

POLICY CAPACITY AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE ROLE OF REGIONAL COUNCILS IN WEST SULAWESI, INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study examines the policy capacity of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) of West Sulawesi in budgeting for poverty alleviation within Indonesia's decentralized governance framework. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research assesses analytical, operational, and political dimensions through interviews, focus groups, and budget data from 2023–2024. Findings reveal major weaknesses: limited use of multidimensional poverty data, fragmented and poorly coordinated programs, and underdeveloped participatory mechanisms. These institutional gaps constrain the DPRD's role in poverty reduction despite formal mandates. Beyond Indonesia, similar challenges exist in Asia, including India and the Philippines, where fiscal authority is devolved without sufficient institutional strengthening. By applying the policy capacity framework to a legislative body, this study offers a novel analytical perspective and concludes with practical recommendations for data-informed planning, integrated management, and participatory budgeting, contributing to debates on decentralization, governance, and institutional effectiveness.

Keywords: Local governance, policy capacity, poverty alleviation, political accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty continues to be one of the most intractable development challenges confronting Indonesia, particularly in regions such as West Sulawesi Province. Notwithstanding constitutional mandates for decentralised governance and autonomy as in the Indonesian Constitution article 18 the capacity of regional institutions to design and implement effective anti-poverty strategies remains uneven. The Government of Indonesia has identified the reduction of poverty as a priority within its medium-term development plans, with the objective of decreasing the national poverty rate to between 7.0% and 8.0% by 2025 (Yashilva, 2024). Nevertheless, considerable disparities between provinces persist. In West Sulawesi, the poverty rate stood at 11.21% in March 2024, significantly higher than the national average of 9.36% (BPS Sulawesi Barat, 2024).

Notwithstanding the 5.25% economic growth recorded in the province in 2023, largely attributable to the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors, there has been no concomitant equitable improvement in welfare (Humas Sulbar, 2024). The observed discrepancy between economic performance and poverty outcomes highlights the necessity for a comprehensive, multi-dimensional policy response that is not only economically sound but also socially inclusive and grounded in local realities.

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economic performance and poverty outcomes highlights the necessity for a comprehensive, multi-dimensional policy response that is not only economically sound but also socially inclusive and grounded in local realities. The role of the Regional Legislative Council in Indonesia usually referred as DPRD is pivotal in this regard. The latter is the regional legislative body that is tasked with the formation of local regulations, budget allocations, and oversight functions. According to Pressman and Wildavsky (1984), the success of public policy implementation is largely determined by inter-organizational coordination. Conversely, Bardach (1998) emphasises the inherent political conflicts that may distort implementation outcomes. Within the framework of the DRP, these tensions can manifest as either enablers or barriers, contingent on the institution's capacity to navigate intricate stakeholder environments and policy demands.

The concept of policy capacity provides a useful analytical lens through which to examine the effectiveness of Mandiri Village in poverty alleviation. The term 'policy capacity' is understood to signify a set of competencies and resources present at the individual, organisational, and systemic levels. These competencies and resources are divided into three domains: analytical, operational, and political (Gleeson, Legge and O'Neill, 2009; Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018). As demonstrated in the relevant literature, there is a positive correlation between high levels of policy capacity and superior policy design, more strategic resource mobilisation, and stronger political legitimacy (Fukuyama, 2013; Howlett and Ramesh, 2015). However, empirical evidence suggests that policy responses to poverty in West Sulawesi have been fragmented and inadequately integrated across sectors. Despite the implementation of national programmes, local innovations have been constrained by the absence of robust institutional ownership and inadequate policy discretion at the regional level. The absence of congruence between national frameworks and local needs has frequently culminated in suboptimal outcomes and policy misalignment (Elmore, 1979; Hull and Hjern, 1987).

