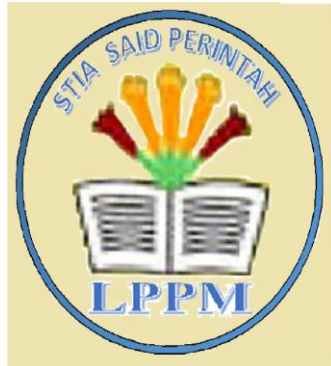

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Strategies for Strengthening Local Institutions in the Regency of Central Maluku

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Abstract

This study examines strategies to strengthen local institutions in Piru Village, West Seram Regency, particularly the Negeri and Saniri institutions. These traditional bodies, part of the community governance system in Maluku, face challenges that weaken their roles. Using a qualitative approach, the study identifies key factors influencing institutional decline and explores how members empower themselves through education and training. The findings reveal strong enthusiasm among members to enhance their knowledge and skills, significant support for those who can participate in learning activities, and high expectations that trained individuals will share their knowledge with others. Overall, the study highlights the importance of collective commitment and knowledge-sharing as essential strategies for strengthening the capacity and sustainability of local institutions in West Seram Regency.

Keywords : Local Institutions, Local Communities, Quality Improvement.

Introduction

The Indonesian people must begin from an unfavorable position. The economic and political crises that have occurred have not only devastated the material foundations of the state long the main driver of the economy and politics (Hidayat, 2000) but have also weakened the state's four key capacities: institutional, technical, administrative, and political (Grindle, in Hidayat, 2000). These capacities are essential to ensure the continuity of economic and political development. The main problem in the political and development processes so far lies in the weakness and neglect of existing institutions within society. Government-introduced institutions have proven unreliable, as they have undermined and weakened locally based institutions that are, in fact, the backbone of institutional functioning at the regional level (Marut, 2000).

As an integral element of various aspects of community life especially in rural areas it is appropriate that local institutions be empowered, or at least that rural communities be empowered through these local institutions. In subsequent developments, efforts have been made to strengthen such institutions through local regulations enacted by provinces, regencies, and cities that have active community-based institutions, such as the *Negeri* government, *Saniri Negeri*, and other local bodies.

Several previous studies have demonstrated the crucial role of local institutions in governance and community development. Research conducted in Negeri Morella, Leihitu District, Central Maluku Regency, revealed that community participation in development implementation is strongly influenced by social and cultural factors as well as local leadership patterns (Tupan, 2021). However, this study was limited to a single village and did not link participation to broader institutional aspects. Meanwhile, research on the *Sasi Lompa* institution in Haruku Negeri emphasized the strength of customary institutions in preserving social values and conserving natural resources (Latuconsina, 2020). The study found that customary institutions possess high social legitimacy but are weak in terms of administrative support and coordination with formal government structures. Together, these studies suggest that strengthening local institutions involves not only building formal capacity but also fostering synergy between customary values and modern governance systems—an area that forms the central focus of this research.

Another study on the implementation of customary village establishment in Central Maluku Regency showed that the policy of recognizing customary institutions has not been optimally implemented due to limited human resources, inadequate funding, and weak institutional design at the local level (Sahusilawane, 2022). This condition indicates that strengthening local institutions requires a strategy that is not merely normative but also considers the structural and contextual factors of each region. At the national level, the World Bank's report on *Institutional Strengthening for Improved Village Service Delivery* highlights the importance of linking institutional capacity, funding mechanisms, and the quality of public services (World Bank, 2020). This approach emphasizes the need for systematic capacity building through training, incentives, and performance evaluation.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by combining formal and customary institutional approaches and developing strategies for institutional strengthening suited to the characteristics of island regions. Overall, previous research has not comprehensively integrated the analysis of customary and formal governance institutions within a single strategic framework, particularly in island areas such as Central Maluku. Most studies remain descriptive and focus on specific aspects either community participation or the function of customary institutions without formulating operational strategies that can be applied across institutional levels (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 1990).

Hence, this study offers novelty both in its approach and in its expected outcomes. The mixed-methods design enables an in-depth analysis of institutional and social dynamics while producing practical recommendations based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The anticipated results include an integrated local institutional strengthening strategy encompassing human resource capacity building, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and enhanced community participation in village governance (North, 1990). Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of local institutional theory but also provides a practical foundation for formulating sustainable regional development policies in Central Maluku Regency.

