



The Dilemma of Decentralization in Public Policy Implementation in Indonesia

Ajeng Putri Aulia*, Andhini

Universitas Katolik Parahyangan

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*Correspondence: Ajeng Putri Aulia

Email: ajengptrauliaa@gmail.com

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Abstract: Decentralization has been a central agenda in Indonesia's governmental reform since the end of the New Order regime, marked by the enactment of Law No. 22 of 1999, which was later revised through Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government. The primary goals of decentralization are to strengthen local democracy, enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery, and accelerate development based on local needs. However, its implementation has led to a range of complex dilemmas. This article aims to critically examine the dynamics and challenges of decentralization in the context of public policy implementation in Indonesia, with a particular focus on structural issues such as disparities in regional capacity, overlapping authorities between central and local governments, weak intergovernmental coordination, and the growing potential for misuse of autonomy by local actors. This study employs a qualitative approach using literature review and thematic analysis of regulations, academic literature, and relevant empirical studies. The main findings indicate that decentralization, when not supported by institutional readiness and adequate oversight, tends to produce policy fragmentation, widen interregional disparities, and create

opportunities for corrupt practices at the local level. Therefore, a reformulation of decentralized approaches is urgently needed through the strengthening of asymmetric decentralization models, improvement of intergovernmental governance mechanisms, and the development of effective and adaptive accountability systems. Without a fundamental correction to the design and practice of decentralization, public policy in Indonesia will continue to face structural obstacles that undermine the quality of local governance and threaten national integration.

Keywords: Decentralization, Policy Implementation, Regional Autonomy, Governance, Public Policy

Introduction

The political reforms that occurred in 1998 brought major changes to the structure of the Indonesian government (Soebhan, 2000). One of the most fundamental agendas born from this era was the decentralization of government. (Rifles & Shotguns, 2022), which officially began with the enactment of Law Number 22 of 1999 concerning Regional Government (DPR RI, 1999). Decentralization was designed as a correction to the centralistic model inherited from the New Order, which for more than three decades had marginalized the role and capacity of regional governments. Within the framework of a unitary state, decentralization is expected to redistribute power, expand the space for political participation, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services by granting regions greater authority to manage government affairs.

Over time, decentralization policies have undergone various adjustments. One of the most significant was the issuance of Law Number 23 of 2014 (DPR RI, 2014). This regulation replaced the previous regulation, emphasizing the division of functions between the central, provincial, and district/city governments. This regulation marked the government's effort to reorganize governance relationships between levels of government to be more systematic and measurable. However, at the implementation level, decentralization has given rise to various complex dilemmas. The implementation of public policy in the era of decentralization does not always align with the initial goals (Nadia Surahmi, Kartika Sari, & Supriyanti, 2023). On the contrary, a number of serious problems have emerged, such as overlapping authority, weak inter-agency coordination, and disparities in capacity between regions, which have impacted policy effectiveness.

In the context of public policy, the dilemma of decentralization is increasingly apparent when the central government designs national strategic policies, which are then expected to be implemented by regional governments. Many central policies are hampered in their implementation at the regional level due to differing perceptions, limited resources, and low local political commitment (Mulyani & Fitra, 2023). On the contrary, what is explained (Muktarruddin, 2021). Many regional policies are inconsistent with the direction of national development, leading to policy fragmentation and the risk of weakening inter-regional development synergies. This situation demonstrates that the implementation of decentralization in Indonesia has not been supported by an effective system of policy coordination and harmonization.

Furthermore, the practice of decentralization also opens up space for the emergence of new pathologies of power at the local level. The increasing phenomenon of corruption among regional heads, the emergence of political dynasties, and the commercialization of bureaucratic positions are some indicators that regional autonomy is often misused not for the public interest, but for the benefit of local elites (Pakatuwo, Bosra, & Ahmadin, 2018). Ironically, decentralization, which should be a path to democratization and empowerment, has in many cases become an arena for resource hijacking by certain interest groups (Heriyadi & Iqbal, 2022). This raises a critical question: has decentralization truly contributed to improving the quality of public policy, or has it instead become a source of government dysfunction at the local level?

Based on these conditions, this journal aims to critically examine the dilemmas facing Indonesia in implementing decentralization, particularly in the implementation of public policy. The primary focus is on analyzing the imbalance in regional institutional capacity, vertical conflicts in the division of functions, obstacles to coordination between levels of government, and the tendency for abuse of authority. This research utilizes a qualitative approach using literature review and thematic analysis to map the root causes of the

problems and offer alternative, more adaptive and contextual decentralization policy designs.

