical and methodological safeguards are recommended:

- First, interviews should take place in a setting where village officials, local brokers, or programme facilitators are not present, in order to minimise social pressure and the perception that responses will affect access to benefits. Enumerators must clearly communicate that participation is voluntary and that answers will have no consequences for the respondent's eligibility.

- Second, enumerators should receive targeted training on how to introduce the GEAR module, how to reassure respondents about confidentiality, and how to handle distress or discomfort when discussing experiences of unfairness or abuse. Particular attention should be given to normalising disagreement with authority as a legitimate topic of research rather than a form of disloyalty.
- Third, for the most sensitive items (e.g., those referring directly to the village head or local political support), researchers may consider using indirect questioning techniques or self-administered response formats where literacy levels permit. In all cases, the GEAR toolkit is intended to protect, not expose, vulnerable respondents; its deployment must therefore be guided by a robust ethical review and context-specific risk assessment.

Table 3. Practical Administration Guidelines for the GEAR Toolkit

Component	Recommended Practice
Unit of analysis	Quantitative: individual adult beneficiary or household representative; Qualitative: individual or community group
Respondent selection	Person formally registered as beneficiary or de facto manager of programme interaction within the household
Interview setting	Private location out of sight and hearing of local officials, brokers, or programme staff
Enumerator training focus	Emphasise confidentiality, non-consequential nature of answers, and sensitivity to power relations and clientelism
Handling sensitive items	Use clear assurances, neutral wording, and where feasible, indirect questioning or self-administered response formats
Integration in surveys	Insert GEAR items as an additional module within existing social assistance or poverty surveys
Use of qualitative probes	Combine with surveys in a subsample of sites to explain anomalies and unpack mechanisms behind quantitative scores

Source: Author's elaboration based on the reflective-critical design of the GEAR toolkit, 2025.

Scoring and Basic Aggregation

The GEAR quantitative items use a five-point Likert-type (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). For each indicator (e.g., G1, E2), scores can be calculated as the mean of all items associated with that indicator, thereby allowing future extensions of the toolkit to include multiple items per construct. Dimension scores (Growth, Empowerment, Adaptability, Rationality) are obtained by averaging the relevant indicator scores (e.g., G1–G3 for Growth).

While it is technically possible to compute a single composite GEAR index by averaging the four-dimension scores, such a reduction is normatively and analytically limiting. Each dimension represents a distinct facet of justice (livelihood security, political agency, reflexive governance, and communicative legitimacy) that should not be collapsed into a single number without careful justification. In line with the reflective-critical orientation of the model, the primary analytic focus should remain on the pattern of scores across dimensions and their internal contradictions (for instance, high Growth combined with low Empowerment), rather than on a single aggregated value. Researchers who nevertheless construct a composite index are encouraged to treat it as a heuristic mapping tool rather than a definitive measure of "overall performance."

Approximate Time Requirements

In terms of survey time burden, the core quantitative module of the GEAR toolkit comprising one item per indicator, can typically be administered in approximately 10–15 minutes per household, depending on respondent literacy and familiarity with likert-type questions. When additional items are added to expand the item bank, researchers should anticipate a proportionate increase in interview duration. The qualitative component is more elastic: a focused in-depth interview using the GEAR probes may require 45–60 minutes, while a group discussion will usually last between 60 and 90 minutes. These

estimates are intended to help practitioners decide whether to integrate the full toolkit or a reduced subset of items into their existing data collection designs.

3.4 Interpreting the Toolkit: A Guide to Reflective-Critical Diagnosis

The matrix and measurement toolkit presented above are not merely administrative checklists. They are diagnostic instruments designed to expose the *structural* and *relational* dimensions of poverty. The construction of these tools serves three specific analytical objectives that distinguish the GEAR Model from conventional policy evaluations. Interpreting the GEAR toolkit requires a shift from reading scores as static indicators of success or failure to viewing them as relational maps of power, agency, and structural vulnerability. Rather than seeking a single overall score, users are encouraged to examine the pattern of results across the four dimensions and their internal tensions, such as high Growth combined with low Empowerment, or strong Adaptability alongside weak Rationality.

