

Capacity of Local Governments in Implementing the National Agenda: A Case Study of the Implementation of the RPJMN of North Sumatra Province

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze in-depth the capacity of local governments to implement the national agenda through the implementation of the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) in North Sumatra Province. Local government capacity is a key aspect in determining the effectiveness of national policy implementation at the local level, as regions play the primary role in realizing development targets set by the central government. The research approach used a qualitative method with a case study design, which allows researchers to understand the phenomenon comprehensively and contextually. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with officials from the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), organizational bureaus, and several related regional agencies. In addition, an analysis of regional planning documents, performance reports, and the results of monitoring and evaluation of the RPJMN implementation was conducted. The results of the study indicate that the capacity of local governments to implement the RPJMN in North Sumatra Province still faces structural and cultural challenges. The main challenges include limited competent human resources in the planning field, weak coordination across sectors and levels of government, and limitations in the use of data and information technology for evidence-based planning. However, there are also indications of increasing institutional capacity through apparatus training programs, the implementation of regional development information systems, and strengthening coordination mechanisms between the central and regional governments. The North Sumatra Provincial Government has also attempted to harmonize the RPJMD and RPJMN to ensure that regional development policies align with the national development direction. These findings confirm that the successful implementation of the RPJMN is determined not only by administrative and technocratic factors, but also by the adaptive and collaborative capabilities of local governments in responding to central government policies. Local government capacity must be understood as a combination of human resource competency, institutional capacity, and the ability to build networks with various stakeholders. This research provides a theoretical contribution to the study of public administration, particularly in the context of decentralization and the implementation of national policies in the regions. Practically, the results of this study recommend the need for a strategy to strengthen institutional capacity based on effective, participatory, and adaptive governance to change. Thus, North Sumatra Province can serve as an example of a more synchronized, measurable, and sustainable implementation of the national agenda.

Keywords: Regional Government Capacity, RPJMN, Policy Implementation, Development Planning, North Sumatra.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara mendalam kapasitas pemerintah daerah dalam menjalankan agenda nasional melalui implementasi Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional (RPJMN) di tingkat Provinsi Sumatera Utara. Kapasitas pemerintah daerah

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menjadi aspek kunci dalam menentukan efektivitas pelaksanaan kebijakan nasional di level lokal, karena daerah berperan sebagai pelaksana utama dalam mewujudkan sasaran pembangunan yang ditetapkan oleh pemerintah pusat. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, yang memungkinkan peneliti memahami fenomena secara komprehensif dan kontekstual. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pejabat Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah (Bappeda), biro organisasi, serta beberapa perangkat daerah terkait. Selain itu, dilakukan analisis terhadap dokumen perencanaan daerah, laporan kinerja, serta hasil monitoring dan evaluasi pelaksanaan RPJMN. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kapasitas pemerintah daerah dalam mengimplementasikan RPJMN di Provinsi Sumatera Utara masih menghadapi tantangan struktural dan kultural. Tantangan utama mencakup keterbatasan sumber daya manusia yang kompeten di bidang perencanaan, lemahnya koordinasi lintas sektor dan antarlevel pemerintahan, serta keterbatasan dalam penggunaan data dan teknologi informasi untuk perencanaan berbasis bukti. Namun, terdapat pula indikasi peningkatan kapasitas kelembagaan melalui program pelatihan aparatur, penerapan sistem informasi pembangunan daerah, serta penguatan mekanisme koordinasi antara pemerintah pusat dan daerah. Pemerintah Provinsi Sumatera Utara juga telah berupaya melakukan harmonisasi antara RPJMD dengan RPJMN agar kebijakan pembangunan daerah sejalan dengan arah pembangunan nasional. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi RPJMN tidak hanya ditentukan oleh faktor administratif dan teknokratis, tetapi juga oleh kemampuan adaptif dan kolaboratif pemerintah daerah dalam merespons kebijakan pusat. Kapasitas pemerintah daerah harus dipahami sebagai kombinasi dari kompetensi sumber daya manusia, kapasitas institusional, serta kemampuan membangun jejaring kerja dengan berbagai pemangku kepentingan. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis terhadap kajian administrasi publik, khususnya dalam konteks desentralisasi dan implementasi kebijakan nasional di daerah. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya strategi penguatan kapasitas kelembagaan yang berbasis pada tata kelola pemerintahan yang efektif, partisipatif, dan adaptif terhadap perubahan. Dengan demikian, Provinsi Sumatera Utara dapat menjadi contoh implementasi agenda nasional yang lebih sinkron, terukur, dan berkelanjutan.

Keywords: Kapasitas Pemerintah Daerah; RPJMN; Implementasi Kebijakan; Perencanaan Pembangunan; Sumatera Utara.

INTRODUCTION

National development in Indonesia is carried out through a medium-term planning framework, one of which is the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) which contains national development strategies in the next five years. The RPJMN document is not only a reference for the central government, but requires active participation and adequate capacity from local governments in the implementation of their policies and programs (Ruhama & Nugraha, 2023). In the context of regional autonomy, synchronization, coordination, and strengthening the capacity of local governments are the key so that the national agenda can be effectively implemented at the provincial and district/city levels (PSPPR UGM, 2025).

