

The Role of the Village Empowerment Office in Assisting the Preparation of Village Medium-Term Development Plans (RPJMDes)

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Abstract: Village development planning is a strategic instrument for realizing participatory and sustainable development. The Village Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMDes) serves as the main guideline for village development over a six-year period. However, in practice, its preparation still faces various obstacles, particularly concerning the quality of the documents and the effectiveness of implementation. This research aims to analyze the role of the Village Empowerment Office in assisting the preparation of RPJMDes in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency, and to identify factors influencing the suboptimal assistance. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies, then analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The results indicate that the assistance in preparing RPJMDes is still dominated by an administrative approach and has not addressed the substantive aspects of planning. Limitations in the technical capacity of village officials and a weak understanding of the synchronization of RPJMDes with the Regency Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD), Village SDGs, and national development priorities have resulted in low-quality planning documents. This research concludes that optimizing the role of the Village Empowerment Office as a facilitator and enhancer of village planning capacity is key to improving the quality of RPJMDes. These findings contribute to the development of public administration studies and village governance.

Keywords: RPJMDes, Village Assistance, Development Planning, Institutional Capacity, Village Government



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1. Introduction

Village development planning is the core of efforts to equalize development and empower rural communities in Indonesia. The Village Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMDes) document is legally mandated as a six-year strategic guideline containing the vision, mission, policy directions, programs, and village development priorities formulated through participatory village consultations. The RPJMDes not only serves as a technical planning reference but also as an important instrument for the effective allocation of Village Funds (DD) and the integration of community aspirations into sustainable local development [1].

However, empirical findings from various studies suggest that RPJMDes often merely fulfill administrative formality requirements and do not reflect development strategies responsive to the actual needs of village communities. One study found that the RPJMDes document in several

villages was produced merely as a formality without providing clear direction for annual development and failing to serve as the primary reference for the village government's work plan [2]. Another study revealed that the preparation of village plans often faces technical weaknesses, low community participation, and limitations in the capacity of village officials to understand the planning stages regulated by implementing regulations [3].

The context described above is further reinforced by findings from development planning studies in several regions of Indonesia, indicating that the process of preparing RPJMDes has not yet fully followed the mandated technical stages. Consequently, village planning institutions often struggle to align documents with regency-level development policies and sustainable development goals (Sustainable Development Goals) [4]. This results in low-quality planning documents that are less effective in guiding inclusive and efficient village development.

The issue of low-quality village development planning is important to research because it touches upon aspects of good governance, community empowerment, and the effective use of public resources. Socially, weak planning can lead to low community support for village programs and development disparities; culturally, a lack of participation can weaken the values of deliberation and local wisdom in development planning; and administratively, low-quality documents affect the accountability of village governance. The theories of good governance and public participation emphasize that the quality of development planning requires the active involvement of all stakeholders and the technical capacity of officials in the RPJMDes formulation process [5].

Although various studies have evaluated aspects of community participation or general RPJMDes planning practices, there is still a literature gap regarding the role of assistance provided by the Village Empowerment Office, particularly in the context of substantive assistance that integrates technical capacity, policy synchronization across government levels, and the meaning of the process for local actors. Many previous studies have focused solely on the role of village officials or the quality of documents, without contextually exploring the experiences of village facilitators and how the interaction between facilitators and village officials influences the planning process [6].

Based on the aforementioned phenomena, this study aims to qualitatively analyze the role of the Village Empowerment Office in assisting the preparation of RPJMDes in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency, with a focus on the experiences of village officials and facilitators in preparing planning documents that are synchronized with the Regency RPJMD, Village SDGs, and national development priorities. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of public administration studies and village governance, as well as practical contributions in formulating strategies to strengthen institutional capacity for more effective technical assistance in village development planning.

2. Theoretical Review

Development planning is one of the primary functions of public administration aimed at directing the effective and sustainable use of public resources. In the context of village governance in Indonesia, development planning is realized through the Village Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMDes) document, which serves as a six-year strategic guideline for village development. The RPJMDes functions not only as a technocratic document but also as a political and social instrument reflecting the aspirations of village communities through a participatory planning process. From the perspective of development planning theory, planning documents should ideally be systematic, data-driven, and capable of integrating local needs with development policies at higher levels [7].

From the standpoint of modern public administration, the quality of development planning is significantly determined by the institutional capacity of the actors involved in the planning process. Grindle explains that institutional capacity encompasses the ability of public organizations to perform technical, coordinative, and adaptive functions in response to changes in the policy environment [8]. Fukuyama emphasizes that the capacity of government institutions is a primary prerequisite for the effectiveness of public policies, including in the context of local and village governance[9]. In the context of RPJMDes, the institutional capacity of village officials and assistance bodies is a determining factor in understanding regulations, planning stages, and policy synchronization across government levels.

Assistance from local governments to villages is part of the developmental and oversight functions mandated by the Village Law. Conceptually, assistance is not only understood as administrative assistance but also as a process of knowledge transfer, capacity building, and organizational learning facilitation. Capacity building theory emphasizes that effective assistance must be sustainable, contextual, and oriented towards solving real problems faced by local actors [10]. In the context of RPJMDes preparation, substantive assistance includes understanding community needs analysis, formulating village visions and policy directions, and the ability to integrate village planning documents with regional and national development policies.

