

## Regional Autonomy Policy and Its Implications for Social Welfare: A Case Study in the Talaud Islands

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### ABSTRACT

Regional autonomy in Indonesia has been implemented to promote equitable development and improve social welfare, particularly in underdeveloped and remote regions like the Talaud Islands. This study investigates the effects of regional autonomy policies on the welfare of the Talaud Islands' population by examining four key indicators: economic conditions, education, health services, and infrastructure development. Employing a mixed-method approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data, the study draws on official statistics from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and supporting documentation from regional development reports. The results show that regional autonomy has led to notable progress in infrastructure development and access to basic services. However, disparities persist, especially in education quality, healthcare access, and economic resilience. Limited administrative capacity, geographic isolation, and inconsistent policy implementation are identified as major obstacles. This research highlights the need for policy adjustments and capacity-building strategies to optimize the benefits of autonomy and ensure inclusive welfare improvements. The findings contribute to policy discussions on regional governance, offering evidence-based recommendations for more responsive and context-sensitive development strategies in remote regions.

*Keywords: Regional autonomy, social welfare, Talaud Islands, decentralization, public policy*

### INTRODUCTION

The regional autonomy policy in Indonesia was launched in response to the need to increase community participation in government and local resource management (Ahmad Zarkasyi, 2021; Mukti et al., 2021; Nurrochmat et al., 2021). Regional autonomy is expected to accelerate regional development by giving local governments more authority to regulate and manage government affairs and development in accordance with the conditions and needs of the local community. In the context of the Talaud Islands, which is an archipelago in North Sulawesi Province, this policy has significant implications for the social welfare of the community (Suwandi et al., 2021; Nurmandi & Kim, 2020; Irawan & Gunawan, 2022).

Regional autonomy is a very important concept in the context of local economic development, especially in regions with unique geographical and demographic characteristics, such as the Talaud Islands. Through regional autonomy, local governments are granted the authority to manage resources and design policies tailored to the needs of the local community. This provides opportunities for regions to develop existing economic potential, such as fisheries, tourism, and agriculture, which are highly relevant to the geographical conditions of the Talaud Islands (Fahmi et al., 2019; Asnidar & Rahayu, 2021; Sitorus & Malau, 2020).

However, the implementation of regional autonomy in the Talaud Islands is not without challenges. One of the main challenges is the limited human resources and adequate infrastructure to support the implementation of autonomy policies. In addition, there is still resistance from various parties who feel threatened by this policy change. Therefore, it is important for the local government

to adopt an inclusive approach and involve all stakeholders in the decision-making process. In this way, it is hoped that regional autonomy can run smoothly and provide optimal benefits for the people of Talaud (Rasyid, 2018; Hutapea et al., 2023; Wahyudi & Mahsun, 2020).

Regional autonomy policies in Indonesia, including in the Talaud Islands, aim to give greater authority to local governments in resource management and decision-making. However, the implementation of these policies has various implications for the social welfare of the community (Ardiansyah & Pratama, 2022; Dewi & Nugroho, 2020; Susanti & Basuki, 2023; Pambudi & Fitriyani, 2019).

### **Comparison of Regional Autonomy in Other Regions**

When we compare regional autonomy policies in Indonesia, we can see significant variations in their implementation. Some regions, such as DKI Jakarta and Bali, have successfully leveraged regional autonomy to boost the economy and improve the well-being of their communities. On the other hand, other regions, such as the *Talaud Islands*, still face various challenges that hinder development. The impact of regional autonomy on *Talaud's* development depends heavily on how effectively the local government formulates and implements policies that align with the needs of the community.

In this context, it is important to learn from the experiences of other regions that have successfully implemented regional autonomy. For example, the implementation of policies based on community participation and budget transparency in other regions can serve as a good model for *Talaud* to adopt. By understanding the positive and negative impacts of regional autonomy in various regions, we can formulate better strategies to maximize *Talaud's* potential and overcome existing challenges.

