

# Optimizing Decentralized Governance: A Comparison of Implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia

Nur Syamsudin <sup>1\*</sup>, Imam Yahya <sup>1</sup>, Kamarul Zaman <sup>2</sup>, Dinda Mauritsa Dina Haq<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Utara Malaysia (UUM), Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> Tilburg University, Netherlands

## Abstract

Decentralization is one of the key strategies for improving governance performance, promoting local accountability, and encouraging policy responsiveness. Nevertheless, when considering institutional structures, sociocultural contexts, and intergovernmental policy dynamics, the effectiveness of decentralized governance requires further investigation. This study explores how decentralized governance can be optimized by comparing two distinct state structures that embody a unitary system with regional system autonomy and a federal system, that is, the Province of Central Java in Indonesia and the State of Kedah in Malaysia. Employing a qualitative comparative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, strengthened by policy documents and white papers. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using a cross-case thematic analysis to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in decentralized practices. The findings showed that, although decentralization in Central Java granted local governments broader formal authority, it was constrained by institutional capacity and policy coordination challenges. In contrast, decentralization in Kedah offered greater policy stability but limited local autonomy and innovation due to strong state-level control. This study highlights the importance of aligning central and regional policies by considering sociocultural factors and strengthening participatory mechanisms to optimize decentralized governance. This research contributes to the decentralized literature by emphasizing the need for context-sensitive, adaptive governance models rather than uniform policy designs.

**Keywords:** Decentralized governance; Policy coordination; Local government; Comparative studies; Indonesia; Malaysia

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\* Corresponding author email: [nursyamsudin@walisongo.ac.id](mailto:nursyamsudin@walisongo.ac.id)

## Introduction

Decentralization grants greater autonomy to regions. In Indonesia, decentralization policy, following a period of authoritarianism, is a means of achieving economic and social equality across the region. This policy aims to advance the region's efforts to realize community welfare, improve public services, and increase local community participation in wisdom-based decision-making (Agustino et al., 2024). However, the impact of this policy is not realized equally across regions due to persistent regional disparities. Consequently, developed areas continue to advance, while less developed areas fall further behind (Mauro et al., 2023). In addition, amidst the prominence of decentralization policy in promoting local democracy, regional administrative, economic, and political independence, and building a democratic political system (Vollmann et al., 2022), it must be carried out properly to prevent the central government from reverting to a centralistic regime (S. Hidayat, 2019)

In terms of decentralization models, Indonesia and Malaysia have different approaches. In Indonesia, decentralization is implemented in two ways: by redefining state power and strengthening local governments. The former entails the change of authoritarian and centralistic system of government to a more democratic one (Hill, 2014); the change of legislature authority (Tinambunan et al., 2025); and the balance between central and regional governments (Nugroho, 2021). Meanwhile, the latter revolves around the actions directed to strengthen local government in the form of delegating large responsibilities to the regions through fiscal decentralization (Lewis, 2005); reinstitutionalizing formal structures to

strengthen regional political leadership (Gani et al., 2024); constructing regional autonomy based on the potential and local virtue of the region (Siburian, 2020); reorganizing geographic resources-based services that reach isolated areas (Jamil et al., 2024); as well as increasing the capacity of the regional apparatus with better quality (Setiawan et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, Malaysia implements decentralization through two forms of policies: First, by strengthening intergovernmental relations through the federalism structure (Ostwald, 2017), fiscal decentralization (Ghani et al., 2021), and asymmetric decentralization (Sulaiman et al., 2025); Second, by enacting sectoral decentralization policy, including granting sovereignty to the state (Sulaiman et al., 2025), encouraging the decentralization of education (Ostwald, 2017), and promoting anti-corruption decentralization (Rahman et al., 2025).