In addition to institutional capacity, good governance and collaborative governance approaches are also relevant in understanding the RPJMDes preparation process. Ansell and Gash emphasize that collaboration among government actors, communities, and other stakeholders is key to producing responsive and legitimate policies [11]. In village planning, the principles of transparency, participation, and accountability are important indicators of governance quality. RPJMDes prepared without meaningful participation risks becoming a formalistic document that does not reflect the real needs of village communities.

In the development of global policies, village development planning is also required to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. In Indonesia, the Village SDGs policy serves as a strategic framework to ensure inclusive, sustainable, and equitable village development. The integration of RPJMDes with Village SDGs and the Regency RPJMD requires adequate conceptual and technical understanding from village officials and facilitators. Recent studies indicate that a lack of understanding regarding cross-level policy synchronization leads to village planning tending to be sectoral and short-term [12]

Several previous studies have provided empirical insights into the problems of village development planning. Research by Pratama and Nugroho in a public administration journal found that most villages face difficulties in preparing data-driven RPJMDes and community needs analysis due to the limited technical capacity of village apparatus [13]. Another study by Sari et al. showed that the role of village facilitators is still more dominant in administrative aspects, such as document completeness, compared to substantive assistance in formulating village policies [14]. Meanwhile, international research by Mansuri and Rao affirmed that the success of participatory planning at the local level is highly dependent on the quality of facilitation and assistance from government institutions [15].

While various studies have examined village development planning and community participation, there remains a significant theoretical and empirical gap. Most studies tend to focus on villages as the primary unit of analysis, whereas the role of local governments—specifically the Village Empowerment Office—in the RPJMDes assistance process has not been extensively studied. Furthermore, few studies delve into the experiences, meanings, and practices of substantive

assistance from the perspective of the implementing actors, despite this being crucial in understanding why RPJMDes often remains formalistic and less implementable.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical review and previous research, this study employs a conceptual framework that places the institutional capacity of the Village Empowerment Office and the quality of substantive assistance as key factors influencing the quality of RPJMDes preparation. This framework is used to analyze the processes, inter-actor interactions, and dynamics of assistance in the preparation of RPJMDes in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency. A qualitative approach was chosen to deeply explore the experiences and practices of assistance, thereby providing contextual understanding that cannot be adequately explained by quantitative methods alone.

3. Materials and Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the processes, roles, and dynamics of assistance provided by the Village Empowerment Office in RPJMDes preparation, which cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurements. Case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena contextually and holistically within a real setting, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined [16]. This approach is relevant for exploring meanings, experiences, and substantive assistance practices from the perspective of the actors directly involved in the village development planning process.

The research location is set in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency, considering that this area represents village conditions facing challenges in RPJMDes preparation, particularly regarding the technical capacity of village officials and the role of local government assistance. The research was conducted during 2024, with the data collection period adjusted to the village planning stages and informant availability. The selection of the location was purposive due to its relevance to the research focus and the availability of pertinent data.

The research subjects consist of key actors directly involved in the process of assistance and RPJMDes preparation. Research informants include officials and staff of the Tabalong Regency Village Empowerment Office, apparatus of Kelua District, village heads, village officials (village secretaries and planning officers), and village facilitators. The selection of informants was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, with the main criteria being: (1) direct involvement in the preparation or assistance of RPJMDes, (2) at least one RPJMDes preparation cycle experience, and (3) willingness to provide in-depth information. During the process, a snowball sampling technique was also used to reach additional informants recommended by initial informants and deemed to possess relevant knowledge about the phenomenon under study [17].

Data collection was conducted using several main techniques to obtain rich and in-depth data. The first technique was semi-structured interviews, used to explore the experiences, perceptions, and practices of RPJMDes assistance from the informants' perspectives. The interview guide was prepared flexibly to allow for the exploration of emerging issues during the interview process. The second technique was non-participant observation, conducted to directly observe village planning processes, consultative meetings, and interactions between facilitators and village officials. The third technique was documentation study, by examining RPJMDes documents, Regency RPJMD, regulations related to village planning, and assistance reports. The use of these various techniques aimed to Strengthen the depth and validity of the data through method triangulation [18].

Data validation in this research was carried out through several strategies to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. Source triangulation was used by comparing information obtained

from various informant groups, while method triangulation was performed by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by reconfirming preliminary findings with several key informants to ensure the alignment of the researcher's interpretation with the informants' experiences. The researcher also compiled an audit trail in the form of research process notes, methodological decisions, and analytical reflections to ensure the transparency and dependability of the research [19].

Data analysis was performed simultaneously from the data collection stage to the conclusion drawing using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive data analysis model. The analysis process included the stage of data reduction, which involves sorting and simplifying raw data; data display, in the form of matrices, thematic narratives, and categorization tables; and conclusion drawing and verification, which is performed repeatedly to ensure the consistency of findings [20]. In the data reduction process, the researcher applied thematic analysis by identifying patterns, categories, and main themes related to the role of assistance, institutional capacity, and the quality of RPJMDes preparation.