The province as an element of local government on behalf of the central government has an important role in translating and implementing the national agenda through the RPJMN. As one of the largest provinces in Sumatra, North Sumatra Province has its own challenges: ranging from regional diversity, human resource capacity, technical institutions, budget, to coordination between different elements of government. In order to accelerate development, the central government emphasizes the importance of alignment between central and regional development plans (Bappenas) so that national development indicators can be achieved. For example, it is stated that without central-regional harmonization, economic growth will encounter obstacles or stagnation. The capacity of local governments, in the sense of institutional capabilities, human resources (HR),

regulations, budgeting, and cross-sectoral coordination, is an important element that must be possessed so that the implementation of the RPJMN at the regional level can run. As stated through the study, the development of local government capacity is needed as an effort to improve the quality of local government administration to be more effective and efficient. Without adequate capacity, regions risk failing to translate the national agenda into regional programs, which can then hinder the achievement of national and regional targets (Bappenas, 2020).

In the literature, there is an important role of local governments in the implementation of the development agenda contained in the RPJMN, both in terms of regulatory regulation, institutional capacity building, and intergovernmental synergy. For example, a study of the role of local governments in the implementation of the legal development agenda in the 2020-2024 RPJMN emphasizes that "local governments have a number of authorities to implement development areas in accordance with regional needs" (Ruhama & Nugraha, 2023). This shows that regional capacity is not only a matter of formal authority but substantive ability in execution. However, reality shows that some of the targets in the RPJMN are difficult to achieve due to regional capacity challenges. For example, there is an evaluation that the economic growth target in the 2025-2029 RPJMN is difficult to achieve due to the efficiency of the government budget and limited regional fiscal capabilities. This shows that the challenges of regional capacity, both fiscal, institutional, and coordinated, are not just theoretical, but real in practice (PSPPR UGM, 2025).

Based on this, in the context of North Sumatra Province, this study wants to explore *how* the capacity of local governments in this province to carry out the national agenda contained in the RPJMN, *what* are the factors that affect this capacity, and *how the* implications of this capacity are on the implementation of the national agenda at the provincial level. With qualitative methods, this study will explore a deep understanding of stakeholders at the provincial level, including planning bureaus, technical agencies, and other elements of local government to obtain an empirical picture of regional capacity within the framework of the national agenda. More specifically, this study aims to: first, describe the condition of the capacity of the local government of North Sumatra Province in carrying out the national agenda contained in the RPJMN; second, identify challenges and opportunities related to the capacity of the region; and third, examine the mechanisms and factors that strengthen or inhibit the process of implementing the national agenda by local governments (Bappenas, 2025).

This research is important because in terms of national and regional policies, strengthening the capacity of local governments is an important strategy to ensure that the national development agenda does not only stop at the central level, but can be implemented to the regions effectively and effectively. Without a capacity building strategy, there is a risk that national planning documents such as the RPJMN will only become a normative framework without real implementation on the ground. In a theoretical framework, the capacity of local governments can be seen as a combination of three main dimensions: human resources and apparatus competence, institutions and regulations, and budgets and inter-governmental coordination systems. These three dimensions, when carried out synergistically, allow local governments to carry out the national agenda optimally. However, when one of the dimensions is weak, such as low human resource competence or weak coordination between agencies, regional capacity will be limited. This is in line with the definition put forward that local government capacity development is an effort to foster the ability of local governments to implement regional autonomy so as to produce high performance (Bappenas, 2025).

The qualitative method was chosen because this study emphasizes an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, the specific local context in this case of North Sumatra Province and the complex and multifactorial nature of policy implementation processes, as is common in policy and public administration studies, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through in-depth interviews, case studies, and policy document analysis, this study aims to reveal how the capacity of local governments in implementing the national agenda and how internal and external factors influence this process, in line with the case study approach and policy implementation analysis (Merilee S Grindle, 2017). The contributions of this study to academic and public policy studies include: (1) providing a rich empirical picture of the capacity of local governments in supporting the national agenda which is still relatively limited in research at the provincial level; (2) formulating contextual policy recommendations for the North Sumatra Provincial Government and relevant to other provinces in Indonesia; and (3) strengthening the understanding that the success of the national agenda is not solely determined by the central government, but rather depends heavily on regional capacity and central-regional synergy (Pierre & Peters, 2000). Thus, this research is expected to serve as a reference for policymakers, local government practitioners, and academics who are concerned with issues of central-regional relations, government institutional capacity, and the implementation of medium-term national development planning (Hill & Hupe, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of research on the capacity of local governments in carrying out the national agenda, there are several conceptual and empirical frameworks that are important to be examined: (1) the definition and dimensions of local government capacity, (2) the influences that affect regional capacity, (3) the relationship between regional capacity and national policy implementation, and (4) local challenges in the Indonesian context that are relevant to studies in North Sumatra Province.

Definition and Dimensions of Local Government Capacity

Local government capacity generally refers to the ability of a local government to plan, organize, implement, and evaluate public policies effectively and efficiently, Setiawan et al., in a study in Indonesia, for example, research shows that regional capacity includes not only fiscal or operational capacity, but also analytical and political capacity. The local government capacity is measured based on a policy capacity framework, including three types of capacities: analytical, operational, and political (Setiawan dkk., 2022).

Meanwhile, other research in the field of minimum service standards found that policy capacity with the dimensions of individuals, organizations/institutions, and political actors plays an important role in the successful implementation of the minimum policy of regional services. Keban also emphasized that "capacity building is a precondition and strategic step for the realization of regional autonomy" because the capacity capacity of local governments is still limited in facing the demands of autonomy (Keban, 1999). From a structural and institutional perspective, research in West Java shows that the local capacity of the government in managing the development of peri-urban areas is built through institutional capital which is divided into three capitals: intellectual capital, social capital, and political capital. Thus, within the conceptual framework of this research, the capacity of local governments can be constructed in three main dimensions:

1. Resource Dimension (HR, Financial/Fiscal, Facilities/Infrastructure)

2. Institutional/Organizational Dimension (institutional structure, regulation, coordination system)
3. Political/Analytical Dimension (political commitment, policy analysis skills, inter-governmental networking).