Furthermore, when discussing implications of decentralization, previous studies across countries present robust findings. First, economic and development implications: Decentralization has integrated local and global economies, with implications for local economic development (Topal, 2015). Supported by studies in Africa, decentralization contributes to sustainable economic development (Atisa et al., 2021). Second, the implications of governance and public services: Decentralization has fostered excellent public services and good governance by involving the government and the community (Paudel, 2013). However, the results can vary due to a variety of policies, resource constraints, and weak community participation (Ghuman & Singh, 2013). A case study in Sweden shows that decentralization in

the health sector has led to regional variations in patient care based on local ideologies and regional capacities (Fredriksson & Winblad, 2008). Third, the implications of environmental management: Case studies in China demonstrate that pollution reduction has occurred as a result of decentralization policies (Xu et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, decentralization can regulate the effectiveness of irrigation (Araral Jr., 2011). Fourth, socio-political implications: Studies in France indicate that the local political environment shapes the implementation of social policies, with right-wing executives tightening cash benefits but investing more in active labor market policies (Hemker, 2017). Meanwhile, in Honduras, decentralization improves preventive care for women, highlighting increased accountability and resilience to shocks (Zarychta, 2020).

Dealing with the impact of decentralization, the studies indicate notable distinctiveness. First, in terms of context, studies across several regions have shown that economic development affects decentralization (Im, 2010; O'Dwyer & Ziblatt, 2006; Visković et al., 2021). However, fiscal decentralization tends to harm GDP growth in poor and underdeveloped countries, whereas it benefits GDP growth in developing and developed countries (Im, 2010). Second, when considering the level of success in the enforcement of decentralization policies, it is influenced by several complex and uncertain factors, such as ambiguity in formulating goals and measuring achievements (FitzGerald et al., 2019), the complexity of the environment in which the policy is implemented (Hudson et al., 2019), time and context differences affecting results (Boucher, 2025), and the diverse perspectives of stakeholders (Dowding et al.,

2025). Third, there is limited understanding of the impact of decentralization, especially on public perceptions of efficiency and accountability (Laborda & Sauco, 2015), quality of service (Kyriacou & Roca-Sagalés, 2019), corruption (Gómez-Román et al., 2020), and the diversity of viewpoints and the role of disinformation (Curnock et al., 2024). Fourth, the political culture of each country influences the process of decentralization through the values, practices, and power relations that shape how authority is distributed between central and regional governments. Political culture plays a decisive role in the implementation and perception of decentralization policies. This can be seen from the contrast between the Nordic countries, where local politics have succeeded in shaping the education system at the municipal level (Kofod et al., 2016), and Bangladesh, where decentralization is hampered by an uncondusive political culture, exacerbated by corrupt practices and a lack of political will (Asaduzzaman, 2011).

This research is significant for understanding how differences in political culture, governance structures, and public policy dynamics contribute to the success and failure of decentralization in Indonesia and Malaysia. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia has undergone a notable decentralization reform process to realize the practice of democracy in government, embrace diversity, and improve local governance. This long path occurred amidst the geographical and demographic complexity that resulted in varying outcomes in each region, (E Hutchinson, 2017; R. Hidayat, 2017; Nugroho, 2021). In Malaysia, a centralized political structure,

shaped by colonial heritage and the need for national unity, has led to consistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws while fostering a culture of nepotism and favouritism (Viola, 2023). Derived from such critical narratives, this study offers a novelty through an in-depth analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each model by scrutinizing the differences in the implementation of decentralization between Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on its impact on public services, governance effectiveness, and community engagement.

## Research Methods

This study used a qualitative comparative case study to analyze how decentralized governance can be optimized through the interplay among institutional structures, sociocultural contexts, and policy dynamics in Indonesia and Malaysia. Applying a qualitative approach, it focused on the processes and practices of decentralization in the real context of local governments.

Data were collected from various sources to ensure the depth of analysis and validity of the findings. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with key informants, that is, local government officials, legislators, academics, public policy experts, and civil society representatives. Semi-structured interviews were selected to explore informants' experiences and perspectives while ensuring consistency in the issues discussed across research areas.

Further, secondary data, in the form of policy documents, laws and regulations, regional development planning and evaluation reports, official statistical data, academic literature, and

policy reports, were collected to provide theoretical and empirical context for the field findings. They served to trace the development of decentralized policies and to triangulate with interview results.

A comparative thematic approach was used to analyze the data collected through interviews and documents to systematically identify key themes related to decentralized governance. Subsequently, the themes were compared between cases to track similarities and differences in institutional structures, policy processes, the role of actors, and sociocultural influences on the implementation of decentralization. This cross-case analysis provided the basis for formulating policy lessons to optimize decentralized governance.