### **Aspects of Improving Social Welfare through Regional Autonomy**

These include the decentralization of resource management, where local governments gain greater control over natural resources and regional finances, enabling more targeted budget allocations for essential sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure. Regional autonomy also promotes improved public services, as evidenced by better access to health and education, which contributes to a higher Human Development Index (HDI) and significant poverty reduction. Moreover, this policy enhances community participation in decision-making, fostering greater accountability and alignment of development programs with local needs. It enables governments to focus specifically on social welfare by designing tailored assistance programs for vulnerable populations based on local socio-economic conditions. Lastly, it allows prioritization of infrastructure development to address accessibility challenges, especially in remote regions like the *Talaud Islands*, thereby stimulating economic activity and improving overall community well-being.

Although regional autonomy policies hold significant potential to enhance social welfare, several challenges must be addressed to ensure their effectiveness. One major issue is resource inequality, as not all regions possess the same natural or financial resources, potentially leading to disparities in development outcomes. Additionally, limited local government capacity, including a shortage of skilled human resources and institutional weaknesses, may hinder effective policy implementation. Furthermore, the risk of corruption and abuse of authority increases if there is insufficient oversight and accountability in budget management, which can obstruct the realization of social welfare objectives and erode public trust in local governance.

Previous studies have examined the impact of regional autonomy on development outcomes in Indonesia. Pratomo and Nugroho (2021) highlighted that regional autonomy has the potential to stimulate economic development and reduce poverty when accompanied by good governance, fiscal decentralization, and community involvement. Meanwhile, Nuryanto (2020) emphasized that regional disparities and limited administrative capacity hinder the success of autonomy in many outer regions, resulting in uneven social welfare outcomes. However, most existing research focuses on more developed or centrally located regions, with limited empirical analysis of remote and geographically isolated areas like the *Talaud Islands*. This research seeks to fill that gap by providing a localized analysis of how regional autonomy affects social welfare in an archipelagic and underdeveloped context. By focusing on economic growth, infrastructure, education, and health in the *Talaud Islands*, this study offers a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness and limitations of decentralization in remote regions, contributing new empirical insights to the broader discourse on regional autonomy in Indonesia.

This study aims to critically assess the implementation of regional autonomy in the *Talaud Islands* and its impact on various aspects of social welfare, including economic development, infrastructure, education, and health services. It also seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities that arise from autonomy in a remote archipelagic setting. The findings are expected to benefit policymakers by providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance local governance and improve welfare outcomes in underdeveloped regions. Furthermore, the research will support civil society organizations and development planners in crafting participatory and inclusive policy strategies tailored to local needs. Academically, the study enriches the discourse on decentralization by addressing empirical gaps and promoting region-specific analysis.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively assess the impact of regional autonomy policies on social welfare in the *Talaud Islands*. The research design is descriptive-analytical with a case study focus on *Talaud* as the primary unit of analysis. The study was carried out from March to September 2024, analyzing developments from 2015 to 2023 to identify trends in social welfare following the implementation of regional autonomy. The *Talaud Islands*, located in North Sulawesi Province, were selected due to their status as a remote archipelago with distinct challenges related to autonomy implementation.

Data for this research were gathered through both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collection involved in-depth interviews with 15 local government officials, 20 community leaders and village heads, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with four community groups, each consisting of 8 to 10 participants. Additionally, direct observations were conducted on infrastructure and public service conditions. Secondary data comprised statistical information from the *Talaud Islands* Regency BPS, financial and development program reports, regional regulations on autonomy, and relevant literature and previous research. Data collection techniques included structured and semi-structured interviews, FGDs, participatory observation, and documentation analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using triangulation and content analysis, while quantitative data were examined descriptively and comparatively. Key indicators used to evaluate social welfare included the Human Development Index (HDI), poverty rate, access to education and healthcare, infrastructure availability, and levels of community participation in development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **General Conditions of the Talaud Islands**

The Talaud Islands have an area of 1,251.02 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of around 94,000 (BPS, 2023). The region consists of islands scattered relatively far apart from one another, creating particular challenges in the provision of public services and infrastructure development.