These quantitative configurations should then be read in dialogue with the qualitative probes, which provide narrative depth and reveal the mechanisms behind apparently contradictory scores. In this sense, interpretation is itself a reflective-critical act: it asks not only *how much* poverty has been reduced, but *in what way* and *at what political cost*. To make this logic more concrete, Table 4 presents a set of illustrative diagnostic patterns that show how different combinations of GEAR scores can be read as qualitatively distinct configurations of power, vulnerability, and institutional performance.

Table 4. Illustrative Diagnostic Patterns in GEAR Scores

Pattern label	Growth	Empowerment	Adaptability	Rationality	Indicative interpretation
Golden Cage	High	Low	Medium	Medium/Low	Material conditions improved, but political voice and agency remain constrained
Technocratic Mirage	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Administrative outputs are reported, yet institutions are rigid and perceived as unfair
Resilient Periphery	Low	Medium/High	High	Medium	Economically poor but institutionally adaptive and collectively organised
Silent Stability	Medium	Very Low	Medium	High	Procedural order and formal rationality are maintained at the expense of open contestation

Source: Author's elaboration based on the reflective-critical design of the GEAR Model, 2025.

Standard metrics often produce false positives that appear to signal policy success (for example, funds disbursed, targets met) while masking underlying failures such as the erosion of autonomy. The GEAR toolkit is calibrated precisely to detect these inconsistencies. The Empowerment indicators (E1–E3), for instance, are explicitly designed to capture political silence: situations in which beneficiaries appear satisfied but are in fact afraid to voice dissent because of clientelistic pressures (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025). By triangulating quantitative scores on perceived efficacy with qualitative narratives about clientelism, researchers can diagnose whether a programme is genuinely expanding citizens' agency or merely purchasing their compliance.

A persistent challenge in social policy research is the disconnect between macro-level governance indicators (Rationality and Adaptability) and micro-level livelihood realities (Growth and Empowerment). The GEAR toolkit integrates these domains into a single explanatory framework. The Rationality items do not ask beneficiaries to evaluate technical budget efficiency, but rather the perceived legitimacy of allocation decisions as they are experienced in everyday life. This approach operationalises Habermas's communicative rationality by treating beneficiaries' perceptions of

fairness as a valid indicator of governance quality. Low scores on perceived impartiality at the micro level can thus function as an early warning signal of systemic corruption or bias at the macro level.

Traditional indicators are often static snapshots. For example, poverty status at a single point in time. In contrast, the Adaptability and Growth indicators introduce a temporal and dynamic dimension. The focus on livelihood diversification and shock-responsive elasticity shifts the analysis from current status to future resilience. Responsiveness defined as the capacity for rapid adaptation to citizen needs through Knowledge Management. It is complements the Adaptability dimension of the GEAR model by emphasizing evidence-based outcomes in social assistance evaluation, rather than mere procedural compliance (Barbier, 2025).

This allows the GEAR Model to anticipate vulnerability before it reappears as statistical poverty. A household may be classified as non-poor today (because of high current income) but remain structurally fragile if its income sources are undiversified and highly exposed to shocks. The toolkit identifies this precariousness, enabling more anticipatory and preventive policy interventions. Figure 2 synthesises this multi-level logic by depicting how the GEAR architecture links the core reflective-critical framework, its dual critical and reflective dimensions, the indicator matrix, and the measurement toolkit into a coherent pathway from theory to technical operationalisation.