The validity of the findings was ensured through two methods: data triangulation, by comparing results from interviews, policy documents, and academic literature; and limited validation, by confirming key findings with several informants. Although the research findings are contextual and not intended for broad generalizations, the comparative approach enables the derivation of relevant analytical implications for decentralization policy development in other contexts.

## Result and Discussion

### Government and cultural structures affect the effectiveness of decentralization

The implementation of decentralization has never taken place in an institutional vacuum. It is always shaped by the interactions among government structures, community culture, and public policy dynamics at the national and

subnational levels. A comparative study between Central Java (Indonesia) and Kedah (Malaysia) shows that although the two regions are in the context of Southeast Asia and have relatively similar socio-cultural characteristics, the implementation of decentralization runs with different logics due to differences in state design and political systems (Bonal et al., 2023; Norris, 2024).

Indonesia, a unitary country, implements decentralization through a regional autonomy mechanism. It is characterized as devolutionary while tightly controlled by strong central regulations (Lewis, 2005; Purwanto & Pramusinto, 2018). Whereas, Malaysia is a federal state that regulates the division of authority between the federal and state governments. This structural difference becomes the determining aspect that shapes the extent of authority for local governments in exercising their power to manage public policies.

In Central Java, the government structure grants districts and cities broad authority over public services and regional development. However, policy documentation shows that such broad authority is not always followed by adequate institutional capacity. Research by Lewis (2023) in *World Development* emphasizes that the inequality of capacity between regions is one of the main weaknesses of decentralization in Indonesia (Lewis, 2023).

Meanwhile, in Kedah, the Malaysian federal structure assigns a dominant role to the state government rather than the local government (local authorities/PBT). The study shows that although Malaysian federalism formally supports decentralization, administrative and

fiscal authority remains concentrated at the federal and state levels (Kiruthu, 2021).

This structural difference has direct implications for policy implementation. In Central Java, decentralization policies encourage local innovation but also give rise to overlapping authority between provinces and districts/cities. Decentralization emphasizes that vertical coordination is the main challenge in a decentralized unitary state (Brahimi et al., 2025; Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2013). However, in Kedah, the concentration of authority at the state level results in policy stability and consistency of implementation but limits the space for local government innovation. This study shows that Malaysia's PBT functions more as an administrative implementer than a policymaker (Ik-Tien & Pey-Wen, 2024; Manaf et al., 2023).

In addition to structure, community culture plays an important role in shaping how decentralization is implemented. In Central Java, Javanese culture, which emphasizes social harmony, hierarchy, and patronage, shapes the pattern of relationships between local governments and communities. Patron-client culture in Indonesia often undermines local accountability despite increased formal participation (Hendrik et al., 2024; Salomo & Rahmayanti, 2023)

Musrenbang documentation in Central Java indicates increased community participation, but interviews and qualitative studies suggest that this participation is often symbolic. This reinforces that decentralization does not automatically result in substantive participation without a change in political culture (Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025; S.C et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, Kedah, a strong Malay-Islamic culture with high respect for the Sultan and traditional authority, fosters social stability. According to Martinez-Bravo (2014) in *The American Economic Review*, the practice of complying with authority can accelerate policy implementation, but compromise transparency and accountability.

Consequently, the implementation of decentralization in Kedah tends to be top-down. The public rarely challenges state government decisions, making social control over public policy relatively weak. A study by Pepinsky and Wihardja (2011) in the *Journal of East Asian Studies* shows that this type of political culture is common in countries with strong traditions of constitutional monarchy.

Relatively frequent regulatory changes also characterize the dynamics of policy decentralization in Indonesia. The revision of local government laws and the reallocation of authority indicate that decentralization is still under adjustment. According to Turnip and Hasibuan (2024), the dynamics of this regulation reflect the tension between the need for regional autonomy and the central government's desire to maintain control.

In Central Java, the dynamics of these policies are reflected both in efforts to increase the capacity of apparatus and in regional planning reform. However, policy evaluations indicate that increases in the budget are not always directly proportional to improvements in the quality of public services. This is consistent with the findings of Assanova and Korpysa (2025) in *Public and Municipal Finance* regarding the limited impact of fiscal decentralization.

In Malaysia, the dynamics of decentralization policies are relatively more stable due to the established federal structure. However, this stability indicates a low scope for policy experimentation at the local level. A study conducted by Ghani et al. (2021) also highlights a key feature of Malaysian governance to maintain stability, that is, fiscal centralization.

