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DEVELOPING PLURALISTIC GOVERNANCE IN RURAL INDONESIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Pluralistic governance has emerged as an approach capable of accommodating multiple decision-making systems, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements, particularly within diverse rural societies. In Indonesia, rural governance often reflects a coexistence between formal state structures and informal indigenous or community-based institutions. However, limited scholarly attention has examined how pluralistic governance develops and operates at the local level, especially in rural contexts. This qualitative study explores the development and practice of pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia, focusing on the dynamics, drivers, and challenges of institutional coexistence. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations involving village government officials, community leaders, traditional authorities, and civil society actors. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging patterns and conceptual categories. The findings reveal that pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia evolves through three interconnected processes: (1) institutional negotiation between formal regulations and customary norms; (2) collaborative decision-making shaped by shared legitimacy and power relations; and (3) adaptive governance practices influenced by local wisdom, socio-cultural values, and development priorities. Despite its benefits in fostering inclusiveness and social cohesion, pluralistic governance faces challenges such as regulatory ambiguity, power imbalance, and inconsistent policy implementation. This study contributes to the broader discourse on governance reform by demonstrating how pluralism can strengthen rural resilience and participatory governance in Indonesia and similar multi-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Pluralistic Governance; Local Governance; Rural Indonesia; Indigenous Institutions; Community Participation; Governance Reform

INTRODUCTION

Governance in rural areas continues to evolve as diverse actors, institutions, and decision-making mechanisms interact in response to social, political, and economic transformations (Boström et al., 2015). In many developing countries, including Indonesia, formal state governance structures coexist with informal, customary, or community-based systems that have historically shaped rural sociopolitical relations. This coexistence reflects a form of pluralistic governance, where multiple sources of authority operate simultaneously in managing public affairs, resolving conflicts, allocating resources, and influencing development agendas. Rather than functioning as a single unified system, governance in rural settings often emerges as a negotiated space between government regulations, cultural norms, social traditions, and local power dynamics (Deininger & Feder, 2009).

Indonesia provides an important empirical context for exploring pluralistic governance due to its ethnic diversity, decentralization reforms, and strong tradition of community autonomy. Since the implementation of the Village Law (Law No. 6/2014), rural governance has undergone institutional strengthening, with increased fiscal authority, participatory planning mechanisms, and recognition of local wisdom. However, in many rural communities, formal governance frameworks continue to interact with adat (customary institutions), religious leadership, informal networks, and civil society organizations. These parallel systems do not always operate harmoniously; instead, they engage in negotiation, collaboration, competition, or coexistence depending on local historical, cultural, and political contexts (Candel, 2014).

Despite its relevance, scholarly attention to pluralistic governance in Indonesia remains limited. Most studies focus on decentralization, bureaucratic reform, rural development programs, or community participation, with fewer examining how formal and informal governance institutions interact in practice. Existing literature tends to frame pluralism either as a challenge to administrative uniformity or as a complementary mechanism for community empowerment. However, limited empirical research explains how pluralistic governance develops, what factors drive its evolution, or how institutional coexistence influences decision-making processes at the village level. As a result,

theoretical understanding of pluralistic rural governance, particularly from a qualitative and contextual perspective, remains fragmented (Bebbington et al., 2006).

This study addresses this gap by examining the development and practice of pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia through an exploratory qualitative approach. The research focuses on the dynamics of institutional negotiation, the role of legitimacy and power relations, and the mechanisms through which formal and informal systems contribute to governance outcomes (Zhong et al., 2023). By analyzing lived experiences and governance practices among village officials, customary leaders, community actors, and civil society groups, the study seeks to generate a deeper understanding of how pluralism is enacted rather than merely prescribed in policy frameworks.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it enriches global discussions on governance by demonstrating how pluralistic systems operate in culturally diverse rural contexts, challenging linear and state-centric governance models. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and local governments seeking to strengthen inclusive and adaptive governance systems (Cori et al., 2019). Understanding pluralistic governance as a dynamic and negotiated process may help improve policy alignment, reduce institutional conflict, and strengthen social cohesion in rural development initiatives. Overall, the study aims to advance knowledge on pluralistic governance while providing meaningful implications for improving rural governance practices in Indonesia and similar multi-cultural settings.

