

# From Policy to Practice: How Decentralization Reshapes Village Political Institutions in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Indonesia's decentralization reforms—anchored in Law No. 22/1999, Law No. 32/2004, and the landmark Village Law No. 6/2014—represent one of the most ambitious local-governance transformations in Southeast Asia. Yet a persistent gap exists between the aspirations inscribed in these policies and their lived realities in village political institutions. This qualitative study examines how decentralization policies reshape village political institutions across three dimensions: structural transformation of village governance bodies, redistribution of authority between central and local government, and participatory practices within village deliberation forums. Drawing on in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, and documentary analysis across twelve purposively selected villages in Java and Sulawesi, the study reveals that while formal institutional structures have been significantly redesigned, substantive autonomy remains constrained by regulatory centralism, fiscal dependency, and weak local capacity. Village Representative Councils (BPD) function more as rubber-stamp bodies than genuine deliberative organs. Village funds (Dana Desa) have expanded development budgets but simultaneously introduced new accountability burdens that reproduce central oversight. The findings advance a “constrained institutionalism” framework that explains how macro-level policy innovations are filtered, diluted, and locally negotiated before taking institutional form. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for continuous capacity building, transparent governance practices, and stronger coordination among stakeholders to maximize the effectiveness of village governance reforms.

*Keywords:* decentralization; village governance; political institutions; village law; indonesia; dana desa; local autonomy; institutional change

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## 1. Introduction

Decentralization has become a dominant paradigm in public-sector reform across the developing world, premised on the expectation that devolving authority to sub-national units will improve governance responsiveness, reduce corruption, and empower local communities (Jin et al., 2025; Chanchani, 2023). Since the 1980s, more than eighty developing nations have undertaken some form of decentralization, driven by a combination of pressure from international financial institutions, domestic democratization movements, and the perceived failures of centrally planned development models (Maksum & Lutfi, 2025; Subroto & Sakti, 2025). In theoretical terms, decentralization is expected to deliver a triple dividend: bringing government closer to citizens through political devolution, matching service delivery to local preferences through administrative deconcentration, and mobilizing sub-national fiscal capacity through revenue and expenditure reassignment (Jin et al., 2025; Digidowiseiso, 2024). In practice, however, these three dimensions of decentralization rarely advance together, and their misalignment is frequently identified as a principal source of governance dysfunction in decentralizing states (Ali et al., 2024; Aritenang, 2025). Indonesia offers one of the most instructive laboratories for examining this premise. The “Big Bang” decentralization initiated in 1999 dismantled one of the most centralized states in Asia, transferring extensive fiscal and administrative responsibilities to more than five hundred districts and over seventy-four thousand villages almost overnight (Syukri, 2024; Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025). This transformation was remarkable in its speed and scope, yet its depth—understood as the

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genuine redistribution of political power rather than the mere transfer of administrative burden—has remained a subject of sustained scholarly debate ever since (Maksum & Lutfi, 2025; Farhan et al., 2025).

Indonesia's experience with decentralization can be understood as having traversed two distinct phases before reaching the village level. The first phase, anchored in Law No. 22/1999 and subsequently revised by Law No. 32/2004, transferred extensive powers to district (kabupaten/kota) governments while largely bypassing the provincial tier—a design that scholars characterize as “district-centric” devolution (Rijal et al., 2024; Jamil et al., 2024). This phase produced considerable variation in governance outcomes across the archipelago: some districts achieved notable improvements in public service delivery and fiscal management, while others exhibited intensified elite capture, corruption, and fragmentation of administrative authority (Herianti & Marundha, 2024; Kurosaki et al., 2024). The fiscal dimension of this first wave of decentralization expanded considerably, yet its developmental impact proved highly contingent on pre-existing institutional quality and local political economy conditions, a pattern documented across multiple Indonesian regions (Aritenang, 2025; Sugiyarto et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, the village emerged as the final and arguably most consequential frontier of Indonesia's decentralization agenda. Under the New Order (Orde Baru) regime of President Suharto (1966–1998), villages functioned primarily as administrative extensions of the central state, governed under Law No. 5/1979, which imposed a uniform Javanese administrative template across the country's vast diversity of local polities and customary (adat) communities (Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025; Widiyanto et al., 2025). Under this arrangement, village heads were effectively appointed rather than genuinely elected, village budgets were tightly controlled from above, and participatory institutions existed largely in ceremonial form rather than as substantive mechanisms of local accountability. The democratic transition (Reformasi) that began in 1998 created political space for rethinking this arrangement, yet substantive reform at the village level lagged behind district-level decentralization by more than a decade, reflecting both the technical complexity of designing village governance frameworks and the political sensitivities surrounding the redistribution of authority away from established district elites (Iskandar & Jambak, 2025; Friska, 2025).