Another aspect to underline is how the two regions cope with human resource capacity challenges. Facing similar limited bureaucratic and community capacity in managing decentralization authority (Mukhlis et al., 2025; Noordin et al., 2017; Tjahjono et al., 2018; Widiyanto et al., 2025), Central Java and Kedah encounter the main source of problem differently. In Central Java, the problem arises more from the fragmentation of authority and patronage culture. In contrast, the primary issue Kedah has is the dominance of the state structure, which constrains local autonomy. This difference confirms that institutional design significantly directs the landscape of decentralization (Demerew et al., 2025; Erk, 2015; Ponce-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Zuo, 2022). While decentralization in Central Java is more procedurally democratic but less substantively effective, decentralization in Kedah is more effective administratively but less democratic with respect to participation and accountability.

Thus, the extent to which authority is transferred cannot be used as the sole measure on the success of decentralization. This study proves that structures, cultures, and policies also contribute to this process. As stated by Tinambunan et al. (2025), decentralization is a political process, not merely a technical-administrative process.

This study implies the need to focus on strengthening the capacity and quality of public participation as part of decentralization reform in Central Java, rather than merely expanding authority. Meanwhile, in Kedah, the main challenge is to create room for accountability and the empowerment of local governments without sacrificing social stability.

Reflecting on the findings, the cross-country learning approach is becoming relevant. Central Java can learn from Kedah's policy stability and consistency, while Kedah can learn from Indonesia's participatory mechanisms and local elections. Such a comparative approach is in line with Adams' idea (2019) written in *New Directions in Comparative Politics*.

Overall, this comparative study confirms that government structure, community culture, and dynamics of decentralization policy are key determinants of decentralization implementation. If these three aspects are not considered simultaneously, decentralization risks being an effective policy on paper but weak in practice.

### **Inclusivity as the Cornerstone of Decentralisation Policies**

The contemporary literature indicates that decentralization policies should be accompanied by a more inclusive approach to effectively address the needs of diverse societies at the local level. Inclusive governance in the context of decentralization emphasizes the involvement of all community groups in decision-making, including historically marginalized groups, such as the poor, women, persons with disabilities, and indigenous communities (Annahar et al., 2023a).

The global literature on inclusive governance places inclusivity as an important element of good governance and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the principle of "leave no one behind". This concept demands that decentralization be more than a delegation of authority; the state must ensure equal access and meaningful participation for all citizens in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of policies (Annahar et al., 2023a).

Documentation and interview data in Central Java and Kedah show that while government structures provide authority space for local governments, community participation is often procedural and not substantive. For example, annual planning forums, such as the *Musrenbang* in Central Java, involve many communities but have not demonstrated strong policy inclusivity (Anggara et al., 2025; Riptanti et al., 2024).

This lack of truly inclusive participation reflects the fact that a decentralized approach prioritizing formal authority alone has not been able to meet the needs of all groups of people. This situation is consistent with the findings of a study on the decentralization of inclusive education in Indonesia, which shows that the implementation of inclusion programs is still constrained by structural barriers and a lack of institutional readiness to accommodate the needs of vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities (a systematic review shows that there is still little literature that assesses inclusivity in decentralization policies) (Annahar et al., 2023a).

In public policy theory, the inclusive approach emphasizes that the decision-making process must meaningfully involve citizens,

rather than merely as passive participants in symbolic consultations. It is also important to strengthen the legitimacy of decentralization policies and increase social accountability to local government (inclusive governance as a paradigm of good governance) (Teles et al., 2025; Tsitlidze, 2019).

Empirical analysis in the literature have noted that inclusivity is closely related to the economic dimension of decentralization. For example, an assessment of fiscal decentralization in Indonesia indicates that, despite fiscal devolution, dependence on central transfers remains high, and communities' ability to influence local fiscal allocations is limited. Hence, to make resource distribution more equitable, fiscal decentralization policies should prioritize inclusive and democratic perspectives in local budget planning (Ardiputra et al., 2025; Ha & Lee, 2022).

In Central Java, the bureaucratic structure and regional capacity inequalities create gaps that interfere with the quality of public services. An inclusive approach will encourage policy design that is more sensitive to the specific needs of local communities (e.g. poor groups in remote areas). In this regard, decentralised policies can be an effective strategy for reducing inequality rather than merely a transfer of authority (Siburian, 2020; Tselios, 2023).