This study is crucial as a contribution to public policy reform efforts in Indonesia, particularly in improving the current, half-hearted decentralization system. In an increasingly complex socio-political reality, a decentralization framework is needed that is not merely legalistic but also able to address the real needs and capacities of each region. Therefore, this paper is expected to serve not only as a critical reflection but also as a solution for building a more integrative, participatory governance system oriented toward spatial justice and public welfare.

Furthermore, the dynamics of globalization and the development of information technology have accelerated public expectations regarding the quality of public services. On the one hand, decentralization provides flexibility for regions to adapt policies to local characteristics. However, on the other hand, many regions have experienced stagnation or decline in public service delivery due to limited fiscal capacity, weak human resource quality, and the absence of an adequate monitoring and evaluation system from the central government. This reinforces the assumption that regional autonomy is not merely a matter of devolution of power, but also requires structural and cultural readiness to carry out government functions effectively.

The phenomenon of inter-regional disparities, both in terms of infrastructure development and quality of life, also demonstrates that decentralization has not been an effective instrument for equality. Rather than reducing inequality, decentralization policies have in some cases deepened the gap between developed and underdeveloped regions. The dependence of most regions on central government transfers, such as the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and the Special Allocation Fund (DAK), demonstrates weak fiscal independence. As a result, regional initiative and innovation capacity are limited, making it difficult to produce contextual policies that have a broad impact on the well-being of local communities.

Furthermore, the transition from a centralized to a decentralized system has not been fully accompanied by a shift in bureaucratic paradigms. Many local governments still inherit rigid and procedural administrative mindsets, hampering innovation in public policy. Regional bureaucratic reform has been slow, and efforts to build adaptive, accountable, and responsive governance to public aspirations often clash with short-term political interests. In this context, it is crucial to review the direction and design of decentralization policies to ensure they function optimally in addressing community needs and strengthening national integration.

Methodology

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method (Moleong, 1989). This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the research is to understand and analyze in-depth the phenomenon of the decentralization dilemma in the context of public policy implementation in Indonesia. A qualitative approach allows researchers to examine the dynamics of relationships between institutions and actors, policy structures, and governance issues contextually and interpretively.

According to (Adlini, Dinda, Yulinda, Chotimah, & Merliyana (2022) the, literature study method was used by systematically reviewing academic literature, laws and regulations, government institution reports, policy evaluation results, and publications from relevant international organizations. The main data sources in this study include:

- Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government and its derivative regulations,
- National and regional planning documents (RPJMN, RPJMD)
- National and international scientific journals related to decentralization and public policy implementation,
- Evaluation reports from institutions such as the Ministry of Home Affairs, Bappenas, KPK, and the World Bank.

The data analysis technique was conducted thematically, namely by identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the main issues that emerged in the discourse on decentralization and public policy implementation. This process was carried out in three stages:

- (1) data reduction by filtering relevant information
- (2) categorization of themes such as institutional capacity, central-regional coordination, fragmentation of authority, and integrity of local actors, as well as
- (3) drawing conclusions by linking findings with the theory and conceptual framework used.

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through source triangulation, which involved comparing various types of documents from different institutions to gain a more comprehensive and objective understanding. Furthermore, content validity was strengthened by referring to established and recognized scientific literature in the study of governance and decentralization.

Through this methodology, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dilemmas faced in implementing public policies in the era of decentralization, as well as provide strategic recommendations for improving governance in the future.

Results and Discussion

Result

This study identifies four main issues that represent the dilemma of decentralization in the implementation of public policy in Indonesia, namely:

- (1) capacity disparities between regions
- (2) overlapping and conflicting authorities,
- (3) weak coordination between levels of government, and
- (4) abuse of regional autonomy.

Each of these issues has a structural impact on the quality of public policy implementation in the era of autonomy.

Inter-Regional Capacity Inequality

Decentralization provides broad authority to regional governments to carry out government affairs based on the principles of autonomy and assistance tasks (Sumarto, 2020). However, in reality, not all regions are on equal footing. When authority is delegated, most regions lack adequate institutional capacity, human resources, and bureaucratic infrastructure. This imbalance creates disparities in the effectiveness of public policy implementation between regions, particularly between regions in Java and eastern Indonesia. This unequal capacity impacts not only the quality of services but also the regions' ability to independently design, execute, and evaluate policies.