Although there has been extensive research on local institutions in Central Maluku, most studies remain descriptive and limited to specific contexts such as community participation in a single village or the strengthening of customary institutions without any linkage to formal government structures (Tupan, 2021; Latuconsina, 2020). There has yet

to be a comprehensive study examining the integration of customary and village government institutions within a strategic framework for strengthening local governance. Furthermore, previous studies have rarely analyzed how structural factors, human resource capacity, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms affect institutional effectiveness in the context of an archipelagic region (Sahusilawane, 2022). This research gap underscores the need for studies that formulate evidence-based and contextually relevant strategies for strengthening local institutions strategies that reinforce administrative and technocratic dimensions while accommodating the unique socio-cultural values of Central Maluku as the foundation for sustainable governance.

Additionally, local institutions are an intrinsic part of the traditional *Negeri* governance system, where the head of government is the *raja* (king) and the legislative body is the *Saniri Negeri*. However, these institutions have experienced degradation, a loss of authority, and increasing complexity with the implementation of the Village Law. As mentioned above, this study seeks to analyze and interpret: (1) the key factors contributing to the weakening of the *Negeri* government and *Saniri* institutions in Piru Village, West Seram Regency, and (2) strategies for strengthening local institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Village/Country Development

National development, as an essential component of community development, should prioritize creating opportunities that allow rural communities to actualize their capacities and potential. Such efforts enhance human life not only materially but also by expanding individuals' freedom to choose their way of living (Sen, 1999). Similarly, regional development should emphasize strengthening community capacity and independence in public participation, rather than focusing solely on government agencies as implementers (Robinson & Gordon, 2000).

A human-centered development approach places human potential at the core of progress, aiming to empower individuals, local groups, and institutions with the ability and authority to participate actively in development processes. In this framework, the government functions as a facilitator that supports "local capacity, capability, and institutional strength" to ensure meaningful community participation (Supriatna, 2000).

Because many shortcomings in national development initiatives arise from weak grassroots institutions, strengthening and empowering local community-based organizations must be treated as a central priority in national development policy (Cheema, 1981).

The Concept of Local Institutions

Brett, (2000) defines local institutions as groups of individuals united by a common purpose who collaborate to achieve shared objectives and address collective action problems within society. Essentially, these institutions act as organized groups that mobilize collective efforts to solve local issues and advance community interests. At the provincial level, local institutions encompass entities such as the provincial government and provincial council.

Cheema, (1981) adds that local institutions may originate either through government initiatives with clearly defined goals or from community-based efforts that evolve organically, with objectives that are flexible and shaped by the institution's development over time.

Effective local institutions in regional development typically share several important traits. They are adaptable to diverse challenges, recognizing that communities differ in their needs and aspirations. These institutions work collaboratively with other organizations to address development problems, while remaining rooted in local cultural values and practices, which enhances community acceptance. Their organizational networks are designed to transform traditional norms and behaviors toward balanced development and equitable resource distribution. Moreover, they ensure fair service delivery, promote inclusive participation, and provide opportunities for leadership and decision-making within the community (Rondinelli & Ruddle, 1977, in Supriatna, 2000).

The Concept of Local Institutional Empowerment

Local institutions are groups of individuals united by common interests and goals, working collectively to address societal challenges, as exemplified by provincial governments and councils (Brett, 2000). These institutions may be initiated by the government with clearly defined objectives or may emerge organically from within the community, evolving naturally over time (Cheema, 1981). Effective local institutions in regional development are characterized by their adaptability to diverse community needs, their ability to integrate with other agencies, and their grounding in local cultural practices. They also play a vital role in

facilitating the transformation of traditional behaviors to promote balanced growth and equitable distribution of services. Moreover, they are designed to encourage broad community participation and leadership, ensuring that members are actively involved in both decision-making and the sharing of benefits (Rondinelli & Ruddle, 1977, in Supriatna, 2000). Such institutions serve as critical actors in promoting sustainable development by addressing collective challenges while remaining flexible and culturally responsive to the communities they represent.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamics and conditions of local institutions in Central Maluku Regency. The research focuses on three key aspects: district government politics, the role of the Regional People's Representative Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* or DPRD), and community participation in strengthening local institutions.

In addition, the study examines policies designed to improve human resource quality through education and training, particularly in efforts to enhance the institutional capacity of village and indigenous governance structures. The research specifically addresses issues related to the weakening of local institutions, including the declining effectiveness of customary institutions, poor inter-agency coordination, and low levels of community participation in decision-making processes.