Similarly, in Kedah, the federal structure expands state-level authority, but local government practices sometimes fail to empower the marginalized groups. An inclusive approach is needed in decentralised design to ensure that all citizens, especially those traditionally underrepresented, have equal opportunities in policy planning and evaluation processes.

Yet, it is important that an inclusive approach is not only about who attends policy forums; it also ensures that the voices of all groups — including women, indigenous communities, and people with disabilities — are heard and have an impact on the policy agenda. Studies on inclusive education as part of decentralization show that without adequate system readiness, inclusive policies will only become slogans (Singh et al., 2024)

The decentralization literature across countries also shows that inclusive decentralization policies are positively associated with reduced regional disparities and improved local economic development. Research on decentralized local governance indicates that empowering local communities through decentralization can reduce economic and social disparities. (Leonid I Polichchuk, 2018).

However, cross-country studies indicate that decentralization does not automatically result in inclusivity; it requires explicit policy intent to include vulnerable groups in the design and implementation processes (e.g., through participation quotas, public information access, and feedback mechanisms). Without this approach, decentralization can reinforce social exclusion or benefit dominant local groups (Amann & Sleigh, 2021; Cossani, 2018; Leonid I Polichchuk, 2018; Monastyrskyi et al., 2025;).

The concept of inclusive governance discussed in recent articles also underscores that inclusivity is not only physical access to policy forums, but also access to information, negotiable ability, and the ability to influence policy agendas—all of which are key elements in the implementation of meaningful decentralization (Sjarlis et al., 2025).

In the context of decentralisation policies, inclusive approaches should be designed at the planning level (e.g., participatory planning that goes beyond formal representation), at budgeting (e.g., funding allocation based on the needs of vulnerable groups), and at evaluation mechanisms (e.g., welfare indicators that capture the experiences of marginalized groups). This strategy aligns with the principles of the SDGs and good governance (Du et al., 2024; Fagerholm et al., 2022; Garrad, 2025).

Further, documentation, empirical findings, and the current literature corroborate our belief that decentralization policies must be formulated and implemented more inclusively to achieve fair, responsive, and sustainable purposes. This approach will ensure that the transfer of power to the local government is not merely an administrative formality but rather a multidimensional integration to encourage a democratic, accountable, and responsive government at all levels of society.

### **The Salience of the Sociocultural Dimension in Policies**

Decentralization encompasses multidimensional aspects, in that, it involves not only administrative and political process, but also social intervention with direct consequences for power relations, values, and cultural practices at the local level. Such sociocultural factors become very critical in the formulation and implementation of decentralization policies to achieve the goals of improving local welfare and democratization, as asserted in many studies (e.g. Monastyrskyi et al., 2025). The data shows that ignoring sociocultural dimension in the implementation of decentralization across various contexts often

leads to high formal achievements but limited substantive impact. Lima (2019) emphasizes that decentralization, perceived as a mere transfer of authority, tends to fail when dealing with complex and non-neutral local social structures.

In societies characterized with hierarchical and patron-client cultures, such as many regions of Indonesia, decentralization can strengthen local elites if it is not accompanied by social control mechanisms attuned to local culture. A study by Rahman et al. (2025) proves that patron-client culture can shift the goal of decentralization from community empowerment to the consolidation of local elites' power.

The empirical findings reinforce the argument that the sociocultural dimension is not an additional variable but a core determining factor that directs decentralization implementation. Villada-Canela (2025) explained that the community's response to decentralization is greatly influenced by social norms, trust levels, and informal relationship structures that already existed before the policy was implemented.

Discussion data also indicated that cultural values, such as social harmony and respect for authority, can foster political stability, thereby supporting the smooth implementation of policies. However, this stability is often achieved at the expense of low levels of community participation. Ponce-Rodríguez et al. (2018) show that in societies with strong compliance norms, public policies are rarely challenged, even though they are not fully responsive to citizens' needs.

Within the framework of decentralization, such conditions can result in a paradox: policies

are administratively effective, but socially less accountable. Garcia (2022) highlights that a political culture that emphasizes loyalty and social order tends to limit the space for public deliberation and citizens' control over local governments.