According to a 2018 World Bank report, approximately 40% of district and city governments in Indonesia experience serious technical and managerial capacity gaps. These weaknesses are evident in the low quality of planning, weak internal control systems, and limited capacity for data-driven policy analysis (Himawan Sutanto, 2022). In practice, many regional planning documents are prepared solely to fulfill formalistic obligations, rather than based on the real needs of the community. As a result, the programs and activities implemented do not always have a significant impact on improving local conditions. This is a classic symptom of what is called (Grindle, 1997) as an implementation gap, where policies fail to produce change due to the weak capacity of implementers at the lower level.

Inequality is also evident in the fiscal aspect. Although decentralization provides space for regional budget management through the Regional Budget (APBD), most regions in Indonesia remain heavily dependent on central government transfers. Ministry of Finance data (2023) shows that more than 80% of regional revenue comes from the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and the Special Allocation Fund (DAK). This dependence limits the scope for regional fiscal innovation and renders autonomy superficial. Many local governments lack significant sources of Regional Original Revenue (PAD), particularly in productive sectors. Yet, one indicator of successful decentralization is the ability of regions to tap into local economic potential to independently fund public programs.

Weak regional institutional capacity also directly impacts the quality of public services. In the health sector, for example, many regions struggle to recruit professional medical personnel and provide adequate basic infrastructure, particularly in border and island areas. Meanwhile, in the education sector, the quality of teachers, infrastructure, and school management systems varies widely across regions. This suggests that decentralization without a strategy to strengthen institutional capacity will only exacerbate development disparities between regions.

Furthermore, capacity imbalances also trigger the practice of policy imitation, where regions simply copy models or programs from the central government or other regions without adapting them to the local context. This model not only reduces policy effectiveness but also restricts citizen participation in formulating policies that meet their needs. In the long term, this pattern leads to community alienation from public programs and diminishes the legitimacy of local governments. In other words, capacity imbalances are not merely administrative issues but also concern the political dimension and the sustainability of local democracy.

Therefore, to make decentralization a strategic instrument for improving the quality of public policy, serious intervention from the central government in the form of capacity building is required. Programs to improve bureaucratic human resources, support technological infrastructure, and strengthen data-driven planning systems must be focused on underdeveloped regions. Without restructuring the design of this capacity redistribution, decentralization will only exacerbate the structural inequalities that have long been a persistent problem in Indonesia's development.

Overlapping and Conflicting Authorities

One of the main dilemmas in the implementation of post-decentralization public policy in Indonesia is the overlapping authority between the central and regional governments, as well as between levels of regional government itself (Arianto, 2021). This often hampers the effectiveness of program execution due to the lack of clarity about who is responsible for a particular governmental matter. In the context of Law No. 23 of 2014 (DPR RI, 2014). Regarding Regional Government, there are efforts to more systematically divide government affairs. However, in practice, the boundaries between central, provincial, and district/city authorities are often blurred, particularly in strategic sectors such as education, health, infrastructure, and the environment.

For example, in secondary education, authority now rests with the provincial level. However, in practice, district/city governments are still burdened with public expectations to provide facilities and ensure the quality of education in their areas (Karmanis, 2022). This creates administrative confusion and inefficiencies in budget utilization. Local governments are often reluctant to allocate resources to matters that are not legally within their

jurisdiction, even if they have high local urgency. As a result, gaps in accountability exist that hinder optimal public services.

Furthermore, overlapping authority often creates inter-agency conflict. Numerous cases demonstrate friction between regional technical agencies and central ministries/agencies, particularly in the implementation of national projects within regional administrative areas. Examples include strategic infrastructure development projects such as dams, ports, or industrial estates, which often bypass local government authority in the licensing process, environmental impact assessments (EIA), or local community involvement. This creates resistance from local governments and delays overall project implementation.

On the other hand, conflicts also occur between regional governments, particularly in areas with potential natural resources, tourism, or disputed administrative boundaries. When two or more regions perceive their authority over a strategic area or object, a struggle for authority and budget access becomes inevitable. This conflict of authority not only hinders development but also has the potential to cause social instability and undermine the cross-regional coordination that is essential for regional development.

These issues demonstrate that decentralization is not yet fully supported by a cohesive legal and governance architecture. Regulatory gaps and weak coordination between levels of government persist. Sectoral laws that are not synchronized with the Regional Government Law have led to numerous conflicting policies in their implementation. Furthermore, sectoral egos within each agency exacerbate this situation. In such situations, public services tend to fall victim to the tug-of-war of authority, while the public experiences uncertainty in obtaining their rights.