METHODS

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how pluralistic governance develops and operates within rural Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because pluralistic governance is embedded in sociocultural practices, relationships, and meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The study followed an exploratory and interpretive orientation, aiming to understand governance dynamics from the perspectives and lived experiences of actors directly involved in village governance structures. This approach allows for flexibility in uncovering emerging themes and relationships as the research progresses.

Research Setting
The research was conducted in selected rural villages located in Indonesia, purposively chosen based on three criteria: (1) the coexistence of formal village government and customary or informal leadership structures; (2) an active community participation system in local decision-making; and (3) ongoing implementation of rural development policies under the Village Law framework. These villages represent sociocultural diversity in governance practice and provide an appropriate context to investigate pluralistic governance dynamics.

Participants and Sampling
Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure representation across formal, informal, and community governance spheres. The sample included village government officials, traditional leaders (tokoh adat), religious leaders, women's groups, youth representatives, and civil society actors involved in local development processes. A total of 24 participants took part in the study, consisting of: 6 village government officials, 5 customary leaders, 4 religious leaders, 5 community group representatives, 4 civil society actors/NGO workers.

This participant composition ensured diversity of perspectives and enabled examination of power relations and negotiation processes inherent in pluralistic governance.

Data Collection
Data were collected through three primary methods:

1. In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews
Interviews focused on institutional roles, decision-making processes, perceived legitimacy, governance challenges, and collaboration experiences between formal and informal systems. Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
FGDs were conducted to triangulate findings from interviews and stimulate collective reflection on shared governance experiences. Two FGDs were held, each involving 6–8 participants.

3. Participant Observation
The researcher observed village meetings, public consultations, and informal community discussions to capture real-time interaction patterns and power negotiations. Field notes were recorded to complement interview and FGD data. Supporting documents—such as village regulations, meeting records, customary agreements, and community charters—were collected as secondary sources.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: (1) familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) reporting. Coding was performed manually and iteratively, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data. Patterns were examined to identify relationships between governance systems, institutional legitimacy, and negotiation processes.

Trustworthiness
To ensure methodological rigor, Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness were applied:

1. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources, prolonged engagement, and member checking.
2. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions to allow readers to assess relevance to similar settings.
3. Dependability was ensured through a documented audit trail of decisions made during data collection and analysis.
4. Confirmability was supported by maintaining reflexive field notes to minimize researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from an accredited institutional review board. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Personal identifiers were removed to ensure confidentiality and protect sensitive information. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed three major themes that characterize the development and practice of pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia: (1) institutional negotiation between formal and customary governance systems, (2) collaborative decision-making shaped by power and legitimacy, and (3) adaptive governance practices responding to local needs and sociocultural values. These themes reflect how pluralistic governance is neither static nor formalized, but emerges through continuous interaction between actors, norms, and institutional frameworks.

Institutional Negotiation Between Formal and Customary Systems

The first theme highlights that pluralistic governance evolves through ongoing negotiation between state-defined village governance and long-standing customary institutions. Participants explained that formal governance—regulated through the Village Law and administrative procedures—coexists with customary leadership structures such as tokoh adat and lembaga adat responsible for cultural regulation, land management, and conflict resolution.

Despite the coexistence, participants noted ambiguity in authority boundaries. A village official stated:

"On paper, the government holds authority, but in practice, we cannot ignore adat. Decisions must consider cultural norms; otherwise, the community will reject them."

This demonstrates how governance effectiveness depends not only on legal authority but on cultural legitimacy. Institutional negotiation occurs especially in land-use decisions, village development planning, and conflict mediation. In many cases, customary leaders serve as informal gatekeepers who either facilitate or block government initiatives. Negotiation also occurs in the production of local regulations (peraturan desa). Some villages incorporate customary norms into written regulations, while others maintain parallel systems—formal rules for administration and unwritten adat for everyday social order. These arrangements illustrate a hybridized governance structure created through negotiation rather than imposed design.