The Village Law (Law No. 6 of 2014) constitutes the latest and most far-reaching chapter in this transformation. It granted villages legal personhood, guaranteed minimum annual transfers through the Dana Desa (averaging IDR 1–2 billion per village annually), mandated participatory planning through Musyawarah Desa, and formalized the Village Representative Council (Badan Permusyawaratan Desa, BPD) as a democratic oversight mechanism (Paska et al., 2025; Iskandar & Jambak, 2025). The law further recognized adat villages (desa adat) governed by customary institutions, representing a significant normative departure from the uniform administrative framework imposed under the New Order (Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025; Jayuska et al., 2025). By 2023, cumulative Dana Desa disbursements had reached IDR 539 trillion nationally, contributing to a marked decline in the number of officially designated underdeveloped villages (desa tertinggal), from approximately 14,000 in 2015 to fewer than 5,000 by 2022 (Paska et al., 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025). Yet the translation of these legislative mandates into changed political practices on the ground remains empirically contested (Maksum & Lutfi, 2025; Hariyanto et al., 2024). Critics argue that the law's ambitious autonomy provisions are progressively constrained by an expanding thicket of ministerial regulations, district-level bylaws, and audit requirements that effectively reconstitute central oversight under new institutional guises (Widiarto et al., 2025; Wisnaeni & Najib, 2025).

This article addresses the following research question: How do decentralization policies reshape village political institutions in Indonesia, and what factors explain the gap between policy design and institutional practice? The study adopts a qualitative, empirical approach grounded in socio-legal and institutional change theory, examining twelve villages across two provinces. It contributes to three bodies of literature: (1) decentralization theory, (2) village governance in Indonesia, and (3) the policy-practice gap in institutional reform.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theories of Decentralization and Institutional Change

Decentralization theory distinguishes three dimensions: political (transfer of decision-making authority), administrative (deconcentration of functions), and fiscal (reassignment of revenue and expenditure) (Jin et al., 2025; Subroto & Sakti, 2025). These dimensions do not always move together. Fiscal transfers can be granted while political authority remains

centralized, producing a “decentralization illusion” documented in multiple country contexts (Ali et al., 2024; Maksum & Lutfi, 2025).

Historical institutionalism argues that institutional change is path-dependent: existing structures, rules, and practices shape how new policies are interpreted and implemented (Büscher et al., 2024). In Indonesia's case, the legacy of New Order centralism continues to structure village political culture even after legal reform (Syukri, 2024; Kurosaki et al., 2024). Kadaryanto and Kurniawan (2025) specifically warn that procedural autonomy without structural justice constitutes symbolic recognition rather than substantive empowerment.

## 2.2. Village Governance and the Village Law

The Village Law represents a qualitative shift from previous regimes in which villages were primarily administrative units executing central government programs. Under the law, villages receive annual transfers (Dana Desa) averaging IDR 1–2 billion, manage their own APBDes budgets, and elect village heads independently (Paska et al., 2025; Karim & Idalis, 2025). Studies document significant variations in implementation quality correlated with village head leadership, local elite capture, and administrative capacity (Ardiputra et al., 2025; Jamaluddin, 2024).