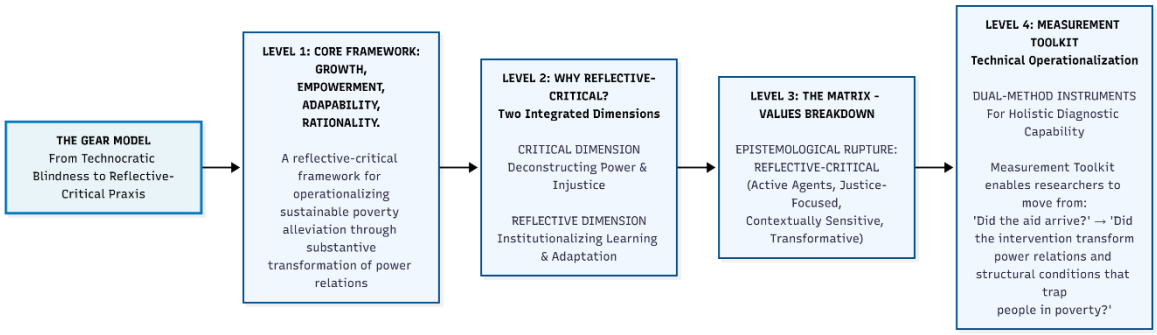

Figure 2. GEAR Model Architecture: From Framework to Measurement Toolkit
Source: Authors' elaboration, 2025.

By deploying this toolkit, researchers and practitioners are equipped to move beyond the narrow question of *Did the aid arrive?* to the far more critical question: *Did the intervention transform the power relations and structural conditions that trap people in poverty?* This shift in inquiry is the core contribution of the GEAR Model to the contemporary discourse on sustainable and just poverty alleviation.

CONCLUSION

Systemic poverty persistence in Indonesia, despite decades of technocratic interventions and statistical successes, reveals a fundamental epistemological crisis: the reliance on technocratic indicators that prioritize administrative compliance, aggregate growth, and cost-efficiency over substantive transformation of human capabilities and power relations. This article operationalizes the GEAR Model as a corrective methodological framework grounded in critical social theory and critical constructivism. Through a rigorous theoretical-derivation approach, the GEAR Model shifts analytical focus from monetary income toward Sustainable Livelihood Security (Growth), from passive attendance toward Political Efficacy and Agency (Empowerment), from rigid procedural compliance toward Reflexive Governance (Adaptability), and from instrumental cost-efficiency toward Communicative Justice and Legitimacy (Rationality). The measurement toolkit, integrating quantitative Likert-type constructs with qualitative interview probes, provides a critical diagnosis of the

Golden Cages of modern welfare states, contexts where material needs are met at the expense of political voice and autonomy.

However, the GEAR Model in this article should be understood as a methodological blueprint and exploratory toolkit for the empirical validation phase, not as a ready-to-use measurement instrument for immediate policy adoption. Although the toolkit is grounded in established critical social theories and rigorous logical derivation, theoretical coherence does not guarantee performance measurement in practice, particularly within contexts marked by asymmetric patron-client relations and material vulnerability in the field. Future empirical validation requires a structured, four-stage roadmap to ensure the GEAR Model transitions from a conceptual blueprint to a robust measurement instrument.

First, expert validation (content validity) must be conducted using the Delphi method with a panel of public administration scholars and social policy practitioners to refine item clarity and theoretical relevance. Second, a preliminary pilot test involving a representative sample of beneficiaries across diverse decentralized contexts (e.g., urban, rural, and remote administrative settings) is necessary to identify cross-contextual ambiguities. Third, psychometric robustness will be assessed through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to verify dimensionality and Cronbach's Alpha for internal consistency reliability. Finally, to specifically address the risk of social desirability bias identified in patron-client contexts, the validation protocol will employ triangulation strategies, comparing self-reported survey data against in-depth qualitative narratives and, where feasible, administrative records to detect systematic response distortions. This rigorous roadmap ensures that the GEAR toolkit is not merely theoretically coherent but empirically resilient and practically deployable.

DECLARATION OF AI ASSISTANCE

The author used Grammarly (an AI-assisted writing tool) for the purpose of proofreading and improving grammatical accuracy. The author manually reviewed and edited all suggestions generated by the tool to ensure the academic integrity and original voice of the manuscript remain intact. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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