4. Results and Discussion

The research findings indicate that the role of the Village Empowerment Office in assisting the preparation of RPJMDes in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency has not been optimal and remains dominated by an administrative approach. Based on the analysis of interview, observation, and documentation data, several main themes emerged describing the dynamics of RPJMDes assistance: (1) limited technical capacity of village officials, (2) assistance that is predominantly formalistic, (3) weak cross-level planning synchronization, and (4) implications for RPJMDes quality and village development.

First, the most prominent issue is the limited technical capacity of village officials in comprehensively understanding the stages of RPJMDes preparation. Most informants from village officials admitted that RPJMDes preparation is still considered a complex and technical process, especially in the stages of formulating policy directions and outlining priority programs. A village secretary stated, “we often struggle to formulate a six-year vision and programs, so in the end, we copy a lot from previous RPJMDes or other villages.” This finding is reinforced by observation results showing that village consultations focused more on lists of short-term physical activities rather than analyses of medium-term community needs.

Second, the assistance from the Village Empowerment Office tends to be administrative and procedural. The assistance provided is generally limited to checking document completeness, format consistency, and regulatory compliance, without delving into the substance of the planning. An informant from the Village Empowerment Office explained, “assistance mainly ensures the RPJMDes is completed on time and in accordance with regulations, due to limitations in time and the number of villages to be assisted.” This indicates that the assistance has not fully functioned as a capacity-building and learning process for village officials.

Third, related to the weak synchronization of RPJMDes with the Regency RPJMD, Village SDGs, and national development priorities. Most village officials do not fully understand how to integrate cross-level policies into the RPJMDes document. A village head stated, “the regency RPJMD and Village SDGs exist, but we don't know how to clearly incorporate them into the RPJMDes.” This situation results in RPJMDes being prepared partially and inadequately connected to regional and national development directions.

Fourth, the impact of suboptimal assistance on the quality of RPJMDes and village development.

The resulting RPJMDes documents tend to be normative, lack data-driven foundations, and are not fully utilized as references in preparing the Village Work Plan (RKPDes) or in implementing annual development. Consequently, village development proceeds inconsistently and is not always responsive to the real needs of the community. Some community informants expressed that village development programs often change annually and lack a clear medium-term direction.

The findings of this study suggest that the quality of RPJMDes assistance is strongly influenced by the institutional capacity and approach used by the Village Empowerment Office. From the perspective of institutional capacity theory, this condition indicates that the developmental function of local government has not been fully directed towards strengthening the substantive capabilities of village apparatus, as stated by Grindle and Fukuyama, whose work suggests that public policy effectiveness depends on the capacity of implementing actors. Assistance focused on administrative aspects tends to produce procedural compliance but does not foster strategic and adaptive planning quality.

The findings of this research are in line with the discoveries of Pratama and Nugroho and Sari et al., which highlight that village development planning still faces limitations in technical capacity and the dominance of formalistic approaches [13], [14]. However, this study expands upon previous findings by more deeply examining the role and practices of assistance from the Village Empowerment Office, not just the capacity of village officials. Therefore, this research offers a new perspective that village planning problems do not solely originate from the villages but also from the patterns of regional government guidance.

Within the framework of collaborative governance, the weak synchronization of RPJMDes with the RPJMD and Village SDGs indicates that cross-level government collaboration has not been effective. Ansell and Gash emphasize that collaboration requires intensive interaction, clear roles, and strong facilitation. The findings of this research suggest that assistance has not been able to bridge the complexity of cross-level policies into applicable knowledge for village officials.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the argument that substantive assistance is a key element in participatory development planning. RPJMDes prepared without assistance focused on the learning process tends to become a symbolic document that is ineffective in development practices. Practically, the results of this study imply the need for a reorientation of the role of the Village Empowerment Office from merely an administrative supervisor to a facilitator and knowledge broker in village development planning.

This research also opens avenues for further studies to explore more innovative assistance models, such as through coaching approaches, peer learning among villages, or the utilization of data-based village planning technology. Furthermore, follow-up research with a comparative approach across districts or regencies could enrich the understanding of variations in assistance practices and the contextual factors influencing them.

5. Conclusion

This research indicates that the role of the Village Empowerment Office in assisting the preparation of RPJMDes in Kelua District, Tabalong Regency has not been optimal, being dominated by administrative and procedural approaches. The assistance has not fully functioned as a process of strengthening the substantive capacity of village officials in formulating medium-term development plans that are data-driven, participatory, and synchronized with cross-level government policies. Limitations in the technical capacity of village officials and weak understanding of the integration of RPJMDes with the Regency RPJMD and Village SDGs have resulted in low-quality planning

documents and inconsistent village development.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that the Village Empowerment Office reorient its assistance approach from mere administrative supervision to substantive assistance based on strengthening planning capacity. Assistance needs to be directed towards improving skills in needs analysis, formulating village visions and policy directions, and integrating cross-level policies. Furthermore, developing collaborative learning-based assistance models and utilizing village planning data are crucial for enhancing the quality of RPJMDes and the effectiveness of sustainable village development.

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