Participatory mechanisms—notably the *Musyawarah Desa*—are designed to embed deliberative democracy in village decision-making (Syukri, 2024). However, evidence suggests these forums are often captured by village elites, with marginalized groups, including women and the rural poor, systematically excluded (Haryono et al., 2024; Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025). The BPD is frequently described as passive and underfunded (Jamil et al., 2024; Wibawa et al., 2024).

## 2.3. Policy-Practice Gap in Institutional Reform

The concept of a policy-practice gap captures the systematic divergence between formal policy design and street-level implementation (Wisnaeni & Najib, 2025; Maksum & Lutfi, 2025). In Indonesia's case, this gap is shaped by: (1) layered regulatory fragmentation across central, provincial, district, and village levels (Jayuska et al., 2025; Widiarto et al., 2025); (2) limited village administrative capacity (Fanda et al., 2025); (3) elite capture and clientelism in village elections (Kurosaki et al., 2024); and (4) accountability requirements that paradoxically reproduce central oversight (Ardiputra et al., 2025; Brasit & Nursyamsi, 2025).

## 3. Conceptual Framework

The results of the analysis can be seen in Figure 1, This study employs a “constrained institutionalism” framework that synthesizes three theoretical strands: historical institutionalism, new institutionalism, and the policy-practice gap literature. The framework posits that decentralization policies are mediated by three sets of constraints before taking institutional form:

- **Structural constraints:** Inherited organizational forms, administrative cultures, and legal architectures that resist rapid change (Maksum & Lutfi, 2025; Büscher et al., 2024).
- **Relational constraints:** Power asymmetries between central and local government, and between village elites and ordinary citizens (Syukri, 2024; Kurosaki et al., 2024).
- **Capacity constraints:** Deficits in human resources, administrative skills, and financial management at the village level (Fanda et al., 2025; Ardiputra et al., 2025).

The core analytical proposition of the framework can be expressed as:

$$VPI = f(DP, SC, RC, CC) + e$$

where VPI = Village Political Institution; DP = Decentralization Policy; SC = Structural Constraint; RC = Relational Constraint; CC = Capacity Constraint; e = context-specific variation.



**Figure 1.** Constrained Institutionalism Framework for Village Political Institution Change in Indonesia.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining multiple case studies, in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions (FGDs), and documentary analysis. The qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's aim to understand processes, meanings, and mechanisms of institutional change rather than to measure outcomes (Syukri, 2024; Wisnaeni & Najib, 2025). A constructivist epistemology underpins the research, recognizing that institutional realities are socially constructed and contextually embedded.

### 4.2. Research Sites

Based on the sampling framework presented in Table 1, Twelve villages were purposively selected across two provinces—West Java (n=6) and South Sulawesi (n=6)—to capture variation across Java/outer island dynamics, development levels, and Dana Desa absorption capacity. Within each province, villages were selected to represent variation in (a) proximity to district capital, (b) village fund management performance (high/medium/low), and (c) BPD activity level.

**Table 1.** Research Sites and Selection Criteria.

| Province       | Villages (n) | District         | Selection Criteria                             |
|----------------|--------------|------------------|--|
| West Java      | 6            | Garut / Cianjur  | Rural-urban gradient; high/low fund absorption |
| South Sulawesi | 6            | Gowa / Jeneponto | Adat community presence; economic diversity    |

### 4.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between November 2025 and January 2026 using three methods:

- **In-depth interviews (n=84):** Village heads (12), BPD members (24), village secretaries (12), community leaders (18), ordinary villagers (18). Semi-structured interview guides explored institutional roles, decision-making processes, and perceptions of policy change.
- **Focus Group Discussions (n=12):** One FGD per village (8–12 participants), targeting diverse community members including women, youth, and marginalized groups.
- **Documentary analysis:** Village Regulation (Perdes), APBDes budget documents, Musyawarah Desa minutes, district monitoring reports, and national audit findings (BPK, 2023–2025).