Influence-Factors in Increasing or Limiting Local Government Capacity

In empirical studies of local governments in Indonesia, various factors were found to be the main influences on regional capacity. For example, case research in Sukabumi City shows that although regional capacity is sufficient in terms of coordination between elements of the city and central government, there are obstacles such as the quality of human resources, community participation, program effectiveness, and efficiency of policy implementation. However, several points must be fixed: quality of human resources, increase the community participation, ensure the effectiveness and the efficiency of the programs and policies.

Research in North Sumatra Province shows that the capacity of the regional bureaucracy to improve the performance of public services is limited by several factors such as the lack of political will from the leadership, low community participation, and endowment (basic capital) factors that hinder implementation. The two main types of factors in this study are internal factors (e.g., human resource competence, institutional systems, regulations) and external factors (e.g., inter-governmental coordination, central-regional policy support, fiscal conditions).

In addition, research on regional budget capacity during the pandemic shows that fiscal or budget capacity is also an important variable that affects the ability of regions to act in crisis conditions. Thus, previous studies have confirmed that the capacity of local governments is multidimensional and is influenced by a combination of resource, organizational, political, and external conditions.

Local Government Capacity and National Agenda Implementation

The relationship between local government capacity and national policy implementation is an important focus in the study of regional development and autonomy. Decentralization in the Indonesian context shows that although much authority and authority is transferred to the regions (Suherman dkk., 2024), development results are not always as expected if regional capacity is inadequate. For example, Siswidiyanto & Sahputri found that "the failure of human development was strongly related to local government capacity to produce education, health, and economic outputs and outcomes" (Siswidiyanto & Sahputri, 2023).

Other research also states that operational capacity alone (fiscal, HR) is not enough; Analytical and political capacity are equally important. While operational capacity (including fiscal capacity) has long been reckoned, this result gives empirical evidence that other critical capacities should be well considered, political and analytical capacities.

In the context of the national agenda such as medium-term development documentation (RPJMN) that must be implemented by the regions, the capacity of local governments is the key so that national programs can be trickled down and have an impact at the local level. Thus, regional capacity is not only a matter of administrative adjustment, but also a matter of how the regions can translate, adapt, and coordinate to implement the national agenda in a contextual and effective manner.

Contextualization to North Sumatra Province

Although there are not many specific studies on regional capacity and the implementation of RPJMN in North Sumatra Province, through generalizations from national studies, several relevance

can be identified. A large and heterogeneous province like North Sumatra faces different institutional and coordination challenges than smaller regions. Previous studies have shown that regions with stronger social capital, political capital, and institutions tend to be able to manage change and carry out development agendas better (Novianty, 2015).

For North Sumatra Province, it is important to look at how the capacity dimension (HR, fiscal, institutional) runs in practice; For example, how strong regional regulations adopt national programs, how coordination between the central government provinces districts/ cities takes place, how community participation and local stakeholders are involved. Previous literature reviews emphasized that regional capacity is often hit by a lack of political commitment, weak bureaucracy, low human resources, and limited budgets (Keban, 1999).

Research Summary and Gap

From the summary of the literature review above, it can be concluded that:

1. Local government capacity is a multidimensional concept that includes resource, institutional, and political/analytical aspects.
2. Various empirical studies in Indonesia have found that this capacity affects success in public service and policy implementation.
3. The national agenda programmed through the RPJMN requires the regions to have adequate capacity so that the central program can be implemented at the sub-national level.
4. However, there is a specific research gap related to how the capacity of local governments in North Sumatra Province to handle the national agenda through the RPJMN, especially in the context of implementation and region-specific barriers.

This research is here to fill the gap by exploring qualitatively how the capacity of local governments at the North Sumatra provincial level plays a role in the implementation of the RPJMN, the factors that strengthen and hinder it, and the implications for national and regional development policies.

Integration of Multi-Level Governance and Local Government Capacity in RPJMN Implementation

The literature on cross-level policy implementation views central–regional coordination as a multi-level governance issue shaped by the design of inter-organizational relationships and the presence of clear network management mechanisms. From a network governance perspective, effective vertical coordination requires an explicit governance structure such as a lead organization or a network administrative organization (NAO) to ensure consistent information flow, mandate alignment, and strategic decision-making across institutions. When such a structure is absent, networks tend to operate informally and sporadically, creating risks of communication delays, role ambiguity, and priority misalignment (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

In the context of RPJMN implementation, weak vertical coordination such as inconsistent synchronization between RPJMN and RPJMD indicators and coordination forums that remain administrative rather than strategic can be understood as a symptom of failed vertical governance integration. The policy capacity literature emphasizes that cross-level coordination requires systemic capacity, particularly political capacity to manage intergovernmental relationships, negotiation processes, and commitment-building around policy agendas. When this capacity is limited, policy integration is constrained and national program implementation becomes partial and uneven across regions (Wu dkk., 2015).

Regional data limitations such as non-integrated sectoral data across OPDs, outdated development databases, and inconsistent outcome indicators reflect weak analytical capacity at both individual and organizational levels. Analytical capacity refers to the ability to collect and manage data, conduct technical analysis, interpret trends, and evaluate policy effectiveness; therefore, weak data systems directly reduce the quality of analysis and hinder evidence-based planning (Wu dkk., 2015).