Data on community participation in regional planning forums also corroborate this conclusion. Despite increased community attendance, the quality of engagement is often low due to cultural norms that avoid conflict and open criticism. Haque et al. (2025) call this phenomenon "participation without empowerment," which is common in decentralization policies in societies with a collectivist culture.

The importance of considering sociocultural aspects in the distribution of decentralized benefits is also evident. Without cultural sensitivity, socially marginalized groups—such as women, indigenous groups, or people with low incomes—often do not benefit optimally from regional autonomy. Oswald-Spring (2022) emphasizes that policy designs that ignore local social structures risk widening social inequality.

In addition, the dynamics of local identity strengthened by decentralization can foster the escalation of cultural exclusivism if not properly managed. Sylvester (2025) shows that in some Southeast Asian contexts, decentralization creates space for local identity politics that can hinder social cohesion and policy inclusivity.

The discussion data also synthesizes that local bureaucracy often reproduces dominant cultural values in public service practices. If these values are discriminatory or exclusive, then decentralization can reinforce social injustice. These findings align with the analysis of Salomo & Rahmayanti (2023), which

emphasizes the importance of understanding local bureaucratic culture in governance reform.

Therefore, decentralization policies need to be complemented by a systematic socio-cultural impact assessment. This approach is recommended by Kelly (2024), asserting that institutional reform without an understanding of the social context will result in unsustainable policies.

A culturally sensitive approach is also important to ensure that the participation mechanism is truly inclusive. Annahar et al. (2023a) show that decentralization policies that consider local values, norms, and practices can encourage public policy ownership and strengthen the legitimacy of local governments.

By considering sociocultural elements, decentralization can lead to governance efficiency and a more just social transformation. This includes changing power relations, increasing the voice of marginalized groups, and strengthening local social capital. As stated by Coleandro (2025), the long-term success of decentralization relies heavily on its capacity to adapt to social contexts.

Without such an approach, decentralization may lead to technocratic policies that fail to address the realities of people's lives. Kosec and Mogues (2020) assert that decentralization that ignores sociocultural factors often results in institutional mismatches between policy design and local practices.

In short, current data and literature consistently indicate that sociocultural factors should be a key consideration in decentralization policies. Understanding local culture, values, and social relations should be a prerequisite for decentralization, rather than

merely a complement to the analysis but a prerequisite for decentralization. This step is significant in creating a democratic, fair, and responsive local government for the community.

### **Community Participation: The Backbone of Decentralization**

Community participation is a key element in the success of decentralization for several reasons. It determines the extent to which the transfer of authority from the central to the regions results in policies responsive to local needs. Data and discussions in contemporary decentralization studies indicate that without meaningful public participation, decentralization risks becoming a mere administrative process that does not alter power relations or the quality of public services (Ahmed et al., 2025; Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2025).

In the public administration literature, public participation involves two elements, i.e. the presence of citizens in formal forums and the active involvement in planning, decision-making, implementation, and the supervision of public policies. Meaningful participation also directly contributes to the accountability and legitimacy of local governments, as mentioned by Šaparnienė et al. (2021).

Data on the implementation of decentralization across various developing countries indicate that participatory mechanisms, such as regional planning forums, are often available, yet the quality of participation remains weak. This phenomenon is described by Godden (2017) as participation without empowerment, a condition in which the

community is involved procedurally but has no real influence on the direction of policy.

This condition indicates that public participation is not merely an instrument of democracy but a prerequisite for decentralization to achieve its substantive goals. Rest (2024) asserts that regions with high levels of community participation tend to produce public policies that are more aligned with local needs and more effective in reducing inequality.

The discussion data also highlight how community participation directly affects the quality of planning and resource allocation. Active community involvement will lead to development priorities that are more contextual and sensitive to local issues. This is in line with the findings of Annahar et al. (2023b), which show that citizen participation in local governance increases the effectiveness of policies and the sense of community ownership of government programs.

In addition to improving policy quality, community participation serves as a social control mechanism for local governments. In the context of decentralization, this control is especially important because regional elites can abuse greater authority at the local level. Rajasekhar et al. (2025) show that weak public participation often correlates with stronger patronage and elite capture at the local level.

The data also indicate that without strong community participation, decentralization can widen social gaps. Groups with greater political and economic access tend to dominate local policy processes, while poor and marginalized groups are marginalized. Sato (2024) affirms that inclusive participation is a condition for decentralization, not one that reinforces social injustice.