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

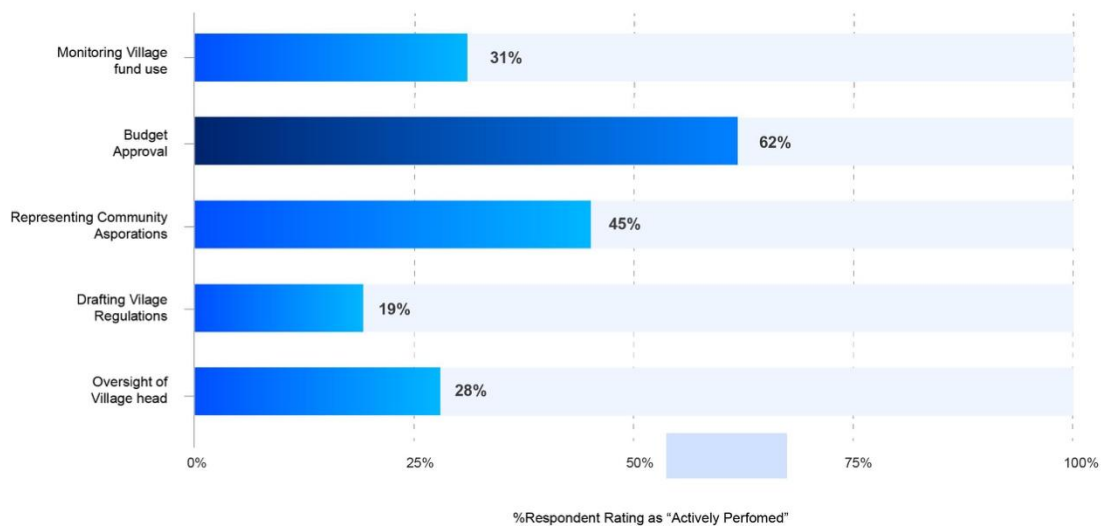
Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 facilitated systematic coding across the dataset. Triangulation of interview, FGD, and documentary data enhanced analytical validity. Member-checking was conducted with eight key informants.

### 5. Result and Discussion

#### 5.1. Structural Transformation of Village Governance Bodies

All twelve research villages exhibited the formal institutional architecture mandated by the Village Law: an elected village head, a functioning BPD, a village secretary, and regular Musyawarah Desa forums. However, the substance of these institutions varied dramatically. In seven of twelve villages, BPD members reported receiving minimal orientation on their legislative and oversight functions, and three village heads explicitly described the BPD as “just signing documents” (hanya tanda tangan saja).

The results of the analysis can be seen in Figure 2, Documentary analysis of APBDes revealed that in 83% of villages, budget allocation decisions originated from the village head's office rather than through participatory planning. Musyawarah Desa minutes in eight villages showed attendance dominated by male community leaders, with women comprising fewer than 15% of documented participants despite national regulations requiring 30% female participation.



**Figure 2.** Perceived BPD Function by Respondents (n = 84). Percentage rating each function as “actively performed”.

#### 5.2. Redistribution of Authority: Fiscal Dependency and Regulatory Centralism

The analysis results can be displayed in Table 2. The Dana Desa has dramatically expanded village development budgets—from near-zero before 2015 to a national average of IDR 1.4 billion per village by 2024 (Karim & Idalis, 2025; Paska et al., 2025). Yet this fiscal expansion has not translated into equivalent expansion of village political autonomy. Three mechanisms of recentralization were identified:

- a. **Normative standardization:** Village fund disbursement is conditioned on compliance with centrally prescribed procedures including APBDes format, procurement rules (Peraturan Bupati), and online reporting through SISKEUDES. Village officials in nine of twelve sites reported these requirements effectively transfer agenda-setting power to district government technical staff (Ardiputra et al., 2025).
- b. **Elite capture in fund management:** In four villages, village heads concentrated control over procurement decisions despite legal requirements for transparent tender processes. Community members reported inability to access expenditure documentation (Brasit & Nursyamsi, 2025).