Furthermore, the complex and multidimensional nature of poverty, as measured by indices such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), calls for integrated policy responses that transcend income-based metrics (Alkire and Santos, 2010). In West Sulawesi, over 83% of the impoverished population resides in rural areas, with food insecurity contributing significantly to poverty indicators. Indeed, 77.55% of the poverty line is determined by food-related expenditures (BPS Sulawesi Barat, 2024). The necessity for place-based, participatory, and data-driven policies tailored to local socio-economic conditions is emphasised by these figures. In light of the aforementioned context, this study investigates the policy capacity of West Sulawesi's legislative council (DPRD) in addressing poverty, with a specific focus on its legislative, budgeting, and oversight functions. The Indonesian experience is particularly instructive for Asia, where decentralised governance has been embraced in diverse forms across countries such as India, the Philippines, and Nepal. By situating this case within the wider Asian discourse, the study aims not only to analyse DPRD's institutional performance but also to shed light on the broader challenges of legislative effectiveness in decentralised systems throughout the region. The study examines the institutional arrangements, inter-sectoral dynamics, and stakeholder interactions that shape the formulation and execution of poverty reduction strategies. The fieldwork was conducted between March and July 2024 with ethical exemption granted by the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Dentistry, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia (Ethical Exemption No: 020/KEPK FKG- RSGMP UH/EE/XII/2024, issued on 15 December 2024).

Literature review

The notion of policy capacity has come to the fore as a pivotal paradigm for assessing the efficacy of public institutions in addressing intricate societal challenges, such as poverty. The term 'policy capacity' is defined as the set of skills and resources necessary to perform policy functions effectively. This concept encompasses analytical, operational and political dimensions across individual, organisational and systemic levels (Gleeson, Legge and O'Neill, 2009; Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018). A high level of policy capacity enables governments to formulate informed decisions, strategically allocate resources, and secure the political legitimacy needed for successful implementation (Painter and Pierre, 2004; Fukuyama, 2013).

Analytically, policy capacity is defined as the ability to evaluate, synthesize, and translate data into actionable strategies. Operationally, this process entails coordination, resource management, and stakeholder engagement. In the context of politics, it signifies the capacity to amass support, navigate discord, and ensure congruence among heterogeneous actors (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018). It is further emphasised by Parsons (2004) that policy capacity plays an integrative role in the process of bringing together various institutional interests and weaving them into coherent policy agendas. In the context of decentralisation in Indonesia, where local governments are endowed with autonomy in policy design and implementation, the relevance of policy capacity is particularly pronounced. As argued by Bullock, Mountford and Stanley (2001) and further elaborated by Howlett and Ramesh (2016), gaps in policy capacity especially at the local level are a major barrier to effective service delivery and poverty reduction.

The DPRD is a pivotal actor in regional governance, with mandates encompassing legislative formulation, budget approval, and executive oversight. When implemented effectively, these functions can exert a substantial influence on the design and delivery of pro-poor policies (World Bank, 2008). However, the actualisation of these roles is often impeded by institutional limitations, which may include a deficiency in technical competence, political fragmentation, and inadequate inter-sectoral coordination. The efficacy of legislative institutions in the policy process has been a subject of considerable debate in the implementation literature. As Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) emphasise, effective coordination among implementing agencies is paramount. In contrast, Bardach (1998) underscores the potential for political dynamics to compromise the integrity of policy outcomes. As posited by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981), top-down perspectives underline the significance of unambiguous policy directives and institutional capacity. Conversely, bottom-up theorists, including Goldner and Lipsky (1982) and Elmore (1979), emphasise the discretionary role of street-level bureaucrats and local actors.

Poverty is increasingly recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon, transcending mere income insufficiency. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), as developed by Alkire and Santos (2010), incorporates a range of deprivations in health, education, and living standards, thereby offering a more comprehensive assessment of well-being. This approach is particularly pertinent for provinces such as West Sulawesi, where poverty is driven not solely by economic hardship but also by poor infrastructure, inadequate services, and limited social mobility. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1, reinforce the imperative for integrated, inclusive, and place-based strategies. Achieving SDG-1 requires coordination across sectors education, health, economic development, and governance which is only possible through strong institutional capacity and collaborative governance (UNGA, 2015). Theoretical debates around policy implementation particularly those which distinguish between top-down and bottom-up approaches provide valuable insights for assessing Actualités de la Presse Française's (AFP) role. In the field of organisational theory, top-down models, exemplified by the work of