Research informants include members of the DPRD, traditional leaders (*raja*), members of the *Saniri Negeri* (village council), community members, and heads of local government departments. These informants were selected to provide diverse and representative perspectives on institutional conditions in the study area. The field research was conducted over a one-month period, during which in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants, including the *raja*, *Saniri Negeri*, community members, and local leaders.

Discussion of Research Results

Customary Institutions in Piru

Maluku Provincial Regulation No. 14 of 2005 formally recognizes villages and communities such as Negeri, Ohoi/Ohoi Ratshap, Fenafanan, Lekhe, Pnue, Oho, Momor, and Kampong/Fanua as customary law communities governed by traditional systems that have existed for generations. The regulation prohibits the creation of new customary villages within existing territories but allows subordinate settlements to become formal administrative villages to standardize governance. Together with Law No. 6 of 2014, it provides legal legitimacy to customary communities and their governance structures, aiming to strengthen regional administration and enhance community participation in development and economic growth.

According to the Piru Village Secretary, although the regulation was approved by the DPRD, customary communities were not adequately informed or involved during its drafting and review processes. This exclusion has created a gap between policy and local realities. Disputes between the regency government and the DPRD over issuing a Regent's Decree have delayed implementation and dissemination for nearly two years, hindering the regulation's effectiveness and creating uncertainty among traditional leaders.

Historically, local institutions such as the raja and customary councils predate regency governments and have long governed through established traditions. Resistance to government-imposed village election policies reflects not defiance but a demand for recognition of these long-standing governance systems. In Piru, which consists of seven hamlets, local leaders continue to play crucial administrative and cultural roles, ensuring continuity of customary practices.

The regulation's broader goal is to revitalize indigenous communities while preserving cultural integrity, promoting participatory governance, and supporting sustainable development. Yet, the tension between customary systems and formal administrative structures underscores the need for better policy integration and respect for traditional institutions. Strengthening governance in Maluku requires harmonizing customary law with formal governance, involving communities in policy decisions, and recognizing the historical legitimacy of local institutions. Such an inclusive and balanced approach will

enhance legal certainty, reinforce social cohesion, and promote sustainable regional development rooted in local wisdom.

Village Government System

Maluku Provincial Regulation No. 14 of 2005 formally recognizes traditional governance systems across Maluku Province, acknowledging indigenous communities such as Negeri, Ohoi/Ohoi Ratshap, Fenafanan, Lekhe, Pnue, Oho, Momor, and Kampong/Fanua that have long operated under customary law. The regulation prohibits the establishment of new customary villages within existing jurisdictions but allows subordinate settlements to be formalized as administrative villages. Together with Law No. 6 of 2014, it provides legal legitimacy for traditional communities, aiming to improve administrative efficiency, encourage participation, and promote regional development.

Despite these objectives, a gap persists between regulation and implementation. Interviews with the Piru Village Secretary revealed that customary communities were not adequately informed or consulted during the formulation process, leaving local leaders uncertain about their governance roles. The absence of a Regent's Decree to operationalize the regulation has further delayed dissemination and hindered the formal integration of customary institutions into administrative systems.

Traditional governance structures such as the Raja and village councils existed long before the formation of regency governments and maintained social order through customary mechanisms. However, modern regulations have sometimes conflicted with these traditions, particularly regarding leadership elections. Resistance from indigenous communities in West Seram Regency should thus be viewed as a legitimate demand for recognition rather than defiance, as these systems have sustained local governance for generations. Piru's seven hamlets, for example, continue to depend on local leaders who uphold customary law and ensure administrative continuity.

The revitalization of customary law communities aims to strengthen institutional capacity, foster participatory governance, and align development with cultural values. Legal recognition enables traditional institutions to collaborate effectively with government agencies, participate in development initiatives, and act as intermediaries between local communities and the state. This cultural grounding enhances legitimacy, cooperation, and community engagement.

A key challenge lies in harmonizing traditional practices with modern administrative systems. Indigenous communities have long-established methods of leadership, decision-making, and resource management that risk being disrupted by externally imposed frameworks. Disputes over leadership election procedures illustrate the need for integration rather than replacement of customary governance. Hence, legal recognition must include efforts to align traditional institutions with formal systems while protecting indigenous authority and cultural rights.