- c. **Accountability overload:** Village administrations face reporting obligations to Inspectorate, BPK, BPKP, and district government simultaneously. This bureaucratic burden diverts administrative energy from substantive governance to compliance management (Fanda et al., 2025; Jamil et al., 2024).

**Table 2.** Comparative Distribution of Village Authority Before and After Village Law Implementation.

| Domain                     | Pre-Village Law       | Post-VL (Design)      | Post-VL (Practice)             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Budget planning            | Central/District      | Village (APBDes)      | District-guided in 9/12        |
| Infrastructure procurement | District project      | Village tender        | Village head-dominated in 4/12 |
| Village regulations        | District decree       | BPD + Village Head    | VH-initiated in 9/12           |
| Community participation    | Top-down mobilization | Musyawah Desa         | Elite-dominated in 8/12        |
| Fiscal accountability      | Internal audits       | Multi-level oversight | Compliance overload in 10/12   |

### 5.3. Participatory Practices: Musyawarah Desa and Democratic Quality

Based on table 3, The Musyawarah Desa is the primary institutional mechanism for participatory governance under the Village Law. Findings reveal a consistent pattern of formal compliance alongside substantive deficit. The three most frequently cited impediments were: (1) information asymmetry between village administration and community members, (2) social hierarchies that silence non-elite voices, and (3) lack of follow-up mechanisms to track whether decisions are implemented.

*“The forum is held, the minutes are signed, the photos are taken—but decisions have already been made before people enter the room.” — BPD Member, West Java*

**Table 3.** Emergent Themes from Focus Group Discussions on Participatory Governance (n=12 villages).

| Theme                           | Frequency | Representative Quote                    |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---|
| Elite dominance in Musyawarah   | 9/12      | “Only the head and his friends speak”   |
| Gender exclusion                | 10/12     | “Women attend but do not speak”         |
| Pre-decided agendas             | 8/12      | “Decisions are made before the meeting” |
| Accountability gap in Dana Desa | 10/12     | “We don't know where the money goes”    |
| BPD passivity                   | 11/12     | “BPD only signs, doesn't question”      |

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Constrained Institutionalism in Village Governance

The findings validate the constrained institutionalism framework. Village political institutions have been formally redesigned by decentralization policy, but their substantive character is heavily mediated by structural, relational, and capacity constraints. This pattern—formal change without substantive transformation—is consistent with Syukri's (2024) characterization of Indonesia's participatory village governance as “narrow” and Kadaryanto and Kurniawan's (2025) critique of “procedural autonomy” as symbolic recognition.

The role of fiscal dependence in constraining village autonomy deserves particular attention. Dana Desa has simultaneously expanded village development capacity and tightened central oversight mechanisms (Ardiputra et al., 2025; Karim & Idalis, 2025). This resonates with Chanchani's (2023) finding from India that decentralized mechanisms can enhance accountability while simultaneously creating new forms of political capture.

The structural constraints identified in this study also intersect with broader dynamics of minority rights protection within plural legal environments. Abdurakhman (2025) demonstrates that in plural societies, constitutional guarantees of equality are systematically weakened at the level of implementing regulation and subnational administration—a pattern directly mirrored in village governance, where national anti-discrimination norms and gender participation mandates are diluted by local regulatory practices and elite-dominated decision-making. The BPD’s marginalization of women and customary community members is thus not merely an administrative failure; it reflects a structural tendency toward majoritarian capture that Abdurakhman (2025) identifies as endemic to decentralized plural legal systems when accountability mechanisms remain weak and enforcement authority is dispersed across multiple governance levels.

### 6.2. *The Village Law and Incomplete Decentralization*

Indonesia's decentralization is incomplete not merely as a function of implementation failure but as a reflection of inherent tensions in the legal architecture itself. The Village Law attempts to balance village autonomy with state accountability, but in practice this balance tilts toward accountability mechanisms that reproduce central authority (Iskandar & Jambak, 2025; Widiarto et al., 2025). Jayuska et al. (2025) document similar “regulatory fragmentation” suggesting that this ambiguity is systemic rather than incidental.