Mazmanian and Sabatier, emphasise the significance of formal authority and policy clarity. In contrast, bottom-up models (Elmore, 1979; Goldner and Lipsky, 1982), underscore the role of local discretion and adaptive problem-solving in decision-making processes. Elmore's "backward mapping" theory posits that effective implementation should not commence with centralised planning, but rather, should be informed by an understanding of the individuals closest to the problem. In a similar vein, Hull and Hjern demonstrate how policy networks, encompassing non-governmental and community stakeholders, can exert a more substantial influence on outcomes in comparison to hierarchical mandates.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive-analytical focus to explore the capacity of the DPRD in addressing poverty in West Sulawesi. The study is situated within the broader context of regional autonomy and decentralisation, wherein the role of the DPRD is pivotal in the execution of legislative functions, budgetary processes, and oversight. The selection of West Sulawesi as the research location was due to the region's persistently high poverty rates and the critical need to strengthen local governance in order to facilitate more effective poverty reduction efforts. The research design employs a case study method, enabling an in-depth examination of the institutional dynamics, decision-making processes, and coordination in policy implementation of the studied case. The data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews with members of the DPRD, government officials, policy experts, and community leaders; focus group discussions (FGDs) with local stakeholders in selected regencies; and document analysis of relevant policies, regional regulations, budget plans, and statistical data. The analysis of the data is facilitated by an interactive model that encompasses data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). The findings are interpreted using the policy capacity framework (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018), which categorizes policy capacity into analytical, operational, and political dimensions across individual, organisational, and systemic levels. This framework assists in evaluating the impact of ABD's capabilities on the efficacy of poverty alleviation programmes. All research activities were conducted with ethical considerations in mind, including the provision of informed consent and the maintenance of confidentiality for all participants, and activities were carried out under ethical exemption granted by the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Dentistry, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia (Ethical Exemption No: 020/KEPK FKG-RSGMP UH/EE/XII/2024, issued on 15 December 2024).

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings from a triangulation of program documentation, budget realization data, and qualitative inputs (interviews and FGDs), analyzed through the lens of policy capacity specifically the analytical, operational, and political functions of the West Sulawesi's DPRD.

Overview of poverty alleviation program planning and realization

An analysis of the program documentation for 2023–2024 reveals that a total of 47 programs were categorized under poverty alleviation across multiple OPDs (regional apparatus). Of these, only 19 programs (40.4%) were explicitly targeted toward poor and vulnerable populations. The remaining programs were more extensive in nature and frequently lacked a clear alignment with poverty indicators, indicative of a deficiency in analytical capacity during the

program design process (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018). The realization of the budget varied significantly. The total budget allocated to poverty- focused programs was approximately Rp 156.4 billion. However, only Rp 113.2 billion (72.4%) was actually spent. Furthermore, six programs experienced realization below 50%. The causes of this low realization included administrative delays, vague beneficiary targeting, and inadequate inter-agency coordination.

Analytical capacity: data use and targeting weakness

With regard to its analytical capacity, the West Sulawesi's DPRD showed limitations in its use of disaggregated, multi-dimensional poverty data to guide legislative or oversight functions. The majority of programs utilized conventional income-based thresholds and lacked MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index) indicators. For instance, although 83% of the impoverished population resides in rural areas and 77.55% of the poverty line is food-expenditure based (BPS Sulawesi Barat, 2024), fewer than 25% of programs directly addressed food insecurity or rural service delivery. Furthermore, the budget hearings and program assessments conducted by the West Sulawesi's DPRD seldom incorporated poverty maps or participatory data, thereby constraining the responsiveness of allocations to real-time local needs. These findings reflect the analytical gaps raised in prior literature on decentralized governance (Fukuyama, 2013; Howlett and Ramesh, 2015).