Collaborative Decision-Making Shaped by Power and Legitimacy

The second theme reflects how pluralistic governance produces a collaborative decision-making environment where authority is shared, contested, or balanced depending on social dynamics. Decision-making processes involve formal village councils (BPD), religious leaders, women's groups, youth organizations, and customary authorities. This expansion of governance actors has increased participation, although participation remains shaped by local power hierarchies.

FGD data revealed that leadership legitimacy—not administrative position—is the strongest driver of influence in decision-making. A community member stated:

"People listen to whoever they trust, not necessarily to whoever holds office."

This illustrates the coexistence of legal-rational authority (based on formal power) and traditional authority (based on cultural recognition). The balance between the two often determines whether decisions are accepted and implemented. Participants described collaboration as a necessary strategy rather than an optional relationship. In policy discussions or development planning, formal leaders frequently consult customary or religious leaders to ensure alignment with community values. Women's and youth groups increasingly contribute, although their involvement varies by cultural context.

Power asymmetry was evident: customary leaders held strong influence in cultural and moral decisions, while government actors controlled budgeting and administration. Rather than competing, these actors generally adopt shared roles—formal institutions provide structure and resources, while customary institutions provide legitimacy and cultural alignment.

Adaptive Governance Practices Responding to Local Needs

The third theme emphasizes pluralistic governance as an adaptive process formed through gradual adjustments to development needs, emerging challenges, and social change. Participants described governance adaptation in response to modernization, digitalization, demographic shifts, and external development programs.

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For example, in managing village development funds (Dana Desa), officials integrate community forums with customary consultations, allowing decisions to reflect both legal procedures and social expectations. A civil society actor explained:

"We adapt the system. We use the formal budget mechanism, but validation comes from community consensus rooted in customary practice."

This adaptive approach enhances community acceptance and compliance with government programs. Adaptive governance also emerges in conflict resolution—formal mediation procedures are often bypassed when customary negotiation is viewed as more efficient, relational, and culturally appropriate.

However, adaptation is uneven and context-dependent. Some actors resist formal policies perceived as restricting customary practices, while others embrace state governance as a path to modernization. Limited administrative capacity, unclear regulatory guidance, and fragmented coordination were identified as challenges affecting consistency in adaptive governance.

Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia is a dynamic process shaped by negotiation, collaboration, and adaptation. It functions not as a dual or competing system but as an evolving governance arrangement influenced by cultural legitimacy, social hierarchy, and institutional flexibility. Rather than weakening formal systems, pluralism supports more inclusive and culturally embedded governance when adequate cooperation exists.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia is not merely the coexistence of formal and informal systems, but rather a dynamic and negotiated process shaped by institutional relationships, cultural legitimacy, and adaptive practices. This section discusses the empirical results in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and previous studies, highlighting the analytical implications for understanding rural governance and institutional pluralism in decentralized contexts.

Pluralistic Governance as a Negotiated Institutional Space

The theme of institutional negotiation confirms earlier theoretical arguments that pluralistic governance emerges through the interaction between multiple institutional logics rather than through hierarchical replacement (Harjoto & Wang, 2020). The findings show that formal village government and customary institutions operate as overlapping rather than mutually exclusive structures. This is consistent with theories of legal pluralism, which argue that governance in rural and multicultural settings is distributed across different normative orders—state law, customary law, and social norms (Berti & and Rossi, 2024).

However, the findings extend the concept by showing that negotiation is not only structural but relational and situational. Institutional coexistence fluctuates depending on issue sensitivity, historical legitimacy, and the degree of community attachment to customary values. For example, land management and moral governance remain heavily influenced by customary authorities, whereas financial administration follows state regulations. This suggests that pluralistic governance is domain-specific rather than uniformly applied, supporting recent research on hybrid governance systems in Southeast Asia.