Furthermore, analytical capacity is not only about technical skills but also about the availability of reliable and sufficient information to support policy analysis. When data is unavailable, outdated, or untrustworthy, policy analysis becomes biased and decision-making less accurate, making it increasingly difficult to align regional targets and indicators with the RPJMN framework (Howlett, 2015).

At the horizontal level, fragmentation across OPDs (siloe work practices), the absence of cross-sector coordination SOPs, and planning forums that fail to produce operational decisions indicate weak institutional capacity. Institutional capacity depends on functional rules, structures, and procedures that enable collaborative work and the execution of shared mandates; when these institutional tools are ineffective, cross-sectoral agendas such as the RPJMN are reduced to isolated sectoral programs that are difficult to coordinate and evaluate collectively (M S Grindle, 1997).

Beyond government actors, the participation of non-state actors such as universities and NGOs is important for strengthening legitimacy, innovation, and access to knowledge and resources in policy implementation. Network effectiveness is influenced by actor composition and governance mechanisms that enable productive collaboration, so limited engagement with non-government actors contributes to weak collaborative network capacity at the regional level (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Finally, limited regional budgets and heavy dependence on central transfers narrow the space for RPJMN implementation and often reduce national programs to minimal activities. Operational capacity includes the ability to allocate resources, manage budget mechanisms, and exercise managerial competence in implementing public programs; when fiscal capacity and priority alignment are weak, strategic national programs fail to receive adequate financial support (Wu dkk., 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how the capacity of local governments at the provincial level to carry out the national agenda through the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). The qualitative approach was chosen because this study emphasizes the exploration of the meaning, process, and socio-cultural context that encompasses the implementation of the national agenda in a specific region, namely the province of North Sumatra. Qualitatively it allows researchers to explore institutional dynamics, human resources, regulations, central-regional coordination, and factors that affect implementation contextually. In line with the literature, "Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on in-depth understanding of social phenomena and human behavior through collecting non-numerical data" (Rustamana dkk., 2024).

Research Design and Location

The case study design was chosen because the research focuses on one in-depth unit of analysis, namely the provincial government in the North Sumatra region, as a representative of the RPJMN implementation process at the provincial level. The researcher will examine one or more provincial government agencies, related technical agencies, and coordination of the provincial centers that have responsibility for the implementation of the national agenda. Through this approach, researchers can trace the mechanisms, obstacles, and actual practices in the implementation of national development policies in the regions.

Subject and Data Source

The research subjects consisted of key informants who were selected purposively (purposive sampling) based on the criteria that they had direct or relevant involvement in the implementation of the RPJMN in North Sumatra Province. Informants can include:

1. Officials at the provincial planning and finance bureau,
2. Head or technical officer of the national development program implementation unit in the province,
3. Representatives from central agencies coordinating with the province,
4. Local stakeholders such as community associations, academics, or relevant NGOs.

The main data sources are primary data through in-depth interviews with key informants, as well as field observations where possible. Secondary data sources include policy documents (RPJMN, provincial RPJMD, related regulations), evaluation reports, central-regional coordination documents, and institutional archives.

Data Collection Techniques

1. **Semistructured Interviews:** The researcher used an open-ended interview guide that allowed informants to outline their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding regional capacities in the implementation of the national agenda. This technique gives you the flexibility to explore the unexpected.
2. **Document Analysis:** Policy documents, regulations, reports on the implementation of RPJMN in the province, and central-regional coordination materials will be analyzed to obtain a contextual picture, regulations, processes, and empirical evidence related to implementation.
3. **Uninvolved Observation or Field Visit:** If possible, researchers can observe coordination activities or program implementation at the provincial level to gain a direct understanding of the implementation process and organizational dynamics.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from interviews, documents, and observations will then be analyzed thematically (thematic analysis) and interpretively. The analysis process includes several stages: (a) data familiarization carefully reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents; (b) initial coding identifying pieces of data relevant to local government capacity, implementation of national agendas, barriers, reinforcing factors; (c) grouping of codes into main themes such as human resources, regulations/institutions, central-regional coordination, fiscal/budget; (d) theme review and sharpening ensure that the theme is consistent and reflects data comprehensively; (e) Interpretation and reporting – linking findings to the conceptual framework, literature review, and research context. This analytical approach is consistent with the rules of qualitative research that emphasizes contextual understanding, the meaning of actors, and social processes (Rustamana dkk., 2024). In the context of local government and capacity studies, findings must also take into account institutional, political, and historical contexts so that they can produce rich interpretations.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the quality of qualitative research, the researcher applies the following strategies:

1. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, documents, observations) to increase the credibility of findings.

2. Member checking or double-checking with the main informant to ensure that the researcher's interpretation has accurately reflected their perspective.
3. Trail audit is complete documentation of the data collection process, analysis, code, theme, and interpretive decisions so that the research process can be tracked and transparent.
4. Reflexivity where the researcher consciously reflects on his position, assumptions and biases so that the interpretation is not too subjective.

Research Ethics

This study also pays attention to the ethical aspects of research, namely obtaining informed consent from informants, maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities and data (if anonymized is required), and using data only for research purposes. The informant is informed that participation is voluntary and can stop at any time without consequences.