Operational capacity: fragmentation and execution gaps

From an operational perspective, the execution of the program was hindered by the fragmentation of responsibilities across various OPDs. Focused group discussions (FGDs) conducted in Mamuju and Polewali Mandar revealed a notable absence of a coordinating body to integrate poverty programs under a unified framework. It was noted by several respondents from both West Sulawesi's DPRD and civil society that a multitude of agencies had implemented overlapping community empowerment initiatives, lacking synchronized goals. This has led to a state of duplicative efforts and the inefficient use of resources. For instance, a job-training program designed to cater to 600 beneficiaries in Majene was accessed by only 178 individuals, representing a participation rate of 29.6%, due to delays in procurement processes and scheduling conflicts with other social protection programs. This phenomenon aligns with the observations documented by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), who have termed this dynamic a "lack of operational coherence." This term is understood to have the potential to erode both efficiency and stakeholder trust within the organizational context.

Political capacity: limited stakeholder engagement and oversight

The political capacity of the West Sulawesi's DPRD was constrained by two primary factors. The first issue pertains to the absence of formal mechanisms for multi-stakeholder consultation. The second issue is related to the presence of political fragmentation within the council itself. A review of the evaluated programs revealed that less than 30% exhibited evidence of community engagement during the planning phases, and only 4 programs conducted participatory evaluations post-implementation. This oversight undermines the principle of inclusive policymaking, as previously emphasized (Elmore, 1979; Alkire and Santos, 2010). Furthermore, the activities of the budget oversight committee (Banggar) were frequently reduced to compliance reviews rather than substantive policy monitoring. It was acknowledged by multiple members of the DRP that their familiarity with technical indicators was limited. Consequently, they relied on OPD reports without conducting independent verification.

Table 1. Summary of key gaps in West Sulawesi’s DPRD in policy capacity

Dimension	Key Findings
Analytical	Poor use of MPI or disaggregated data; weak alignment of programs to core needs.
Operational	Overlapping programs; inconsistent realization; limited coordination.
Political	Minimal community participation; weak inter-factional consensus in DPRD.

These findings collectively affirm the core research objective: while DPRD holds legal mandates over budgeting and oversight for poverty alleviation, its functional policy capacity remains uneven across domains. As such, budget decisions are not yet sufficiently informed, targeted, or inclusive to catalyze structural reductions in poverty.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that while the DPRD in West Sulawesi holds formal authority over the regional budgeting process, its policy capacity across analytical, operational, and political domains remains critically underdeveloped. These limitations impose significant constraints on the council's capacity to direct poverty alleviation programs towards meaningful and equitable outcomes.

In accordance with the findings of Wu, Ramesh and Howlett (2018), the inadequate utilization of disaggregated, multi-dimensional poverty data by the council indicates a more profound issue: the lack of analytical procedures embedded within council operations. Fiscal transfers and public spending have been identified as robust predictors of poverty alleviation. Nevertheless, West Sulawesi's DPRD persists in relying on broad income-based thresholds as its primary strategy, rather than focusing on targeting rural populations and those experiencing food insecurity. It is noteworthy that the rural extreme poor constitute more than 80% of the region's total impoverished population.

The observed fragmentation across OPDs aligns with the seminal analysis (Bardach, 1998), that coordination even in well-designed policies often breaks down during implementation. The narrow control exercised by the West Sulawesi's DPRD, which is primarily confined within the procedural scope of Banggar, serves as a microcosm of a more extensive problem. This problem is characterized by the dysfunctional interagency cooperation and the incoherent delivery of programs. This finding is consistent with broader analyses of decentralization in Indonesia. These analyses attribute stagnant human development outcomes to inconsistent local government capacity and the failure to implement coordinated strategies (Setiawan et al., 2022). The aforementioned capacity gaps are analogous to global lessons from other developing countries. In these countries, a lack of systematic coordination and resource consolidation has been linked to implementation failure.

From a political perspective, the effectiveness of the West Sulawesi DPRD's oversight function is questionable, as there is a notable absence of citizen and marginalized-group participation in budgeting processes. This deficiency has been shown to amplify the risks of elite

capture and limited accountability, as Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) have previously noted. The Indonesian decentralization model, which is characterized by the legal devolution of authority, frequently encounters implementation challenges in practice. These challenges are often attributed to the presence of local elitism and the limited political motivations of patrilist structures. The data demonstrate that municipal councils tend to prioritize internal consensus and procedural compliance rather than performance-oriented budgeting that is directed by the community. This pattern has been observed in other regions (Howlett and Ramesh, 2015).