From a political culture perspective, the level of community participation is strongly influenced by social norms and local values. In a culture that emphasizes harmony and respect for authority, critical participation from the citizens is often limited. As suggested by Bui et al. (2023), in many Asian contexts, public participation tends to be passive despite the presence of formal mechanisms.

The discussion data implies that this challenge often prevents public participation in decentralization from progressing beyond the consultative level. In fact, the literature highlights that effective participation must be deliberative and provide space for citizens to influence final decisions. Deliberative participation, as mentioned by Radtke (2025), significantly contributes to improved policy quality and public trust.

The importance of community participation is also evident in relation to policy sustainability. Development programs designed without community involvement often fail to survive in the long term because they do not align with local needs and capacities. Teles et al. (2025) argues that the sustainability of decentralized policies depends heavily on community support and active involvement.

In addition, community participation contributes to strengthening local capacity. Involvement in the policy process enables people to learn to understand the mechanisms of the government and improve their political literacy. This is in line with Ameridyani et al.'s (2025) idea that participatory decentralization is not only a transfer of authority but also a construction of social and political capacity at the local level.

The data also shows that inclusive community participation plays a catalytic role in conflict mitigation. When various social groups have adequate space to express their aspirations, the potential for conflict stemming from policies insensitive to differences in interests can be minimized. This is consistent with the findings of Franzke et al. (2025) regarding the role of participation in maintaining local political stability.

Nevertheless, the literature confirms that participation will not be effective without adequate institutional support. It is critical that local governments provide transparent information, feedback mechanisms, and assurances that the community's aspirations are genuinely considered. Annahar et al. (2023b) emphasize that participation must be institutionalized so that it does not depend on political will alone.

Thus, recent data and studies underscore that community participation is not merely a complement to decentralization policies but the primary foundation of their success. Without meaningful participation, decentralization risks losing social legitimacy and failing to achieve the goals of local Equity and democratization (Zarychta et al., 2024).

Overall, the importance of community participation in the decentralization process is reflected in its ability to improve policy quality, strengthen accountability, reduce inequality, and build local capacity. Therefore, decentralization policies should be designed through an inclusive, deliberative, participatory approach to ensure meaningful benefits for society.

## Context Matters: Localizing Decentralization

Data and discussions on the implementation of decentralization show that decentralization policies cannot be implemented uniformly without accounting for diverse local contexts. Recent literature confirms that social, economic, cultural, and institutional capacity differences across regions lead to a "one-size-fits-all" decentralization model that often fails to achieve the goals of effectiveness and fairness (Li et al., 2023).

Empirical studies confirm that the success of decentralization largely depends on the suitability of policy design to local characteristics. Foa (2022) affirms that policies which do not account for bureaucratic capacity and local social conditions are prone to the risk of performance gaps between regions, even when the formally allocated authority and resources are the same.

In the context of local political culture, the discussion data also strengthens the findings of the extent to how social norms and informal power relations influence the implementation of decentralization. Schultz (2022) suggests that in areas with patronistic and hierarchical cultures, decentralization tends to strengthen local elites unless it is adapted to the contextual mechanisms of participation and supervision.

In addition, local economic and geographic dynamics also determine the effectiveness of decentralization. Areas with weak economies or those that are remote require a different policy approach than more developed areas. Camelia and Virgil (2025) denote that incompatibility between the decentralized design and local

realities can lead to inefficiency, overlapping authority, and low-quality public services.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of decentralization in Central Java (Indonesia) and Kedah (Malaysia) has led to positive outcomes, albeit with structural, social, and policy limitations, underscoring the need for a systematic and sustainable evaluation of decentralization policies.

First, from the perspective of government structure, decentralization in Central Java, based on regional autonomy, enables local governments to have a relatively broad scope of authority. However, this has not been fully followed by adequate institutional capacity and inter-institutional coordination. Meanwhile, the federalism model in Kedah fosters policy stability and consistency but limits autonomy and innovation at the local government level. These findings suggest the need for different structural designs that yield distinct implementable implications. In this regard, policy evaluation is required to assess the fit between the authority design and the actual capacity of policy implementers.