Research Procedure

The stages of the research chronologically include:

1. Preparation: preparation of interview guidelines, identifying and contacting informants, obtaining permission from relevant agencies.
2. Data collection: conducting semi-structured interviews, field observations, and collecting policy documents.
3. Data transcription and organization: transcribing interview recordings, compiling observation notes, archiving documents.
4. Data analysis: codes and themes are identified and then interpreted according to the conceptual framework that has been formulated in the literature review.
5. Reporting: compiling the results of the analysis in a narrative format, relating to the literature, concluding factors that affect the capacity of local governments and policy implications for the implementation of the RPJMN in North Sumatra Province.

Research Limitations

The characteristics of qualitative research and case studies bring several limitations, namely: (a) generalization to all provinces or other districts/cities in Indonesia is limited; (b) the data is highly dependent on the subjectivity of the informant and the researcher's interpretation; (c) access to certain documents or agencies may be restricted; (d) the time and resources required for the collection and analysis of qualitative data are relatively large.

Relevance of Methods to Research

With this method, the research will be able to answer three main questions of the research: the condition of local government capacity, inhibiting/supporting factors, and implications for the implementation of the national agenda. Qualitative approaches and case studies allow for the disclosure of mechanisms and processes that are often hidden behind mere statistical figures, resulting in a richer understanding of the dynamics of RPJMN implementation at the provincial level.

Operationalization of the Concept of Capacity for Research

General concept: Policy / Government Capacity

The approach used in this study takes the concept of policy capacity as a collection of competencies and resources needed to design, implement, and evaluate policies (analytical, operational, political) at three levels: individual, organizational, and system. This framework is important because it provides a matrix for placing the capabilities of HR, institutions, and networks (Wu dkk., 2015).

Human Resource (HR) Competence Human Competence

Operational definition: the ability of the apparatus to perform the functions of planning, policy analysis, program management, performance-based budgeting, and communication between actors. (refers to the dimensions *individual* within the framework of Wu et al.) (Wu dkk., 2015).

- 1) **Indicator/observable variable (qualitative):**
 - a) Technical knowledge of planning and budgeting (interview narrative about the experience of compiling the RKPD/RPJMD).
 - b) Analytical skills (ability to read data/indicators; sample answers to case interviews).
 - c) Managerial and leadership experience (policy decision case studies).
 - d) Access and utilization of training / capacity-building (training documents, testimonials).
- 2) **Qualitative measurement methods:** in-depth interviews with planners and heads of OPDs; curriculum vitae analysis, training documents; *member checking* to validate competency claims. The role of human resource competencies as a prerequisite for technical capacity is reinforced by literature that emphasizes the importance of individual analytical capacity in producing evidence-based policies (Howlett, 2015).

Institutional / Organizational Capacity

Operational definition: structure, procedures, information systems, budgeting mechanisms, and organizational culture that allows regional institutions to plan, coordinate, implement, and evaluate programs that are aligned with the RPJMN. This concept also refers to the organizational and systemic dimensions in the literature on government capacity (M S Grindle, 1997).

- 1) **Indicator/observable variable:**
 - a) Clarity of organizational structure and coordination mechanisms between OPDs (SOP documents, Decree on the formation of task forces).
 - b) Planning and budgeting governance (availability of evidence-based planning SOPs; budget flows).
 - c) Monitoring-evaluation and reporting system (dashboard, report format, monitoring frequency).
 - d) Availability of integrated data / regional development information systems.
- 2) **Qualitative measurement methods:** analysis of RPJMD/RKPD documents, observation of coordination meetings, interviews with planning officials and accountability. Grindle emphasizes that institutional capacity should be seen as an organization's adaptive capabilities, not just a formal structure (M S Grindle, 1997).

Network Capacity / Governance Networks

Operational definition: the ability of local governments to establish, manage, and utilize intergovernmental networks (central-regional verticals), inter-OPDs, as well as external networks (NGOs, academics, private sectors) for policy collaboration, resources, and program innovation. This concept synergizes with the literature *on network governance* and network management modes (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

1) **Indicator/observable variable:**

- a) The existence and function of the central-regional coordination mechanism (coordination forum, MOU, technical team).
- b) Forms of network governance: *participant-governed*, *lead-organization*, or *network administrative organization* (observation of the role of the main actor).
- c) The intensity of information and resource exchange (frequency of meetings, data sharing, co-financing).
- d) Participation of non-state actors (universities, NGOs, the private sector) in planning and monitoring (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

- 2) **Qualitative measurement methods:** stakeholder mapping, triangulative interviews (central parties, provinces, partners), MoU analysis/memorandum of understanding, and network observation. The literature states that the effectiveness of the network depends on the mode of governance chosen and the coordinating capacity of the main actors (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Mergers/Comparisons with Framework Wu et al. (2015) and Grindle (1997)

- 1) Equivalence: Human resource competencies → *individual analytical & operational capacities*; institutional capacity → *organizational operational & systemic capacities*; network capacity → intersect with *political* and *systemic* capacities (Wu framework) and are rooted in Grindle's attention to institutional context. The use of the Wu matrix (3×3) helped the researchers place indicators into relevant cells for more systematic analysis (Wu dkk., 2015).
- 2) Additional network contributions: The network literature emphasizes that managing wicked problems requires strong network capacity a dimension that is not always explicit in the classical capacity framework but is crucial for the implementation of RPJMN in heterogeneous regions such as North Sumatra. The governance mode Provan & Kenis provides a practical guide to assessing whether the network is functioning effectively (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Implications for qualitative research instrument design

- 1) Structure the interview guide based on the above indicators (questions to assess individual competencies, institutional processes, and networking practices).
- 2) Use triangulation (interviews + documents + network observations) and actor maps for validation.