Therefore, fundamental reforms are needed to harmonize inter-institutional regulations and synchronize authority across government. The central government needs to develop clear technical guidelines for comprehensively dividing the roles and functions of each level of government. Furthermore, establishing binding horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms is crucial to avoid overlap and strengthen synergy in public policy implementation. Without improving this authority structure, decentralization will continue to create bureaucratic friction and erode government effectiveness at various levels.

Conflict of Authority between Central and Regional Governments

The conflict of authority between the central government and regional governments is one of the fundamental dilemmas in the implementation of decentralization in Indonesia (Makchul, 2021). The spirit of regional autonomy affirmed in Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government often clashes with sectoral regulations maintained by central ministries and agencies. This results in overlapping policies and ambiguity in the

implementation of strategic programs. This phenomenon creates legal uncertainty, slows public policy implementation, and often leads to bureaucratic inefficiency.

This conflict is evident in strategic sectors such as forestry, mining, fisheries, and education. For example, local governments are often excluded from the mining investment licensing process, which is entirely delegated to the central government. Yet, the environmental and social impacts of these activities are directly felt by local communities (Arianto, 2021). This lack of regional involvement has given rise to resistance, protests, and even horizontal conflict. It also creates a legitimacy dilemma in the implementation of central policies, as they lack institutional and social support at the local level.

In addition, public policy formulation often ignores the principle of subsidiarity, namely that decisions should be taken by the level of government closest to citizens and that has the capacity to handle them (Makchul, 2021). The central government often withdraws authority it has granted to regions under the pretext of national consistency or administrative efficiency. This phenomenon is known as recentralization by stealth. (Iskandar, 2023), where autonomy that seems to be legally guaranteed, is actually co-opted in practice by the center through various technocratic mechanisms.

Conflicts of authority also arise in the context of regional finance. Although regions are granted fiscal space through transfer funds, such as the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and the Special Allocation Fund (DAK), the central government continues to dictate the priorities for their use through a strict earmarking system. This makes it difficult for regions to design policies that align with local needs. When the central government sets policy direction from the top down but imposes implementation responsibility on the regions, accountability becomes blurred and the risk of shifting blame increases.

Resolving this conflict of authority requires regulatory harmonization, clarity in the division of functions, and strengthening of vertical coordination mechanisms. The central government can no longer impose a one-way approach but must open up deliberative space with the regions through forums such as the National Coordination Meeting (Rakorbangnas) or the Autonomy Advisory Council. Otherwise, decentralization will continue to be plagued by latent tensions between the central and regional governments, ultimately negatively impacting the quality of public policy and the effectiveness of national development.

Inter-Regional Capacity Inequality

One of the most glaring dilemmas in the implementation of decentralization in Indonesia is the disparity in capacity between regions, in terms of human resources, institutions, finances, and policy technocracy. Decentralization assumes that each region has relatively equal capacity to formulate, implement, and evaluate public policies (Heryani, 2023). However, in practice, this assumption is far from reality. Many underdeveloped

regions lack reliable bureaucratic apparatus, sufficient fiscal resources, or an administrative culture capable of supporting modern governance.

Developed regions such as DKI Jakarta, West Java, or Bali have a much stronger bureaucratic and fiscal infrastructure compared to districts in Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, or parts of Kalimantan (Fauziyah, 2021). As a result, when granted autonomy, regions with low capacity tend to experience stagnation or even decline in public services. For example, the implementation of education or health policies often fails to run optimally due to a lack of technical personnel, weak coordination, or ineffective budget absorption. This imbalance then creates multi-speed governance, where some regions are able to leapfrog while others remain stuck in basic problems.

This capacity gap exists not only in technical administrative aspects, but also in the quality of regional leadership. Regional leaders with populist backgrounds or supported by transactional political capital often lack a strategic development vision. They tend to use regional autonomy as a tool for consolidating power, rather than as an instrument for public service. This creates a sharp divide between progressive and innovative regions and those that are stagnant and riddled with internal conflict. In this context, decentralization, rather than equalizing, perpetuates structural inequality.

The central government has introduced a system for measuring regional government performance through indicators such as the LPPD (Regional Government Implementation Report) or the SAKIP (Government Agency Performance Accountability System). However, these indicators are often administrative in nature and do not reflect the actual outcomes of public policy (Sappe, Manaf, & Syafri, 2020). For example, high budget absorption does not necessarily translate into improved service quality. Capacity imbalances also mean that not all regions are able to meet these indicators to their full potential, reinforcing the stigma of underdeveloped regions and reducing their access to national affirmative action programs.