Decentralized governance, as demonstrated in Piru's hamlet-based system, underscores the value of local leadership and participation. Each hamlet head supports governance and administration, ensuring responsiveness to local needs while maintaining autonomy. The provincial regulation strengthens this model by providing legal clarity, improving coordination with higher authorities, and institutionalizing participatory decision-making.

Overall, the implementation of Maluku Provincial Regulation No. 14 of 2005 and Law No. 6 of 2014 represents a commitment to inclusive and culturally grounded governance. Integrating traditional structures into formal systems enhances resource management, equitable growth, and sustainable development. Continued community engagement, policy harmonization, and widespread dissemination of legal frameworks remain essential to ensuring that Maluku's customary communities thrive within a legitimate and culturally coherent governance system.

Saniri Institutions in the Country

In Piru Village, the Saniri serves as the legislative body within traditional governance, comparable to the Village Consultative Body (BPD) under Law No. 32 of 2004. Although Piru has long practiced this system, it has not yet been formally recognized as a traditional village under the Minister of Home Affairs Decree No. 01 of 2017. Despite this lack of formal status, the Saniri continues to play a central role in governance, reflecting enduring customary traditions that the community seeks to have officially acknowledged.

Working alongside the raja (village head), the Saniri Negeri helps draft local regulations and monitor governance. However, while West Seram Regency has issued a regulation on the Saniri, it has not been effectively implemented, leaving communities uncertain about their legal position. This situation underscores a disconnection between

formal administrative frameworks and the customary systems that have historically governed local affairs.

Traditionally, the Saniri, in collaboration with recognized clans (Soa), manages the selection of the raja through an indirect democratic process based on customary law. This mechanism ensures that leadership transitions align with traditional authority structures and maintain community harmony. The Saniri's decisions are regarded as sacred, with the raja responsible for executing them, while issues related to community welfare are resolved through consultation. This dynamic balance between customary authority and formal governance preserves institutional stability and legitimacy.

The Saniri model emphasizes indirect democracy, where leadership selection is entrusted to representative institutions rather than conducted through direct elections. This system, found across Maluku including Ambon, Seram, and Nusalaut maintains stability, respects clan authority, and reinforces cultural identity. Community resistance to externally imposed election methods thus reflects not opposition to democracy but a defense of the right to preserve traditional governance practices.

Even amid modernization and technological change, the Saniri remains adaptable while maintaining its cultural foundations. Decisions are reached through consensus among the Soa, ensuring openness, dialogue, and collective legitimacy. This adaptability allows the Saniri to sustain social cohesion and continuity of leadership.

Overall, the persistence of the Saniri system in Piru Village demonstrates the resilience of indigenous governance amid evolving administrative structures. By preserving its indirect democratic practices, the community safeguards social harmony, honors ancestral authority, and ensures a form of governance that remains both culturally grounded and democratically representative.

The Existence of Local Institutions

Institutional development in Piru Village has not been implemented democratically, causing weak community ownership and limited participation. Decision-making remains dominated by local elites, making participation largely ceremonial and undermining institutional legitimacy. Dependence on elite approval reduces institutional autonomy and creativity, particularly within the *Saniri Negeri* and State Institution responsible for selecting the *raja*, resulting in stagnation and loss of relevance.

Efforts to strengthen institutions through education, health, and non-formal training programs by the West Seram Regency Government, often in collaboration with NGOs and religious organizations, have aimed to improve governance and community empowerment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these initiatives, and existing policies remain top-down, focusing more on financial allocations such as *Dana Desa (DD)* and *Alokasi Dana Desa (ADD)* rather than on participatory capacity-building.

Policy implementation is further hindered by a lack of training facilities, qualified facilitators, and continuity in programs, limiting knowledge transfer and institutional sustainability. Consequently, local institutions in Piru Village continue to face structural weaknesses, elite dependency, and inadequate human resource capacity. Strengthening them requires sustained, participatory, and autonomous interventions to promote innovation, effective knowledge transfer, and community empowerment for sustainable development.

The Collective Commitment of the Regional Government and the Regional People's Representative Council

Local institutions in West Seram Regency, especially in Negeri Piru, have long functioned effectively under traditional governance. However, after the administrative expansion of the regency through Law No. 40 of 2003, which increased the number of sub-districts and villages, existing regulations required revision. This transformation of customary states into administrative entities caused major institutional changes. While traditional institutions remain recognized *de facto*, they lack legal legitimacy due to the absence of regional regulations governing their operation.