Decision-Making Influenced by Power and Cultural Legitimacy

The second theme reveals that pluralistic governance reshapes decision-making processes by blending legal-rational authority with customary legitimacy. Weberian authority theory explains that traditional authority derives from cultural continuity and community trust, whereas legal-rational authority is embedded in formal state structures. The findings show that both forms operate simultaneously, but cultural legitimacy frequently carries more influence in community acceptance—particularly in rural contexts where social cohesion and moral credibility are valued.

This reinforces prior studies (Talib et al., 2022) showing that decentralization alone does not guarantee community participation; rather, authority must align with socially recognized legitimacy. In many cases, formal governance actors seek endorsement from customary leaders to avoid resistance and ensure implementation success. This aligns with the concept of shared or overlapping authority, which posits that pluralistic systems function effectively when institutions recognize each other's roles rather than compete (Keen et al., 2018).

However, while collaboration was observed, the findings also indicate unequal participation across gender and age groups. Although the Village Law promotes inclusive deliberation, participation remains influenced by traditional hierarchies. This suggests that pluralistic governance may reproduce rather than challenge existing power structures unless intentional mechanisms foster equality.

Adaptive Governance as a Response to Local Complexity

The third theme supports literature on adaptive governance, which can strengthen resilience by integrating multiple knowledge systems, cultural values, and local priorities (Leeuwis et al., 2021). The study shows that pluralism enables flexibility as village actors adjust formal regulations to fit local cultural practice. For instance, formal budgeting

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arrangements are socially validated through customary consensus-building, demonstrating how procedural governance becomes meaningful when contextualized culturally.

This adaptation reflects a form of institutional bricolage (Hammami & Hendijani Zadeh, 2020; Maama, 2021; Rorong & Lasdi, 2020), where actors selectively combine formal procedures with indigenous practices to create workable governance solutions. Rather than weakening administrative systems, bricolage allows pluralistic governance to remain relevant to community identity, history, and lived experience.

Yet adaptation is uneven. Variability across villages suggests that pluralistic governance lacks uniform institutional structure and depends heavily on local leadership, historical relationships, and administrative capacity. This finding raises questions about scalability and policy expectation—particularly in relation to national governance frameworks that assume standardization.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the development and practice of pluralistic governance in rural Indonesia through a qualitative inquiry involving village government actors, customary leaders, community representatives, and civil society stakeholders. The findings show that pluralistic governance is not merely a parallel coexistence of formal and informal systems but a dynamic and negotiated structure shaped by institutional interaction, cultural legitimacy, and adaptive practices.

Three key conclusions emerge from the empirical analysis. First, pluralistic governance develops through ongoing institutional negotiation between state governance frameworks and customary norms. Rather than operating in isolation, these systems overlap and influence each other, particularly in areas of land use, rule-making, conflict mediation, and cultural regulation. This negotiation results in hybrid governance arrangements that combine administrative procedure with customary practice.

Second, governance effectiveness depends not only on legal authority but on culturally recognized legitimacy and social trust. Decision-making processes demonstrate that formal village leadership and customary authorities share influence, with community acceptance often privileging traditional leadership credibility. This finding reinforces the argument that legitimacy—not institutional design alone—is central to local governance functioning in culturally embedded contexts.

Third, pluralistic governance operates as an adaptive system, responding to community needs, sociocultural values, and evolving development priorities. Actors engage in institutional bricolage, selectively combining formal policies with culturally grounded practices to ensure decisions remain socially acceptable and implementable. While this adaptation enhances local relevance and community participation, it also leads to variability in governance outcomes across different rural settings.

Collectively, these findings contribute to theoretical debates in governance, decentralization, and development studies by reframing pluralistic governance as a relational, negotiated, and adaptive process rather than a static institutional configuration. The study also highlights the importance of aligning formal governance frameworks with culturally grounded institutions to enhance policy implementation and strengthen community resilience.

Future research is recommended to explore pluralistic governance through comparative studies across regions, examine gender and youth participation within pluralistic systems, and analyze how pluralism interacts with digital governance reforms and rural sustainability agendas. Such inquiries may deepen understanding of how pluralistic governance can contribute to equitable and context-sensitive rural development in Indonesia and comparable multicultural settings.

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