The initial analytical code focused on Wu cells (analytical/operational/political × individual/org/systemic) and network modes (participant/lead/NAO) to facilitate the interpretation of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of RPJMN Implementation in North Sumatra Province

The results of the study show that the implementation of the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) at the North Sumatra Provincial level has been pursued through the preparation of the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) of North Sumatra Province. This RPJMD was formulated to adjust the direction of national policies set out in the RPJMN, especially in the fields of infrastructure, poverty alleviation, equitable development, and increasing regional competitiveness (Bappenas, 2020).

However, the results of interviews with officials at the North Sumatra Provincial Bappeda show that the harmony between the RPJMN and the RPJMD is not fully optimal. Some national indicators, such as the target of reducing extreme poverty and increasing the human development index (HDI), have not been fully achieved due to limited human resource (HR) capacity and regional fiscal. This indicates that although there is a good policy framework at the central level, its implementation in the regions faces various implementation obstacles (Winarno, 2012).

The comparison with West Java Province provides an idea of whether the planning harmonization challenges faced by North Sumatra are unique or a common pattern that occurs in various regions. The study of West Java is relevant because the province is known to have a relatively more established planning system, a high level of governance digitalization, and consistency between planning documents (RPJPD-RPJMD-RKPD) that are more structured.

Institutional Structure and Planning Coordination

North Sumatra still faces institutional challenges in cross-sectoral and cross-district/city coordination, as reflected in the lack of synchronization between provincial and local development priorities. Some districts/cities have not fully aligned the RPJMD with the policy direction of the RPJPD and RPJMN. This leads to overlapping programs and a weak focus on regional development. On the contrary, West Java has built a relatively more solid coordination system through the Integrated Planning and Budgeting System (IPBS) mechanism and the strengthening of the Regional Apparatus Forum. This system accelerates the synchronization of planning documents because all regional apparatus are required to enter programs through an integrated system (Prakoso, 2022). Thus, the pattern of problems in North Sumatra tends to be general, but the level of disintegration is higher than that of West Java.

Consistency of Planning Documents

In North Sumatra, a number of studies show that there is still discontinuity between the RPJMD and the RKPD, especially related to performance indicators and development targets. Inaccuracies in measuring indicators cause difficulties in conducting performance-based monitoring and evaluation (Nasution, 2020). Meanwhile, West Java has implemented a *cascading strategy* that ensures that the RPJMN-RPJMD-OPD Strategic Plan indicators are interrelated. In addition, the use of a digital dashboard based on real time data makes West Java have better consistency in the harmonization of planning documents (Arifin, 2021).

Public Participation in Planning

North Sumatra still relies heavily on the traditional *Musrenbang* mechanism, which often becomes procedural and has not yet substantively captured community aspirations. Public participation also tends

to be stronger at the village level than at the district/city level (Lubis, 2022). By contrast, West Java has introduced *Musrenbang Juara* and an *e-Musrenbang* system that enables community participation through digital platforms. This approach enhances the quality of public input and speeds up the verification of proposals (Sutrisno, 2021).

Planning and Budgeting Integration

The main challenge in North Sumatra is weak integration between planning and budgeting documents. Programs included in planning documents are often not reflected in the budget, largely because priorities are not supported by a clear analysis of fiscal requirements and budget needs (Hasibuan, 2020). By contrast, West Java has adopted a budgeting approach based on the Money Follows Program principle, ensuring that programs approved during the planning process are matched with a defined budget allocation. This integration helps prevent deviations from agreed development priorities.

This comparison suggests that North Sumatra faces broader planning harmonization challenges, particularly document misalignment, weak planning–budget integration, and limited public participation. The problems are also more complex than those in West Java due to the absence of an integrated digital system and a robust coordination mechanism. Therefore, North Sumatra’s issues are not necessarily unique, but addressing them requires institutional reforms, stronger digitalization, and improved bureaucratic capacity to achieve effective planning harmonization.

Institutional Capacity in the Implementation of RPJMN

This study found that the institutional capacity of local governments plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of the implementation of RPJMN at the provincial level. Based on the results of observations and interviews, there are three main dimensions of institutional capacity that affect implementation, namely:

1. Organizational structure and coordination between agencies,
2. Planning and budgeting capacity, and
3. Monitoring and evaluation mechanism (monev).

The institutional structure of North Sumatra’s Bappeda generally aligns with national planning guidelines. However, coordination across regional government agencies remains suboptimal. For instance, in implementing development agendas in the environmental and food security sectors, technical agencies often operate in a sectoral manner, with limited integration across programs and functional areas (Dwiyanto, 2015). Planning capacity is also shaped by the quality of data and information. Several informants noted that sectoral data across agencies is frequently inconsistent, which complicates the formulation of regional performance indicators that are aligned with the RPJMN. This indicates a persistent gap between the evidence-based planning standards expected by the central government and the technical realities faced at the local level.

Your findings on weak planning harmonization in North Sumatra Province further suggest that bureaucratic fragmentation continues to occur systemically, particularly through limited coordination among OPDs, misalignment across planning documents, and weak integration between planning and budgeting. This pattern implies that many agencies operate within narrow sectoral mandates and tend to protect their internal priorities rather than pursue integrated development objectives. This dynamic is consistent with regarding the persistence of a “silo mentality” in Indonesian local bureaucracies, where organizational units prioritize sectoral agendas over cross-cutting development goals.