This legal ambiguity is further compounded by the ideological dimensions of judicial decision-making at higher governance levels. Hermawan (2025) demonstrates that judicial institutions do not operate as neutral arbiters of law; rather, judges’ interpretive orientations—shaped by political appointment processes and prevailing governance ideologies—substantially influence how constitutional and statutory provisions are applied in practice. In the Indonesian village governance context, this insight is especially relevant: the consistent deference of district and provincial courts to administrative discretion over village-level claims reflects not merely legal formalism but a systemic ideological predisposition toward centralized state authority. When village communities or BPD members seek judicial redress against arbitrary executive action, they encounter an institutional environment in which, as Hermawan (2025) observes, courts operating in politically charged environments tend to align with dominant governmental interests rather than uphold constitutionally protected rights of weaker institutional actors.

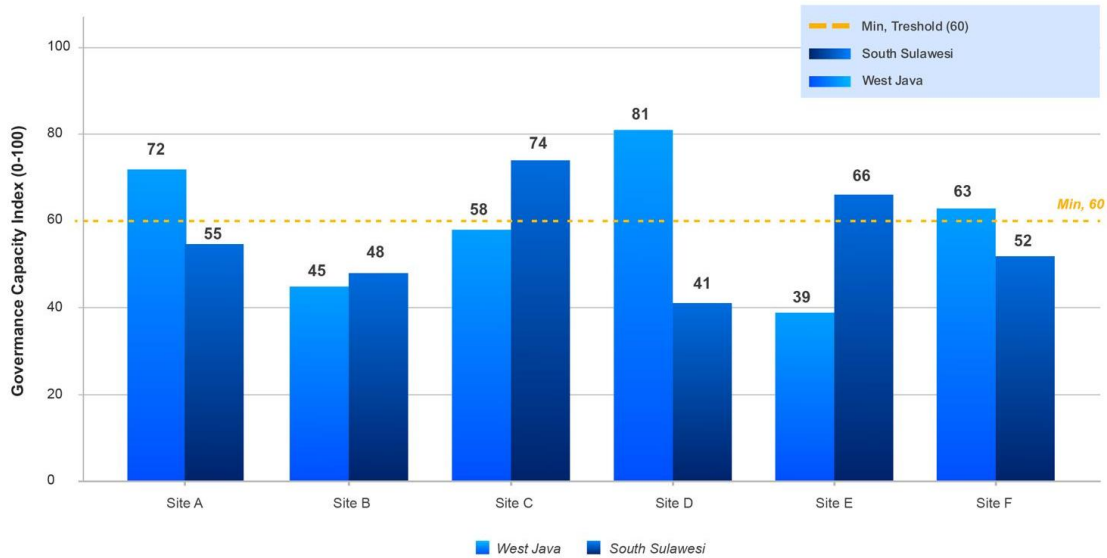
### 6.3. *Implications for Substantive Village Autonomy*

The policy-practice gap documented in this study has significant implications for the quality of rural democracy in Indonesia. If BPD remains a rubber-stamp institution and Musyawarah Desa a ritual rather than a deliberative forum, the formal architecture of village democracy cannot translate into meaningful political empowerment (Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025; Haryono et al., 2024). The marginalization of women in village deliberation—documented in 10 of 12 research sites—is particularly concerning given constitutional commitments to gender equality (Syukri, 2024).