A further impact of this capacity imbalance is the emergence of wider development disparities at the national level. Instead of accelerating equity, decentralization actually widens disparities between regions. As regions with high capacity advance and those with weak capacity fall further behind, the primary goal of post-New Order decentralization reform becomes a paradox. Decentralization, which should be a tool for democratization and improving welfare, has become a trigger for socio-economic segmentation and spatial injustice.

Facing this reality, national public policy needs to reformulate the asymmetric decentralization approach, which provides preferential treatment to regions with weak capacity, whether through increased conditional transfers, human resource development, or technical assistance. Affirmative action from the central government must be empowerment-based, not merely charitable. Without this corrective policy, decentralization

will only perpetuate interregional inequality and weaken the integration of national development as a whole.

Discussion

Decentralization in Indonesia is a crucial instrument for bringing public services closer to the people. However, its implementation has left a number of serious problems reflecting structural and cultural dilemmas in the implementation of public policy at the regional level. One of the main issues that has emerged is the disparity in institutional capacity between regions. While authority is broadly delegated through regional autonomy, many regions lack the structural and human resource readiness to manage that authority. This situation makes policy implementation in resource-rich regions with established bureaucratic capacity more effective than in underdeveloped or frontier (3T) regions. Consequently, disparities in the quality of public policies and services received by the public arise.

On the other hand, decentralization has also given rise to conflicts of authority between the central and regional governments, as well as between levels of regional government. Many national policies have stagnated or even been distorted in practice due to a lack of alignment in interpretation and implementation between the central and regional governments. For example, in issues of spatial planning, licensing, or environmental policy, there is often overlap between central and regional regulations. This lack of synchronization leads to ineffective policy implementation and even creates legal loopholes that are often exploited by vested interest groups. Weak coordination across sectors and regions is a major factor exacerbating this problem. Conversely, in a well-coordinated system, decentralization can actually strengthen policy efficiency and effectiveness because policies are more contextualized to local conditions.

Decentralization also encourages the growth of policy fragmentation, where each region sets its own policies without regard for harmonization with national or other regional policies. This fragmentation creates regulatory uncertainty and difficulties in building national integration. In the economic context, for example, many investors struggle to navigate the highly variable regulations across regions. This not only hampers regional investment growth but also tarnishes Indonesia's image in terms of ease of doing business. This policy fragmentation is a direct consequence of weak vertical and horizontal coordination within the government system. Yet, one of the essences of decentralization is to strengthen synergy between levels of government, not to create policies that operate independently based on sectoral egos.

Another equally important issue is the abuse of regional autonomy by some regional heads, who use decentralization as a tool to consolidate local political power. Practices such

as transactional politics, nepotism, and corruption by regional heads often emerge precisely after regions have gained broader authority. This phenomenon demonstrates that decentralization without strong control and accountability only widens the scope for abuse of authority. The increasing number of corruption cases of regional heads from year to year is evidence that regional governance is not ready to responsibly face the dynamics of autonomy. Therefore, decentralization needs to be accompanied by more effective oversight and a meritocratic system within the regional bureaucracy, so that the ideal goal of decentralization, which aims to improve public welfare, is not distorted by local political interests.

Conclusion

Decentralization, as a governance reform strategy in Indonesia, was fundamentally designed to strengthen local democracy and improve the effectiveness of public services. However, its implementation has created serious systemic and multidimensional dilemmas. This study shows that decentralization policies, while normatively aimed at bringing government closer to the people, often clash with realities on the ground characterized by institutional capacity imbalances, conflicts over authority, policy fragmentation, and rampant abuse of power at the local level. In many cases, the delegation of authority to regions is not accompanied by strengthening bureaucratic capacity and adequate oversight systems, resulting in inter-regional disparities in the quality of public policy implementation.

Furthermore, the policy fragmentation resulting from decentralization has weakened national synergy and created regulatory complexity that hinders interregional integration and the effectiveness of national development. Abuse of discretion by regional heads also indicates that decentralization is often used as a political instrument for the benefit of certain groups, rather than as a means of improving public welfare. Thus, it can be concluded that decentralization in Indonesia still presents a paradox between the ideals of democratization and the reality of bureaucratic dysfunction at the local level. This calls for a comprehensive evaluation of the current decentralization model.

Therefore, it is crucial for the central and regional governments to strengthen oversight systems, harmonize policies across sectors and regions, and systematically develop mechanisms to increase the capacity of local officials. Healthy decentralization can only be realized if supported by institutional integrity, policy synergy, and active and critical public participation. Without these, decentralization runs the risk of becoming a tool for reproducing inequality, rather than a means of transforming social justice.

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