That fragmentation is not only a structural problem, but also a bureaucratic cultural problem, such as low trust between units, weak formal coordination mechanisms, and lack of incentives for cross-

sectoral collaboration. Your research findings reinforce this argument, particularly in the context of North Sumatra, where the implementation of a planning system that is supposed to be aligned (RPJPD–RPJMD–RKPD) is disrupted by bureaucratic practices that maintain the sectoral autonomy of each OPD (Sitanggang, 2021).

Who highlights this problem at the national level and its universal form, your findings show a more contemporary form of fragmentation, namely the low utilization of integrated digital systems, weak data sharing, and the lack of policy integration between provinces and districts/cities. Thus, your research contribution is to expand the understanding of bureaucratic fragmentation in an increasingly complex era of regional autonomy, and to show that the problem of silo mentality is not only an old problem that has not been solved, but also develops in new forms as technology develops and demands of modern governance.

In addition, your research complements the results of previous studies showing that bureaucratic fragmentation has a direct impact on the quality of development planning. For example, a study by McLeod (2018) and Turner (2019) found that the disconnect between levels of government planning leads to low effectiveness of regional development programs. Your findings reinforce these conclusions by providing concrete evidence from the North Sumatra context, where planning disharmony has an impact on unfocused development priorities and low planning accountability (McLeod, 2018; Turner & Hulme, 1997).

Thus, this comparison shows that your research is not only aligned with previous research, but also provides empirical added value that bureaucratic fragmentation remains a significant challenge in the harmonization of regional development planning in Indonesia.

Capacity of Human Resources and Regional Leadership

One of the main findings of this study is that the individual capacity and leadership of regional heads have a strategic role in directing the national development agenda in the regions. The leadership of the Governor and the head of OPD is a determining factor whether the priorities of the RPJMN can be translated into concrete regional policies. The results of interviews with academics and bureaucratic officials show that the political commitment of regional heads greatly determines the success of implementation. For example, strategic infrastructure development programs such as provincial roads and agricultural irrigation have received great support because they are considered to be in line with the national vision of "Advanced Indonesia" (Bappenas, 2020). On the other hand, programs to increase the capacity of the apparatus and digitize public services have not been a priority because they are considered indirect to have an electoral impact. The capacity of human resources of the apparatus is also still limited, especially in terms of policy analysis, performance-based financial management, and reporting of development results. This is in line with previous literature findings that weak administrative capacity is often the main obstacle to decentralization of development in Indonesia (M S Grindle, 1997).

The findings of this study are in line with a number of previous studies that show that regional heads in Indonesia tend to prioritize concrete programs that have high electoral value over the strategic agenda set by the central government. Various studies on decentralization, such as by Buehler, show that regional heads often direct development policies on physical projects that are easily visible such as road construction, revitalization of urban parks, and new public facilities because they are considered more promising in building political image than bureaucratic capacity-building programs or planning reforms that are invisible in nature (Buehler, 2010).

The findings in this study confirm this pattern in North Sumatra, where a number of regional heads prioritize projects that have a direct electoral impact over the harmonization of planning directed by the

RPJMN. As a result, the national agenda is often only administratively accommodated in regional planning documents, but not included in budget priorities. This shows that the dynamics of electoral politics in the regions have a direct effect on the effectiveness of national policy implementation, thus creating a gap between policy objectives and implementation on the ground.

To broaden perspective, the study can also be compared to practices in other countries that have successfully overcome similar phenomena, such as the Philippines. Several cities in the Philippines such as Quezon City and Davao have shown progress in improving the analytical capacity of civil servants through structured capacity development programs, collaboration with universities, and the implementation of data-driven planning systems. These reforms allow local governments there to separate short-term electoral interests from more strategic long-term development agendas (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011).

An important lesson from the Philippines is that increasing the technical capacity of bureaucracies can reduce local governments' reliance on the political preferences of regional heads. When policy analysts have better ability to provide data, manage information, and make evidence-based recommendations, the planning process becomes more rational and less affected by electoral demands. In contrast to North Sumatra, the findings of this study show that the absence of a systematic capacity building system makes electoral bias remain the dominant factor in determining development priorities.

Thus, this comparison confirms that strengthening the technical capacity of the apparatus and protecting bureaucratic professionalism is the key to reducing the electoral bias of regional heads and ensuring the successful implementation of the national agenda.

Center-Regional Synergy in the National Agenda

The capacity of local governments can also be seen from the extent to which the regions are able to establish vertical synergy with the central government. In the context of the RPJMN, this synergy is realized through coordination between Bappenas and Bappeda, the preparation of RKP (Government Work Plan) documents, and the transfer of central funds. This study found that the central-regional coordination mechanism is still top-down. Local governments often receive development targets from the central government without the flexibility to adapt to the local context. For example, the national target to reduce extreme poverty by 0% by 2024 is difficult to achieve in several districts/cities in North Sumatra due to the very different economic characteristics between regions (e.g. between Medan and Nias). This condition shows that the capacity of the regions to carry out the national agenda is highly dependent on the discretion space provided by the central government. The greater the innovation space provided, the higher the capacity of the region to adapt national programs to local needs (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

Obstacles to the Implementation of RPJMN at the Provincial Level

Some of the main obstacles found in this study include:

1. Regional budget limitations, especially for national priority programs that require large financing support.
2. Bureaucratic fragmentation, where inter-agency is still running sectorally and has not been integrated into one regional development management system.
3. Lack of public participation, especially in the development planning and evaluation process.
4. The weak monitoring and evaluation system, which makes it difficult to measure the implementation of the program, its impact on the achievement of the RPJMN.