Recent studies employing the policy capacity framework have emphasized that the success of public services frequently necessitates the collaborative operation of analytical, operational, and political capacities (Setiawan et al., 2022). In the context of Yogyakarta, it was found that the enhancement of fiscal capacity, when synchronized with political endorsement and analytical capability, yielded a concomitant reduction in poverty levels (Sriyana, 2015). However, West Sulawesi's DPRD does not share this alignment. It possesses fiscal mandates devoid of the requisite data and political partnerships to execute them effectively, leading to fragmented and politically driven budgeting that exhibits an absence of sustained social impact.

In the broader Asian context, parallels can be drawn with India's panchayati raj institutions and the Philippines' barangay councils, which similarly grapple with aligning fiscal authority, technical expertise, and participatory mechanisms. This suggests that the weaknesses observed in West Sulawesi's DPRD are not unique, but emblematic of a wider regional pattern where decentralisation has devolved formal authority without sufficient institutional strengthening. The novelty of this study lies in applying the policy capacity framework (L Thirupathi, 2021 & Duka Ventura Eva, 2012). Traditionally used for executive agencies to legislative councils, thereby offering a comparative tool that can be extended across Asian cases.

Research on participatory budgeting indicates that civic engagement can significantly improve pro-poor outcomes, reduce inequality, and enhance transparency, as evidenced by Porto Alegre, Brazil (Porto de Oliveira, 2017). The allocation of financial resources by communities has been demonstrated to influence the prioritization of investments in sanitation and health, as well as the enhancement of revenue compliance. For the DPRD of West Sulawesi, the integration of participatory mechanisms such as open hearings, local assemblies, or digital platforms has the potential to engender stronger ownership, better alignment with community needs, and readiness to utilize poverty disaggregated data.

These findings underline the need for institutional reforms that bridge analytical, operational, and political capacities. For practitioners, the implications are clear: legislatures must integrate poverty data into planning, establish cross-agency coordination mechanisms, and embed structured citizen participation. Such measures are not only essential in West Sulawesi but also in other decentralised contexts ranging from South Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa where similar institutional weaknesses hinder effective poverty reduction. Thus, the Indonesian case offers transferable lessons for public administration scholarship and practice.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) in West Sulawesi has formal authority over important functions, yet faces challenges in contributing to poverty alleviation due to deficiencies in policy capacity. Issues include limited data-driven planning, fragmented program implementation, and low stakeholder engagement. Budgeting practices lack strategic focus on addressing the complex nature of poverty, with programs not aligned with real-

time poverty data and critical needs. Poor coordination among agencies and minimal participatory budgeting hinders public spending effectiveness. To enhance the institutional effectiveness of the DPRD, reforms such as improving analytical capacity, enhancing operational coordination, and institutionalizing participatory practices are necessary. The study underscores the importance of combining formal authority with institutional competence for effective governance, stressing the need for local councils like the DPRD to play a key role in evidence-based policymaking for poverty reduction in Indonesia. More broadly, this research highlights lessons relevant to other Asian countries experimenting with decentralisation: without strengthening the analytical, operational, and political capacities of legislative institutions, the promise of poverty reduction through local governance may remain unrealised. The innovative application of the policy capacity framework thus opens new avenues for comparative analysis across Asia's evolving political and governance landscapes.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study comprising anonymized interview transcripts, focus group summaries, and policy documents are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants. However, selected excerpts and aggregated data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in compliance with institutional ethical protocols.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

FUNDING

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

This study was conducted in compliance with institutional and national research ethics standards. Ethical exemption was granted by the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Dentistry, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia (Ethical Exemption No: 020/KEPK FKG-RSGMP UH/EE/XII/2024, issued on 15 December 2024). Data collection was carried out between March and July 2024 in West Sulawesi Province.

Both verbal and written informed consent procedures were applied in accordance with the research context. Verbal consent was obtained in cases where participants preferred not to sign written forms due to cultural sensitivities and privacy concerns. In such cases, consent was documented by the researchers through audio recordings at the beginning of each interview and contemporaneous field notes. Written consent was obtained from participants who agreed to provide it. All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and confidentiality measures prior to data collection.

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