For nearly sixteen years, tension between the District Government and the DPRD over the establishment of regulations for customary institutions has weakened institutional legitimacy and created internal disputes, particularly in Piru. Although the District Government attempted to apply Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 1 of 2017, which defines criteria for customary villages, traditional communities resisted, viewing it as conflicting with customary norms.

This regulatory uncertainty has also affected the election of village heads. Many traditional villages have opposed government-led elections because they contradict customary mechanisms. The government's insistence on conducting elections—citing

prolonged acting leadership and delayed development—often diverted Village Fund (ADD) resources from essential programs, intensifying community dissatisfaction, especially in Piru and other traditional villages.

The transition toward formal recognition of customary villages has been further hindered by the government's failure to implement Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 1 of 2017, which requires community consultation. Although the DPRD drafted regulations for Negeri and Saniri institutions in 2020, the absence of a Regent's Regulation has stalled their implementation. Government insistence on strict adherence to national procedures has prolonged delays, leading to public protests, including road blockages along the Trans-Seram route.

In conclusion, ongoing institutional conflict between the District Government, DPRD, and traditional communities has delayed the formal recognition of customary institutions in West Seram Regency. The lack of regulatory clarity undermines traditional governance, disrupts leadership succession, and impedes development, highlighting the urgent need to harmonize customary systems with formal administrative frameworks.

The Collective Commitment of the Village Government and the community

The ineffective use of local institutions in West Seram Regency, particularly in Piru Village, is often attributed to negative stereotypes of villagers as lazy or uneducated. This stigma undermines participation and autonomy, enabling government dominance and limiting dialogue. To address this, political education is essential to build citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities, encourage rational decision-making, and strengthen civil society. Such awareness would help communities utilize local institutions to promote self-reliance and grassroots interests.

Centralized, top-down governance has further weakened institutional effectiveness, making decentralization crucial. Delegating programs to capable community groups and ensuring that village funds (ADD, DD, PAD) reflect public rather than elite interests would increase participation and empowerment. Strengthening institutions like the Saniri requires not only financial support but also human resource development. Although the district government previously provided training, COVID-19 restrictions disrupted these efforts, and limited capacity-building has reduced institutional performance.

To improve governance, capacity-building must be continuous and inclusive, involving district, sub-district, and village levels through workshops, mentoring, and inter-village learning. Shared funding responsibilities can ensure sustainability, while local institutions should actively plan and implement programs. Well-executed initiatives would enhance human resources, institutional management, and public engagement.

In essence, revitalizing local institutions in Piru demands an integrated approach combining political education, decentralization, participatory governance, and sustained capacity-building. Aligning institutional functions with community needs and strengthening human capital can restore legitimacy and effectiveness while revitalizing social, political, and economic dynamics.

Research in Central Maluku Regency similarly identifies weaknesses in human resources, coordination, and participation, reflecting limitations at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. From empowerment and governance perspectives, these challenges stem from limited community involvement and poor integration between customary and formal institutions. The study thus proposes a model combining cultural values with participatory and transparent governance principles and recommends sustainable institutional capacity strategies through synergy between formal and informal institutions, political education, and collaborative mechanisms to promote inclusive and sustainable regional development.

Conclusion

The West Seram Regency government seeks to improve human resource quality through training and education to empower local institutions, but implementation remains constrained by limited funding and weak execution at both regency and sub-district levels. Despite these obstacles, members of local institutions demonstrate strong motivation to enhance their skills and share knowledge, supported by empowerment programs from NGOs, universities, and other external partners.

While the Regional Government and the DPRD have accommodated institutional interests through regional regulations, implementation has stalled due to the lack of a formal decree. Budget limitations further restrict mentoring and training initiatives, prompting the government to explore more sustainable empowerment strategies. In Negeri Piru, local

institutions remain influential through democratic decision-making and local recruitment, and collaborative funding is seen as essential to expand capacity-building programs.

Theoretically, the study underscores the need to integrate capacity development, empowerment, and institutional governance within Central Maluku's cultural framework. It recommends establishing a permanent coordination forum between government and traditional institutions to design and implement development policies grounded in local wisdom. The government should also provide managerial training for indigenous leaders and village officials to enhance governance effectiveness. Although the study's scope is limited, its findings highlight the importance of sustained collaboration between government and customary institutions to create adaptive, culturally rooted governance for local communities.

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