These obstacles show that regional capacity is not only about technical resources, but also about aspects of governance, participation, and accountability. According to Grindle, the strong capacity of

government is reflected in the ability of public organizations to adapt, learn, and innovate in the implementation of public policies.

Discussion: Relevance of Findings to Government Capacity Theory

The findings of this study are in line with the framework of the government capacity theory proposed by Merilee S. Grindle. According to him, government capacity consists of three main dimensions: institutional capacity, technical capacity, and political capacity. These three dimensions are interconnected in determining the success of public policy implementation. In the context of North Sumatra, political capacity is relatively strong at the regional leadership level, but institutional and technical capacity is still weak. This imbalance causes the implementation of the RPJMN to be often symbolic of adopting national targets without careful operational adjustments. In addition, the theory of multi-level governance Pierre & Peters (2000) is also relevant in explaining the relationship between the central and regional governments in the implementation of the RPJMN. Local governments are in a position between "national mandates" and "local needs", which demand adaptability and policy negotiation. Failure to balance the two has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of overall national development.

The findings of this study make an important contribution in examining the relevance of Grindle's theory of government capacity and multi-level governance theory in the context of national policy implementation in Indonesia. First, the research findings confirm Grindle's proposition that government capacity consists of two main dimensions: political capacity and technical capacity, and that an imbalance between the two has the potential to result in policy implementation that is symbolic in nature. In the context of North Sumatra Province, there is a strong political push to align regional planning documents with the RPJMN, but technical capacity, especially data, analysis, cross-sector coordination, and evidence-based planning capabilities, is still weak. As a result, the harmonization of planning that should be substantive often turns into mere administrative compliance, which empirically confirms the phenomenon of symbolic implementation as proposed in Grindle's theory and discussed by Hill & Hupe (Hill & Hupe, 2014).

In addition to confirming the theory, the findings of this study also broaden the understanding of government capacity in the context of countries that implement asymmetric decentralization such as Indonesia. Grindle emphasizes the internal dynamics of government organizations, while this research shows that the capacity of local governments cannot be understood without taking into account the hierarchical structure of central-regional relations. In the framework of multi-level governance, the relationship between central and local governments is often assumed to be a cooperative, interdependent, and equal relationship. However, the findings of research in North Sumatra actually show that the interaction between the central and regional governments is still command and control, for example through planning standards that are very determined by the central government, top-down evaluation mechanisms, and the lack of space for regions to adapt policies based on local contexts.

Thus, this study challenges normative assumptions in multi-level governance models that emphasize horizontal collaboration and coordination. In the case of Indonesia, the implementation of the RPJMN actually shows that the governance structure is still closer to a bureaucratic-hierarchical model than a collaborative model. The power imbalance between levels of government makes coordination more compliant than substantive negotiation, so it is not in line with the collaborative governance literature (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This research shows that without coordination reform and rearrangement of authority, multi-level governance in Indonesia will still experience friction and implementation gaps.

Therefore, the findings of this study not only strengthen previous theories but also show the limitations of the concept of modern governance when applied to a very hierarchical bureaucratic political context such as in Indonesia.

Research Implications

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that increasing the capacity of local governments in carrying out national agendas such as RPJMN must be carried out through:

1. Strengthening the capacity of data-based regional planning and budgeting,
2. Improving coordination between OPDs and across sectors,
3. Improving the quality of bureaucratic human resources through public policy training and development management,
4. Increasing synergy between the central and regional governments in the form of two-way consultations, not just top-down instructions.

This capacity building will strengthen the position of the region as the main implementer of national development that is responsive to local and global dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study examines the capacity of the North Sumatra Provincial Government to implement the national development agenda through the 2020–2024 RPJMN based on interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings show that although the RPJMD is formally aligned with RPJMN priorities particularly in infrastructure, economic, and social sectors practical implementation remains constrained by limited resources, weak coordination among regional apparatus organizations, and mismatches between national targets and local capabilities. Institutional challenges such as bureaucratic fragmentation, overlapping authority, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, and limited integration between planning and budgeting further hinder effective policy execution. In addition, limitations in human resource capacity reduce the ability of planning staff to conduct policy analysis, manage development programs, and utilize information technology for planning and reporting. The central–regional relationship is still largely characterized by top-down coordination that does not always accommodate local context, making certain national targets difficult to implement in areas with distinct geographic and socio economic conditions. These conditions indicate that the main issue is not a lack of commitment, but insufficient institutional, technical, and adaptive capacity to translate national priorities into effective regional programs.

Based on these findings, this study recommends comprehensive efforts to strengthen regional capacity in planning harmonization and RPJMN implementation. Key priorities include improving sectoral data integration, developing reliable regional information systems, and enhancing the analytical competence of planning personnel to support evidence-based programs. Stronger linkage between planning and budgeting is necessary to ensure that approved priorities are matched with realistic resource allocation. Governance reforms are also needed to reduce fragmentation through improved cross-sector coordination mechanisms and performance-based management systems. Human resource development should focus on strategic planning, policy management, and financial management skills, supported by internal knowledge-sharing practices. Central–regional synergy must be improved through more responsive and flexible coordination, allowing regions greater space to adapt national programs to local conditions. Monitoring and evaluation systems should shift toward assessing outcomes and impacts rather than administrative outputs, supported by the development of performance dashboards. Finally, more substantive participation from universities, NGOs, and communities is essential to strengthen the

relevance and legitimacy of development policies and ensure more inclusive implementation of the RPJMN in North Sumatra.

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