Second, from a cultural perspective, this study highlights the importance of social values, such as hierarchy, patronage, social harmony, and obedience to authority, as they play a major role in shaping patterns of local participation and accountability. Such a culture, on the one hand, favors policy stability and acceptance, but, on the other hand, limits the community's critical participation and social control. This implies that the evaluation of decentralization policies cannot be purely technocratic; it must also consider the sociocultural dimension and

informal power relations developing at the local level.

Third, from a policy-dynamics perspective, this study shows that decentralization is a process that continually evolves but has not been fully consolidated. Changes in regulations, overlapping authorities, and regional capacity disparities indicate a gap between the normative goals of decentralization and the realities of its implementation. This reinforces the argument that policy evaluation is significantly vital, not to end decentralization, but to improve the direction and mechanisms of its implementation. Therefore, decentralization that remains relevant to the development of local and national contexts can flourish.

Fourth, this study accentuates that community participation, which remains procedural, is an important indicator of the need for policy evaluations. Although participatory mechanisms are in place, community involvement has not fully influenced strategic decision-making. Policy evaluation is highly required to assess the quality, inclusiveness, and tangible impact of community participation in the decentralization process.

Overall, the conclusions of this study address the research objectives, arguing that decentralization is not a policy completed at the stage of authority delegation, but a process that must be continuously evaluated to avoid producing further inequality, strengthening local elites, or weakening public accountability. Therefore, evaluation toward decentralization policies is needed to ensure that these policies truly achieve the goals of improving governance quality, equitable development, and community

welfare, in accordance with the local context of each region.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings and analysis, it is recommended that the success of decentralization implementation is highly dependent on the level of policy harmonization between the central and local governments. This study shows that policy misalignments, overlapping authorities, and differences in Development priorities across levels of government can reduce the effectiveness of decentralization and weaken the quality of public services.

First, it is necessary to strengthen the mechanism for harmonizing central and regional policies through collaborative, integrated planning. Second, this study recommends a clearer and more consistent affirmation of the division of authority between the central and regional governments. Third, strengthening coordination across levels of government is an important recommendation. Fourth, the harmonization of central-regional policies needs to be accompanied by a participatory and sensitive approach to the local context. Fifth, this study recommends strengthening local government capacity as a prerequisite for policy harmonization.

Overall, the recommendations of this study emphasize that the harmonization of central and regional policies does not entail the recentralization of authority, but rather an effort to align goals, ensure policy consistency, and enhance implementation effectiveness within the framework of decentralization. Harmonization, designed through dialogical, adaptive, and continuous, evaluation-based processes, will strengthen decentralization as an

instrument of responsive, equitable, and sustainable governance.

### **Research Contributions**

This research contributes to the effort to deepen the understanding of decentralization, positioned as an administrative policy and a complex social, political, and cultural process. *First*, by emphasizing the importance of integrating structural and cultural approaches, this study is expected to enrich the body of decentralized studies. *Second*, this research provides a conceptual contribution, in that, decentralization should be understood as a *policy-learning process* that requires continuous evaluation and adjustment. *Third*, the benefits of this research are expected to extend beyond the contexts of Central Java and Kedah and to provide guidelines for other countries that currently or plan to implement decentralization policies. *Fourth*, this research offers an analytical framework that other countries can use to assess and design decentralization policies more comprehensively. *Fifth*, this research provides empirical evidence dealing with cross-border decentralization practices, such as overlapping authority, capacity gaps between regions, and weak local accountability. Thus, it can contribute as a comparative reference that enriches global public policy practices. *Finally*, this study is expected to benefit the development of decentralization theory and inform the formulation of public policies that are more sensitive to local contexts.

### **Research Limitations**

This study has several limitations that must be stated explicitly. One of the main limitations is that the unique landscape characterizing the locus of the study, Central Java and Kedah, may not suit the contexts of other regions or even

other countries, and cannot be automatically generalized. Multifactorial elements, such as local history, regional leadership characteristics, political dynamics, and certain sociocultural values, should be acknowledged as contributory elements shaping decentralized practices.

In addition, the qualitative nature of this study drove the focus on documentary data and interviews with selected informants. The study's geographical and temporal scope also become the limitation concerning this study. However, these limitations should not be perceived as a reducing value of this study; instead, they inform the need for a contextual and comparative importance in decentralization studies.

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