Achieving substantive village autonomy therefore demands more than regulatory revision; it requires institutional reforms that address both the legal architecture and the political-ideological environment in which that architecture operates. Drawing on Abdurakhman’s (2025) framework for minority rights protection in plural societies, village communities—particularly indigenous groups, women, and economically marginal households—can be reconceptualized as constitutionally protected minority actors within Indonesia’s plural governance landscape. This reframing would obligate the state to ensure not merely formal representation in BPD and Musyawarah Desa, but substantive participation backed by independent oversight mechanisms, accessible legal aid, and enforceable anti-discrimination guarantees. Abdurakhman (2025) further argues that civil society organizations and national human rights institutions play an indispensable role in bridging the gap between constitutional norms and administrative practice—a function that, in the village governance context, could be fulfilled by strengthening the institutional mandate and operational funding of BPD, community legal aid organizations, and village ombudsman mechanisms.

Hermawan’s (2025) comparative analysis of judicial behavior across multiple jurisdictions further reinforces the case for institutional design reforms that insulate village governance from majoritarian political capture. His finding that judicial independence and merit-based appointment processes produce more impartial institutional outcomes translates, at the village level, into an argument for BPD members to be selected through transparent, competency-based mechanisms rather than informal patron-client networks, and for village-level dispute resolution bodies to operate with clear mandates protected from village head interference. Just as Hermawan (2025) identifies consensus-based, time-limited judicial appointment processes as moderating ideological bias in high courts, the introduction of regularized training, external evaluation, and fixed terms for BPD members could serve a comparable function within the village governance ecosystem. Together, the institutional frameworks proposed by Abdurakhman (2025) and Hermawan

(2025) converge on a shared prescription: substantive accountability requires not only formal legal guarantees but independent, well-resourced institutions capable of enforcing those guarantees against majoritarian and elite pressures. The results of the analysis can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Village Governance Capacity Index by Research Site (n=12).

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. Conclusion

This study examined how decentralization policies have reshaped village political institutions in Indonesia through a qualitative investigation of twelve villages in West Java and South Sulawesi. The findings demonstrate that the Village Law (Law No. 6 of 2014) has generated significant formal institutional changes, including participatory governance mechanisms, strengthened legal recognition of villages, expanded fiscal resources through *Dana Desa*, and the formalization of the Village Representative Council (BPD) as a local oversight institution.

However, formal transformation has not been matched by equivalent substantive change in political practice. Village institutions remain constrained by structural legacies of centralized governance, unequal power relations between elites and ordinary citizens, and persistent limitations in administrative capacity. Many BPDs continue to function as passive bodies, while *Musyawarah Desa* forums often serve as procedural requirements rather than genuinely deliberative spaces. Although *Dana Desa* has increased development resources, complex accountability requirements have simultaneously reinforced central oversight that limits village autonomy.

The constrained institutionalism framework developed in this study explains why policy objectives are frequently diluted during implementation, as structural, relational, and capacity constraints interact to shape how decentralization policies are interpreted, negotiated, and institutionalized at the local level.

Overall, Indonesia’s decentralization project has achieved important progress in institutional redesign but nonetheless remains characterized by incomplete decentralization. Achieving substantive village autonomy requires not only legal and regulatory reform but also sustained investment in institutional capacity, inclusive participation, robust accountability mechanisms, and gender-responsive governance that empowers local oversight institutions.

### 7.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on the study, we recommend:

- a. Strengthen BPD capacity through mandatory orientation, adequate operational budgets, and protection from village head interference. Independent monitoring of BPD function by district governments should be regularized.

- b. Reform Musyawarah Desa procedures to mandate genuine deliberation, enforce gender quotas (minimum 30% women), and create accountability mechanisms for follow-up on community decisions (Hariyanto et al., 2024; Syukri, 2024).
- c. Rationalize accountability reporting requirements to reduce compliance overload, enabling reallocation of administrative energy toward substantive governance (Ardiputra et al., 2025).
- d. Develop asymmetric decentralization arrangements granting greater autonomy to high-capacity villages while providing stronger support to low-capacity ones (Jamil et al., 2024; Kadaryanto & Kurniawan, 2025).
- e. Invest in village administrative capacity through sustained training programs for village secretaries, BPD members, and fiscal managers, with particular attention to gender-sensitive governance practices.

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