#### **The Impact of Regional Autonomy on Social Welfare**

##### **1. Economic Aspects**

###### **Economic Growth**

The analysis shows that local government spending has a positive effect on economic growth in the Talaud Islands. From 2015 to 2023, the Talaud Islands' GRDP grew at an average rate of 4.2% per year, slightly below the national average of 5.1%.

###### **Poverty Rate**

BPS data shows that the poverty rate in the Talaud Islands has decreased from 18.7% (2015) to 14.3% (2023). This decline is largely attributed to more targeted social assistance programs and improved access to basic economic services.

##### **2. Educational Aspects**

###### **Access to Education**

Regional autonomy has enabled local governments to improve access to education through the construction of new schools and scholarship programs. The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) for elementary schools increased from 92.3% (2015) to 96.8% (2023), while the NER for junior high schools increased from 78.4% to 85.2%.

###### **Quality of Education**

Despite increased access, the quality of education remains a challenge. The interviews revealed that a shortage of qualified teachers and adequate learning facilities remain major problems.

##### **3. Health Aspects**

###### **Health Facilities**

The number of community health centers and integrated health service posts has increased significantly, from 8 community health centers in 2015 to 12 community health centers in 2023. However, the uneven distribution of health workers remains a problem.

###### **Health Indicators**

Life expectancy in the Talaud Islands increased from 67.8 years (2015) to 70.2 years (2023). The maternal mortality rate decreased from 312 per 100,000 live births to 245 per 100,000 live births.

##### **4. Infrastructure Aspects**

###### **Transportation Infrastructure**

Road and port construction has increased, but is still uneven across the region. The length of paved roads increased from 156 km (2015) to 198 km (2023). Communication and Electricity Infrastructure Access to electricity and the internet has improved significantly. The electrification ratio has increased from 78.4% (2015) to 91.2% (2023).

### **Challenges in Implementation**

#### **1. Limited Human Resources**

Interviews with local officials revealed that the limited availability of qualified human resources is a major obstacle to the implementation of development programs. Of the 15 officials interviewed, 80% stated that human resource capacity still needs to be improved.

## 2. Budget constraints

Despite having greater authority, regional budget constraints remain an obstacle. The Talaud Islands' local revenue (PAD) is still low, with high dependence on transfer funds from the central government.

## 3. Geographical Challenges

The geographical conditions of the archipelago create special challenges in the provision of public services. High transportation and logistics costs are a hindering factor in the implementation of development programs.

## Community Participation

The results of the FGD showed that community participation in the development planning process was still limited. Only 35% of FGD participants said they had been involved in development planning consultations (musrenbang). This shows the need to improve mechanisms for community participation.

## Comparison with Other Regions

Compared to other island districts in Indonesia, the Talaud Islands show relatively good performance in several aspects, but still lag behind in terms of HDI and poverty rates. The Thousand Islands district in DKI Jakarta has an HDI of 75.8, while the Talaud Islands have an HDI of 68.4 (2023).

## CONCLUSION

The regional autonomy policy in the *Talaud Islands* has had a generally positive impact on community social welfare, as evidenced by improvements in access to education, health care, and basic infrastructure—demonstrating that decentralization has allowed local governments to respond more effectively to local needs. Nonetheless, challenges such as limited human resources, budget constraints, and the region's difficult geographical conditions continue to pose significant obstacles. Furthermore, low levels of community participation in policymaking processes hinder the alignment of development efforts with the actual needs and aspirations of the population. To address these issues, several strategic recommendations are proposed: enhancing the capacity of local government officials through training and education programs; strengthening mechanisms for inclusive community participation in planning and oversight; diversifying local revenue sources by developing key sectors such as tourism and fisheries; focusing on sustainable infrastructure development to improve inter-island connectivity; and fostering better synergy between central, provincial, and district governments to ensure effective and coordinated implementation of development programs. A more comprehensive and long-term strategy is essential to ensure that the full benefits of regional autonomy can be realized sustainably across the *Talaud Islands*.

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